

# Oedipus the King

Michael S. Judge

**Listen, buddy, I'm trying to help you. Shit, you think we want you here? We've got thousands of you muttering fucks locked up all around the world, people with vaguely threatening "connections," people who may or may not be involved in something that may or may not have ever happened or may or may not be happening right now, and it's costing us a lot of goddamn money. Think of your burden on the taxpayer. I'm a taxpayer. You a taxpayer?**

I don't know.

**American?**

We all seem to be.

**Great. Cagey. This is not going to help you, or me, or anybody, and the people up the ladder ... I mean, naturally, I can't say exactly who they are, but they won't be amused.**

I'm sorry.

**Look, let me tell you what we want: we either want to charge you, convict you, and extradite you to whatever place will take you, some fucking Kansas governor who wants to cut his deficit by adding work at the state pen, or whoever's feeling friendly in the Sunni countries, it doesn't matter – or we want to get you out of here to make room for the next version of you. Maybe we'll trade you for a hostage. And if you give us enough to get what *we* want, we can get you what *you* want. You got a wife? Family?**

Not that I remember.

**You a queer? No offense. It's fine to be a queer now. They can get married.**

Not as far as I know.

**OK, look, they don't tell me enough and you don't tell me anything, and when you do, it doesn't add up to shit, and I've only got so much time to prove that we either do or don't need to keep you here, after which *I* can't help you anymore. It'll be out of my hands. And you don't want to be in the hands of the next guy. You understand?**

Yes.

**So here's what we're going to do: you just tell the story again, from the beginning, and try to make some goddamn sense. Just talk, anytime, anyplace. We've got the cell bugged, and I don't need to be here.**

And the hood? For when you take me out?

**The hood's bugged, too. They all are. You talk, we'll hear it. Shit, talk in your sleep. It'll be as useful as anything else you've said. So are you ready to start again?**

I've done this so many times already.

**And none of them have been the same story, and we're going to *get* you to corroborate at least one version of the story, and the better your version matches the one we like, the better your chances of getting out of here, understood?**

Yes. But I don't know –

**No, of course you don't know. You wouldn't. You just start talking. I don't have any more time to waste with you.**

I woke up in a northern country – wait – that’s not exactly right; rather, I woke up in the northern *half* of a country, maybe a southern one; in retrospect, it must’ve been; I felt the pressure of the sea to the north, and it wasn’t cold enough to be Nordic, so maybe a country in the middle of the world; anyway I woke up on my left side and wiped the sand off my face and out of my hair and knew I’d been sleeping on the north-south axis, and that the sea was white and black not far to the north, and that between me and it were dunes and desert and maybe cities and maybe olive groves and vineyards and probably antitank mines and biological-weapons research facilities and possibly the exact latitudes discussed in the outdated non-alignment pacts, and so I started walking to the northwest, sure I’d hit the sea eventually, feeling no need to hurry, obscurely certain that veering a little bit off course would take me more safely to the sea. No. I’m sorry. It was northeast, not northwest. Write that down. Definitely northeast.

And after some days of sky so blue the blood vessels in my eyes burst and some nights of desert cold so dark I could watch the stars’ slow chemical experiments in progress and some afternoons so red and soft and fissile I could chew my way through vacant cities of eroding stone, I came to a place like a junkyard, maybe a weapons dump, maybe a black site disguised as a weapons dump, and saw two people, or two human-like organisms: one was crucified to a huge pile of broken black machinery that looked like technological detritus, chunks of obsolete computers, navigation systems from disassembled warheads, nerve agents reverting to the sarin frost that drips from the thawed dendrites of the stars, and he was eyeless – not blind, but eyeless: trails of black blood dried onto his cheeks, empty sockets, pearly mollusk flesh visible under the anti-aircraft lights that sometimes swung across the junkyard. He was a little bit older than middle-aged, maybe 60, and bore the marks of swift and painful reversion from health to devastation: you could still make out the muscles of his abdomen, chest, arms, but his face was badly withered, seemed to hang off the skull, and his back was bent like the upper-right quadrant of a circle away from that heap of dead machines, which was shaped more or less like a sphinx: lying on its stomach, hind legs tensed, forelegs and paws stretched out, and he was crucified where the sphinx’s face would be.

He was silent. I think he was alive, though he hardly moved, never spoke, occasionally moved his lips, emitted no more sound than a death-rattle could explain.

Revise that: I think his body was undecided between living and dying, was waiting out a half-survival till it should recognize the terms of life or death.

And maybe ten feet from that sphinx of rotten motherboards and loose splayed sarcomeres of stars' dissolved histology, there was another human figure, a much older one, also blind, but with his eyes intact, just covered completely with cataracts, spotlessly dead white, I mean unmarked porcelain white. He was naked from the waist up and had wrinkled saggy breasts, a long gray beard, and long gray hair, tangled all over in confused bird's-nest topology; from the waist down, he was encased in a block of some kind of stone, I'd guess marble, though I don't know that much about geology. It looked like marble. Light gray with patches of rosy blush and porphyritic veins. I say "encased," but maybe that *was* the lower half of his body; I don't know; there was never time to ask.

Near the foot of the marble block, somebody (probably not him) had etched *Teiresias*, in the Greek alphabet, and on the sphinx of broken machinery, somebody (probably not either of them) had affixed a nameplate, only some of which was still legible – the rest had been eroded, I think – but I was pretty sure that it was supposed to read *'Oidipous Turannos*, also in the Greek alphabet.

And then the man trapped (trapped?) in the marble block smiled, and I imagine his eyes would've "lit up" if they hadn't been balls of polished calcium, and he said something like, You're here, or, You made it. And I said, Yes, I think so. And we started to talk. Really, he started to talk, allowing for my occasional question or interjection. He said something like this:

## Session #1

Let me begin at the end, since that's what you're here to hear: *the sickness of the city was the city itself*. Good? Understood?

We have been the vectors of our own plague, the sickness we would decrypt, and have erected at its medullar impetus, its pre-cerebral behest, such architectures as occlude the plague entirely by incarnating its exact and total shape. Mass, density, length, width, whatever other dimensional coefficients you care to assign. You will be offered a map of bacillus and told to locate the bacillus somewhere on the map. You will be scarified with the meridians and constellations of a nautical chart and asked to tell which fibrotic star has risen from (to disfigure) your skin.

The corpse-interpreter pauses for what seems like but must not be a breath and says: Listen – it was dry heat until just a few days ago, and all the insects had been scrubbed off the temperature till nightfall, inched over the playback head as in a data-storage surgeon's slow correction of gauss-herniated stars, magnetic irregularities burst through the walls of their own diaphragms to derange, deform, even destroy whatever else we cared to mutilate the tape with, scar the film, record as an archive of such wounds as are required for its recording. That's what you get, anywhere, in any kind of recall: a wound, from which some faculty of meat or of meat's "mind," should you still believe in such distinctions, reverse-engineers the star-trauma's histology of wounding.

You get the shadow-mass left by an amputated organ, and you guess with all your gristle and muscle and yellowing but clean teeth at what that organ might've looked like, what function it could possibly have performed – and the calculating brain, the kind that tells you not to  $x$  because woe betide  $y$ , is nowhere near any of this, is a very late addition, hence the confusion that arises when you try to add it in. I might be wrong. I've been wrong before. My function was never to be correct; it was simply to be wired up for a different impedance than was the rest of the city or the whole of its citizenry, since I was never citizen of anywhere, and had to be led along the fallen walls by a boy

scarcely less blind than I was, had to be leashed to a slave in and out of Thebai, since I could be trusted with the lives and deaths of kings but not with the roads toward and away from their palaces.

You wait for the verdict, you sometimes relish its obscurity, you suffer through my ritual dismissal, sometimes violent, sometimes merely unconcerned, when those who have summoned me reply that I'm either a fraud or an idiot, and I have to tell them, Well, I could be wrong, we could both be wrong, and then it's exeunt me and the slave and maybe certain members of the chorus, who have come up on stage in the capacity of onlookers or the plaguestricken, who have swarmed and fixed themselves into a frieze of minerally-afflicted flesh in metonymy of the geologic sickness of the stars, an asterism's calculus of malady picked as white stones from the laid-open arteries of the corpse like votes for *yes* from what had been a drifter's funerary urns, white stones, remember, calx and later numeration, the buildup of such wincing calcium astrobiology as soon enough will overgrow the bones.

Right? Is that more or less right?

(As I remember it, I "answered.")

Good. So what you don't remember or find right is all the leading-to and -away-from, the miles and miles I had to walk toward Thebes or Athens or Sparta or wherever, in and out of the provinces, not all of whom recognized my station or use, many of whom recognized *me* without taking my job very seriously, many of whom were overrun with people hurt by things I'd said, out of no desire to hurt them or anyone, except, except, well, the truth is maybe a, I don't want to say disease, it's too clean to say disorder though that may be true (since cosmos is chaos seen at the right remove, the correct varispeed, the frame-rate of carbonized stars readjusted to the frailty of the projector's affianced eye), let's call it a syndrome, since we only have the symptoms and the symptoms may be the whole of the thing, alright? OK?

Sorry, it's a tic, this compulsive need for permission. I've spent my life and several lifetimes more, in death also, being ushered into the rooms of men and women who could have me killed for no better reason than feeling like having me killed, and my role has been to tell them what they probably don't want to hear, in real or assumed

stoicism, knowing that I could get strung up in the middle of Act 2 without much ceremony or dissent at all, but knowing also that I probably won't be.

You have this phrase, Scavenger, I've heard it when the doctors of the impalpable disciplines descend on Crete and the islands south of Rome to count the corpses of the unsuccessful immigrants, to ask around the suffered-to-bunk factions of the Libyan Coast Guard for a rough guess at survival rates and the uncounted uncountable lost, you know, film crews and sociologists, they show up in dissociative flocks and then vanish for decades at a time, the only kind of concern they know is the kind that might be the title of an academic conference at which they'll be honored, no, truly, humbled and honored to present their papers, all of them written expressly to gain admission to that conference and to fuck over the little shits who might take their spots instead, honored and humbled, yes, I mean the company you've got me keeping, dear lord, I mean the reflex imprimatur I'll be able to wheeze out of any arthritic joint from this point forward, think of it, like lymph pooling at a wound, like the clear fluid between or after pus and blood, once the sore's been squeezed dry, once the scarring process has begun –

Think of it, please, a wet snapdragon obelisk of zooid stars' deboned mantissa, waiting on the floating point of coral spines, that sums might self-assign.

(But the phrase, the phrase, you had a phrase you wanted to tell me, or at least one I wanted to hear.)

Just the kind of urgency I heard from kings who didn't really want to be told, but god damn if they didn't *think* they did, and that's what I was reborn for – the first birth, and who my mother was and if I even had one, well, who knows, not me nor anybody better than me, but the second birth, you've probably heard stories about that one, how Master and his wife were arguing about fucking and came to me to settle the dispute, and I answered right or wrong – “there is, in fact, more earth than sea,” try to tell us different – and was blinded i'the eye but unblinded behind it, had a caul scraped from the forebrain's haul of cortical pitchblende stars, that their isotopes might panic or relax their subdivision in the presence of whatever's asked of prophecy, the mantic faculty, yes, an ability to notice the decay of your own nuclei.

That's one story. There's another about snakes fucking, twined around a twig in the woods, and you can read a great deal into that one, too, if you're versed in its



elements, if you know the scorch of ozone after the air splits for the thunder-god's thunder, and the frightened people, just barely on the windward side of history, just in the first few instants of historical inclusion, picking up charred acorns from the forest floor, to feed to themselves or to their swine, depending, on what, a lot, ask me later, just depending, and how thence come the words for law and religion and the decipherment of script, all from that plant's name, *ilex*, and the acorns fallen and gathered; and then a whole separate mist to reinstall the swiped cauls of the cortex if you bother yourself thinking about Asklepios the Snake, whose travels are mapped with extraordinary accuracy, like military campaigns, perhaps presaging some – *certainly* presaging yours, Scavenger.

And don't take it personally when I call them "yours." I don't mean that you're a Nazi or a Stalinist or carry a torch for Mao and believe that global warming is a Western conspiracy to prevent the spread of industrialization to the 3<sup>rd</sup> World – which, if it was, has been spectacularly unsuccessful, cause fuck if I can't smell the Chinese air from here, the thickness of it more than palpable enough to rub between greased fingers, I mean truly, you can feel your lungs printed several transparencies deep, a mimeography of menaced tissue, a multilevel xerograph of implanted carcinogen stars.

(I'm not any of those things, for Hitler or Stalin or Mao, or for America either, or really for much of anybody but the larvae, the nameless and crushed whom the scavenger encounters.)

Good. So you're not offended.

(Not really. Who's got time.)

It's just that I call them "yours" because they came after I died, if I died – I'm stateless in the necropolis as ever I was in any unprefixd polis, and the agora will hardly have me, and the amphorai pour out other people's obsequies, and the lachrymatory jars stay dry as my own confusion of multiply gendered organs, the spliced-up medicine show exobiology of whatever stars encode my misspelled genes.

No memory in his cups, hardly even an angry god, and when I show up in the Nekuia, you know, that twelfth or thirteenth chapter of the first book your people cared to call a book (though there were others, earlier; how else would that other fictive blind man have known what to call his?), I'm present there as the only one among the dead whose mind is yet entire, and I come to the lost sailor with a kind of calm missing from

even the ghost of his mother, who tears at him with flesh reduced to cobwebs, her bones a hospice for underprivileged and dying spiders, her skeleton a triage ward for damaged files of proteinaceous stars.

And I drink the blood he pours out for me, after one or another god's or goddess's advice – I want to say it was Circe who told him how to act, but it could've been Calypso, too, but no, probably Circe, it has the ring of blackmail, doesn't it, it's the kind of advice you'd give under extortion, after your medicine has failed to turn your man into a drowsy fuckable pig, and who'd blame anybody on either side for *that*, it's what the living spend much of their time and effort on, as you'll know if you're alive or ever have been, Scavenger – and I'm calm, and I don't paw at him or ask to be remembered to the living, or jostle for pride of place among the dead, and I'm closer to the living man in the underworld than is even his own dead mother. Now how that's for horror.

And I said "yours" because you've learned, since I was anywhere on Earth or under it, to pitch wars and pogroms as campaigns of purification, a form of geoglyphic medicine, the massive earthworks effort of removing some obvious chancre or cyst from the surface of the human world, redressing some populous syphilis by starving the Ukraine, dekulakization – a word not many people remember, because the people who heard it most and who most deeply needed to know what it meant all died of the word and of its knowledge – or the kind of insect reflex Germans used to rouse Jew-baiting blood in their siblings, sons, and daughters, I mean why kill a roach and not a moth, why swat at mosquitoes but not stomp the roly-poly bugs, which actually aren't bugs but "terrestrial crustaceans of the order Isopoda," Armadillidiidae, hell of a convenient word for jamming into a hexameter, pity it came too late for Homer.

And you're told the answer to your own question: "Revulsion," they'll say, "the pure revulsion for a thing not of your kind and deleterious to your health," as if – were revulsion and harm the real reason for any kind of holocaust – we wouldn't throw ourselves into the ovens first, before they were even built, a muffled thudding cannonade of live flesh frustrated with its inability to burn on the dirt floors of unfinished furnaces.

"Truth to power" was the phrase, what I was meant to speak and to whom, and all the outcast consequence predictable as soon as I'm brought in, shuffling, with a boy (a

slave) to lead me, a boy (an idyll's shepherd maybe paroled for the moment from a life of poverty and buggery, but probably not, probably the same life with its coordinates scarcely even reassigned, the model shifted, the geometry given three-dimensional life that he might sleep beneath a parallax of the one constant constellation, some flood-scraped or scar-leavened parataxis of the same predatory stars), a boy (about whom nothing to be said, since the play says nothing, the dramaturgy finds him expendable as his no-name role, and anyway, he'd have been played by one of the principals or possibly a chorus member in necessity's brief drag, swaddled as newborn, neonate indeed to the world of the men who will set the sale price of his sheep, thumbs on the scales, thumbnails often underneath the scaling of his own psoriatic flesh, probing for usable codices of virus the tesserae of dermatopathologic stars emitted from what inner folds of embryo turned outward last, what disjunct and discarded surface of the brain is forced to bear the daylight without even one remove, a constant and disruptive lack of the eye's firewall, prophylactic star-cathexis), a boy, you understand, not much more than that.

He would've been as tired as me, and not much younger, given the rigors of choosing an age when you've been forbidden from dying, as I was thought to have been forbidden. Later the story would change, and it would turn out that I'd been dead the whole time, only with my mind preserved impeccable in hell, as philosophy detached itself like a polyp from the skeleton that bore it, as the brittle and many-times-broken bones of the old poietic ossature rained upward underground in a marine snowfall of photomultiplier stars – ultraviolet, infrared, whatever other ranges you care to name now that there's equipment, biologic however far removed, however filtered by a range of plausible proxies, for its naming – and came up with the idea of Mind as distinct from the flesh it incarnates, or which incarnates it.

Well. As a dead man, I tend to keep my own counsel about it, though I'll give you a hint: I think mind, noos, staging ground for eidos to be shredded by whatever extinctions have slept black as shadow-fruit in the pre-cerebral rungs of the spine, is real, but that it does depend on matter, and that without some term of incarnation somewhere, you're thinking wishfully about your own solidified wishes. Plato lived a thousand years after me, or maybe somewhat less, but fuck Plato – am I allowed to say that at a millennium's remove? – and you might have come to me along different lines, Scavenger, specifically not railroad tracks, without his prattling about the Idea. The

architects of genocide tend to be Idea Men, though their subordinate engineers are afforded only part of that luxury: some wavering-flame, some sensitive-candle stuff about destiny and the Historical Will, as it may befall them, or just a staid belief in the rightness of forces which they've invented and which they pretend are the will of God.

Your time fears fanatics, Scavenger. Perhaps it should learn to live in terror less of fanaticism than of boring, unassuming, reasonable men and women whose actions are nonetheless indistinguishable from a suicide bomber's, if held at several more removes, if given greater and exculpating distance by the forms of *tekhne* intervening between them and what they blow up.

I'm not even talking about the operators of the drones, though of course they're in there, too; I'm not even mentioning the stale air in the trailer, green with a decaying freight of unconsummated surveillance, 24/7 recon-camera feeds with half-lives not much briefer than the syringe bait-and-tackled with the fishhook histamine of radiocontrast stars, and just as apt to sleep in the vein, to canker all hematic dreaming from that point forward with something extra for the scanners and the men who have to sit by them, waiting for blue and yellow to bloom from the averaged outline of a human corpse (living though it may be) so they can write down some automatic computations which they neither understand nor need to, all of which will then be sent for processing at an exorbitant fee to a lab across town, across the country, in sub-Saharan Africa, in one of the border states recently carved out of India, in the million-tenant slums of Mumbai, behind the trash-compactor walls of Kowloon City, anywhere you like, shit, British Indian Ocean Territory, maybe I've mentioned that before, and adolescents with wispy black mustaches already better at reading bloodwork than the tenured and Ph.D'd Americans they think they're going to *replace*, but whom they're actually going to *reinforce*, buttress as manual labor behind a façade of academic inscrutability, while the professor swears (by no means so crude or trivial as actually saying or doing anything) that his genius is more than the sum of any labs' analyses, that he's got an eye for it, yes sir, consulted on several large movies, perhaps you've heard of or seen his work.

These I don't mention. But stop a moment, *siste viator*, and think of how angry the billion people on the Subcontinent are going to be when they find out that their buy-in to capitalism has already occurred, and that it bought them a nearly unimaginable hellscape of obsolete disease and work sorting through industrial and medical waste

which is illegal even in *China*, so christ knows how goddamn hideously dangerous it must be. Many of these people seem to think they'll earn their way into the First World, and that the G-whatever will be an integer richer for their perseverance. Whether this is calculated disinformation or gullibility or ambition beyond bloodlust, even your blind seer cannot say. But if they were ever to get to the big table, they'd be faced first of all with the realization that the First World works *because* there's a Third World, not alongside or in spite of it, and that no amount of scholarship students and Competitively Priced Labor is going to undo the vile magic of that ligature.

Maybe the price of the ticket is the requisition of a billion more anonymous slaves, scheduled long before birth (or the variously scheduled drugs they'll need and won't be able to afford, thanks to a certain former Secretary of State's public-sector work in price-gouging for AIDS medicine in Africa) to die of curable disease in a preventable world, and maybe a former president or two will actually put on a panama hat to go cure pinworm, and let his Medal of Freedom stay in glass on the mantelpiece, to be cleaned two (2) times daily by his Indian or Bengali or Pakistani housekeeper, who's still working off her debt to the company store of the Promised Land, whose first and last promise, in turn, is that such debt can ever be worked off.

Maybe India will finally show us how to spread slavery to the moon, and that way pay down its indenture, shipping test-corpses to Io, digitally reproducing enough experimental coffins to counterfeit for research purposes the geodesic meat of stars.

Infinite scroll, and the same hundred thousand blocky pixels repeating every time you trespass on some internally-defined limit, like the wrath of your own bones against the carnage that encases them at the end of every day, like white gummy tears pressed or shaken from the skeleton's wrath-bearing tree.

The small birds, snipes, sparrows, young robins, are trying to clean themselves with dust and come away smeared with a humid and nameless poultice, whatever dust becomes when the air is wet with insects and the daytime is a respiratory ailment to be suffered until night lets us breathe again, if we can ever breathe again; the fieldmice clamor an accidental stepwise music from the piles of bones, stone, metal, and disappear into the stubble of grass less cut than etiolate, allowed to die in a heat it had

no means of converting, sunshine nourishing only a vitamin deficiency in the stalled chlorophyll stars.

Sorry if I seem distracted. Do you know anything about medicine, Scavenger?

(I've only got a layman's scattered knowledge. An interest in the words and in the body, but no real idea of how to put my hand to any organ, other than to kill it, which I've never meant to do. Well, almost never. I've tried to kill some parts of myself before, and they've always proven suspiciously durable, that is, compared to the awareness they incarnate. You'd think a fragile man's wrists would be fragile, too, but there are blunted kitchen knives, for butter and for steak, and the blades of disposable razors mangled out of all cutting shape, from here back to the deepest American south to disprove that thesis.)

You drink?

(I used to. Couldn't die of that either, at least not yet. I sometimes fear cirrhosis, hepatitis, enlargement, NSAIDs piling up in a ream of backlogged blood like a library of unclassified star-afterbirth, fetal twins conjoined to the placenta and eaten over an incinerator fire or buried underneath a sapling.)

I don't drink either, or can't, being apparently dead, but lately I've started to wonder about this bump on my torso. Didn't notice it until just a few years ago. Or what I think were, are, years. It's just underneath my lowest right rib, the one subject to Eden's foreign math, I think, and at first I took it for a subcutaneous cyst or maybe even a supernumerary nipple, and then I stopped thinking about it, and if I could've continued not to think about it, we'd be talking ourselves panicked about something else. But a little while ago I heard that prolonged periods of extreme alcoholism can swell your liver so much that you can actually feel it from the outside, and I've started to wonder if that bump is maybe the product of drinking, and if I'll have to die again – which, trust me, you do *not* want to do if you can help it, which you can't.

(Does it hurt?)

The bump?

(The dying again.)

Horribly. And no respite from it, except to come up again into the buried world, gasping like you've just drowned and been resuscitated without your permission – should've signed the nil-by-mouth, should've left orders in case of a necessary

respirator, a feeding tube, a bag to store my bile in – and just as confused about being dead as you were the first time. Have you ever drowned and then been brought back?

(I don't think so.)

Inland creature. Chances are you won't be, but maybe give it a try sometime. There's no reason I should remember my own death, especially since I had to pick it up in the form of a rumor – at first I was immortal, remember, and then I was dead already but still coherent – but what little memory I do have is much like the drowning and the white, the waterlogged, the lake-dragged and forensic rebirth, slapped to sowl by an EMT, irritated cops scratching out filled blanks on their incident reports or throwing them away entirely. Which is why I worry about this bump under my ribs, and wonder who's been drinking in my name, since I can't drink.

(Is there medicine for the dead? And is that what I've come here to ask?)

In a sense, and possibly. We can be wounded to the deficit of other wounds, productively hurt, balanced at such a delicate rapprochement of contused or lacerated memory that we scar over in all the right places, and people keep drinking to us, and dictators with the minds of day-drunk town-square bigots will crawl to our tombs and pay eunuch homage. But in my case, maybe they should stop, since I think I can feel my liver creeping out between my bones; or maybe it's not their fault, maybe the cups have all run dry but for the crippled king's gouty genital blood, and what I'm suffering is the carbon saturation of star-alcohols outside the solar system, planet-forming regions drunk already on their own teetering asymptotic blood.

You want some alien booze? Freshly mined, or so my creditors assure me. Frigid serum drawn of the kink of a conjectural galaxy like frozen marrow from the hilltop where an archaeologist quarries his unclassified find. Moonshine you pour right down your spine.

Fuck you *right* up. Hey Fed, hey wiretapper, you wanna get shittily talkative on a black glittering bottle, heavy liquefied time, absolute zero approached in randomized spirals by the half-life of contained xenobiotic stars?

(But you had mentioned "truth to power," as by preposition, a transmission, something sent.)

I did. I must've. Consider where they led me before they brought me in for the seasonal verdict – and consider also that all power, then, was a power of the seasons: that the god, thus the king, thus the city, had to die every winter for springtime's scheduled resurrection, and that I would accordingly be brought in by intervals predictable if not quite regular, feel a phosphorous stirring in the tray of dirt where I might've been thought to lie between such summonings, a shallow drawer of significant soil, a sample-slide of stars' forensic casework not yet sorted into biopsy or contents of disease, protein complexes not yet unwound from their histone constellations, and all the night sky in the DNA still more or less functional, capable of guiding whatever navigation it could guide before, though perhaps unworkably distant now from the communicating vessels – where the red and white blood moved like skiffs and clippers in a continent of choked canals, a city of blue vacant veins where weather moved overhead in untouchable premonition.

Not wet when raining, nor dry when there was sun, though there was rarely sun: an autocue of sterilized and rolling cleanroom stars, and clouds like the effusions of a chemical reaction planned in a separate chamber, one of those incubators with asbestos gloves built into its glass wall, diagnostic down to its own physiology, where researchers may handle a toxic ore or touch the skin of a harlequin baby, rearrange the pigment spot upon the gelatinous embryo, thus to reprogram its eventual yield of eyes, the black absorbent output-stars assigned to any source code of eventual deformity; not even accident-spawn; retail mutants, which should exclude them from the heading of mutation; chickens designed to be so overweight they break their own legs every time they try to scamper, cows fed on indigestible corn and then on sheets of steel sponge to make them vomit what they can't digest, dogs with auger holes drilled through the black-red of their cheeks and leaking non-trivial saliva to produce non-zero results, a whole catalepsis of significance delivered from the instant to its own past, so that we know our present work to be worthwhile, so we can guess we won't have regretted any of this and thus need not regret it in the instant; I mean, I have a lease on a two-bedroom place, just a few blocks from the test site, the significantly bad-random clumps of trees and bracken seen from overhead on what might be a surveillance drone's colonoscopy or a lubed flexible stalk-eye camera probing the joints of dead arthropod stars but is, actually, only a bit of open-source and public-access software, for real, you don't even



have to download the program, you just enter the right URL into the address bar and then the right sequence of proper nouns into the search field, and there you are: we, not you and me, but I and another, spent most of last night looking at overhead views of supposedly decommissioned military encampments, Air Force bases, Air National Guard reserve stations, and noticed that all of them entailed the same flaccid disguise of earthworks, a clean-cut and well-maintained highway through miles and miles of unlivable scrubland, and then the outbuildings and guard stations and retaining walls and biohazard signs, right, and then the entrances named in a fit of martial nostalgia not even the 75-year old janitor can really remember first hand, the Katy Entrance, the Elizabeth Entrance, nuclear-error pinups, as misplaced and seventh-hand a sense of sepia warmth as hanging '40s porn over the banks of screens where the drone operators spill their coffee and bitch about contrast and resolution, inadequately filtered images, poor instructions from and to Mission Control, I mean fuck me, you know, every time they see a blip that looks less than five feet tall they call it a "child" and tell us to hold off, but shit, bro, I see things that look like rifles all the time and don't get to tell nobody, don't get to call it on, if that's a phrase, which it should be if it isn't – scarce room for doughboy heroics or gas-trench mustache-waxing in that colony of death-by-menu-option, where a group of Americans not much less or more culpable than any others for the actions of their nation, which would be carried out with or without them, perform what has perhaps superseded buying and selling as the fundamental American act: they *select*; they're given a list of choices and they choose their favorite; this list happens to refer to targets and coordinates, and so may tear apart the sky above, let's say, a school where Afghan shepherd children, less removed from ancient Greece than from the countries where their wool and opium will be sold, are shouting at each other across the gravel or just sitting bored in a classroom while some hapless Coalition translator, whose cover story is *Afghan gradeschool teacher*, tries to get across the meaning of diacritic marks in Arabic, which is something he's spent his entire life studying and still barely understands, so think of the SEALs who undergo an "intensive 6-week course in literary and spoken Arabic" and come out thinking they don't need to worry about signal and noise, about the CAT scan's propensity to seed the analyzed body with alien organs of condensed star-interference.

So the operators pick their favorite item from the list, that they might get paid on the 1<sup>st</sup>- and 15<sup>th</sup>-listed days of a month in a twelve-item list, that they might then choose their favorite options from a world consisting of lists for their selection, now that buying and selling are so much an off-to-the-side business, prosecuted on scales and in arenas that elude by many many miles any kind of common understanding. Don't worry about Greece defaulting or being forced to accept German austerity, and certainly don't consider the fact of anti-immigration rhetoric as a baffler against any serious talk about NAFTA, or a kind of radar repellent, the same sort plated on the hulls of the stealth bombers they manufactured just a few miles away at Whiteman, designed to keep us from finding – as if we wanted to find them – the junkyard and roadside graves of the Mexican women who were fed to the borderland factories, so that we can continue to select among the various options the factories produce. I like rustic. You like modern. Let's compromise. Let's each get our own. Democracy prevails.

No point trying to bat the fruitflies away or smash the ravenous hatchling mosquitoes on the mirrors, whitewash, enamel – they seem to breed less in the room than in your eye, an unwanted cathexis, conversion of external signals to neurotransmitters and cerebral voltage going both ways at once, a delusional parasitosis of very real disease-transmitting stars: black beneath the cornea, black-brown out in what seems like space and is really space's light bent over and through that envelope of rounded and stomped horn, a tessellated frieze of what might've been tusks come to cover and hold the eye's cold gel, and in it hang the animate corpses of the insects you killed yesterday and will kill again tonight, dash in the doorway to slam the door against, snipe from the screen, roaches and cicadas in their revolting silent slow-motion birth, optical-lobe silicosis, black-lung stars marring the X-ray in an electron cloud of possible flourishing cancers.

Superposition, phase space, however you like. I've slapped and scratched and prodded and slammed my palm against what turned out to be glass, which broke beneath the impact and shed more blood for the bloodsuckers to batten on or at least feel blindly toward – think of that: weak eyes, you'd imagine, compound maybe, I don't know much about the physiology of leeches or mosquitoes, but an overwhelming sense of smell, something like the berserker's murderous intuition of the vectors of greatest

harm, his sense of how to cut through flesh most like cutting through air, reengineer the whole terrain of meat and grass and trees beneath the gasping oxygenate stars (immune to all toxicity but that of breath), until his movement is the infliction of damage, and his invulnerability is that he's just part of the landscape, a section of horizon, say, like the millionth of a degree among the 360 around the call-it-a-sphere of plosive light which first voiced the wrecked galaxies into their grammar, first gagged on the allergen that spaced its paratactic hiss as histaminic stars.

The killer is not so much a killer, then, as the force of violence itself (not death, which is much larger than violence, though possibly of equal duration in time, I don't know, I haven't been told yet), and seems himself impossible to kill because to kill him would be to reconstruct, again, the whole field where the battle's been pitched, like assassinating the weather, tearing the rainclouds apart with the same spears you used to spike and toss the infidels' babies into a heap for later burning or the curious plastic surgery of crows, the reconstructive bone-astronomy of jackals.

Should be easy, right? The human hand is of incredible strength and could break almost anything if it were numb to pain but awake enough to keep its grip. Truly. You'd be amazed at what people can tear apart with their bare hands when they can't feel how badly it hurts. And it's an old maxim of open-sky burial that the hands are almost always the last to go, that even the carrion birds have a damnably hard time picking apart the fingers and branched plate of the palm, snapping radius from ulna, that calcium pinhole camera whose contact points photograph osteon-stars in eclipse. Permanently. So deeply co-embedded that, by the time of the next eclipse (and there are lists to lists that, too, though they're less open to your selection), you'll forget about the first, and stand upon the buckled ridge or trophy mountaintop it created.

(You mentioned democracy. Your invention, wasn't it?)

Not *mine*, but if by "your" you mean "the Greeks'," then I guess I can be blamed – but listen: there's more to say before we get to that, and anyway, a myth is not of the nationality that claims it. I'm no more Greek than a Sioux god is American, which is to say, not until the massacre relieves me of my tribal and non-statist delusions, not until the holocaust builds borders out of compacted ash and furnace-reduced bone, at which point everybody knows where Greece begins and ends, and we might even agree on a

name for it and take the others for epithets, as transcribed by a man (or a woman, or by men or women, if there was a Homer at all) who was born about as close to Troy as to Athens, who had no particular geographical reason to feel himself more affiliated with the Atreides than with Paris and Hector, and who notably doesn't call "his" enemies cowards unless they commit an act of manifest cowardice. Look at the *Iliad* sometime with that in mind. The Trojans are just men who have to die in a Greek song, not particularly villainous, certainly less guilty of guile and cunning than are the Greeks, and ultimately felled not by prowess or bravery but by a scheme, a feint, a stratagem, which says a lot about the next book and why it needed to be written or transcribed.

And the kidnapping, or possibly elopement, of a Greek queen with a semi-Turkish prince, well, that's the kind of thing the Thunder God was up to all the time, wasn't it (founded Europe that way, on the back of a garlanded bull, the stunted progeny of a quick fuck across lines of species and literal blood, hers white and red catching on his hooked astrocytes of ichor, clear, cold, sweet, the spinal fluid of a recently vertebrate deity, the cellular repair of certain oxidizing stars' tarnished DNA).

Myths' slag litters the Ur-slum where they lead me first and where I, though blind, can see the graded, the pixilated redness of the sky, a digital installation, the stratified geology of methanogen stars' acrid vapor seeping; clinker and incinerator-tokens, coins of a body part not to be bought back from the ferryman, not to be insured across the passage, no pawn ticket, no bill of sale, not even a deed in the form of a gene, a wrecked tracer entitling you to the restitution of mutant stars clogged behind their ligand gate like unclaimed emigrants' shoes in some warehouse, somewhere house, on another coastal island, not the famous one, no, a basement with no statue to provide such automatic anti-anonymity (there *must* be a honeycomb beneath a wax candle that large; no such product of hives' genetic industry could possibly exclude some on-site housing for the bees, even if they're dead, and the housing is the meanest possible form of mass grave, a ditch with the corpses roped up head to toe in layer after layer of crushed black-and-gold blood-hawasers, a giant mainframe of wafer-thin extractable circuit-boards stacked one atop the other in divisions so minute as to require a special tool, a form of postpartum forceps, for their gloved and semi-sterile extraction, logic-arcs failing with the decay of wings and thoraces, insect pulp decaying in an inverted

graph of its onetime success at bussing the unmixed multitrack of pollenate stars to the fused stereo bouncedown of stamen and pistil) – right?

These will be body parts left in medicine’s escrow or planted like the afterbirth upon the eastern shore of that black river, across which not even its own stump of cauterized blood vessels will recall it. Someone has taken a flatiron to the gulfs in which terminate the rivers of Babylon, and there will be no reminiscent Zion figured by their distribution over that flat land, the garden at the desert’s edge, where now men and women in combat fatigues paler than the rinds of camel spiders swarm up and down the steps of a reconstructed ziggurat, conceivably looking for what the sitrep and the handbook call “improvised explosive devices,” which is a funnier juxtaposition of adjectives than anybody has bothered to notice yet. It can’t be *that* improvised if you know it’s supposed to explode.

The real IEDs are the basement meth labs blowing up all across your hometown, Scavenger, wherever you’re from, Mittelamerikanischer and that’s all I need to know, remember?

The sharp but not especially loud *bang* across the street, the doors of the attached garage flexing outward like the final fissure of a long-overworked joint, windows blown to an icefall of cinder-slathered glass upon the driveway, and though we were several blocks away, on the weedgrown soccer field of a discontinued public high school, we could smell the explosion as soon as it happened, an odd mix of other chemical smells: cordite in July, gunpowder on sanctioned and unapproved occasions, the waft of pistol-discharge that whipped through the black hot air on a night as humid as the inner cheek of a gored deer: a stuck pig gasping, the boar stung with his own tusk after stinging the seasonal king, a stent of water-insoluble plastic printed with quick photomachinery to counteract the keloid plasm 3D-printed by the stars upon what once was called your liver and is now a rigorous document of dysfunction, piling up runtime errors line after line and much too fast to read, an automatic antivirus program held up to the very edge of a malware star’s gravitational pull and spitting out wronged diagnostics quicker than even the technicians can verify them, held together only by the integrity of its scars.

Go ahead, poke beneath your rightmost bottom rib, see where cirrhosis or the kind of hepatitis you don’t even have any fun acquiring has swollen that disembodied

fibrous brown wing into a pure organ of pain, the place where all unprefixd -algia collects, and conveniently so, sparing you and I the effort of learning the Greek for all the different places your capable of being (of storing, of sensing) hurt.

I only know so much of my own language, Scavenger. They were writing a different dialect by the time they came to write me down, and to accuse and laud me both by the inclusion. I'm told it was a kind of polyglot Ionian argot, with interlacing of the minstrel's favorite words from other idioglossia, whatever he'd picked up by being variously 1). blind; 2). a soldier; 3). a prisoner, as his full name would suggest; 4). an islander rather than a mainlander; 5). some kind of simpering male courtesan, maybe even as far west as the islands south of Italy, if Mr. Butler is to be believed, and why the hell not, he said some things worth saying; 6). a professional songster, like one of yours in the early dregs of the last century, crawling in panic and hunger around the American south, trying to sing his way out of any too-stern observance of the Jim Crow laws, because even the most murderable white bigot don't get too het up about the police and the mayor's mansion when them boys is singin' somethin' wonderful, and hell, I guess I just like to go down'ere ever once in a while and see how the other half lives, namely underneath me.

Panicked men, Scavenger, black American males whose genealogical trees were pasted-together bills of sale and often went no further back than the sarcastic acquisition of a last name when the Proclamation did its intended duty and freed not a single fucking slave, remember, since it declared slavery illegal only in the states which were already rebelling against the Union – which is a little bit like declaring all German genocides of Jews illegal circa 1946, and hey, didn't you stage those Nuremberg Follies for exactly such a purpose, weren't there stories about hanging yourself in your cell as a final measure of disdain, the way you and I might also commit a cellular suicide were either of us any longer capable of dying, what was his rank, I want to get the proper nouns right, I want to say Feldmarschall – let's get all the titles in – Feldmarschalls, Vizekanzlers, Ministerpräsidenten of Prussia till there was no more Prussia, neither to minister nor over which to preside, Ministers for Economics (November '37 – January '38, so he must've been a knockout), for Aviation ('33 – '45, so a preferable appointment), commander-in-chief of the Luftwaffe from 1935 till der Untergang des Abendlandes, so lay that atop or beneath his succession of Schacht as the Minister of

Economics in November '37, a Renaissance man, ganz richtig, since nobody ever specified what had to be reborn in any certain Renaissance ...

And even, no shit, the Minister of Forestry for a while, since who better to administer the Reich's forests than the man who knew them best from overhead and would have such ample opportunities for comparison to the Ausland he'd be burning down, that's one way to grade a forest, right, how easily it burns, how recent an update to the overall ballistics of the Reich was necessary to send that fucker back to the ashes, A-, which is still an A, bitte, an A aber mit Kleingeld jingling, for doing such an accurate impersonation of the future Jews, for not even exploding, no showers of splinters, no reek of daylong burning leaves, just a high-water mark of carbonization climbing almost instantly up the trunk with a sound like a snake being stepped on, the encryption of the Torah's most bitter scrolls in fluid solution with the life-support sap of the lignified xylem star.

Same star's intron of aeronautics dangling, wrecked, cracked, bubbled, a loose board in the genetic manger of an already-transcribed swath of DNA, passed over, transfer-proteins booming out in the transmembrane domain like dry thunder not on but just *under* the horizon, in a land as flat as yours, where it's possible from certain vantages (often those out on the road, between a place you fear to reach and a place to which you fear to return, and no way to sum or average that fear into a single mathematics, insoluble coefficients refusing to cross out either above or below the denominator, preventing as yet the transcription of any slope-intercept line, only this dwindling freak integer like an asymptote, running strictly north-south, occasional semiquavers into the decimal domain, west to Wichita, a little bit back east for the ugliest stretches of Oklahoma, but come on, you know where we're going, a straight shot through the lands of legal firearms, an open-carry license like a passport at every border crossing where the bigot cops are rewarded for every truckload of Mexicans they pull over, notwithstanding the fact that the little tollbooths and security huts in which the state employees stand – those last few, after the privatization of everything from water to jail – were almost invariably built by truckloads of Mexicans, working for a flat rate per Butler building which inevitably comes out below minimum wage, not that they're complaining, because they'd be fired and maybe turned in to Immigration if they

complained, and nobody's stupid here, come on, we all know the trains run from the heart of Kansas City, right there at the emptied-out ex-stockyards by the river, all the way to Guatemala, the tip of the Yucatan, and that there's river-bound pyramid-resonance enough along the way to observe, quite at your mandatory leisure, handcuffed to the guardrail inside a boxcar with no seats, the draining and replacement of the stars' seasonal blood, the paragraphs of alphanumeric labwork abbreviations seeping into and through the translucent black stone where we sometimes cut the wrists and throats of men, women, and children chosen, or volunteering for sacrifice, eager or afraid or both to let their veins compose a nexus with the black road of the knife-wound, the infected razor-edit, sloping right down through the middle of the lacerated Milky Way) ...

Possible, I was saying, from certain vantages, to see storms without being beneath them, to watch the fields where thunder does mean lightning and rain from a parking lot or set of half-uprooted train tracks where they only mean lightning and thunder, feeling them split and burst the air but dry as you weren't born, losing your footing every few minutes no matter how still you try to stand, because all that's underfoot is gravel, broken glass, discarded spikes and nails, rail-driver garbage long since pensioned off to some Urban Beautification Committee which is actually a front for, let's say, a private consortium looking to buy the entire sewer system from underneath the city, thence to cater its waste disposal only to the neighborhoods which can afford the Premium Disposal Package, a Mafioso throwback without any of the blurry ethnic nostalgia.

And with none of the furious charity, however many times it's been sold out and travestied by now, of Italians protecting each other when the cops weren't too enthusiastic about picking up distress calls from particular neighborhoods – though, let's not forget, those Italians were almost certainly bigots too, and weren't about to let the moulignoni into any protective society, no more than the Irish banded together to help the Poles or the Catholic Czechs formed human cordons to protect the Czech Jews: none of that ever fucking happened, did it, Scavenger, and isn't there a bit of a wish for its renewed non-occurrence in all that sudden interest in their bloodlines your classmates began to take, aetat 15 or so, been in high school long enough by now to need a way to segregate themselves even further than the economic criteria of high school attendance already do, so they fantasized about being the great-grandsons of IRA, about



uncles in Solidarnosc, about much-removed cousins wearing black gloves to extract information from the KGB, and for a while the Irish kids sat with the other Irish kids and tried to pretend they gave a shit about tin whistles and rugby.

It would just be sad, and almost pitiable, if it weren't the small-scale rehearsal of everything they'll be asked to act like they believe from that point forward. Half a weekend digging up your ancestor's Ellis Island papers (and excited about the project for maybe three of the required fifteen hours), while not ten blocks to the east there lies a neighborhood whose occupants' grandparents became American by virtue of a twenty dollar bill or a bit of stock in a quick-growing bank – calling the Merrills, Lynches, Kempers – and whose “citizenship” will be revoked with even less ceremony. But, saving grace, a bit more paperwork: the officer's grammatically feeble incident report will wash like gutter-wet newspaper down to the public defender's office, and will achieve as much publicity as on-the-scene reporting of last year's least-watched collision of two cars, neither one traceable through any credit firm or DMV, each bound for anywhere at all.

Red sky from the corpsefires or from steel mills out of season, sunset's eschar sloughing hypertrophic stars. Come on, Scavenger. You know these places. Period details aside, you've even lived in them. Tell me: has your age solved the problem of the slums?

(Quite the opposite. I'm told that, in a dead era, the slum was a vexing byproduct of the city; now the city has effectively ceased to exist, though some of its architecture still obtains, and serves as a fictive excuse for the fractal proliferation of the slums. We live in order to spread squalor. We pay for and expect certain protections in order that they be elsewhere revoked.)

Exactly. You know them well enough. Up- or backdate it as you please: say we live beneath a viral database of anachronistic stars, their excretory sleet of anode sludge importing damaged files for obsolete diseases, missing directories whose absence can't prevent the leprosy budding on the skin, the syphilis blooming silver sores around the soon-to-be-missing mouth, now less an organ than an accidental slit in the side of a soft rotten fruit, a corrupt melon's long-ago engagement with the last knife of the last person who risked eating any of it, and found himself vomiting liquefied melon-flesh into an

alley whose other contents were more or less indistinguishable from what spattered straight out of his stomach like the dirty inconstant rainfall of industrial places, unevenly weighted by the sift and swirl and set of its pollution, contaminant-star byproducts' affinity to snow or hothouse drizzles.

You know them. The materials change but the zones stay the same: there's *always*, always, wherever you are, this swath of desolation on the outskirts, the sometimes-grids of streets you'd never dream of calling neighborhoods, nothing so cynically anodyne – even the city planners and the pensioned Corps of Engineers never called it a “neighborhood.” Men who lie for a living couldn't quite croak *that* one out. They simply avoided mentioning it, except for its occasional value as a scare tactic, a future with which to threaten the parts of the city still under the bromide suasion of “neighborhood,” where people still imagined that they might know or even want to know the people who lived next to them. Remember the “broken-window theory”? Perfect form. Stuck the landing. Tease the suburbs with what you'll call a causeless Kristallnacht, and hide the piles of monogrammed bricks you yourself have used to break the windows – not exclusively Jews', not anymore: memos, budgets, any dodge that can extract from the city council a 21-10 yea vote to give a private developer \$250 million for a new basketball stadium while you're deferring payments to public school teachers and closing down the mental hospitals in the black part of town.

Any means necessary, didn't the man say? What, you want a ride, you going uptown? Cause uptown is the only way anyone with a car is going. Get yourself asperged by the wind off lake Michigan and linger all day outside the intake facility, hoping it's an insane asylum's, because if not, it's probably Cook County's, and nobody who goes in there ever comes out. Not with intact internal organs and functional front brain.

A dirty windbreaker, mismatched socks, sweatpants tucked into winter boots though it's a brutal late-July, with a cardboard sign about having fought in some country we'd prefer to forget, while the polished cars head north as quickly as their drivers' skin allows (a white guy doing 75 in a 60, well, that's what you call a scruple, not something the police need to waste their time on) and the dirty, half-junked, wheezing, purple-smoke-billowing sedans that have survived the last American Industrial Age, those memorizing like a Torah portion the date the steel mills closed outside Pittsburgh, held

together now by their rust as a galaxy's formation is dependent on the necropolis biofeedback of gravity still exerted by dead stars (all the more so for their dying: to come apart or to collapse is to let loose the heat, the energy, once used to keep you hanging together, and those stars large enough to go nova will deform the local star system's histology in exact proportion to the force of their removal, which is, in turn, the darkly mirrored ergon once required to compose them, the tain of their silvered spines, the toxic mercury drip hardened to compose an autonomic skeleton of stars).

But you know that. I've heard you do. I've been told. There are rumors and then there are rumors, and who but the dead should spread them quickest, who pick them up like the crepitant gristle of worms in the earth, blind animals sightless not because they were wounded or defective at birth but because the part of the world they occupy has never required them to have eyes – a stray pigment spot here and there, sure, the cluster of cells darkening the embryo of an annelid star, but at that stage it remained, was never prodded toward a deeper density of light's absorption ...

And, we must imagine, thus takes light for what it is, particle and wave, as much an *object* as a condition, while we tend to see not light but what light shows us, tend to rate light on a percentage scale of how well it makes the world obvious, forgetting that light is alive itself and not a transparent medium, is an opacity the more seductive for its ubiquity. Light ain't clear, Scavenger, and you don't see right through it. You see things as shaded, tinted, deformed by it. You stumble over the surface of the day, mistaking its occasions of consonants for pure rhyme with the luminous topology of mutagen stars.

And though I was supposedly blinded, past tense, past participle even, an event occurrent at a definite if unknown time and place, I find now that I approach my blindness as must a worm, a cave-fish, an infant mole: not the deprivation of light, but its transposition into a different register, as though you were to go deaf but be able to taste sound and recognize it that way, to have your tongue put to sleep but speak by the raising and lowering, the hackling and taxogrammic calm, of the joints of your curare-embalmed bones, the spinous processes extending from the vertebrae of quadriplegic stars.

(And you remember?)

Sure, memory is in there, as much as anything else, but I “see” through my skin, as an insect breathes through its; I look out of a spiracle, through glabrous acres of whale-flesh, staring up to where refracted broken water-stars, the drowned constellations, strew some gelatinous light over Jonah, as his great-grandchildren might’ve stared up through the flues of the Dachau smokestacks, watching the ruakh, the breath once synonymous with spirit, filtered now through ash and burnt bone, a tincture maybe recognizable to the god who exhaled it and maybe not, a thermographic star once to be found smoldering in the thorax and now tainted with the chemical signature of the broken vessel which bore it; and though the skin of mine visible above this herm, this lobotomized obelisk, is hairless as a stillborn baby’s, still my bones have little feathers like the scales of moths, not large enough to see with the unassisted eye, but if you were to crush one of them against a lightbulb or screen door – and you could; they’re brittler than the chalk of their analogues, though as much composed of discarded marine bone, an osseous compound eye, a many-species splice coiled in the blastular cavities of once-cartilaginous stars – you’d see a cloud of clumpy dust go up, then quickly fall, bunched up like chunks of polystyrene foam or fiberglass insulation, and you might wonder, as you do, wonder for a moment what secret compartment of the moth was hiding all that dust, unable to believe that it lay on the wings and outside of the body, that you’ve just killed something arrested halfway between insect and bird, and thus as much an evolutionary relic as some lizards are, posted on the meridian where bird devolves to dinosaur, carrying the thunderous skeleton of a Triassic behemoth but as hollow avian bone now, and in a much smaller body, sized down to the pliant delicacy of the human-hunted flesh, a paleontology of analogized stars for omnivores to shoot down, pluck, gut, roast.

And on the outside out of the city, in the unincorporated places, neither their own townships nor such “area” as any larger municipality would claim, bickered over by mayors and councilwomen who don’t want its murder and drug numbers on *their* books, a kind of inverse Anschluss here, arguing that, ja, aber nein, nein, Independence, Grandview, Raytown are historically part of *your* territory, nicht wahr, speak your stunted dialectic, are stung in the cheeks with your odd accent, half the flat-voweled and rhotic Polish accent of old Chicago, half the buckshot-and-moonshine twang of the states just beneath you now, Scavenger, the places you pass through to pick up cocaine

and anecdotes, the \$60-a-night motel where you and three other men in reeking suits you'd worn for three or four days stuck your spit-dampened fingers into a bag of what you *hoped* was bad coke, to follow the transaction by which you acquired it (first set of three that night at a pool hall, ten or twelve tables lined up side-by-side down the length of a narrow corridor, with just enough room between them to get a crew of small-time Little Rock hustlers and their girlfriends pissed off about who bumped whom in the byplay of accidentally intersecting bets, hey, motherfucker, you wanna stay the fuck off my elbow while I'm tryna beat 'is cocksucker right here, I gotta go behind the back to fuckin' break, babe, good luck, you know, that's how my daddy always did it, god rest his miserable cocksuckin' soul, and speakin' of cock and who sucks it, you notice Bailey's name's all over both 'em bathrooms back there? Hope that's her *old* phone number, cause shit, *I'd* call it if I didn't know the bitch – and after the shambling half-coordinated music, already sloppy drunk on the whiskey-and-cokes the bar was too careless to card you for, trying to avoid the eyes of a mangy-looking lupine 6'5" in a trucker hat who turned a barstool to face the stage and rubbed his cock through his jeans while looking right at your babyfaced and slightly effeminate rhythm guitar player, well, after all that, the bassist hopped off stage to get himself a drink before losing too much of your 15-minute set break, hoping to get another before you have to go back on, hey, maybe do a song or two without me, guys, something with just guitars, I know all y'all shitheads can sing harmony, do some Motown in stilted gringo 8<sup>th</sup> notes while I grab a whiskey sour and smoke some of the pot we bought off the side of the highway in Branson – it was amazing, actually: singer says, Fuck, I wish we had some weed, my stomach's a mess and we've got three shows tonight, and the bass player says, Don't worry, I've got a guy, dials a number, names a highway, and maybe twenty minutes later we pull up alongside a rest stop billboard – not the rest stop itself, just the billboard – where a short hairy guy in a hunting vest stands, watches the bass player get out of the van, palm-slaps him two dime bags while accepting a \$20 high-five with the other hand, then gives a one-armed chest-bumping male hug and disappears back into the unmanicured roadside foliage, and all the sudden we've got weed for that night, and Scavenger, didn't you say, How the fuck did you *do* that?, and the bass player said, Oh, that's my brother, he lives somewhere around here – so anyway, half of half an hour offstage while the remaining  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the band lilts limping through an oddly Celtic-

sounding rendition of “You Really Got a Hold On Me,” too many 4ths in the harmony, maybe, and somebody none of you had ever seen before comes up to shake your bass player’s hand, probably to ask/demand that you play “Carry On, Wayward Son” in the next set, but no, not a word, sunglasses in an Arkansas bar at about 1 am, and it turns out he’s palming him-you-us a bag of menthol-smelling too-white cocaine, later to be dabbed at by nervous fingers atop the peeling plastic veneer of a motel dresser after you’d seen what a mistake it was to try to find some anonymous party to crash with, just a fan, a friendly, you know, in the middle of Arkansas, and years before the state trooper pulled you over and threatened you with a K9 unit for bringing drugs out of Texas. Sorry, officer. Right crime, wrong year. Now I don’t even have the trafficking or use of controlled substances to explain my behavior. I just go the same places small-time drug dealers do, know most of the same people, and will probably die in the same tracklight meanness, watching my wrist-blood phase from brown to red in the flicker of an eviscerated halogen star).

Skin a topography of sores and sloughs and bites, held together by the tensile strength of malady, peat bogs for preserving its own cytological dead, the mineralized surfaces of stars’ extracellular matrices, the protein architecture hosting zeroes at each of its critical points, and a grit of accidental soil and ancient frozen botany come to fill each still-gulping mathematic mouth, in fluxes and jags of inconstant calculus, derivatives wheeling through the iron-rich dirt like carrion crows through what passes for the sky overhead, though the sky itself never passes, gives no sign of maturation or decay, juvescence never, Christ the Tiger only on assigned days, feasts we haven’t the time off from work or the pocket money to honor, and yet somebody’s still going to mock up a wire frame ragged with paper flowers and twists of tinfoil, with maybe a saint or the funeral card of a child killed in a car accident for centerpiece, to draw us across the highway overpass, to pause us at its center, reflective less on missing life or local hazard than on the few sparse reasons not to jump off, pretty certain that, at this hour, we wouldn’t dent anybody’s roof or hood, would provide a startling asymptote to the graphs of traffic, an infinite-slope spike,  $\Delta t$  screaming loose in a fit of sheer numerical panic, while dogwood blossoms on the disembodied wicker man press close to the softened glass inside our eyes, embalm among the glial layer twisted roots, like swamp-

cypress remainders, of deceased and long-deleted stars, the tertiary acid structure permanently waiting for its last coil to be renamed DNA.

Acids everywhere, threatened in the rain, obvious in the soil, just strong enough to wash away everything but the teeth and stronger bones of the corpses who don't dot this edgeland, though if you were to fly low overhead with the right kind of camera equipment – radiographic, exposure-time sidechained to the decay of some predictable isotope, like searching for coffins of stars in metaphase – you *would* find thousands, possibly millions, of dead bodies underneath less than the regulation six feet of soil, not all of which betoken something sinister. Many were buried by their two or three widows, children, parents, without time to measure the depth of the grave, nervous of the swing of the searchlights, the blinding interrogation-wattage lamps posted at each corner of the barbed wire that surrounds the factories

(Cheap clothes, cheap furniture, slightly more expensive guns, star-quarantine for medical research and for military R&D, equally likely to be fit into a nanomachine rinsing down the metastatic cells and in the wiring of a missile's nosecone, the control panels of a chained-to-the-wrist briefcase, a white dome of fatal light come blooming over either foreign capitals or cancers like some blizzard-ravaged chemotherapy of stars, the tatters of burnt film fluttering in numb snowfall from the strips that know their damage as pictography, their cicatrix as image's shallow radix, topsoil roots),

scared to be caught using "company property" for a purpose so meanly personal as burying their blood relations, though to be honest, nobody's really sure what comprises company property and what's merely treated that way. Condition of the edgelands, Scavenger. You could – some have – you could go to City Hall and look up all the claimjumped deeds and petty buddy-fucking they've seen fit to put on paper, note the megasupply receipts for purchase of a plot of mud  $x$  by  $y$  miles, each square foot of it in turn subcontracted to some vertically-integrated concern out of Taiwan or Cambodia which is in no way required to abide by any of the work-safety or minimum-wage conditions "set" by the supply company that actually owns the land – and even if they were, convenience setting in like cataracts to sepia the indigestive eye, it turns out that there are 120 labor inspectors for a working population of 2 million, let's say, each of whom spends his once-per-two-years visits not on the factory floor, making "sure" that children under 18 aren't working, "checking" the condition of equipment he knows

nothing about, no, he spends those hours in a back room looking through (obviously doctored) birth certificates and machinery-inspection slips he wouldn't know from some newly-constituted republic's fake-looking money, too many colors, too unfamiliar an archetype or dead king offcenter underneath the number and the weird sign that mean denomination.

Dram, florin, taka, rupee, Bermudian dollar; real, Brunei dollar, Singapore dollar, kyat, riel, US\$ right there in Cambodia; escudo, yuan, franc franc franc, to go with the convertible peso and the Dutch Antillean guilder, exchange rates swelling and subsiding like a soft-tissue cancer, a mastectomy of the swapped-out breastmilk stored up in your cheeks after a long pull at a triply-mortgaged mother, concerned herself, wherever she is, if she exists at all, with her own chances for sarcoma, the likelihood of stars' target genetics building white clouds on her mammogram's emulsion.

Not done? US dollar in East Timor, US dollar in Ecuador, US dollar in El Salvador, and Jesus a lot of nations are still on the franc, Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, the CAR, Chad, Comoros, where the hell is Comoros, o don't hold us to the alphabet, bien bien, Gabon, French Polynesia, Guinea with and without -Bissau, Mali, Liechtenstein, but all official there, you see, all the regulated and legislated currency, whereas many of the countries on the dollar – Zimbabwe, Micronesia, Panama and Palau, Cambodia and, I shit you not, a country in the Caribbean called Saba, which is owned by the Netherlands, “[their] smallest special municipality (officially *public body*),” and “consists largely of the potentially active volcano Mount Scenery.”

Right. That's it. Fuck Washington, D.C., this is the capital of the United States. An active volcano called Mount Scenery, owned by the Netherlands, still using the American dollar? Does the world (yes) sometimes conspire to build us its own metaphors (always) long before we should think to alchemize them? You need the American condition summed up in three facts, Scavenger?

Lava nobody can time out, a tourist-trap American name for it presumably undisturbed by decades or centuries of Dutch occupation, and the paper face of Andrew Jackson skittering hand to hand undisturbed in the settlements below, brushing up against the white shellacked walls of the Anglican-looking Catholic churches, whose officially-announced post-homiletic intentions rarely include, “O Lord, please prevent



that huge goddamn volcano from erupting,” but probably do let fall the routine request for the safety of King Willem-Alexander and Queen-Consort Máxima, neither of whom we’re ever going to see.

Imagined guard-dogs galloping silently, unbarking, over the depressions and rises of the scrubland between here and the factory gates; imagined snipers waking up from the last dirty smoke of cashed-out hashpipes (you can smell it from here; it’s strikingly like burnt lo mein) and internet porn in their sentry towers, realizing in the instant, however stoned they are, that if they’re going to get disciplined, everybody in the Firm would rather it be for them shooting somebody harmless than for allowing somebody potentially harmful to go unshot, and who’s not potentially harmful, who’s anything other than a possible terrorist when the world’s biggest and most powerful government (videlicet, “cover story”) is killing its own citizens with drones because they happen to propagandize for the other side *in English*, which is really the mortal sin here, and doing it with completely made-up dossiers which figure these defectors as possibly, potentially, probably, hell, almost definitely active in a specific and timestamped plot to blow up the Brooklyn Museum, sure, why not that, the Grand Coolie Dam, the Foxconn factory in Indiana, not that we’re not doing a pretty fucking good job without their help, why, there’s an African Methodist Episcopal church just a couple days’ drive from where you sit right now, Scavenger, which could tell you about the real chances for domestic terrorism, committed on our soil by one of our citizens, and in *that* case by a guy who posted a 2,000-fucking-word manifesto days, even, weeks, before he went into the church and started shooting black people for being black – so you’d think, hey, the authorities want evidence, they need a plausible case before they start detonating people with radio-controlled airplanes, they’ve got to be able to take the bits of the body in a black bag to the morgue across the street from the district court building and say, Look, we’ve got more than enough to prove intent, malice aforethought, definite and detailed plans, you’d *think* maybe the redneck with the bowl cut who writes a short-story-length screed about racial superiority and then goes and buys an assault rifle, that maybe, just maybe, *he’d* be the kind of guy the government would latch onto.

But no, no thanks, too many implications, don’t want to get involved, it’s much, much easier – and this is frightening thing, because from a logistical and mediatized

standpoint, *they're not lying* – to kill an American citizen who's grown a beard and taking to wearing djellabas, no matter where on Earth he is, and no matter what international and domestic laws we have to contravene to kill him. You want to accuse them of evasion of the truth, of hypocrisy at least; go on, accuse them. They can take that sort of accusation standing up. It's now simpler to engineer the target assassination of a man who never actually committed a crime than it is even to detain, much less arrest, a white supremacist with specific plans (and specific guns) to act on his bigotry. Surgical strikes, remember. We get in, we “neutralize the target,” we get out.

And for all the hand-wringers who worry about getting involved in regional conflicts whose circumstances and history we don't really understand, upsetting balances of power so delicate they've taken since Cain and goddamn Abel to reach even this murderous equilibrium, well, shouldn't you be happy? We just killed some guy who liked to sit with his legs crossed and occasionally write for *The Intercept*. Had we detained, arrested, indicted, arraigned, tried one of our own citizens, we'd be getting involved in the ongoing 500-year genocide of black Americans, and isn't that exactly the kind of quagmire you want to stay out of? Don't look at my hands, look at the headlines – aren't they scrupulously clean?

So what was I saying, what did I even think to say –

(Dogs. Dogs and sentries.)

So right, yes, imagining the guard dogs trained not to bay or shout until they've got their teeth around a stranger's jugular, imagining the sentries scrambling to put their half-limp cocks away and stub out the roaches of their joints in the special red ashtray, the one they remind themselves to empty after every hour of use – and you don't really need to “imagine” any of this, because you've seen it all before. It just hasn't applied to you yet. Don't worry. It will.

So you and a couple others, probably affiliated by blood (though not necessarily your own: in these liminal zones it's hard to collect even under the heading of “slums,” there's enough blood freely flowing that it's no major task to find an open enough vein to serve as meeting-place with somebody who was, until just now, a stranger – arteries gaping like sewage-outflow pipes, aqueducts where holes have worn through the fat-encased webbing of the hard, lateral scleroses of unwatched, unscreened surveillance-

archive stars), you meet, you maybe have a fire, a little bit of food, enough of a cigarette left to share, a plastic bag one-hundredth full of pot or meth in a back or inside pocket.

So you do share it, whatever it is, and then you start the climb up the embankment, heads low, paranoid about everything in the world and justifiably so, hoping they haven't found the body of your brother, sister, would've-been-fiancée where you left it the other day, in one of the bunches of lilies and violets they've planted to beautify the drainage ditches; you try to smell the dogs and gunpowder on the sluggish unstirring late-summer air; you hope to dig a shallow grave for somebody you loved, and on (and in) corporate earth, a one-corpse community-outreach program, a report on your environmental footprint not to exclude from its arches and detailed cartographies of sole-skin the splaying ribs, the anxiety-whittled and misaligned spine.

Gendered knives, syringes classed by subject's mass and density, soiled glass columns as to incubate a lab-negative map of injectable embalming-fluid stars, coiling in tight logarithmic spirals on the scaly skin of moths, the leper-winged, the bitter lye-fed plants which grow in small gray clumps in the gray remainder of a drained once-chalky lake, whose meniscus of small lunar tide leaves white chemical stains on the stalks of inedible off-green reeds; and we scratched ourselves to bleeding, without ever having meant to, without noticing the blood, stubby fingernails poring over what we hope are only mosquito bites, white raised welts we acquired during sleep like dream itself had done some teething on the most vein-rich layer of our skin, implant the fine probosces, download influenza's atlas of the Nile.

Which part of the Nile. You know which part. SARS masks still in effect, back in the country where my moving parts were manufactured, and even on a day of no official dated plague, a good chunk of the population will still affect the surgical masks like halves of orally-implanted eggs, the aftermath of ovarian stars' violent hysterectomy, growing now on language spoken or suppressed, dragonfly swarms of breath, a dreamcatcher for the grunts, gasps, shrieks of something even profounder than fear – despair in its outward aspect, the absolute certainty that nothing will ever get any better than this, because it has no reason to: she was canning fish, with rubber gloves and plastic goggles installed, wearing a hairnet and a sterile suit like a diaphanous trashbag, eyebrows caulked in a surprised crescent above the goggles' sweat-steamed lips, her own

mouth unpainted, no reason to paint it, no hope that anyone would see it, including herself, better to forget, go numb such as the state's finances currently permit some forms of numbness, booze yourself into a carnal rainbow of distracted and incautious flesh on the American liquor the foreman buys when he wants to impress the next assembly-line worker he's going to try to fuck.

And he almost always succeeds, because, christ, do I have to explain it, who wouldn't fuck an ugly man for a raise when that's the only raise you're ever going to get, who wouldn't suck him off for job security when you've got the last job in, say, China, may as well be, when another generation of hopeless 14-year olds is already angling for work as seamstresses and factory-floor monitors, in their own homes if possible, watching two dozen children stitch the labels inside shoes whose brand I am, ironically, not allowed to mention, sweating in the brutal muggy heat, fanning yourself and occasionally your own child but leaving the rest to gulp what fetid air they may, split pads of unthimble thumbs, occasionally run a line of stitches halfway up an unprotected forearm, as in prediction of a laceration not yet needing to be closed, a bloody preventive medicine to stall obstetric stars ...

But she was just standing there like any other day (which is itself a brutal fiction, in continuance of these brutalized facts: not like "any other day"; like many of the days lived in the last 200 years, but someone *did* once walk on and then into the Earth without bitterly hating and regretting the whole misfortune of being born – how badly we need to believe that, or to believe, at least, that somebody believes it, pick it up like a social infection – and already so much time has passed in the last 20 years alone, so many centuries of infestation have been compressed into that brief log of our polity, that we can describe any fraction thereof as "a day like any other day," and it's *not*, please god let it not be, save me from what I already do, prevent the present from its occurrence and the past from already having occurred), hands in the brine and sludge, a salmon-pink mud of something that probably isn't salmon but will be sold with a label naming it some other fish which it probably isn't either. Say tuna. Why not. Americans have definite ideas about tuna; they know what it's supposed to mean; even the least deprived, the fabulously under-scourged, seem to enjoy the occasional fit of blue-collar roleplay, to enjoy pretending that they know the taste of the cheap saline dogfood their subordinates are forced to subsist upon.

So give us an assurance of quality in charmingly broken English, a mass-produced clip-art decal of a fish which will be positively astounding in its uselessness – even the most gullible little kid knows *this* is something not to trust, the same way he’s learned to feel sickly and confined at the worse animation of older cartoons, the stilted camera work and soap-opera quality lighting of public access TV shows, the frame-rate of the made-for-TV movie: there’s an excellent chance that this child, who’s maybe 5 or 6 years old, has never even heard the word “illegitimacy,” but illegitimacy is precisely what he judges, inerrant, absolute, eyes for it as fine as any pyramid-core beast’s for the black weight of the heart, its kilowatt-hours consumed to blacken the bulb and fry the filament into the edible and moth-flocked nervous system of an early vertebrate star.

Don’t know, mom, can’t tell you, just look, how can you not see what I’m seeing. The people move wrong. The colors are too muted: a hospital palette, a chroma key derived not even from the actual walls and ceilings of a nursing home but from the cataracted patients’ sense thereof, night’s glaucomatous redaction of a hospice for invalid stars. The dialogue all sounds like it’s been spoken out of three or four throats before it got to the actor’s mouth. The synch is off. The gestures are over-the-top, like these unbelievably fragile egos hadn’t yet learned the difference between acting for the stage and for the camera.

Why won’t you look like I’m looking. What’s in or out of your ears that you can’t hear how wrong this is, how strangely over-crisp and aspirate where ought to be the compressor’s warm pumping, the air between the assonants sucked silent as the earshields they’re going to lend me when I’m slid inside the clanging MRI machine. I sense it as clearly as the interval that divides actual apples from the green sting of the laboratory-grown “apple flavor,” as definitely as the falseness of my own gristle-locked motion as compared to the smooth panning of the shots across the cities since burned down.

Pay attention to the aftermath: it’s what gives us our geography, tells us (maybe) where and when we are, because a woman might start screaming beside the conveyor belt of any fish cannery at all (though how many of those have you ever actually seen? How many are there in the continental United States, and of those, if there are any, how many employ people whose last moment of sanity, which is in some sense to say hope –

not positive hope, not hope *for* something, but whatever threshold, insane enough in its own way, keeps the obvious data of despair from shattering their bones within the casings of tired meat, keeps the adrenaline and even smacks of rare-bait serotonin coming, keeps them from simply buckling like badly built bridges, uninspected for years, raising the fatal hackles of an abridged vertebral junction, spinal sections fusing as in ossuary syzygy of stars), but only certain of them will be subjected to futile gestures of calm by their coworkers, given the rest of the day off, walked back still shrieking into the manager's office, forced to attend mandatory psychological counseling (at their own expense) if they want to keep these jobs, and god knows they don't, but they have to. What kind of world have we pitifully imagined that it's possible to be so structurally, so necessarily alienated from your own meager desires. I desperately want to keep doing this thing I hate, so that other hatreds less in my control won't overwhelm me. I know what happens to homeless women, and what the cops say in reply.

(Shtum. Get that crazy bitch out of here. I've got three frat boys off a Xanax and a half-bottle of molly water apiece in the drunk tank, buddy, and it's hooker night in the holding cells, and then I've gotta do a little side business down at the offbooks facility, you know the one. DA's trying to make a terrorism case against some drug dealers. Figures he can tie them in with a Mexican supplier, which he probably can if he pays off the right people, and scare the border-state right-wingers into considering it a "terrorist attack." Good head on that boy. He'll be the goddamn governor pretty soon, and all for establishing a completely useless precedent. So what I'm saying is, don't bring me any more fucking headcases claiming they've been raped. How in the hell would I prove something like that. Send her to the mental ward, if there's any room left, and if not, toss her in county lockup for vagrancy, providing false information, resisting arrest, whatever you've got. I'm telling you, it was a smart man who made "resisting arrest" a crime. Imagine the first few weeks after the passage of *that* law, and everybody wondering what in hell they're *supposed* to do. Speaking of which, I've got three kids from Cabrini Green, a kick-door operation, and they didn't have any drugs *on* them or in the apartment, but they sure as shit resisted them some arrest, and if you happen to see the DA passing through, you might mention to him that the meat wagon pulls in plenty of small game to wrap up in his terrorism case. Shit, half the arrests I ever *made* could

be on the docket there, and won't it be impressive if they are. A seventy-page document of nothing but names, addresses, and mandatory minimums. All told, we'll have 'em in jail longer than their averaged-out life expectancies. Cellblock as iron lung. Get 'em respiratin'. Don't nobody panic now. CO's from a Crip block, and he'd be real unhappy to see you bleeding. What simpler methodology to get rid of gang colors than to make sure everything and everyone in prison is black. Make your beds tight as the head of a noosed drum, and let's all head off to the commissary, where you might be able to cop a fix, if you know which cop's the fixer, and what joke name he's giving retail heroin this week.)

I wasn't there. I was in the bathroom. I was out back, on the roof, underground, having a cigarette. I was monitoring my assigned post, Elizabeth Gate, southwest point of entry, when I heard the shouting over my walkie-talkie. (I was asleep in the vinyl-sided hut next to the traffic arm, because who the fuck wants to go in or out between 9 and 5, what cross-section of society has both the desire to be here and the leisure to be anywhere *but* here. You want to say, *This was nobody's first choice*, but after a while, well ... you wouldn't believe how thankful some of these people are to *get* to spend their days working for \$13 a week, doing shit that would be illegal if this weren't a sketchily-defined Enterprise Zone, which seems to mean that laws apply in inverse proportion to their violation. Only the unbroken still obtain, and if you break a law, you make damn sure to snap its neck. Don't need any walking wounded. Casualty ward's so full that they revoked its funding.)

And I heard – you know what I heard – you were there when I wasn't – you were showing the investors around, up there on the catwalk that surrounds the factory floor, all of them wearing hardhats and suits and the kind of stylized profit-margin plastic surgery of profit and determination that sufficient money seems to enact upon the skin, and then there she was: down at the assembly line, she just started screaming, not like a scream of alarm or pain, which rises and falls in proportion, but just bloody fucking murder, every time a little louder, eventually falling to her knees and then sitting on her splay feet and twisted ankles, ripping off her hairnet, popping the first three snaps of her outdated and wildly below-standard hazmat suit, screaming and screaming, till the

onsite cops dragged her out the side door and her scream was transposed, along with tire treads crunching gravel, into the notable absence of a siren.

Built in mirrors, and largely for their omnivore consumption: the images they eat seem fairly static, but you wouldn't believe how many tinily modulated repetitions, what bulk of carnal passacaglie, go into the composition of apparently flat data. It is in the mirror as with myth: you don't even hear about it (see it) till it's happened a thousand times, in structures homologous enough that the bone-resonance can soak through the permeable skin, as of fish becoming mammals, reptiles birds, a transposition of the same bones figured in the coronal discharge of faultily-wired calcium stars. Seen or heard is nightmare cleansed, so many times rehearsed in the back brain and down the knots of spinal nervure that it's almost lost affective power, very nearly come uncharged, no electron +/-, no metal salts expiring or ignited when the eye cathects its cone-and-rod-webbed catch of insect stars, arachnid frenzy cooled to numb-tongue delectation of a crop already eaten, savored once, perhaps, more likely mauled in a year of starvation, eaten till you got as sick from eating as from fasting, swollen bellies bursting as with water after a forced march across the Kalahari, and the colonial soldiers back there in the towns you left, spooning malarial water from the wells they don't know how to operate, complaining of your lack of culture.

Cartridge belts and pith helmets and an allegiance to the dual monarchy, the Kaiser's vision of a Germany capable of straddling both hemispheres, and the circle of the city itself terminally disabled, now that they've slaughtered all the cattle in which once bided the temperature of the dead, their decrypted spinal heat come to sleep in a securer flesh, and thus to be fed to their own descendants, who in turn would feed theirs once death came reaping.

Nothing sinister. Simply an observation, closer than the ones the west can countenance, of how things seem to operate. Let the sand, half-acid soil, skew-plotted mastaba wind perform the actual surgery, none of which can be mistaken for violence on the human scale, and violence much above or below that scale has tended to strike us as either sublimity or compost, the holocaust of angels or the worms and leaves indistinguishable in their mutual decay. Extract from the muscle-corded back the



osseous vermin that encodes, in its five hearts and segmented skin, the runtime script of fused annelid stars.

Fused as the cycles are, no matter how you'd counterfeit them, and the fee for a premature myth is the myth's own internal requirements of suffering and of death sped up to fit whatever timeframe you've allowed it, so that – for example – a thousand-year empire compressed into less than a decade and a half will wreak that millennium of casualties in only its twelve allotted years, or the fake cities that line the dignitaries' highway from the suburban airport into Rome proper will be filmed and filmed and filmed, subject to such cinematic replication that a couple decades' worth of Italian movies will see them photograph in greater bulk than any other part of the actual city they're designed to impersonate, even with the tourists toting Japanese-made cameras made possibly Japanese, in turn, by the American occupation that also repurposed the propaganda stagesets for the production of world-friendly mid-budget cinema, the same that came through the southern half of the peninsula raping the shepherd girls and feeling righteous for bringing freedom to Abyssinia or some shit.

Not that either they then or I now could tell you what Abyssinia meant, or whether or not it still exists in any form of politics or memory, except to mention that it sounds like a Biblical designation, one of the churches prophesied to in the early and slower-going parts of the Apocalypse of John, a Patmos warmup act, sorting out invectives while you prepare the business with the lambs and broken seals the same way Homer would've whipped out a god-defining epithet to get himself prepared for the next hendecasyllable of dropped shields and gouts of black blood spurting from the artery the arrow more than grazed, employed some formulaic description of a house's outer halls and the wine and meat to be guzzled within while he tried to figure out how the god, in the form of a stranger, would answer the gentle interrogation of the local king, asking after parentage, native city, maybe feeling out allegiance to yet another sovereign, which is a senseless designation, but a real one nonetheless: there can be as many one true kings as people will believe in, and you don't need many sycophants to start feeling like royalty.

After they had put aside desire for food and drink, the queen turned to the traveller and said, "But where do you come from" etc., and the king bade her hold her

tongue, saying, “After such a long journey – and it must have been long, by the road-dust I see on his sandals” etc., and the traveller, who was secretly the frontal lobe disguised as an olive leaf, said, “But I could hardly fail to answer the question of so generous a” cetera.

Plunk your lyre and get your plot points twisted into some rhythmically applicable skein, because you’re about to have to explain the whole damn thing again, since this is hour – let’s say – three of the third night of six consecutive four-hour performances, or something like that, and you’ve noticed the actual king starting to nod off, and you’ve been hanging around this particular palace long enough to know what kind of thing interests him (his wife goes in for genealogy and he for food and killing) – same dumbshit intrigues, waste, queen clearly fucking some soldier or courtier while the king prides himself on his unused ability to fuck, in theory, whomever he should choose, the “choice” of it still not really separated in the pre-Greek mind from the kind of rape which the god of thunder (which comes before justice, and may still be its simplest reciprocal form, all the variables canceled on the fraction’s upper and lower halves, a song-preventive medicine of stars annulling stars) regularly enacted upon whomever, anybody at all, so to say that the king is the king may be simply to say that he can rape anybody he wants without any fear of reprisal.

Has power ever actually meant anything else? When was the last time your neutered midbrain’s mouthpiece took the stand for violating someone else’s flesh, and with what limbic excuse did he plea-bargain himself down to an offense laughably entitled “the obstruction of justice”?

Dreamt over and over until, like any addiction (which is to say, a habit your blood knows, whether or not your brain yet recognizes it, an implant of rigid seething fractional stars desperate for their wounding light’s completion), there’s no comfort in the actual dreaming of it anymore, only anxiety as to whether or not it can be dreamt again, Scavenger, worrying about the exact number and variety of sleeping pills you took, some designed to knock you out, others to impersonate a function your brain seems to have been born without, let’s see, \$5-a-pop pills for truckers, plus a handful of bitter melatonin, plus the valium derivative they prescribed you for panic attacks which it does absolutely nothing to forestall or moderate, but take enough of ’em at the right

time and it's good for a couple hours of drooling, horsefly-ringed pass-the-fuck-out sleep on a stranger's couch, in rooms whose tenants don't expect to find you there, after a long night whose beginning you can't remember and whose end came like a punishment for such quick-acting amnesia: I've got no idea how it started, I remember hundreds of long kitchen matches and dented silvery cans of shitty beer on a stranger's front porch, arm around somebody I don't actually even find tolerable, coerced into that posture as one is into patriotic song, knowing that to stand there with your arms folded would be, well, not pointless, but certainly not pointed, nobody's going to change for it, the Anthem will continue to be played at the start and end of all scheduled events, we respectfully ask that you rise and remove all headwear, including the religious kind, Shabbat shalom, as-salamu alaykum, and no, the prerecorded PA announcer isn't waiting for "wa-alaykum salaam," your half of the formula is implied by your attendance, same as consent in some vile old *droits du seigneur*, the fat priest and his first fruits, the groom will now repair to any available outhouse to fuck himself silly and vengeful while the local lord fucks his newly-official wife, her unconspiratorial flesh forced in this repulsive instance to conspire.

Tell me again – this isn't rhetoric; I'm asking for your help – tell me again if you have any other definition for "power." Tell me how I can ever feel protected anywhere, not even *safe*, just marginally protected, without knowing also that my protection is contingent upon the tolerance and abuses of the same men I hope to be protected from. Would you trust your own veins in that setup. How could you. Would you come, after a while, to trust to nothing more or less than the suddenly uncanceled phase of the exterminating stars.

There must've been other details, I must've known where we were going at some point, but the mnemonic film clips right to red-wine vomit and pissing in the Turkish-carpeted corner of a stranger's room from the only other surviving footage, that front porch – a slap of still-damp cement in the shape of an elongated flagstone, laid out in front of some fake-brick shack whose walls were actually beaverboard underneath a molded plastic impersonation of molded mud, and you could hear the fat carnivorous raccoons scratching behind the siding, hear the meth-dealer neighbors shrieking and punching their way toward a third citation disturbing-the-peace citation this month, which would itself occasion a call to Child Protective Services, and get their two doomed

children sent off to a foster home for six months, where things will be 0% better for them, while mom and dad complete (i.e. fail to complete) mandatory diversion therapy, lose (for non-attendance) the jobs they only theoretically had, maybe put on ankle monitors and ask to use the neighbor's porch to have their next meaningless goddamn scratch-and-shoutfest, so the cops get called to a different address, and the renters of that house can say without exactly lying that no, officer, we haven't been outside all night, we heard yelling but didn't investigate, you understand, not the kind of neighborhood where you just go fucking around in other people's business, saw what looked like maybe a carjacking a couple weeks ago but who am I to judge who ought to be getting into what car at what intersection at which hour of the night, the fuck do I know about the legally deeded (in every sense of the passive voice) owner of a scuffed-up black SUV stopped at the corner of Hickory and Avenue G, motionlessly gunning the engine while a hugely muscled shirtless guy appears from behind the row of landlordless poverty apartments across the street, the kind of place that clearly used to be a hooker-and-crackhead motel and hasn't been cleaned up much since they bought it to rent the rooms for \$600 per month instead of \$20 per night, neat conversion rate, and I'm told – understand, officer, this is all second-, fifth-, eighteenth-hand – that you could get high on just the crack smoke that sifted through the paper walls if you knew where to sit and breathe, if you'd made your physical peace with the lice and the roaches, worn your own failing body-heat into some patch of the carpet less stiff with unknown but guessable fluids than the rest, the only six square feet of the floor that actually feel like *carpet*.

Rest is like a rained-upon dog nobody but inconstant sunshine dried. The dirty drifting aftermath of a storm that never so much stops as changes its own altitude, so thunderheads turn to violent electrolytic fog, so overripe green-gray cloud comes to stuff your pores with wet spiderwebs and store surgical swabs in your defective throat, baffle your pack-a-day panting with elision of the few respiratory stars the lightning's ozone reverb hasn't already shocked back into their hives.

## Session #2

From the suffering city – where people and buildings both wilt as they stand; where ochre-thickened sweat has replaced blood and shit in the gutters; and where the recent gods, the overseers of human things like justice and deceit, tilt abandoned from the niches of their shrines, leaning perilously forward on rotting plaster bases to siphon the last ounce of devotion from the air, decrepit hymnals dosing them with a last hit of specific heat – he moves to the zone where the grass turns to sand and the outlying bunkers to rare tumuli, captured on the radiographic cameras of the stars as a few white bone-fracture roads in a sea of celluloid black.

Every time he lives the metal house in the hills and goes down among his people, they stand before him as if for military inspection of the war-dead, flourishing sores and wounds, demonstrating the pitch and yaw imparted to the vulgar tongue by a cleft palate, the relentless biological detuning of the Word to which they all entrust their health. Singular or compound, mutable or rigid, the debates still progress in other cities, closer to the mainland, more isolated from the searing salt wrack of the shore, from which his people and his city have only lately been dredged. I was there and saw what I could see; the rest I've been told. And I know, because they tell me, that I wasn't alone in the feeling: those who built the city while I hid in the long grass, ate locusts (no honey in the offering, and all the bees are fat and drowsy on opium sap, hovering where huge red poppies ring the bronze sarcophagi of the dead gods from whom the city is derived, as nautical maps from the infinitely dense ossuary of stars), drank goat's milk and brackish water, laid overnight in the cane picking ticks and spiders off my legs, shivered when cold sun baked the clay hard enough to stand on – the city-builders all said, either at the time or later, that it felt as if they weren't so much constructing anything as salvaging something, dragging the escarpment, assembling corpses enough to substantiate the allegation of a major crime.

God knows we don't lack for those. They're of a different kind now, with an etiology known by name if not by cause; it was different then. Many, mostly women and mostly young, in the plain ill-fitting clothes of the poor, dirty with work and billowing loose with the hunger of the flesh they encased, showed up in sites that made no sense, on plateaus and in fields to which no murderer would bother to drag his victim. Places on the way to which you'd have passed the teeming slums, in which somebody is always awake and always edgy enough to notice any sound as loud as the bleat of the crickets, the knocking stones and knotted vocal cords of the sheep and goats in the dirt fields overhead at night. Half the poor sleep underground, in ragged and half-collapsed tenement cells dug into the hills and the funeral tumuli of the old deities, whose names we have forgotten, whose honorifics we remember, whose attributes and special zones of fortune or control are a mass of conflicting rumors and contrary prescriptions among old wives.

Some swear that the cure for plague is sleeping in a cradle full of docile snakes, so that the infection might pass to beasts it can't harm, since their skin is already scaly and streaked with black; some claim that the godhead once responsible for illnesses and cures has lately changed his specialty, that he only understands mathematics now, and that the first man to construct a geometrical proof of the healed body will dispel the sickness, though the geometers come out of the agora's gate every day looking haggard and gray-faced, unshaven, bloodshot, and a few will even confess to you, if you get them drunk and desperate enough, that while they've been unable to produce any syllogism or logarithm on behalf of health, they've accidentally run across more than enough proofs that disease not only can but must eventually occupy all flesh, and that the city itself – any city – is a dry run for the pox that finally encrypts it into the airless code of the grave, an epidemiology of gravity-eating stars.

There are, of course, other suggestions for causes and cures, and the mathematical school is still small, though it'll grow as do the numbers of the dead. The poor are frantic but quiet and switch their religious allegiances as often as prayer is disappointed, and prayer, as you must know, is almost always disappointed. In some places, I'm told, the practice of faith is so common and of such long standing that anybody at any time can break into a hymn in the middle of the street and, halfway through its first verse, find herself surrounded by fellow communicants, singing and

playing, improvising over the chords, deftly knotting the melody around substituted notes in the bass, occasionally breaking through the membrane that separates song from the pure mourning cry, the root from which all song and thus all language descends.

I hope that's true. It isn't here. When you enter the slums, you make a cracked unsteady progress on week ankles and bent soles, prodded and paused by the sound of the poor underground trying to learn the music of this week's patron deity, uncomfortable with the odd intervals of the new scale, slipping over the barline when imported worship dictates that fifteen or seventeen beats comprise a measure, lost and looking for repetitions, holding a tonic drone until the sequence of strange chords should wrap once more around the root.

Desperate to restore consensus daylight, beset by an internal occupation, hunting, like anemic cells reduced to reapers' sickles, the body's constellations for the programmed death of stars, he walks, a woken sleepwalker, past the last district where "street" is just a crawling body's habit worn into the dirt, no road to speak of, no stones smoothed by this or any other passage, waves of turned-away somatic interference throbbing from the pebbles and mud like body heat from recently-tempered glass, snarled and fissile as the wind that would be nettling the grass if there were any, tangled several zones back in the last olive trees, gone stale along with their deeds and the peptic discomfort of their ownership, and moves into the untracked miles where wet earth gives way to dry and dry to something undecided between rock and dirt and sand, the desert edge, sedimentary skeletons clattering in the permanent autoclave that sterilizes the medical waste of stars.

In his progress, he leaves accidents and passersby, women and men tangent to the broken sleep he pursues and is pursued by, contagious now not with whatever plague a vector bends to bring but with the vectors themselves, waiting each upon its scheduled epidemic, inoculating a few whose cells are young or deaf enough not to be recoded by the virologic undertow of stars, the structures of foreign organs seeded partial, holographic, such that any tiny fragment scripts the whole, though not to our blood's penetration: they hang in the carotid fork, they relentlessly conjugate the aortal verb, thinning further its temporal slices, cross-sections of violently timestamped sap creaking across the capillary thresholds of suspended xylem stars, rigged up now among

the gantries and trusses of a rigid chlorophyll life-support, distilling cellulose from melted bones until the trapped body is an extension of its cage.

Or vice versa. Logic it either way you like; pursue examples to their genesis; set loose a pride of analogies to their obscurer hunting; still the firstborn can't say much about the youngest of the dead, and even Eden parentage, difficult as it may be or seem, is much less difficult than the reconstruction of the corpses before Eden, disproportionate and angled sterner than the bone's postpartum dispensation would allow, *paradeisos* from a Persian word meaning not much more than "garden," which should make us look again at gardens but will more likely disenchant us with paradise, should any of us still be thus enchanted.

Caduceus from the mud cadaver's variously kinked spine, a bent ladder to the brainstem much as architecture's internal momentum delicately complicates the path a church alleges: bones to heaven, sacs of bloody human leather to a body so subtle that it sends angels rabid, those long-term and merciless surgeons of stars, classed out of the vertebral labyrinth from which the stars themselves grow in strange clusters and electron clouds, probable rather than determined, waiting for the moment's neuromodulator flux to film their quantum-state collapse into a pane of massed and melded films, with one predominating from the celluloid herd only because we have eyes for its predomination, because its spectra better fit our own than any to either side of it or us: a "natural" azimuth, black as the genitive negatives of day, healthy to our clipped eyes but horribly burnt with the subcellular skin-mutations engineered by ultraviolet stars.

And infrared. Much on his mind now, as he passes the last edge of the last spit of land which could conceivably be called "garden": an inland peninsula of swamp, sucking groundwater from some arm of the Ionian, Adriatic, or Aegean, depredating the rivers' mouths of all the blue smoke-thick flicker of spinal warmth massed there in blackout's ozone-tinged bewilderment for Ostia's exit into the Tyrrhenian Sea, without time among all the pierced-transformer hum – that downshift mastodon glossemia (an as yet unnamed medical condition: insoluble language in the blood), and stars' blown histologic fuses – to notice the tire tracks that gouge the sand into ridges and flatlands, valleys printed deep by the rev and reverse and repetition of a car used to run a man



over here, once wet with the inwash of seawater, either over- or belowground, now dried into pristine and unthinkable complex bits of sand-circuitry, lightly lubricated with the drying blood and mucus of a corpse famous enough to have its absence announced in the newspaper.

But not quite famous enough that the secret police or the reconstituted Brigade Nere will ever need to tender the body to the state surveillance organs for inspection: the people who want, or maybe it's better to say *need*, to see the dead man after death are the same people who would never, ever trust an official state autopsy, and for reasons which it would be dishonest to call *good* but which are nonetheless very well substantiated; the moment they heard that Paolo was dead, they knew they'd never hear the story of why and how he actually died, and though anybody who knows Paolo's name could come up with a dozen general and specific reasons for him to be killed, and though his killing is nothing in the nature of surprise, it's still absolutely maddening never to be told whether he was shot by a cop or by a neo-Fascist or by a soldier, who drove the car that ground his skull into the beach, who sent the libelous telegram that brought him out that night, how intensely to detest the official lie that he was killed during a gay assignation gone wrong – because it *is* a lie, they're sure, it's exactly the kind of gay-bashing garbage they'd use to explain his death no matter when and where and how it happened, but there's always a chance that he *did* flirt with the wrong sailor, and no matter how little we want to give the pigs who killed him that satisfaction, part of us will always wonder about the possible consonance between their lies and his cadaver ... and after a while, you start to wonder – why not say it like it is: *we've* started to wonder – if this atmosphere of permanent and petty uncertainty isn't quite as damaging as all the impossibly brittle hope, all the failed coups, all the Stalinist retrenchment, all the patently doomed summer governments taken down after even less than their mandated three months by paratroopers who everybody knows are American, though nobody will ever allow himself to slip up and call them "American" in print, this endless bitter fucking exhaustion of never quite being told the truth about anything at all, no matter how little the truth could affect us by now, no matter how resoundingly prevalent the lies about poor dead Paolo, how firmly built into every dispatch since the '70s that mentioned his name even in passing, a blank-major structure, brutally consonant, the

kind of merciless sterile geometry that passes every night before the embryonic eye in the top link of Apollo's sleeping spine.

It's too late to save him. He died on the beach. Please for god's sake just tell us who did it and why.

We have guesses, we have candidates, anybody who even knows his name could rattle off five or six plausible scenarios without consulting a reference book, but we don't know, and it's very slowly, very delicately killing us not to know if we're ever being told the truth. Even if the truth is wrong, even if the idiocies mount up in the telling like mocking centurions named them in tongues bereft (or free from the damnation) of Latin.

The soldiers giggle gleeful as children to hear the barbarian struggling with their vowels, and few or none of them will wonder later at the prevalence of a darker and much less funny music in that friction, a bloody interlanguage gashed so deep its spine shows white and ochre-streaked between the moths' preserved gray wings.

One-glyph rilievo cuneiform of tire tracks, printed over and over again at various angles of dissension and repose, badly set like the mimeograph sheets on which we used to try to run off the news before realizing that the only people likely to read it were the people who'd printed it, encrusted now as a semi-permanent feature of the beach, too far from the water for all but the highest tide to reach, fossilized circuitry exhaling the vitriolic and quick-drying vapors of the neurotransmitter meant to build cyclical resonance into the synaptic tree of stars.

Just tell us. Please. We've learned politeness and had to unlearn it for survival, but we'll put it on again if that'll get us the answer, even if Paolo really did go there to meet or fuck or talk down some unwisely-chosen boyfriend – which I don't for a fucking second believe, don't get me wrong: it sounded like bullshit from the jump, and if, at any moment in the previous decade, you'd told me that Paolo was going to die in suspicious circumstances and asked me what the official state explanation would be, I'd have said, They'll tell us that he went to meet or fuck or talk down some unwisely-chosen boyfriend.

This is who we are to the state, which is to say, to the corporations and the bagman-ideologues who use the state as a form of ransom, an illusory kind of

kidnapping, something they threaten to revoke unless we treat them the way they like to be treated and are busy dismantling in the meantime no matter what we do: any one of us is a dossier, a sheaf of biometric scans and prescription information, a list of degrees conferred or aborted and occasional publications, and though the intelligence committees will complain about overwork, and the avaricious interns bitch over expensive liquor in the red-lit Beltway and Boston bars of their scorbutic fraternity, sunken-eyed and terminally pale with tracklight messages from the hearsay satellite heart, all of that information can finally be boiled down to a single sentence, often a single phrase, the only one that really matters – the excuse they’ll print in public when they kill you.

The rest is dross. Utile blowby. It serves, if at all, to reinforce, substantiate, provide signal details, the kind of local color that’ll make a middle-class bigot nod his multiply cushioned head and say his multiply cushioned stock-in-trade phrase: That *sounds* true. And we do, as a species, operate primarily on that basis; we believe things by their grain and smell, and once we’ve decided that *x* looks more like real wood than *y*, good fucking luck proving to us that *x* is a decal and *y* the heartwood of a mangled tree.

And you and I, wherever we are, whatever the hell we’re supposed to be, have long since passed through, and deposit our future causes of death like silt inside, those narrow crosshairs. As for me, I don’t anticipate that I’ll ever be important enough to die, but if by some odd chance I am, they’ll call it suicide or possible death by misadventure, and depending on what kind of state my corpse is in by the time it gets to the city morgue, they’ll argue in larger and smaller factions for drug overdoses accidental and intentional, slit wrists, self-asphyxiation, knowing the whole time that there’s more than enough “proof” to slather over any of those rationales – it’s not that the game is difficult, it’s that every person near it has an aggrieved, petty agenda, and that somebody’s future career as an Undersecretary of State for Domestic Intelligence depends on his having convinced the current Undersecretary to go with misadventure rather than suicide, since suicide strikes the layman as more suspicious.

Yes, sir, I’ve been fully briefed on the subject’s history, I know about the prior attempts, and I’ve seen the scars myself, but it’s my feeling that all this apparent evidence will actually work against us: somebody from the APA is going to talk about cutting, somebody from his past is going to mention his proverbial fear of drugs and

history of suicidal ideation, and they're going to argue that here and now make a strange place and time for him to finally go through with it. But an overdose, borne equally of ignorance and apathy – of not knowing how much to take and not really caring if it kills him – *that*, sir, will provide both his detractors and his rapidly retreating friends with the satisfaction of a solved mystery, with the acid tang of a truth you dislike but are still proud to have deduced. Terminal decryption is its own reward, and god knows it better be.

Anthrax and white hellebore lace the wind with delicate streaks of dried froth, dismantled toxins altering with pollen's drift the genome of the cemetery bees, and the castrated almond trees fall to the same surgical utensils which will later pick their progeny from the sill of a rain-blurred tomb, all legends drowned in soggy noise, all stelae smoothed out by the generation-loss of thunder, rerouting the striate terminals that coil from the faulted amygdalar stars.

Fissured radiograph, like celluloid flexed too often after its exposure, so it's impossible to tell now what's an effect of data rot and what corresponds to the star's half-life physiology – a body we infer, for that matter, from the light it emits and not from any ability to touch or even see it, so why not presume also that the decay of a photograph's storage medium partakes in star-anatomy, and that albumen-smeared ambrotype slides, heliographs sinking into the soft stone of their matrices, ferrotype plates filigreeing frail and hypersensitive internal organs with verdigris and rust, likewise alter the recorded star's histology with ex post facto feedback, hystereses looping through the open tomb.

The aftermath or prescience of some enormous storm hangs on the zero horizon, banded in thick chalky strata like the mineral desiccation of a rainbow, a light-fossil compounded as is chalk of perished creatures: crushed bone, shed scales and fur, hydrostatic cartilage inflating and discharging watery electron-sour data in the cores of osteogenetically-defective stars, down whose neural tubes pour frostbite branches of liquid oxygen, dry-ice burns presaging the spines later to develop on the white side of a wound's lens.

Easy to see as far as you like here, so long as both the sight and distance correspond to some rapprochement with the zero, the genitive null at the heart of Apollo's hive, from which he seasonally ferries clouds of frozen bees, shivering in their stasis with built-up electrical charge, ready to burst sideways from the glacial cracks which diagram the cellulose skeletons of unborn ferns. Green is from a broken white and blue from light's destruction, as anybody who's heard can tell you. Whole botanies printed photonegative in the cracks and seams of permafrost, and much of the kingdom animalia likewise latent in the latencies of plants, the ravenous chlorophyll appetite sucking the exact axial marrow from the spectrographic stars.

Down the beach, past the seawall, once mossgrown, now embossed with fretful crumbling nerves from the last dry and years-old stonecrop, the final algae of the final high tide. There will come another, higher than even the cities have banked on, to soak the agora down to its vertebral column of previous threshing floors, the acropolis back to the impacted smokestack helix of prior acropoles, a tortuous molecular chain lining up its ingrown hexagons to wring pink dye from a honeycomb of benzene-poisoned stars, colorless volatile bees storing the gentian sequence in the stinger's root, inside the ovipositor's precise genetic crosshairs.

Remnant grippe and recall-fever, sweating out the prior ghosts of ill heat as much as any present excess of warmth, though there's more than enough in the present to make dispensing with the past seem almost necessary. Impossible, for all that, but almost necessary. Old caloric expenditure, old temperings of overheated and then ice-salved nerves, veins loosely annealed to the bone, neural populations alloyed into taut malfunctioning integrals of stars.

The sutured seams start speaking again under such conditions as these, and the codex of old injuries which any one of us comprises starts to sing the way it does in memory: all at once, in wild overexposure and chromatic saturation, choral as the sunrise birds and no less given to counterpoint, each burn notice and laceration-file reopened to mewl or shriek but mostly to mumble, almost voiceless, pure fricatives and plosions without any silken cords behind to shake the whole bone-resonator into sympathetic reverb, which is what speech is, the interval of tuned-mass meat responding to an otherwise glinting and incomprehensible whisper, flicker-noise of DC-

bias stars botching the zero spinal volume, the non-decibels of mute nerves and non-coding DNA.

Gripping the S and F like sheets of sandpaper rubbed together, biting off the T, P, B, rasping out a glottalized prologue to each H that sounds like slow exhalation over a phoneline, the sound of doom accomplished but unspoken, of bad news about to be reluctantly delivered. You know it, I know it, neither of us can do anything about it, and no memory is sharp or cautious enough to let us resist it the next time: we'll be drawn in, as we always are and always have been, by the incredible site-gravity of dread, its massive black-hole density recoding the corpses of stars, precisely calibrated now as the space they took with them in dying, the distortion of their absence, so intense we still see it in the nearest and least dubious source of light. We could once have added "least endangered" to that list of honorifics, kept the roll call in comfortable proportion of human fallibilities to divine absolutes, but that was another country and a hugely younger time: the sun is as threatened as any electric grid, perhaps more so, and its premonitory illnesses have started to bleed over onto Earth like sympathy pangs of a ghost-communicable pregnancy, symptoms sweated out before contraction of the actual disease, a forecast plague suffered in advance that it might pass in quiet or simple rehearsal once the bacillus actually reaches our shores.

You were scratched by a rat and I was haloed by cracked fleas; your arms were covered in welts inflicted by the tails and claws and teeth of unseen animals, and all the water in my bucket turned to blood; you came to me talking about perpetual darkness, much more horrible than night, because you were certain that it was daytime and should've been bright, and equally and still more horribly certain that the problem wasn't with your eyes or nerves but with the world's understanding of light, with the transmissive capabilities of the stars, and that malfunction on so vast a scale would be impossible to recover from, even if the light could survive in its exile, sweat out the hibernation in a country much less hostile than indifferent and much more alien than either, wandering over stones and earth you could tell should be red by the feel of them but which will never, in the permanent darkness, be any color at all, will remain only an ochre latency, the Word without flesh enough to speak itself to flesh.

Now, when we say we've seen him walking through the "cemetery," don't start thinking of Arlington or any English country churchyard, ripening its elegies in time for the autumn and as much in the name of comfort as any wine wrung from the summer's rotting fruit, a long mellow vintage like the snowblind glare of suicide tempered down to a constant and warming simmer: placid ligneous ease, and the guarantee of a long and peaceful sleep before the final debacle. This is not that.

It's more like the most rundown and unrepaired sections of Père Lachaise, and still more like any visiting-the-dead day in, say, Mexico or Haiti – a place where the dead are visibly, sensibly alive, where the old gods weather out their public exile, and where death is neither endstop nor interregnum between the human and divine empires but a transmutation of species, a switch to different frequencies and bandwidths than the ones the living use (although there's a certain amount of overlap, and our lives are made in large part from the interference seeping through those stations), on which the dead consume and are consumed by different maps. Dying is anonymity, and anonymity may just as well result from a surfeit of names as from nominal absence: the dead are variously named but don't reliably respond to any certain sound, and the change they undergo is much like the endosymbiosis of the living cell, an incorporation of previously bounded and singular structures into a larger and stranger mass, legible in the vital signs of stars' slow biochemistry in crumbling bloodwork documents, yearly renewed, yearly dissolving, autoimmunity tuned to the circulation of Pleiades and Plow.

There's precious little metaphysics here, and not much "hope" in the Judeo-Christian sense – the hope that the human ego will survive across the invisible edge of death, as obvious but suprasensory as the edge of a black hole, whose presence we can infer from the deformity of xenomorphic stars around it, but whose actual shape we can never see, because it eats all the light which might illuminate it; the hope that this same ego will, in full command of its living faculties, stand before some supreme adjudicator and be allotted either reward or punishment in the name of its good and evil acts. That doesn't seem impossible to us, but it also doesn't seem very likely.

It seems, more than anything else, like an abstract sequel to the old metaphors of gods' benefice or displeasure, which were always ways to talk about the world ("graverobbing angers Anubis" also means "graverobbing is a good way to catch an incurable disease," "graverobbing deletes the whole continuum of ritual and history by

which any one of us is saved the effort of learning how to grow crops and start and stop fires again,” “graverobbing disturbs the cyclical metamorphoses of nature, extracts something from a thereafter-damaged loop,” none of which is any kind of superstition, all of which is necessary and has been perilously misplaced), the kind of thing you’d believe if you came across the old texts and had no idea at all of where they come from or what they mean. Religion as a whole, in fact, seems in its modern incarnation like an alien’s reconstruction of a misunderstood rite, in all but a very few places, none of which are in the First World and all of which are violently and constantly threatened by it.

The oldest religion wasn’t a matter of blind faith or Thomist rationales for necessity (if you need a mathematician to tell you whether or not there’s a god, it’s probably too late, no matter which answers he gives you), and it didn’t require unquestioning belief in anything that wasn’t plainly observable. It simply provided a poetics, a living coherence of metaphor, that enabled living men and women to talk about the equal and analogous coherence of the world, sun, moon, and stars, and to understand the deaths of those they loved, and those they’d only heard about, as part of something larger than the birth and extinction of a particular organism. There’s no need to wonder about the existence of heaven and hell and no real cause for argument: of course poetics differ with time and place, as well they should, since the biodiversity of metaphor is likewise evidence of, and analogic with, the coherence-in-plurality, the structure-through-mutation, which metaphors themselves both enact and encode.

Not too long ago, most of the people on Earth would’ve considered it insane to go to any other city and attack its people for their allegiance to their own gods, and the emperor of Persia could say very simply to the Jews returning from the Babylonian captivity, “Who is there among you of all [Yahweh’s] people? His God be with him, and let him goe vp to Ierusalem, which is in Iudah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel, [for] He is the God which is in Ierusalem.” Simple. Yahweh was, at the time, Jerusalem’s god; what self-destructive and ultimately useless bullshit would it be to try to stop his temple from getting built? Why get angry at apple trees growing where apple seeds fall?

But then comes evangelism, and with it abstraction, the necessity of converting your god into a principle applicable to all times and peoples and places, and then of attributing completely human and stupid events to his omniscience and even, with a leer



of sheer meretricious malice, to his love; thence, the gradual erosion of those few places where the kidnapped and extorted god is still plainly alive, in the shrines and language of the people – usually poor, often hopeless, almost inevitably exploited and abused by the real or pantomime apostles of an abstract and universal deity – who still live with the realities from which the old gods sprung, who still wash their clothes in the river from which the river-god drew both his image and his name, still go out to visit the dead and offer them some bread, some booze, a cigarette or amulet, a song or Creole refrain, remembered perhaps less for its explicit meaning than for the integrity of its music.

Until the new graveyards are dug to house the corpses of the occupying army in prefab numbered tiers, mass-produced body bags and bulk-purchase prayer; until the consequent corpses of the occupied are thrown into the bay, burned in the hospital furnaces, or simply left in pools of black blood and shafts of brutal white sunlight in the center of the street: whole luminous spectra condensed into surgical lamps that spotlight each streak of mourning earth where tongueless lips bawl blood and lymph from a slit throat's second mouth.

A purgative test, then, shunting the code over into runtime to check for permissions- and directory-errors under panes of tense greenish light, caffeine-twitchy and vaguely tremulous, combing through video smog and noisy pixels to assemble a bioassay of the stars' genetic splices.

Security cameras and headset mics assigned to officers in the field, drone surveillance and thermographic film, the whole delicate star-anatomy of heat-loss coefficients: it all feeds back here, dinning in marbled monochrome out of slightly convex monitors, curves of shadow each a deepening of the same green found where high-albedo regions soak through the digital display, a narrow chlorophyll economy of sleep-mass and cellulose tuning. As the State grows, its gardeners direct its branches, pollard the trunk or pleach the vines, dope out the unofficial physics of secret heliotropisms, curvature patterns craning glyphic blocks of starchy vegetable spines toward the dark-matter thunderstorm raining in from unexpected angles, the chromosomal alterations printed as X-rays of possible species in the aftermath of black-radio stars.

Mutations' scripts hang for a cosmic moment, millennia once they finally disperse, millennially dead by the time we pick up their turbulence – sometimes it's in the visible spectrum and sometimes in the audible, a talons-on-limestone shriek of fissile stone put through the paces of a forced genetic update, evolutionary software downloaded in dark wet strobes of code, subroutines trickling like floodwater from the nucleic-acid backbones of extinct stars:

Ararat dampness, the last earth-breath and lithic steam to burn off postdiluvian, like the last blind stage before the embryo develops eyes, desperate ever afterward for some return to that rich nutrient blindness of blood, suspended in a medium that sustains you and not, as now, in a foreign and dissipating fluid, allegedly there for us to breathe but suspiciously inconsistent, ravenously coupling with carbon pollution or transmuting fetus-in-fetu into ozone (a whole scratched archive of ectopic star-alleles withheld somewhere back of the womb, behind the explicit contributions of the vein), almost as if the air was designed to give us just enough time to learn how and more or less why to breathe it before its planned obsolescence kicks in and we feel, as those fortunate enough to drown in water could never have felt, how much of our asphyxiation is our own fault, and by what inhuman immune system the fractured air might quickly regroup.

All valence shells open, all frequencies set to receive, corroding and finally covering the violence of human habitation as a scab knits glassy cells over a wound, with not much more to show for it afterward than a darkened sphere of breath, a faulty wiring in the light-scheme of the day – dimmer than God remembers, and more prone to sudden lapses into blazing sunset epilepsy, migraine-auras slipping cleanly off the stars' electroneural interface and straight into the visible sky: tongue swallowed, eyes rolling, salivary glands in mumbling overload or dry as the alkali plains after a geologic accident rescues the coastal lands from the sea – and a kind of incomplete temenos of pink eruptive flesh, long since calmed down to a level with the rest of the skin.

Injury's pride chromatic only, like the site of dismantled standing stones, a ring of limbless trunks by which the pyramid-city's murdered Indians might calculate the solstices and seasons, trace the stars from lignin husk to rich phloemic flux, a cellular biology of galaxies' leaking sap.

Waiting or not waiting. It happens quite without reference to our attendance, and the times and seasons on which we seem to attend are really the moments in which whatever we're waiting for is most vibrantly and horribly occurring. The art of security is, by definition, a posthumous art.

The king has called in experts from all similarly troubled regimes, and they tend to concur. You can only hope that the plague decimates expendable parts of your society (and there isn't even the cynicism to append, "and you decide which are expendable," because you don't: power has worked the same ways now for more years than any living empire can recall, and you, at its highest and most concentrated point, at least within the given city or nation, are much more a slave to its dictates than any of the men and women you sacrifice would care to recognize, are essentially a practitioner of reversed shamanism: rather than taking on the tribe's sickness as your vocation, and the unpredictable and often fatal process of its alchemy into revelation, you distribute the sicknesses revealed to you personally, as the state's architect, as the One who in another era would have referred to himself in the first-person plural and used the state's name interchangeably with his own – you are, that is, the subject of the nation's sentence, and your job is the proper distribution of predicative force, meting grammar's violence into some acceptable basal state of slaughter), and that the next epidemic looks more or less like this one, doesn't invalidate whatever meager knowledge of protection or prophylaxis we've gained.

The snakes are drowning in the silos of rotting summer grain, now that each harvest is converted before its actual reaping into monetary terms, a sequence of overwhelmingly hedged bets which use public hunger and public disease as their units of measurement, but only out of politeness and convenience. If *hungry people* is in both the numerator and the denominator, it can be safely canceled out for all mathematical purposes. We'll keep ours and, let's say, Yemen will keep theirs, but only because starvation provides a legible medium of exchange. If not for the fact that the non-specialists tend to get bored, we might as well just be talking numbers, and we sometimes wonder if the Joint Chiefs of Staff understand that their whole employment might just as well be (and often is) translated into World Bank loans, shipments of dehydrated wheat, and promises to drill or not drill for oil in Alaska.

There are some, the enthusiastic upper-management fascists of a state too old and gratefully corrupt to care about what is and isn't fascism, who suggest that the whole existence of the military is, how shall we say, rather outmoded. A symptom rather than a cause. Evidence of dedication to a lapsed epistemology, an *imago mundi* better suited to those whose empires could be plotted on geographic axes.

We don't even know how much land we own; we'll never need to. Our tenancy is better measured in terms of wages paid below the lowest possible wage that would keep the natives from starving, of gross national exports, of tariffs lowered and once-public services tendered no-bid to people we all met during our years in the private sector (because we all met the same people, because "the private sector" is really a few thousand kingmakers and kings, plus all the peons who will die for their enrichment), in failed presidential elections per year while the soldiers in sandy desert fatigues swarm over the reconstructed ziggurat, not even looking to steal mementos or chisel out gold fixtures like their conquistador predecessors pulling down the temples in Tenochtitlan.

Their sense of purpose is nowhere near that clear. They only know that they've been told to patrol the area, and that the reward for obedience will be a miserly pension and a paid-off student loan. Let the old gods and the young look after themselves.

Tense cigarettes, brief and highly-coded interludes of speech outside the Institute, where Oedipus the King is waiting just like everybody else, in this case for the arrival and lecture of a smug shit from the Defense Department, who thinks he's managed to supersede a hundred thousand years of baffling and ultimately pointless human war in one swift feint of intellect.

He's wrong, and everybody knows before he even starts to speak that he's wrong – which suggests a number of interesting and horrible interpretations of the event. Politics requires a certain amount of irrational self-belief, and the best politicians (not the best human beings involved in politics; who's keeping track of *that*?) can switch at will and with no apparent dissonance between hysterical arabesques of *l'état-c'est-moi* belief in their importance as representatives of the popular will and utter penny-ante, backbiting utilitarian dirty work.

They are men with a rare degree of contempt for almost everything, and with the even rarer ability to make people believe they're speaking sincerely while they

pontificate on things and, finally, other people for whom they have the most poisonous disdain. There's even a leading edge of megalomania to the best, a kind of usefully timed bipolar episode, whereby they can truly *mean* both of these things at the same time. They can believe what they say while knowing it's not true. Submit that to whatever scrutiny or reasoned critique you like, but the fact remains: these men *can* do it. And their belief is precisely calculated on a gradient of contagion, precisely modeled and test-marketed to afflict the widest possible cross-section of people who aren't normally so credulous. You could say, if you were in the mood, that such contrivance means they can't really believe, and you'd probably be right, in all kinds of ways that don't really matter.

If you were to catch one of these gifted sociopaths in a moment of rare articulacy and self-awareness – and Oedipus the King, whose government is convening here tonight at the behest of one its ambitious mid-ranking officers, has been one such sociopath, and will be again – you might be able to tease an explanation out of him, and it might go something like this: Politics is the process of creating social reality, is it not? So if belief in something patently false still helps to create reality, are we to judge its falseness from its preordained design, or are we to marvel at the process of its purification from bullshit to actuality? And if I know that, and you know that, and it's our job to make things happen, how can we hold lies to be always and only lies, if what they create is always and only real? And how can anybody expect us to take seriously the division which, for mass-market and secular purposes – and I say “secular” advisedly, because there is a kind of priesthood at work here, a transubstantiation substituting shit and metal for blood and wine and the GDP for the corpus Christi – obtains between the true and the false?

You wonder how politicians, men with advanced degrees from Oxford and Harvard and Cambridge, degrees conferred upon them only partially in error (part of getting *any* degree from Oxford or Harvard or Cambridge is knowing that nobody there actually does all his own work – it's a self-selecting process, you see, and locates its own talent pool much more reliably than any standardized test), men who every day play cat-and-mouse with this summer's possibilities for genocide against next winter's likely collapse of several European parliaments, could possibly get caught up in the stupid shit that finally brings them down. Mistresses, “campaign contributions” actually used to

pay off tabloids and ex-employees, blowjobs from secretaries and pages of all genders and sexual orientations, a cache of porn, a stash of blow, a slush fund in the Caymans. How could they be so sloppy? That's just it: they're not sloppy at all. They've simply trusted the translation of their political powers into other arenas, and have, to their chagrin, found a point at which the two coordinate systems do not match perfectly.

"Perfectly," hell. Nothing does, and nothing needs to. They must only match approximately, and even when they don't, the force of propaganda – itself an amplification of the much stronger force of people's desperation to believe whatever they wish were true; propaganda, when it works, is only a machinery for activating *that*, a kind of improvised fugue taking human hope and misery for its themes – may line the points up close enough.

One of the king's advisors coughs and spits into the dust, swirls the scotch around his glass, and says, between deep puffs on a cigar (which would be contraband if he weren't the person who decides what "contraband" means), If reality is malleable, as both the physicists and priests have told us, and if you've made a career out of abuses petty and grand of its malleability, why *wouldn't* you believe that you can simply say a drunk night with a hooker didn't happen and, in the saying, make all indiscretions disappear? We've all sat and talked in rooms where war crimes were committed, and are voices are on tape in the same conversations which some tribunal might eventually subpoena for evidence, debating and finally approving the substance of those war crimes – and none of us, not even the most frantic, has any real fear that he'll ever be prosecuted as a war criminal. So, knowing that, you tell me: what's hubris, and how in the world could I know when I've gone too far?

Staff cars, all late models, expensive and American, start to purr and shudder into the parking lot outside the Institute where the DoD hack will deliver his address. And if he knows, as we already know, that he's about to lie, distort, misconstrue in the worst possible faith, if he knows that the ideological elegance and statistical suavity of his argument have less than nothing to do with pigs' blood and horseflies fed plump on rancid fat in the gutters of the slum where they make the bullets and the soldiers, his aim must be something other than accuracy, and his desired outcome something other than belief.

The generals are escorting their escorts into the hall, the think-tank delegates are already working up furious and self-promoting pogroms against certain nouns they expect to be prevalent, ripostes to imaginary offenses, logarithms to ransack databases for certain lexical oddities, and Oedipus the King is wondering if anyone anywhere actually knows why his city is sick – if it's anything that could be reversed or contravened, or if maybe it's an illness of the Earth (or of time, and of gravity, the force that condenses time into minerals), a nerve agent whose molecular structure is modeled by the drifting affinities of stars.

Rewind that: if anybody anywhere knows and, if so, what that suppositious diviner would do with the information. Act on it, almost certainly not; sell it, possibly, given time, but premature, premature; most likely sit on it, cagey and defensible, plausibly ignorant, working up a failsafe private quarantine against the stars' resonant contagion, the communicable immunodeficiency they transmit as echo, till signal-overload turns all the bloodcounts black and all the cities in the vein look terribly and slowly preyed upon, enclosed beneath sheets of used carbon and last-ditch creosote, pollutants spread out over a city with no particular laws for workers or the work they do, a skeletal assay of dissected stars' stained ossuary algebra.

Tar-thickened smoke and fiberglass fumes – delicately branching toward the complexity of those same stars' glitchy neuro-electrical maps, topographies of discharge and overdose frying in the valleys and tectonic uproar of a fissured cortex and the heavy presynaptic seas beneath, thick and cold as liquid oxygen, right on the point of delicate translation from the star's long-blackboxed MRI to rivulets of hippocampal milk – soak through the exoskeletons of brightly-colored insects, or possibly spiders, I don't know, I've never been able to get close enough or had enough light even from a distance, I've only seen them darkening the few derelict streetlights called for spot-cleaning from the extinction of vast sections of the power grid, zones of the city no one cares enough about to pay for lighting them anymore, last axes of dislocation, places you wouldn't gratify even with the name "slums": slums are still inhabited, if not technically habitable, and these are crossroads and abruptly aborted blocks, terminating into switchbacks of obsolete railroads or just into orange-tinted dust and sterile dirt full of ground glass, which not even the most desperately hungry would choose to occupy.

Call it a superstition, if your life is equipped with the kind of insulation that treats everything but its three favorite sciences (let's say economics, geography, and some very basic inorganic chemistry) as superstition. It isn't. The invisible poor have simply seen what happens in these places and chosen not to subject themselves to it – and what happens is exactly, carnivorously Nothing: nobody comes out, nobody even sleeps on the benches or curbs of the empty train station, nobody resets his erratic body-clock to the stalled hands of the unlit clocktower, doping out the power-loss and transform-rates of the malfunctioning circadian stars.

They just know, and you would too, if you lived anywhere near here: these are streets whose function both precedes and postdates those of the city in which they now compose a nominal section, and after the pavement's been torn up for reincorporation into the bunkers or crushed-gravel fairways of the wealthy, these streets will still be here, sleeping uneasily and more or less merciless in strata halfway down the dirt's eventual exhaustion into stone, and the turgid oily efflux where neural interfaces printed on the lids of stars' sarcophagi transfused postmortem dopamine and serotonin into the shale and clay of petrol's eventual extraction. Gasoline and napalm, exhausted species and necrotic light, whole horizontal colonies whose occupants and architecture are both made from the mummified umbilical cords of the sun's serial abortions.

You'll know if you wait long enough to find out. Nobody in, nobody out, a perfectly closed system, if only because the human remnants who do eventually arrive here don't quite qualify as anybody, and because the pieces of pieces which do eventually leave are nothing you'd mistake for a person. Marl and silt to bake into impersonations of stone in the furnaces of the city morgue, to bury in the plots of land between old redbrick Gothic banks and icehouses that only appear vacant, to shove in the hospital incinerator along with fouled scalpels and syringes and the medical waste of the stars they've engineered back to blood, bone, and mutant genes.

And the smoke is heavier and more constant than weather; and when it rains, as it rarely does, the rain must be inferred from patterns of smog-disturbance, because it usually can't be felt droplet-for-droplet, can most often be intuited as a slight overplus of pressure on a certain region of the skull, a cranial deformity testing out its densities and displacements, prodding you through richly worked and multiply dead carapaces of



funeral architecture (the millions of dead osteons compacting a buried pyramid, a bone-encrypted ziggurat, and each morbid skeletal cell is itself another chamber of dissection and interment, a rich crystal web of calcium nerve-models swarming and fixing resonantly in place the remains of an extinct zooid star), seeing just how much more pain you can take before you're driven into one of the very few permanent escapes.

There are drugs, of course, though they take money and constant effort, and it ultimately may not be any better to have to shiver and scream through opiate withdrawal than to hurt the way you do right now; there's suicide, and the various scenarios for deaths tantamount to suicide, like robbing somebody you know will fight back, or driving till you fall asleep, not caring where or if you'll wake up; and then there's a stranger and less cleanly referent process, something we might as well call "disappearance," a series of strobes and infrared pulses scanning and altering the rapid closed-lid movement of the mineral eye sleeping in the base of the bent spine.

I take it that you see the difficulty here. It's hard to tell you if you don't already know, and who needs to be told in dossiers and briefings, in kill rates per ton plotted along logarithmic axes, what he's already learned in song? – not *his* song, certainly, god no, but a song whose oscillations he's been briefly given to incarnate, tenacious and fragile as star-systems lend somatic structure to the searing pronunciation of the light's first terrible Word (eardrums of contractile space itself bursting from the center outward, cartilaginous galaxies tightening their coils to avoid ever receiving such a horrifically bright message again).

And, tenacity and fragility moving faster than either will know to justify or even to explain, the cells die, the body withers, and the rate of decay and regrowth is such that you hold together, more or less, hugging yourself in the cold but hugging a new exquisite and fallible machinery of meat every seven years or so. As for what holds over between those carnal radios, what principle (call it the long-term memory of selectively amnesiac light, which hoards *almost* everything, and good luck guessing what it's likely to forget) or actual physical wave and attendant particle collapse, well, that's what some of us have been trying to name since names were the condition of our passage through the night, our dubious and finally psychotic passage, and we've forgotten much more than we've learned – the sciences, after a certain point, being not at all unlike taking a

metal detector to the beach to look for evidence of metal detectors. You're searching with the thing you mean to find, and whatever results occur to you, specious or defensible, given or stolen, you're likely to learn more about your equipment than what it's supposed to measure.

You know these places, though "district" and "zone" are really too formulaic, too given to communicable repetition, to name them: their edges are constantly shifting, if within bounds, frontiers to which money and scorn have set the statistical deviation. Not that even scorn and money won't eventually lose their grasp – and we're approaching that moment rather quickly. The ruinous sites after the slums have been, for maybe 70 years, under power's petty and bilious control; power has known what to do with them and has improvised new ways of doing it till improvisation hardens into the meanest, most predictable kind of sonata. We all ought to be able to recite it like the archaisms in the Lord's Prayer, given zero thought by the millions of mouths which daily mumble and smear them, small oddities of speech so naturalistically fixed in the camphorated and formaldehyde-reeking diorama of the prayer itself – the acid-yellowed fur of lab rats ready for dissection, the vacant and matte artificial eyes of human corpses propped up on small gantries we can hardly see from the viewing room, only lapsing back into visibility when they turn on all the lights and unhook the cadavers for maintenance and cleaning, and they're very careful never to do so before the audience has left: anybody remaining after *that* point has given up his privilege of being called "a member of the audience," and he'll see and hear secrets in precisely inverse proportion to his ability to tell anyone about them.

(Access ballooning to compass ignored genocides and combined military and medical instrumentation furiously modifying the prone and tender stars, scrapping their extracellular matrices to build up a set of manmade proteins, but only because the witness's disclosure is shrinking to a fraction that never quite hits zero, although it'll be approximating zero by neater and neater failures till time itself makes the zero leap that its equation can't explain: 0.2, 0.1, 0.05, 0.025, 0.0125, 0.00625, in perfectly predictable and nonetheless baffling sequence ... )

So how does it go. Simple enough. 1). You need sources of labor and of raw material; you've already raped and destroyed the landmass you live on, along with its

natives, because you come from the kind of secular theology that sees any given place as the sum value of its own targeted destruction, stuff to extract, stuff to refine; you can't use your own poor for labor, even the most desperate among them, those least stuck on any point of dignity, because there are laws about minimum wages and work safety in your country now, because a big part of your power hinges on the plainly ridiculous but still prevalent notion that your country, the one you destroyed to bring it into existence, is some kind of guardian of justice and opportunity.

2). ¿Que quieres? In even the middle-ranking circle-jerks of power, it no longer need even be said out loud: you come up with a semi-imaginary enemy, one based on actual people but infinitely more renewable than they are or could ever be, e.g., hammer-and-sickle specters of gen'yin board-certified starving Russians, and then, as a direct consequence of same, "terrorists" who are largely hopeless men, rededicating themselves to Götterdämmerung politics only because there's nothing else in their world which merits the least fucking belief. You grow up poor in Iraq, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and then tell me that the end of the world seems anything but realistic.

And finally, 3). You invade in the name of eradicating that formless ideological enemy, call it whatever you want – there are villages all over Haiti, for example, in which almost nobody knows how to read or write, and those few who do are literate in a language much more African than it is French, a Creole not too many steps removed from the slave ships that brought their ancestry to the Caribbean; these are people to whom, in theory, the whole spectrum of European-language politics should be utterly foreign, people practicing a religion older than European knowledge of the land they now inhabit, but every one of them knows the words *Communisme* and *Communiste*.

Why? Well, Papa Doc Duvalier, that canny old nightmare incarnate, realized early on that he could do whatever he wanted to his own people *and* keep the American rolling in: he only had to give the odd televised tirade against Communism and promise, in exceedingly vague terms, to make Haiti a bulwark against Red infiltration of the Caribbean. So every Haitian, from the nearly-white and heavily Francophile ruling class down to the peasant farmers whose whole culture and cosmology is basically African, has learned that *Communiste* is what you shout at somebody if you want the Tontons Macoutes to come cut his head off in the middle of the night. It doesn't matter one damn bit who can and can't define the political tenets of Communism, or explain why

they're worth opposing. *Communisme!* has translated itself fully into the domain of verbal magic, audible Freischütz artillery, and it's the most effective spell that many of us will ever get to use.

Amen cadence. You've made the dominant-tonic pivot and landed hard on the last root of the last and first chord, musically assured of heaven's reality and of your soul's progressive cleansing, if not quite so rosily certain on any other level; now comes the last fermata, fainting toward some further change, an alchemy of mutagenic stars, as tonic serves in turn as pivot fifth for the fourth chord of the key. But anyone who's ever had to go to church can tell you, by humming if not in theoretical terms, that this is just a gesture. Nada mas. You go up to F from C for the first closed-sequence Alpha of *Amen*, an apparent line of flight that's really on tracks more fixed and predictable than any subway system's, and you fall back down like Noah riding the fallen flood down to Ararat, realizing – and he must've been amazed that he'd never realized it before, as any of us would be in his position – that the reward for God's approval, and for the survival it entails, will be a brutal life among God's wreckage, defining heaven by its inverse like a photonegative defines the glare-blind sky of its positive print by zones of scorched carbon decay.

Oedipus waves off his security detail at the back door and steps into the parking lot for another cigarette. He's been waving them off since the day he took office, half out of political showmanship (we love it when our manifestly killable kings act impervious) and half out of the genuine desire to be alone, but they've only recently begun obeying the order. Read into that what you will.

The King is nervous tonight, not because of the avaricious little son of a bitch from the Department of Defense – he's read the speech already and could've guessed most of it from the man's intolerable conversation – but because he's not sure how long the populace can keep from accusing him, not his office or his indecision, but him *bodily*, of causing the plague, and he's even less sure that such an accusation would be wrong. Seems as tenable as anything else, and not much more or less likely to lead to a cure. Fix him in the camphor and heavily liquefied time of some patent-drug vaccine, embalm

him in radiation-tainted water and cocktails of expensive ineffectual drugs, and install him up among the relentless viral synthesis of stars.

He attempts to scan what would be a horizon if he could see more than a few blocks through the darkness, adjusting his stock gestures to a blackout which is only partly attributable to the absence of sun: there are forms of high nigredo here, corrosions so deep that they've replaced atom-for-atom the entire substance they once corroded, like grains of foreign minerals replacing the skeletons of shellfish and insects, whole vertebral columns once invaded and now reinforced by the influx of xenobiotic stars. The sun, or so the allegations have it, will return to hive all these alien constellations in a single ray by daytime, and to restore the blankness, the scabbed patina of sluggish lactic calm over the roaring black zero whose creatures spread across the night like phosphenes behind his own lightworn eyelids, a continual duress of programmed and expensive light, enough to wear the structure down to bones translucent as fishes' and hollow as birds', build up a massive dependency, but never quite sufficient to destroy the receiver entirely.

It's not a game, as far as the king knows, and nobody should much stand to benefit from it, but its basic orchestrations have been imported wholesale for the use of the state – just substitute *money* or *drugs* or *violence* for *light*, and don't think for an instant that the state's monopoly on legitimate violence is even *meant* to tend exclusively to peace and its varied uses. Oedipus could teach you something there, and given the chance, he might. He came power thinking, as he imagines many of his predecessors would've thought, that a monopoly of harm is designed for a reduction in harm's overall level, a set of instincts stiffened against its permeation, like lab dogs' lower ganglia bristling at the presence of ether or the metronome's wooden gunshots.

Wars, in such an economy of force, are justified when they cause less violence than would the decision not to intervene; police carry guns against the threat of better-armed criminals, right, sure, let's pretend we think that's true; contracts for missile-defense systems come and go, along with their phenomenally impractical schematics – heat sensors on the ozone-warmed bellies of half-sentient satellites, okay, why not, we don't foot the bill, in fact we draw our salaries from the footnotes of the bill, radiological detection devices swung permanently off zero by the input-hysteresis of stars, a DC bias

inching closer, as their shields decay, ablative armor ablates the wrong way, to trigger the counterstrike to an imaginary thermonuclear attack (unless the solar system entire can be considered a thermonuclear attack, and that might be the first reasonable thing they've said all day).

That's the official story. You kill to keep from mass killing – nobody has a problem with that, not even the supposed opposition. They may disagree over specific *instances* of prophylactic slaughter, may be able to prove, even quite conclusively, that a given war was started for reasons which have nothing to do with national defense, but given a real attacker, almost none of them would ask us not to strike back. They believe in self-defense. Whatever other conditioned reflexes they've managed to shake, *that* one is still stably on the throne. And the problem with self-defense as we conceive it (say "problem" here in some audibly ironic way, ensconced between quotation marks that din like the brackets which shift the code into thrashing runtime) is what the military men like to call "mission creep." Videlicet: you'd kill someone who was trying to kill you, right? Right. Would you kill someone who you were almost certain was *going* to try to kill you? Probably. Would you will someone who, in five or ten years, will have excellent political and economic reasons to kill you? What about twenty-five? What about fifty?

And do you kill men who would absolutely murder you right now, if they had the power, but who are too strapped for cash or hopelessly incompetent even to get out of, say, Diego Garcia in the Chagos Archipelago, British Indian Ocean Territory, just to choose an utterly random example of a place where we definitely aren't running a black-site military prison and employing the torture techniques we learned from paroled Nazis, tested under MKUltra, wrote into the Kubark manual, and shipped out to Poland, Afghanistan, Cuba, Abu Ghraib?

The brunt of which, naturally, is to distract us one and all from *why* anybody would want to kill us, who we are that our deaths should be such a source of justified hope to so much of the world, what kind of mass displacement of wrath we've caused and how we've caused it – even from the question of whether killing you and me in particular is what *anybody* really wants to do. Oedipus has heard and seen enough to suspect not. Even when the Vandals come to sack the capital and kill the king, they aren't especially finicky about that king's peacetime identity, who he is when he's not

being the public mammal he's supposed to be. They want to kill the capital-K King, whoever's unlucky enough to wear the crown at the moment of invasion, and they don't give a tenable damn about which one of the Queen's sons happened to weather the last succession struggle and come out calling himself Athens or Rome.

The peninsulas crane out into the sea, and the clusters of afferent ganglia struggle to route signals for pain and fatigue out to the capitals, so windswept and bleakly fire-insured now, so many miles and faulted uplifts distant from the neurofilaments of nociceptive stars.

Barren as the icefields, and about as likely to store scraps and chains of rusty DNA for garbled reuse in the stars' winter-prone engineering, delicate programs of synthesis and lytic drift where the genomes flare, like bursts of black plasma, around the annulus of zero's breached hull.

The king is pacing, that aimless circular walk of the habitual smoker, noticing as much as he can and trying not to be noticed himself in the act, timing his slow about-faces against the offended propriety or unknown nervousness of anybody who might happen to pass, a roulette that's not without its delicacies and particular dangers: you want to look like you were going to turn anyway, like the stranger's appearance just happens to coincide with an intuited point on a long curve, because if he notices you turning away, he might suspect you of being the kind of person (cop, mark, rival dealer) who's *trying* to look nonchalant and unaffected, which is, of course, exactly what you're trying to do.

So you take a few more steps in his direction, let the curve belly out by successive geodesic sections toward the tipping point on the coronal edge of an imperfect circle, some kind of moment azimuth dictated by the firmness of the dirt (not very: stones and glass and plastic, whole legible archaeologies of petroleum use and the peoples inferable from same, deductions waiting on the next episteme's scientists, should there be any, who will dimly recall their forebears as brittle inexplicable men, given to a massive program of unbearably slow and affected suicide, crawling down the slope of an exponentially shrinking function, unable, for whatever reason, to admit to anybody that zero waits beneath the day and to shatter the thin, soft lithic floor of their chosen mathematics, either in the name of seeing zero and turning back, or in the namelessness

to follow), the distribution of rainfall (suspicious, and less tethered than ever to the season's white and mudstreaked turn), the soles of your shoes, the 24-hour shiver along your thinnest veins, transmitted in dull oscilloscopy to the roots of thicker arteries, pulmonary and carotid, till they finally meet in the aorta and fuse there like striate graphs of central pattern-generator stars.

Not much traffic out tonight. There wasn't supposed to be, but then there's never *supposed* to be, not in these gridless Ausländer map-scabs, places on the edges of five or six townships, none of which have any particular desire to claim them. It's not only a matter of suburban prejudice and misplaced pride, though of course those play into it, too; the borders depend, as they always have, on the ambitions of various men and women on either side, hoping to shovel the crime statistics into a different congressional district, gerrymandering their way out of crack houses and cul-de-sac traps where young men without any kind of government ID lead lives of bewildering danger and vulnerability – lives which, in a turnabout that would be ironic if it weren't precisely programmed into the state's immachination, will almost inevitably end in the most final kinds of government identification, the prison-intake number and the toe-tag.

For all political purposes, these teenagers and children, sometimes 5 or 6 years old and already practiced in the peripheral tasks of the drug game (washing pots, knowing for whom to latch and unlatch the door, sitting out on the porch in the impersonation of play, so that the rare non-police white passerby can say, Aw look, a tree grows in Brooklyn, but actually on the lookout for cop cars, marked and otherwise, and whatever make and model is used by the rival gangs – really any car at all which you see more than once without knowing its owner, and some of these little kids have a sharper eye for chop-shop work and aftermarket rims than any serge-suited suburban dealership pimp) – again, for the purposes of the politicians, these (mostly) men and boys are criminals not yet convicted, casualties briefly reprieved from whatever is to be their cause of death. They barely exist in any official or statistical sense, although in some cities, ten times more drug than tax money comes and goes per annum.

Their transactions are in cash; their intelligence, so insulted, slandered, and mislabeled by a school system whose only real job is to provide so many certificates per year claiming that it's trained the next generation of waiters, custodians, and small-time white collar criminals, has never really shown up on any official metric – and you'd



better believe that anybody who can live from 8 or 10 to 18 or 20 on a block of stash houses and crack bandos is *smart*, and has had his or her intelligence tested every hour for every day of every year in ways that college graduates will never need to worry about; they probably aren't going to vote, because they've already suffered too much bullshit, of both the horrific and the everyday-harassment varieties, to believe that any elected son of a bitch will ever do anything for them, and they're right. Nobody will. The system, at its most lenient, exists to deny their existence.

Occasionally it will veer over into some utterly insincere act of charity, like sending patrol cars around to hustle kids into compulsory classes at public schools whose funding the same system has been slashing for fifty straight years. And after two, three meaningless and transparently self-promoting campaigns like that, how are you supposed to feel anything but insulted, condescended to, written off, and how are you ever supposed to take seriously the idea that anybody you haven't known since childhood wants anything but death for you?

So it's back to the officially foreclosed-upon houses in the demographically empty neighborhoods, and back to a hunted life whose gains and losses can, at least, be measured at the end of the day: how many of your friends are still alive, how many of those missing were killed by officers of the same government that wants to "help" you, how many days of calm and calculation you've got left before the gangrenous mathematics of all this conspire to burn you back to warzone instincts, recoiling from sound and light, paranoid at the approach of your own shadow when the sun burns down the city at your back.

Wildflower dyes seep frighteningly vivid from the fossilized wasp's nest, smelted and cast now to the texture of iron-laced rubber and the color of some black alcohol derivative, a compressed Babel terrace of dark polyvinyl tongues, recessed pollen geometries logged deep within the star's biomechanical memory and accessed only haphazardly, with a recall less photographic than photocopied, furred at all its lightward edges with imperfect pixel amnesia.

Some granular sleep, and afterward the unshakable, inoperable feeling of heat in great stagnant masses, digital skeletons of archived thunderstorms, mosaicked byte for byte like novae around bone cells site tranquilized calcium stars inside a ring of their

own dead, a thick liquid breath of plasma just condensing into white tacky rain, something to stain the skin and clothes, but not for hours after you're caught out in it. The drizzle pelts down, spaced precisely as the quincunx trees in any Babylon garden, and we lean forward or back a bit to save certain of our surfaces from the damp. Skull lightly slapped by ethyl-foggy water, air bubbles crawling into the mains, sewer grates gone milky with a cataract per bar of prescription-loess and damaged chemistry.

After which, some of us will look down at ourselves beneath the odd spectra of the few lights in the shed where the man from the DoD is set to deliver his address, and we'll find our sodden clothes faintly glowing, stung to radiance with additives to rain, neural pollutants our forebrains normally filter from the pitchy xylene output of the star, stained with the need for heavy vegetable sugars and that need's rare satiation, chlorophyll and grain alcohol enough to sink the veins into their backing of soft iridescent flesh, rewire the whole system infrared as the instincts that stay with our bodies even during sleep.

Violence, fear, asphyxiation, rage, horrible thirst. These Oedipus recalls. There may be others, freaks of the autonomic nervous system, efferent glitches rattling from the middle vertebrae to shake a limb or hand out of the dormancy its briefly disconnected brain can never know, sleep-paralytic stars compressed with apnea, barely swelling or contracting, radiating only a stale and faintly wasted light, like the smoke hanging in bluish strata once morning comes to eradicate all traces of our tenancy here, or of the King's: chairs, mic, PA, lectern shipped out on the same requisitioned Army flatbed that brought them here, functionaries and posterboys airmailed home across the world to be variously coddled, fucked, fed, harassed, kept up all night by the gritty incessant digestion of their computers, the pained motherboard dysphonia of hardware with its origins in military R&D now being forced to run figures and simulations which even the military who built it would find borderline insane, landfall scenarios and Operations Orders rigged to simmer on digital standby and rendering, of course, the breakout of war some fraction more likely because we've got a plan for how we'd run a war, were any to occur.

Oedipus remembers the night they brought him in on that thing in Syria, toxic gas billowing through the cul-de-sacs of prefab Damascus suburbs, trying to claim that they'd had knowledge of both the attack and its perpetrators three days ago (which, if it

were true, would beg the question of why the fuck they'd wait three days to say anything about it), thin coffee and day-old, half-empty bottles of water, screwtops missing for at least half that time, gone stale and dust-mottled as gruel or the gentler aftermaths of oilspills, the diesel spectra fanning upon shores of tainted gulfs as to display what minerals remember of the light they ate when they were meat or plant-life, the hydrocarbon algebra that raises our blood sugar with transfusions of mauled stars.

The point of which, as he recalls it now, shifting foot to foot, hands variously at each other, the edges of his pockets, the accidental beard he hasn't yet cared enough to shave, the lining of his uncomfortable jacket, the tip and white cylinder of his cigarette – a strange arrest, a locomotor hiccup there: he can never ash it on just one try; he has to sight along its length, perfectly place and time the tap that shrugs the ash away, middle finger twitching above and waiting for its moment and location, looking like (he always has the thought) a withered old bird trying to feed its absent young, the final crane dictating terms of body heat without any bodies to receive them, and how long can it possibly be before there *aren't* any cranes left, given the rising mercury and general lull in public shit-giving ... he had meant to disclose some *point*, but hold on, this outranks it.

The populace, it would seem, gives a sturdy fuck about anything in roughly decade-long cycles, talks it up, lets it ring between the functional equipment of their variously bandaged and rebuilt faces, a halo of friable reverb banging around between the walls of ventilation systems, different spinal picking up rumors of meningeal fever from the pingback of an echovirus star – and if you can't manage to get anything done within the narrow strobe of that decade, good fucking luck, because it's going to take another one for anybody to care again.

Bearing that in mind, how long can we possibly expect to keep seeing and hearing birds, and how long – this bothers him the most, because it happens to him on a small scale almost daily, and he knows that no mental preparation will make it any less obtuse or painful when it happens – how long after our first totally birdless day will it take us to realize that the odd camber of the light, the strange detail and persistence of the hugely complicated acoustic mass that goes to make up urban silence, came from the absolute absence of birds?

How long will each and any of us walk around, feeling faintly uneasy, maybe watched or listened to, wondering what small miscue is lagging in the heart of the daytime, before we figure out that there are no birds singing, flying, landing on the branches and plants, picking insects from the cups of nectar-druggy flowers, wringing worms from the loom of the rain-loosened earth?

... but the point, right, the point is that having a written plan, in more or less comprehensive detail, for an air assault and eventual amphibious invasion of Syria – units stationed in and around Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, and we could probably threaten some of the Libyan coast guard into signing up, since they remember what we did to Qaddafi, with nobody's permission and a strange, almost sleepwalking fatalism on the part of the televised world, which seemed to regard it as so foregone a conclusion that he'd eventually end up shoved against the side of a jeep and shot in the face that not a single person of any real influence has bothered to ask, in the years since, how in the hell it was legal to sweep into another nation, assassinate its leader on film, and sweep out again, neat as surgery and no less prized, in fact a real similarity, a more-than-passing resemblance, between the bright sheen of chrome and white PVC respect around a surgical specialist and the similar zone of echoless public esteem around the men who managed, in a week or so, to isolate and destroy the, whatever he was, the president, prime minister, dictator of what was, in theory, a sovereign nation. We did it in full view, and by the time we turned around to dare any among the assembled to tell us it was wrong or even inadvisable, we found that they'd held celebratory galas in our honor before the thing even occurred, and were already furling up the banners.

It was, like Guy Fawkes Day, curious praise for a non-event, except that the non-event this time involved a summary execution on a dirt road, surrounded by olive trees and a full uninterrupted dome of molten-metal sky, recorded from all the angles you could want on the cellphones of the variously-commanded soldiers (Americans, Libyan rebels, probably some Libyan loyalists who made the very wise decision to turn rebel in that instant, UN or NATO peacekeepers with guns they hardly know how to use and just enough college degrees to get themselves shot for talking out of turn). Quite enough footage to edit together a decent slow-motion sequence: the flare of orange pixels blocked out precisely as 8-bit fireworks, the vertical spray of black blood visible against

the liquid heat and perturbed air of a thunderstorm held in permanent reserve, the many-part fall of the body, section on section thumping against plastic and hollow metal with a precision that it's almost impossible not to call balletic, almost impossible not to describe by saying that it looked choreographed and rehearsed, although that's really not what we mean at all.

What do you mean, then. Harder to say, and less likely to be understood if you do manage to say it. Maybe – and this is only a possibility – maybe it's that we're so unaccustomed to seeing a human body act in an utterly unpremeditated way that, when we do, we can only compare its unscheduled grace to the comparable effects of meticulous planning. Maybe our meat is so affected that, in dying, it attains the fluidity toward which its affection has been aiming – and is immediately slandered by reference to the exact contrivance it's finally escaped. Well, and.

It would, somehow, have been more of an event if we'd failed to shoot the man in his head. That same oddly-angled continuum of grace presided over his assassination, and we would've upset everything by arresting or paroling him, by sending him to trial, even if the trial ended in execution, or by purchasing his silent exile for whatever fee he still would've had the gall to charge us in that last docile garden of rifles.

And the point, *jesus*, the point is that Oedipus found himself reverting more and more often, on the night of a possible Syrian invasion, to the terms of the Operations Order, surprised to notice how much more certain he was with every interlude of speech that an invasion was the right move. There was no new evidence at all; everything he knew in that panic room, he knew before entering it; and as the night wore on, in fact, it came to seem more and more likely that the Syrian government *hadn't* planned or executed the gas attack, and that it was actually the work of one of the rebel groups to whom Oedipus would be lending effective if not official aid were he to order an invasion.

Some Salafi resistance cadre, calling itself an “army” but maybe without more than one or two hundred members, capable of carrying out small targeted operations and likely, when it does, to claim that these were the outcomes of massive and months-long recon programs, when they probably happened because five or six men – gone Puritanical with despair, transmuted, on the fine lathe-edge of constant fear and economic immiseration, into free-agent Defenders of the Faith – meet at the same

restaurant every Friday night to bullshit about scriptural literalism and the spread of impure practices. They happened to know a guy who did *x* and worked for *z*, and happened to know an unobtrusive place you could hide a bomb, an airfield which the Syrian government planes never used and only rarely monitored, a guy who used to make mustard gas for another splinter group in Iraq before the Americans fired all the Baathists. That's it. That's the "targeted reconnaissance program of an armed and dangerous insurgent group." And if Oedipus were itching to eradicate rather than reinforce them, he'd absolutely use those words in his public justification, and nobody would much bother to inquire or disagree.

But he wasn't. Not that night. He had the Order laid out, saw more and more evidence per hour that the Order described something horribly inadvisable at best and borderline suicidal in most circumstances, and was fascinated to find himself powerless to take that evidence seriously. Eventually he got talked out of an invasion, and his government pushed some watered-down resolution about inspectors and weapons stockpiles through the UN, but he's never forgotten the numb exultation of that war-footing, the clarity of the sensation – not at all a thought: it was pituitary, it was thick and inert as hormone-riddled cream – that, as long as nobody really knew what was going on, he might as well obey the dictates of a plan, and let its fallout dictate the subsequent reality.

Eyes gone, eardrums punctured, bones insensate with the chemical equivalent of cold, but no chill, no discomfort, only the muffled grasp of some absolute instrument in utter darkness: an implement, whether of surgery or of war, whose purpose he couldn't guess, but whose shape and weight and texture told him exactly how to use it.

But behind the details of this or that atrocity, the variously error-ridden god-machines from which they emanate and into which they will return as blackboxed data, we were singing (and still sing) a song about the places water flows when nothing interrupts it, chemically bound to thick substance, the blood, spit, oil, and semen of our national machinery – and there's something incommunicable as simple pain or fear in the experience of a nightmare so vast: not a signal to bent sent along the nerves but the actual searing and subsequent anesthesia of the nerves themselves, being burnt out like blown fuses, all patterned code reverting to the black milk of pure noise while you're

dissected and analyzed by the medical technologies of stars, whose goal is not to cure you.

Not, at least, such as we'd recognize a cure. And witnessing a catastrophe like the ones Oedipus is weighing tonight – invade or not, imprison or not, quarantine or force to the pyre a bonfire of the carnal vanities – commits you to an awful confidence, a halved trust which can't even be shared with yourself: like a dream of incest or horrific mutilation, you can't say with comfortable certainty that you don't *want* it to happen. You did generate it, after all. Never in your waking life, but by any coordinates you'd acknowledge ... but there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, and besides, we've lived too long by the dangerous lie that nations are built and run rationally. They aren't. The dream, and its merciless possession, come first, and rationality then enters to justify the dream with whatever excuses the moment's terror and vantage will bear. We have been the guileful autopticians of our own sleep, trafficking in bad magics of the eye, and our cunning may sometimes be so deep as to convince us that we built the pyramids before we knew what gods were to be buried in them, or that Christ was placid as accountancy and bromides, and contemplating heaven's justice, when he first felt the iron nails scrape and split his living bone.

The sky tonight is a touch-sensitive medium, blackly responsive, a tissue culture of fossil fuels in a growth medium of stars' muted neural voltage, cracking into small and delicate branches, plans for trees recorded in the ice sheet whose recession will allow the birth of leaves, a slow chlorophyll genome losing chromatic ground from the albedo of the polar suffocation and down through blindingly blue water, a shade that palpates your irises for pigment like kneading curare from the leaves of a poisonous plant, alkaloid paralysis from the swollen freeze of stars, twitching too quickly for the eye to see, but inferable from the inconstant light upon our skin, a first derivative reassembled after the fact by melanin cells in exile from the spinal cord and brain.

Press it anywhere and it does respond, though maybe not till some patch or node miles distant, and maybe never within our limited remit. We've grown too used to the promises of the later gods, those built for export, engineered like merchants' alphabets to slip glib and simple into the vellum-lined lungs of other languages, surgical readouts' proxy artifacts of stars: the world moves together *and* is immediately comprehensible,

the cosmos as you know them are a necessary vital coherence *and* you yourself are so important that the sun could not suffer the loss of your soul to warm and to annihilate.

Time to be trained away from those now, Oedipus thinks. We need to hear nothing else as we need to hear this – that yes, there is a biologic harmony, an overtone of fluid organization, and the stars do swarm or rarefy in terse cymatic glyph, graphing the voiced light for akousmatikoi to notice; and that no, you probably shouldn't expect it ever to make sense to you in particular, not at least without long study and self-abnegation, and a removal, to such extent as it's possible, of your own desire from the coherence you're researching.

You *definitely* shouldn't expect some cheap reduction to cause-and-effect, which is always really to say punishment-and-reward, in your own life. It's the rare Westerner who's capable of admitting that, though all things may or may not "happen for a reason," almost none of the reasons have *anything* to do with his ego and biography – and that, just as likely, "reason" is a frangible schematic, a post-hoc orthodontia to reset unwholesomely migrating teeth, and that nature recognizes nothing so brittle and cowardly as pure cause and pure effect. Get the fuck out of here.

We do partake of all in all, we're knotted into local integrities of same fluid force moving everywhere according to its histologic music, the growth and differentiation of stars' intrauterine anatomy, and none of that guarantees personal survival, much less personal happiness. And in the west, at least, we almost all live so far from anything unmediated by humanity, receive so few stimuli which haven't already been filtered and statistically edited to fit power's demands, that we would be (and are) absolute goddamn fools to think that a car crash or the reassignment of a ministerial portfolio occur because "things happen for a reason." Consider our vanity. Consider the truly astonishing self-importance of a creature who can claim, because he believes in a First Cause and an Inevitable End, that God decreed from all time to no time – from the swarming glossolalia of the silence before Alpha to the final and infinite ash-plains of the hum after Omega – that he, our friend the believer, should be prevented from getting on a plane which ended up crashing.

What kind of monstrous psychopathy can thereby condemn the other two hundred passengers to God's backlog of write-offs, the flüchtige hingemachte Männer, a



prop closet full of blood and incomplete capsule biography? And when you hear somebody start to talk like that, do you actually say any of this to him, point out the truly Luciferian pride of a creature capable of equating its own petty lusts with the mutable biology of the cosmos – or do you shut up, nod and half-smile, undecided between indulgence, contempt, and fear, embarrassed with his appeal to forces you can't believe in, worried that most people in most of the world think this way, and that any species living under the auspices of seven billion private and mutually exclusive deities, each with its mammal rind attached to enact "destiny," is a species that can never come to anything but carnage? That even carnage, once we've compressed ten thousand years of violence into a century slender enough for a few people to have seen from end to end, won't be enough to disabuse us?

Bee-fur and motes of sharp-edged dust, circulating under a massive quarry of cloud, coarse-grained and varicose as dry-transfer light, the annunciating heatstroke of the neural-pathway stars, finally burning close enough now for us to see their glare before they die, shedding fields of insulating gases and baffler-plasma like fog burning off after nocturnal rain, a rash, a blankly marbled scar-tissue field of ozone and birth-defective gravity.

Permanently deformed now, gnarled into a shape which is, like any written language, the precise registration of a violent and sudden absence, the codex of moment-wounds from which we might, working backwards, deduce the predatory angel who passed by so quickly, but whose arrival seemed so long foretold that he moved among and over us much as might a thunderstorm that simply never stops: no dramatic flash-flood warnings, no sky aching with the brutal birth of lightning, the chemical reek of blown transformers pulsing in the middle stratum of heaven like blood rushing to a pained and fear-taut orifice, cartilage washed over with the leukocytes whose white repair it can't know how to receive. Nothing impressive. Just a slow and unabated buildup of water, progressing geometrically, a predictable count of inches per hour, till the cities float away from their underlying continents, as dimly recalled and as haloed with rumor now as was Atlantis in the years when we (I'm told) could touch dry land.

Stage sets for the Day of Wrath, OK, that doesn't need much explanation. We've been prepared. Incredible detail of precision-broken things, the foley artist's care

designing the feathery die-off of small-ordnance explosions, dialing in the parameters for attack/decay/sustain/release as though for the genetic synthesis of stars – this has all been practiced more times than even the statisticians can really believe, though they’ve got documentation, and anybody with the buy-in money can tap into a huge (and hugely lucrative) sideline in disaster-spectacles, mass-producing gaudy versions of future decay while we do nothing about decay’s very real and immediate presence. “Do nothing,” shit, we actively encourage it. The contracts for dam inspectors have gone dark in a state with a couple thousand dams, and nobody seems very enthusiastic about reverting any of it to public control and thus to public funding. We’re at the movies, watching dams burst. Bother us when something interesting happens.

And all postop rationales aside, all earnest and maybe even half-accurate arguments for the display of effective force, the mutual assurance of destruction, it’s hard to look at a species which creates weaponry capable of annihilating not just itself but the whole world which gave birth to it and not to think that species must, in some measure, desire the annihilation. We don’t build bombs that we don’t want to go off. What we make, we want to use, and if not before the construction, then certainly after. There’s a force around technology, analogous to the deformation of gravity around a dead star, which bends all probabilities toward the use of that technology, like light bends in the presence of its own decease. Events “transpire,” strings of random numbers start stammering the same few integers, and the whole caudal chain – everything that leads from a few esoteric and unfundable experiments in a lab in Fresno or Bavaria to the permanent installation of a million pounds of shadow-carbon shadows between the present pavement and ancient dirt of Hiroshima – proceeds with the internal poise and placidity of a cyclical nightmare, a dream in which you constantly realize you’re dreaming and must wake into the same horror, over and over again, to realize over and over again that you’ve been dreaming.

It never *has* to end. We’ve taken mere trends for necessity, and our own most rudimentary hopes for the actual design of waking light. The fact that it often ends is no guarantee, and it will be a cruel recognition if it ever *does* end, and we happen to wake up, skinny and nearly blind with the inrush of immovable scalding light, to see what befell us in the course of the nightmare’s logically widening spiral.

And we're prepared for this, in some measure, if only on the most disembodied and fatuous level, if only in the same sense that we're prepared for the sun to eventually die and, in its titanicly slow death throes and rigor mortis, to swallow the Earth – thrashing on the fire-damaged shore of a black sea, disturbing by radial eddies the sleep of neural-oscillator stars – because we know we won't be here for it. (And perhaps because, privately, we don't believe that anyone will be, or would want to.)

But *this*, thinks Oedipus, staring into the darkness for what small edges and densities he can make out, the brutally bare pedagogy of a district where the only math is the steady regression to zero, this is something else, and something for which we were never even equipped with the right neuroses, a prophylaxis of swallowed speech and aborted gestures. It looks less and less like there'll be a Day of Wrath. Many small approximations, sure, and probably one or more biological-weapons attacks capable of killing millions, maybe even the beloved Cold War scenario of a briefcase chained to a suicide's wrist and shoved tumbling, in the odd way corpses do (no resistance, no instinct to protect itself), from the eastern seaboard down into the Beltway. But no single, final flame, no all-souls passage into cinders and scratched air, the unsteady phonography of a loss that only the lost would know how to play back or want to hear.

And, in Revelation's stead, the slow and faintly sickening realization that huge tracts of the world have already ended, and that even the most prosperous and populous city bears within itself zones which already look like the world will on the other side of that crawling, dry apocalypse: abandonment, sand, missing water, a single huge Indian reservation, a worldwide Middle East, and only rumors of a few cold-blooded birds reborn to guard the undefiled Poles, like carcasses of bulls still burning black at Eden's gate.

Might as well stub out that final cigarette, Oedipus, with a series of gestures so painstakingly calibrated to look spontaneous that, by now, they nearly are – what cardsharps and street-magicians used to call their “honesties,” the whole nothing-up-my-sleeve rigmarole which disguises the most flagrant part of the illusion, and through thousands of cumulative hours of practice, a few seconds at a time, Oedipus has streamlined and reduced these to a choreography so limpid and automatic that even he can't tell when he's acting anymore.

Simplicity and directness, they used to tell him, simplicity and directness. You can tell when something “natural” is being faked by its overelaboration: every move is prolonged just a little bit past its believable duration, and you cough, scratch the back of your neck, run a hand through your hair with such emphasis as these small details would never really require, were they truly off-the-cuff. They need to be precise, but in a precision modeled after carelessness; they need to be just long enough to register on the observer’s habitual eye, not the one probing for detail but the one dealing in logarithms that his conscious mind could never explain, little chemical sentences passed directly nerve-to-nerve which add up to the impression of honesty and which it’s the work of any given human being to counterfeit convincingly.

And this, he’s thought more than once, is the most exhausting part of the proximity to power: the fact that nothing can ever, ever be taken as it appears, the torturous baroqueries of code which infest every waking moment and most of the sleeping ones as well. He’s learned a certain gruff appreciation for the style of military dictators and unashamed fascists: they go straight from the brainstem to the outward paraphernalia, affect the uniforms of ranks they haven’t earned and the capes and heraldry of kings whose bloodlines died five hundred years before anybody still above the ground was born, and their psychic needs are so painfully apparent that it almost feels cruel to turn them down. They’re the lastborn children of power, the sad ignored stepsons, acting out in horribly predictable ways for even more horribly predictable ends, and they fuse so many decades’, even centuries’, worth of power’s abuses into a few short years of autocracy that they’re inevitably overthrown with blood and ceremony.

How could it be otherwise. Certainly, their ousters aren’t the result of mere abuse, or of any surpassed equilibrium of bloodlust: we in North America kill more people every year than any Latin caudillo ever has, and for nothing much more exalted or psychotic than convenience. The dictator’s bipolarity tends toward the extremes of violent paranoia and tarnished public largesse; we, a few hundred miles to the north, know nothing so sincere. We vacillate between calculation and anesthesia, and by now, the reflexes you think are your own – how much slaughter you can watch or read about before shoving the book away or turning off the TV and thinking, “Look, I care, I’m a good citizen, but a man can’t take all of this in at once, nobody can” (or *should*, we all

add, as if we came up with the notion) “observe so much horror in a single sitting and expect to remain hopeful or even competent” – have been tested, altered, reinstalled so many times that even the lab technicians have gained reflexes to modulate them, salivating bone-wet floods of amygdalar milk when the metronome-shackled dogs drum up a simpler quotient of saliva.

Nobody ever said you *had* to remain hopeful or even competent, and nobody depends very much upon your self-preservation. This isn’t what we’re told, and admitting it is worse than bad for business, and besides, it’s so much easier, so much more like the meaningless splinters of personal philosophy or belief in God’s benevolence we use to justify the day’s dozen minor reverses and disappointments, to think that each of us needs to retain some minimum quantum of optimism, a machinery as rudimentary as the eyes of undersea creatures, fat gastropod splashes of white and blue paint across skin just becoming photosensitive, so recently inlaid with a skeletal schematic version of the stars’ nucleic acid synthesis, the D- and RNA they build from light. Those who give up, we’re happy to tell ourselves, can never change things for anyone.

And those who don’t give up, we’re much less happy to report and to repeat, probably can’t change anything either. I don’t know that it’s true, Oedipus doesn’t know that it’s true, but we owe whatever broken and corroded sense of decency we have left to say it out loud, even if it proves false, simply as counterbalance to all the self-help horseshit we’ve been taught to streamline from text to mantra, mantra to hymn, hymn to the public face of nations’ deeper logic.

Even on the middle levels of power, where men like presidents exist, that kind of dubious amateur medicine obtains. Each secretary, majority and minority leader, envoy and ambassador, general and intelligence director has been convinced, by his or her peers, autobiography, and heavily-mortgaged grasp of history that we need to remain calm and dispassionate as we can, that we need to collaborate and not make too much useless noise, that the workings of power may be odious, sure, but if nobody decent ever agreed to move within them (like a living insect agreeing to its station among the fast-elapsing half-lives of the mineralized stars, fed to hibernating fatness on pitchblende and amber, gnawing crystal seed for some comparable reorganization of the vital fluids), nothing would ever change at all. Hmm?

To which you might well answer that nothing *has* ever changed at all; that the workings of power here and now are more or less what they were in fucking Babylon; and that perhaps our greatest resource for some genuine schism, a faultline triggered by the white and deafening acoustic capstone of a single decibel's or syllable's removal, would be to lose our goddamn minds, to panic ourselves to shreds, to refuse even such collaboration as keeps our blood cells similarly apprised of what constitutes an invader, similarly tuned against the veinward drift of antigenic stars.

But the gospel of anxiety – a terminal point, both private and public, over and through which we might pass like a beam of concentrated light is refracted through the locked inner topology of quartz, thence to read back the damage of heat and time upon a legibly scarred surface, remaking if not redeeming the whole history of recorded hurt – isn't going to find many takers here tonight. Everybody within a radius of several miles, from personal security guards up to the members of the effective royal family, has been coached since youth to believe that cooperation with power is the precondition to helping the powerless or even, and try not to laugh, to changing power itself. How that's supposed to work, well, I've never heard it very thoroughly explained. But nobody here is in the position to find it laughable, and were you to ask for an explanation, they'd lend you a patronizing laugh or a succession of slogans, each one primed and polished to do the only thing slogans are ever meant to do: restore quiet.

Everything else is the uncomfortable path to quiet's restoration. Even the most apparently nihilistic messiah of pure violence – even the amplified ghost-images of dictators and juntas we've been taught to fear so profoundly, have heard invoked so many million times against the plainly true but somehow still unbelievable fact that we, in our rationalized complacency, do worse things every day than any dictator has ever managed to do – only prophesies chaos as the necessary formula for a final and durable silence.

Above that silence, nothing even so hopeful as noise: only the small angles of indentation, the acute targets, of gesture and mannerism, of costume and disdain, to be gleaned from powerful people trying to seduce or accuse each other. Every aspect of the DoD functionary's speech, from what kind of clothes he's wearing to whether he begins it with *Ladies and gentlemen* or with a roughly amiable *Okay, everybody*, has been

datamined for its precise ability to cancel noise, to neutralize specific forms of interference, and if any of us wants to know what's actually being said (least of all Oedipus, who, as king, as center and terminus both, necessarily brushes against all forms and sources of bypassed signal), we'll have to reverse-engineer intent from appearance.

Up to and including the possibility that the bureaucrat doesn't mean a single thing he's about to say, and that all of it is shadowplay, staged to gauge Oedipus's reaction. In which case: don't react. If you can help it. Grafted root-directories grown backwards through the cortex of a star.

He grinds out the last cigarette on the loose gravel of the parking lot, heads inside, followed at no very vigilant distance by his security detail (which could mean etc. and etc. and etc., I don't know, you've got the background by now to work out all these mean ramifications for yourself), and takes a seat, significantly neither behind nor directly in front of the podium, but off in a semi-lit corner of the converted warehouse, all evidence of whose conversion will be struck like set-dressing by the time he gets back to his room. A seat on the dais would imply tacit agreement; a seat facing the podium would imply dissent. As it is, Oedipus is pretty sure that the DoD's program will proceed with or without his approval, and there's no point in pressing the issue, no reason to assume it didn't begun a hundred kings ago and won't proceed long after monarchy is abolished.

Ladies and gentlemen, the bureaucrat begins – so there's one to strike off your program notes, a fallible trunk from which to string the rhetoric's fallible branches – I don't think it's any secret that the military and I have some pretty profound differences of opinion regarding the operation of our foreign wars. (No notable reaction from anywhere in the room, so he continues.) I believe, essentially, that the armed forces are to be used as a blunt instrument – a precise one, to be sure, an instrument of incredible reach and detail, but blunt nonetheless. However much intelligence we pour in, and however much good feedback we get out, the military exists to kill people and destroy things, and though it may pursue such goals with almost infinite fineness, the goals themselves remain binary and unsubtle, a fairly fixed array of yes-no outputs. Yes, we killed him, or no, we didn't. It's ridiculous and unfair of us on the civilian side to expect anything more out of our military. Its officers and enlisted men have been blamed too

much for failures which should really be chalked up to those responsible for deciding how the military is to be *used*, not to the military itself. (The politics of this are too obvious to merit much reaction: safe guess that both generals and State Department underlings are fuming, and that nobody in attendance takes the half-assed praise at all seriously.)

So what I propose is something very simple, eminently doable, and possessed of a long and successful history: I propose that the armed forces should be used only to do the thing they're built to do, to kill, and that the whole remainder of a delicate occupation and political rebuilding should be left to civilian authority. (No surprise.) I do *not*, however, propose that this authority should be parceled out among government organizations, which are no less given to crosstalk and redundancy than the military. I propose instead that every nonviolent aspect of our wars and occupations, from this point forward, should be delegated to private bidders, firms used to dealing with the exigencies of surveillance, site security, policing, incarceration and so on in a manner which our military has never had to learn – and, I hasten to add, *should not* have to learn. That's not their job. They didn't volunteer to be Mesopotamian cops; they're soldiers, and soldiering should be their one and only responsibility. Let the rest of the operation be divided among specialists in each of its individual facets, and let those specialists compete between each other for the money which we'd otherwise be funneling into useless and messy paramilitary projects. You'll each find, under your chair, a preliminary report on the subject, authored by my department and principally by me and a few close advisers, detailing the division of non-military work and offering the names of what I believe to be the organizations best-equipped to handle each particular element of an occupation. Thank you for your time, and I look forward eagerly to hearing your reactions.

The bureaucrat steps off the podium, exits quickly through the same side door Oedipus just used to take his smoke break, and the audience stands up, almost every member of it angry but for almost totally personal reasons: angry at implied slights, at the personal gamesmanship offered as political strategy, at the cheap reasons given for a plan that's been more or less in place for the better part of a decade, at the pretense to personal insight on the part of another goddamn seat-filler with aspirations toward some higher and better-rewarded seat.



And there may, and I stress *may*, even be somebody in that audience upset at the glaring and obvious corruption of all this, and the dreadful slippage it betokens, from public wars with at least the affected rationale of public security to private wars which, like anything in the private sector, will require no rationale at all as long as they make money. Then again, such ground-level concerns, so easily derided as “idealism” or “naïveté,” may well have been left back in the senate-campaign offices and graduate-school papers of everyone assembled here, and they all may have aged long ago into a sepia truce with the real machinations of power, a life-support by tier on tier of pixel-dwindling photocopies, all living basically on borrowed time, all essentially at peace with whatever doesn’t cheapen their personal stock. Maybe so, maybe not. It’s never really been our job to know.

### Session #3

The radios have grown together – screaming at this unwilling graft, some insect tissue-culture grown to connect them by suspensions and poised weights it's past their own overloaded signals to limn with echo's torch or to evade – into some common autumn, a narrowed but enriched bandwidth, closer and closer attention to the tiny perturbations of the message-bearing sphere, these leaf-tarnished and bitter-gold signs emitted by the seasonally decaying stars.

Rangy with the damped static crackle of vacuum tubes' exertion, cloaked in eardrum-flexing haloes of answering-machine reverb, harsh aspirates each like a small unwanted deliverance, the recall from some softened and postproduced acoustic zone to the bare frightening vibration of dead breath against the tunnels of your skull, cast over them like spiderwebs grown together in the years between the deaths of architect- and tenant-spiders, and with it a congruent displacement from the city as a known track or navigable landscape to the city as the precise shape – a premonitory hieroglyph, a medical image by which the shaky radiologic stars haruspicate the syndrome yet to come: causing tumors by developing their photographs, replacing neural pathways with magnetic films' deep-freeze electrical treeing – of some third and parallel deliverance, into the zone of the city's secret purpose, the inhuman act of bioengineering for which all our plausible commotion has served as inaccurate captions, title cards gone astigmatic with the overdose of light.

Unable to fix points = unable to define functions, such as we've conceived both function and definition = unable to do much of anything at all, really, except sit clutching the chemical foundation of your present moment, inner and outer halves both proportionally represented, a proprietary cocktail of carcinogens and prophylactic drugs to mute or strangle the bare yew-dark seeds of cancer, the metastatic stars engaged in crude acts of self-surgery, connecting to and altering each other along dark aniline

branches grown, like spars of tide-smoothed stone rising from the escarpment of an evaporated sea, ropy and clotted on the linings of your lungs.

Mine too. We wait. Try not to let the day scream any further off its runners than it has already. Camber's out for good, and neither of us has any reason to trust the seasonal alignment as much more than a convention, the way you say *the sun's going down*, though you really know that it's *us*, that we descend, after intervals less and less equipped to bear the trade-name *daytime*, to all the acts of bloodshed and spliced genetic vapor-trails once reserved for the descending sun, the underworld it travels through, the slaughter it oversees or undergoes, the bubble-chamber pathways skirting tangent to the edges of a neuromodulator core grown in the stars' mutant laboratory.

Down and across, and organs to be grown from the doxology of shed blood, the slow coagulant benediction, and either of us might lean against the other and come back wearing patches of foreign skin, rivulets of unwanted lymph, a yielding and suicidal immunology, open to all stimuli, eagerly receiving all forms of interference, from the basal-state synaptic noise of stars' taut neurofilaments to the slacker and more predictable spread of mouth-to-mouth diseases: mononucleosis aging into kinship with anthrax, biological weapons refined from the natural debilities of the creature, like rearticulating a burst skeleton from the clattering rash of rough white patches shearing-stress detailed upon each bone.

Joints intaglio with heat, salt-swollen pressure, dilated veins, greedy hydrophile granules soaking up the sea all salts imply, building a ziggurat succession of microscopic chalk cliffs, thus to rewrite the scalar intervals of blood, entomb an ancient strangely-measured music alongside the flimsy sickle-cell cuneiform that litters the stelae of hidden invertebrate stars. Unrecognized. And if you did find them, you wouldn't know what you'd found, wouldn't even be sure that the plaque, seal, shield, cartouche itself wasn't the discovery, that it betokened anything at all. We've listened to the oracles and taken what they said as an objet d'art, a nacreous phrase to be caressed at our leisure. They were talking about us, and what, beside and in us, is alive in the air right now. They were describing imminent atrocities of weather.

The schizophrenics sit on the grass slope, backs against the drab wall of the ex-library, converted sometime in the last few years to a privately-owned “mental health clinic,” which is the chic and marketable way to say amateur Bedlam. There is cruelty, yes, but update your paraphernalia. No need for the firehoses, lobotomy scalpels, curious experiments with trepanation and induced substance-dependency, attempts to modulate the radiation blowing in thick plasmid sheets, dark and briefly stunning as torrential rain, off the genetic weapons-dump where we dispose of the decorticated stars. Useless material, captain, non-coding, non-replicating. Safe to bury it? Safe for whom? Burning this country to the ground would be safe for *us*, since we’d be on emergency evacuation helicopters long before the fire ever reached the colonial houses and the jerrybuilt intelligence bunkers set up in their shadows – and how sentimental are you really willing to get about the “safety” of a people you never really saw or thought about?

Not even when you lived half a mile from their diesel-slathered throngs, rarely saw leaving their hovels. Sheets of tin and zinc, packing crates, wooden pallets, mattresses and box springs, held together with a hand-smear and delicate mortar of dirt, clay, reeds, the odd sapling, posts and pickets of any material at all, the shapeless plastic fractions of occupying powers who left and, in their chosen exile, devolved upon the colonized locals all this imponderable faceless machinery, miles and miles deep and wide, an interminable and stagnant ocean of plastics without features, without legible purpose, as deeply obscure as the artifacts we may eventually find on other planets, unable to decide if they’re to be taken as religious totems or fragments of cryptic alternate technologies.

Or if, like our *own* alien artifacts (the ancient Mexicans’ and Native Americans’ pyramids and huts, the wooden henges ranged around solstice poles, the animal- and god-faces carved into still-living trees), they’re both religion *and* technology, and date from an era before religion was so sterile and useless that it had to be consigned to a separate sphere and tax code. From a time, if we can even begin the attempt to remember it, when the tribe’s observations of a living and dying god were directly implicated in the ways that tribe undertook every activity. Chemical terms in the angels’ aborted calculus, dormant (but not deactivated) bionics grown in carnal homology with the stars.

Not much call for shackles and pitchforks these days (which is not to say that the hospital orderlies aren't equipped with zip ties and tasers: "emergency equipment" is a significant racket, and you only need one theoretically viable case of "inpatient violence" to justify a huge annual overhaul of the facility's equipment, with a kickback of some small percentage, naturally, to the board that owns this and a dozen other hospitals and happened to recommend a certain supply firm, well, we just like doing business with people we know, you understand, they're good ol' boys) – these are the madmen of another dispensation, one that calls itself peacetime while doing absolutely everything nations used to do in the time of war, eroding further any meaningful distinction between the two. Such that, if either of us were to be asked whether our nation is currently at war, we'd have to answer *yes*, but we'd also have to think about it. The old props are gone. Rations, coffee brewed from acorns, tea wrung from tulips, patched tires and laddered stockings, Army-issue cigarettes half-smoked and stuffed with whatever fillers we find lying around, up to and including sawdust: that's all archival material, a good five- or ten-second stretch of stock footage to tape somewhere in the first reel as a supply of period color.

Even the terminology is self-conscious archaism: there's no "footage," there are no "reels," and there will be no "tape." It's all on the same hard drives, all stored in the same form that manages to encode both the fluctuations in the price of Chinese labor and the dwindling count of white cells in our blood, and any part of it can be converted into any other part, cross-matched, rendered covariant, until any given monitor can be scanned as an index to all others, if you've got the right kind of eye and the right sorts of connections. Put it this way: a man who fields only useful phone calls can hear about a 5¢ drop in the per-barrel price of Saudi oil and forecast, from that limited intelligence, a foreclosure on an entire city's worth of Section 8 housing for the elderly and permanently disabled, a massive budgetary cut in the provision of medicine to the bedridden, a huge overhaul of the pricing system for ambulance rides, a 20% jump in the rate of traffic tickets and public-nuisance citations, plus the corresponding shift of percentages in a lame-duck mayoral incumbent's gubernatorial war-chest.

It's not just that anything, through money's specious magic, can be made equal to anything else; it's that, in an economy based on such hybrids of speculation and wrath,

everything *must* be made equal to everything else, continually, in a series of wagers and decrees, each one of which will then be heavily mortgaged into credit and debt, obscuring still further the daily and ultimately unrewarding fact that we have never, as a people, managed to assemble an economy which feeds, educates, and employs every one of our citizens. That's no accident, and it's also not a function of complexity or difficulty, whatever the apologists bawl at you. A public-works program to reinforce the levees crumbling all up and down the Mississippi is *not*, and never has been, more complicated than a hysterically elaborate debt-swap scam in which some ambitious faction in the Emirati government ends up owning your house. It's just that we aren't particularly interested, en masse, and we've never particularly cared. The rest is collaboration, and those who continue to talk up the relative merits of either side, while the whole fucking thing collapses, are quislings, nothing more and nothing less. They have, like those unmentioned in the Beatitudes, already received their reward.

But the rewards keep rolling in, and Christ knows they ought to. It's a day of thick humidity and heavy pollen, spore-loaded plants slaving wild over the fetid breeze, streams of allergens thick enough to cut the dry white envelope of your eye trailing behind the wet fronts like froth down a racehorse's jowls, and we really shouldn't be leaving the schizophrenics out this long, but what the hell. I'm not a doctor and neither are you. They slump on the green slope of imported turf between the sidewalk and ex-library with the odd weightlessness of the paralyzed, who let their legs dangle even when sitting flat on the ground, and they all look light to carry, flimsy as pillowcases stuffed with laundry. Many of them are. I've heard it remarked on, I've felt it for myself, and there's no good explanation, but everyone seems to agree: a man whose mind is irrevocably broken also loses some auxiliary weight, some quantum of resistance, and he lolls over your shoulder like a dead dog off the tailgate of a truck.

A hassle, maybe, but let's not get ungrateful. We've learned to think of these human cocoons much like the defense secretary thinks of war – which is to say, they're investment opportunities, every one a goldmine both potential and actual, hemorrhaging the money for his suppositious cure *and* figuring as meat collateral in the grant sweepstakes, another richly possible patient on which another factitious antidote may be tested. It's incredible to think that the incurably insane were once considered a *burden* to society, and even less believable that they were, for hundreds of years,

allowed to roam free, conceived of as a natural fraction of any given populace, one village idiot per demographic village, one crazy old woman as soon as your town grows enough to have its own outskirts. What a waste. Of opportunity, not of people; there will always be more of those.

But the money – to house, clothe, feed these mammal loss-leaders on the *public* dime! To provide them bare asylum free of charge, and to lament how much it cost, when the whole time, a paralyzed and docile cash-cow was staring us in the face: charge the insane, or more likely their families, for the “palliative care,” charge the city in the form of subsidies for crime reduction and lower homelessness statistics, charge the research councils and charitable organizations for grant money to be spent on curative regimes you’ve never thought would work, charge all those not imprisoned herein for better security, a more thickly drawn line between the documentably insane and those who only act that way.

Conquest is a frontman’s game and must lead – tiresomely, with the *pari passu* predictability of something that’s meant to be tragic but only comes off dull (and if comedy, as some have suggested, is the capacity of laughter to recognize and correct mechanical behavior, then tragedy is at least in part our horror at the notion that many of our lives are more mechanical than even our nightmares allow) – to reprisal; divide and *invoice*, divide and deduct, if you would be a viable Caesar, and hold your multiple state in any city whose ambitions and resources have conspired to engorge it with daydreams of playing at Rome.

“Siege” was a different arrhythmia, another overworked heart’s excursus, fibrous where it should be smooth, overwrought with half-valuable data, fusing sketchy thermal intelligence to bitsmooth the striate physiology of stars – siege he can handle. Never underestimate the value of a constant but vague enemy, a noxious quantity somewhere east of zero: indices to an inverted western front, the undeclared border war on which we build our hoards of stones and gases, pipelined for storage to holding-company caches within smelling distance of the cold metallic sea.

Robbed graves, unsealed crypts, the black air furling pestilent tongues into the dry holocaust of arid southern daylight like a solar flare on negative filmstock, the carbon wasteland of histamine-deleted stars – a swarm of bees held in such long

metabolic storage that, upon their many-times deferred exit, they float out druggy and ponderous, weaned off any native calculus of sun's conversion rates to pollen or nectar, bearing nautilus phonographies of their own built-up glandular wax. Mandibles arthritically fixed at the constant ratio between heat and food, effort and sleep. An artificial reflex arc in which to test the biomechanical programs loaded up from long-abandoned stars' genetic engineering.

Spent machinery and unassimilable code. The vapors are very nearly too heavy to be borne on the unleashed air, and given enough time, all would drift floorward, scattering ash not quite coherent enough to gather in gray-out sastrugi, modeling wind-whipped topographies of polar snow, quick-exposed erosion manuscripts for quickly forgotten decryption by the alternate genomes latent in that ice, so green, so clearly a precursor to the dying greenness elsewhere. Near the zero from which the world grows, a hoar-streaked fontanel secreting (with more and more effort, and less and less obvious success, on each iteration) the cortical organ of Earth, an interface across which transfer mirror-neuron photomachineries of stars, you can very nearly believe in another green chance, and a slow but irresistible redemption of the half-sated hungers dozing fitfully down the whole length of your blood, playing parallel to your lab work like the waveform of the soundtrack runs down the chiseled celluloid margin of some filmstrips – a gentler dispensation, an eventual reprieve from everything you could suffer but were unable (forbidden?) to name.

And naturally so, since it turns out to be nothing much more than the whole condition of your being here, the hundred-year deformation of the species which, in the most hopeful outcome, will only register as a minor anatomic freak, a cluster of mutation agents fused together in the fossil record of the stars.

Not all results are so encouraging as our disappearance; we've learned to worry about traces, tilted radiation-counters, water tables leaning distinctly toward the cytotoxic, in a way that would've been nonsense even 80 years ago, and may well be senseless again to our grandchildren, should we have any. Should we be so, what, well, that's the question, isn't it. Run it in one direction from inconsiderate to blasphemous and megalomaniacal – and then, if you've got the strength left, run it the other way, yet again a strip of fouled but reclaimable land to the sunrise side of zero, a narrow scrim of



absolute golden blindness called the dawn, and a species much like ours but with a few irreducible differences remembering, as we cannot remember, how to *shelter* beneath the morning's rose and take its protection for anything but granted. If any should survive by then, they'll know. How fragile the lacerating botany of another daylight, another set of backlogged CAT scans and damaged files half-loading on the buggy genetic hardware of the stars, and how likely it is that any period between a darkness and darkness, neither of which may be called "night" in the absence of intervening daytime, will simply fall apart.

Split from the azimuth downward or site us along a datastream of fallible cynosures, target-stars to aim for like the target histologies of mutating genes – and not only or especially while they hang in the sky, pass over the corpus callosum of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, transfer into the Earth's stranger and less pacifiable lobe, prey to dreams which, though incarnate in its voltage, are no more its own than my dreams are mine, than my sleep accedes to any lit propriety.

The spindles group and distort, the wave-spikes cluster around values associated with REM, panic, mals grands and petits, and the world is no less helpless than you'd be in such straits, steep-walled and looking gnawed upon, constructive plate boundaries above which there can be no bromide return to daylight consciousness and no reassembly of an ego credible enough to row and pray to the other side of noon, a nightmare that can only be sweated out till it should turn to some less scarifying dream, if it ever does, and without appeal to any gentler unity – since, by then, we will have built and rebuilt the polis on nightmare's exact coordinates, harnessed evil sleep for a renewable fuel source, renewable if wildly hazardous and apt, for what we should be careful not to call its "reasons." Reason, in the outward, the morning-bleached sense, ergot and agaric scraped away, only predictable seedlings and rectilinear beds, has precious little to do with any of this. That's become clear while everything else has become confusion. As long as reason proceeds from *ratio* only, it remains a kind of consensus inquest, a cover story equipped with just enough method and public concord to stay regnant.

Not really because its technicians believe, or because its theorists have worked it out to their own satisfaction; just because the laws of least resistance have channeled that water here, into a reservoir large enough that nobody will much bother to look for

the bottom, apparently in decent enough repair that we've got years and years before any of the huge cracks in its concrete walls slip over the waterline, climb like the gathered rainfall's distorted memory of lightning into the daylight those amnesiac storms once cauterized and parodied – twelve hours, more or less, of legible and relied-upon brightness condensed into a single optic shriek of abraded electrons, the immune system of the atmosphere (clotted now with platelets grouped, for density and mass, by song's cymatics) discharging all its cures against inoperable stars.

And, well, shit, you know? That's the real language of impending but uninteresting disaster: *fuck, but, huh, I mean, fuck, right?* There was always something else more profitable and more politically promising to fix, some specious plague and hearsay invasion, and nobody on Earth gets much of a kick out of hearing that the reservoir from which we draw our water is falling apart, that stored rain is leaking into and drowning the farmland, that we need thousands of man-hours to fix hundreds of tiny cracks. To get excited about a rotting foundation, you either have to traffic in a very specific subcategory of corruption, or you have to contract an awful kind of love with the black addictive sting of the truth. Very few of us do either; even fewer ever want to.

So remember, the genuine soliloquy of our decay is in those stubby, blunt, opaque interjections, plain as gesture if you know the man and the situation, useless otherwise ... well, hell. Which is not to say that a fuller, rounder rhetoric won't be required for postmortem purposes – better-cadenced, more oratorical, something Episcopalian and white-candled to hum from behind a not particularly dogmatic altar, word-painting as cheaply as any hack Italian opera composer, and grazing but leaving fundamentally untouched just as many of the real Mysteries, so pat and businesslike about misery and death, so eager, as were the kings themselves, to fold up succession struggles and the reigns of unalloyed sociopaths in a bit of turgid second-act recitative, thus making good on the old metaphor (still alive, as all are metaphors, but so often condemned to paralysis in open daylight, encrustation beneath so many layers of careless use and indifference, that a single life is hardly enough to dig back to any trope's living tissue): we hear the king call himself Denmark and say *Our* when he means *His*,

and we take it for period décor, the painterly touch of a screenwriter canny enough to get his diction together.

We miss the point, as we usually do. When the king calls himself by the name of his country, and speaks of his own problems in terms of his people's doom, he means it literally, and it will be enacted with absolute fidelity to the figures he pronounces. He says "our" because his subjects will die, have died, are dying at this very moment, in the name of his pathologies; he names himself as he names his nation because that nation is a lab-cadaver, a test subject for the grading and routinizing of his private schemes, and because war on Us, the Royal Us, the Denmark who We are, is to be war on the millions of helpless written-off people to whom Our personal power is real. No subjects, no kings.

The years of political chaos begin when the people figure out that their allegiances *can* shift, that bloodlines need not necessarily be honored, a full Henry IV melodrama here – and before you get too optimistic about the power thus placed with the people, remember this: some pretenders to the throne will make their cases with bribery, kindness, high ideals with lower and higher percentages of intent ever to follow through, and at least one of these men – who, whether or not he's an idealist, sure looks like one under the tracklight – will probably assume power for a brief interval.

In that interval, he's got options. 1). He may try to make good on some of his campaign-season promises, in which case the unofficial wing of some more prosperous military is likely to leave him strung up, fatally scarecrowed, in front of the presidential palace, spit on and paraded by a general or minor World Bank Eichmann who knows *exactly* how much of his rhetoric he's meant to put into action, and with whose interests in mind. (*September the 11<sup>th</sup>* means something very different below a certain latitude – pero no eres chileno, huevón. Even the gringos gansos, however, may note that the same economic program follows in October, no matter what year's September you're thinking of.)

2). He may immediately get paranoid and grandiose and start using violence to reinforce his authority. We don't really need to hear that explained; one might append a footnote here, arguing that a leader's use of violence is in direct proportion to the eventual violence of his own downfall, but that's really only true if you've managed to get sideways with the First World in the process. Saddam Hussein wasn't notably more

awful than the Saudi royal family – in fact, he attacked the Kurds and Kuwaitis as a way to pay back war debts forced upon him by the west, via the politically suave and oil-rich Sunni nations, old-style, colonial-manor plutocracies, who wanted to have a crack at the Ayatollah's Iran but didn't especially want to use their own men, guns, and money; this isn't to say that Saddam Hussein wasn't a bastard and probably a war criminal, because he was, it's merely to point out that he was a dumb strongman, not a mastermind, and spent his era of influence doing other people's work.

We didn't invade Iraq and kill him because of anything he *did*; we invaded Iraq and killed him because, depending on whom you believe, we either had a spectacularly ill-advised letch to set up an American satellite state in Mesopotamia, thus somehow bringing democracy to the fuckin' moon, or we (much more credibly) wanted to assure a constant westward flow of oil, thought we could use "liberated" Iraq as a clearinghouse for intelligence about terrorism in the region and a place to store our weapons and troops, and didn't necessarily trust Saddam not to cuddle up with anti-American insurgents. Politics and all. Gotta keep the fundamentalists happy enough not to kill you while keep the capitalist bloc convinced that all the doctrine is a sop to the hardliners.

(We may also have worried that Saddam would let slip a few pieces of tender intel – like, for example, the fact that the United States gave him the sarin with which he gassed the Kurds, and that we *told him where and when to use it*. Once that attack became big news, the Bush White House converted it into a *casus belli*, and just imagine Saddam seeing his old CIA friend George on the TV calling him "worse than Hitler" a few weeks later, wondering what the fuck rabbit hole of international gamesmanship he'd just fallen down.)

And last, and most probably, 3.) The new leader may lapse quickly back into bad faith and dayjobbing complacency, which is probably his safest move; the people will be too exhausted with the effort of having brought him to power to do much about it, and the process of backing a dark horse only to see him turn glibly sorrel in the high-odds light of coronation day is a neat prophylactic against that particular horse ever getting replaced. You flatter the people, you force a transfer of a power, and then you make it clear to those same people that nobody with even the tiniest fucking chance of real success would *ever* change anything in power's basic machinery – that success, in short,

is a self-selecting process, and that the best a given populace can hope for is a politician who finds it advantageous, for whatever reason, to act for a while as though he gives a shit about the people who arranged his ascension. He doesn't; they know; he knows they know; and this is called *political stability*. It's a much-vaunted feature of the prosperous western nations.

Nobody believes a damn thing can ever change, and so nobody is very likely to start assassinating presidents (well, nobody outside our own intelligence and military agencies), because the presidency is recognized as a kind of unctuous convention, the same way the tip to the maître d' isn't *really* a "suggestion." You have to pay it – and, by the time you're eating in the kinds of places that have maîtres d', you're probably *excited* to pay it, because it's a symbol of the status you've been trained to desire. You enjoy the greatest acceptable happiness that the subject of a mediatized kingdom can experience: the feeling of playing a role you know to be false, and of the exact moment (central to us as the transubstantiation of the bread and wine, and, if you've got a little bit of money and a few opportune friends, frankly a lot goddamn easier to believe in) at which there's enough economic force piled up behind your imposture to make it more or less real.

Hope to god that there are less repulsive forms of human joy than this one, but know that this is the best you're ever *supposed* to experience in a nation such as ours. The rest are suspicious and, in the state's official sense, "antisocial." They're private to the point of hermeticism, and we've been bred distrustful of anything it takes more than an adrenaline surge and a sentimental streak to understand. *Hands where I can see them*, comes the voice over the megaphone, the shrill bark down the swollen dorsal nerve.

Graphite vanes, programmed to simulate some wetly-fledged hunger of glabrous millipede flesh, gnaw at the skinned lips of the moon: tissues once articulate and now reclaimed – forgiven, even – by an embryonic tumult, a cellular largesse, for which "inside" and "outside" are sophist's terms, postop reports, the catchwords of a rheumy metaphysics not yet brought to the pitch of affliction.

And we, whatever our protests otherwise, have elected by some congenital rabies of sleep to freeze these fluxions toward the rudiments of organs, upload lab-ready scleroses, print grids of violently rectilinear circuitry – a language of incisions each the

same depth, along the same axes, not even binary, figuring in their various coefficients of resistance and issue only more and less modulated ways to say *no* – as a means to direct and defuse the current, buzzing like a microphone-snared hive, that vermiculates the tender, the paralytic stars.

Wormeaten to contiguity, and vibrating themselves apart, to some hypersensitive opposite of sleep, a condition of egoless wakefulness which cannot fail to cost us more than everything, the I and all the propositions it advances superseded now, gored open. Some magnanimous butchery. A benignant carnage of the stars, like toxic radiation can, at carefully monitored (or utterly random) dosages, convert itself into a kind of medicine, and the infected bone and tissue purge themselves of younger cancers, deleted by the slow-moving presence of this black and first carcinogen, an ultrasound scanner browsing for ectopic stars the womb would never know to nurture or refuse.

But that's, well, huh. Somewhere very near the cyclical slaughter of the sun. It could be either the last possible moment before dawn takes over from the interrupted night, or the last possible moment before night again reclaims her immobilized prey, feeding fuel-lines of morphine and curare from the biologic weapons-dump of stars to dose and numb the waiting moon, who shines with the helpless inner resonance of all those whose next few hours are pretty clearly planned.

Haruspex, nothing. Haven't you used the moon for haruspicy before, won't you again, and isn't she the central pattern generator – the motherboard whose currents, impedances, and flumes of adrenaline, warm blood, lactic acid are directed by the living pin-connectors which sprawl like centipede legs from colonies of neuromodulator stars.

Ohms shift, gauss noise weathers certain sections of the soundtrack to an odd flimsy sterility, a resonance less like the instruments we meant to record than their own recorded ghosts, prodded halfway out of friable iron sleep, coaxed stannic now where ferrous oxide used to be the basal condition of their dreaming, editing at random the medical stills of the stars' half-evolved organs into a perilous conjunction of REM.

(And, though you wouldn't know till later if you ever know at all, setting thus the terms of nightmare's spread, the valley walls of plausibility and daylit identity between which it must move, and in whose geology we have perhaps the truest, if not clearest,

picture we'll ever get of how our minds work, and of how deeply they rely on a memory more fissile than the fuses in the nosecones of ballistic missiles, apt to tweak over into half-lives shorter than can be measured by the parallel decay of a radiocarbon star.

The world you're given, over and over, by the darker, wetter ducts in the lower strata of your own brain is fixed within those valley walls, like sharks' teeth in ice, hollow marine skeletons meant to swell or relax with water pressure, now tuned to a permanent tension under the duress of glacial density, as though the bones of migrant birds should be locked in the flight-profile of one particular escape from tropic to tropic, and all migration afterward succeed or fail to the extent that it matches this last flight, a calcium Urphänomen ringing against the waves on waves of panting moths who are emigrating from Capricorn to Cancer, following the cut and bleeding meat of the moon, thick sugar silver effluvium over a fossilized butcher's display, to whatever island is left them. Or left anybody.

And in some dreams, whose logic we should no more doubt out of hand than we do any of our other sciences – they're made, like all our methods are made, from the radiant detritus day deposits in our bodies, the glowing wreckage of pitchblende stars laid in thick radiograph seams down our spines, ready thence to photocopy anything the efferent nerves send; their construction is no more or less fallible than the syllogisms on which Europe existed for about 800 years, fattening itself with greedy pleasure at its own symbolic trafficking, attributing the results of slavery and lust to a withered and one-god bootleg copy of magic; and dreams have this advantage over the sciences, that they can't exactly lie.

They may confuse, bewilder, seem schizophrenically fixated on objects and events whose significance we don't understand at all, imply desires in us of which we have no waking knowledge or in which we would deny all daylight complicity, maybe even meaning it, maybe even expecting not to be caught. But they can't lie. No finger on the scales, and none of the mathematician's gluttony for symmetry and smoothness, his horror of the striate and deformed, his avarice for what we all call "sense." A dream tells what truth it can, from whatever wracked angle, and then dissolves as far as all instrumentation can detect. But we all know by now that no dream ever fully disperses, and a few of us have massive research-and-development contracts to design and build a kind of spinal metal-detector, a scanner capable of sussing out what molecule-thick veil

of dream clings to the bone that surgeons can correct and coroners catalogue, like an imperceptible scrim of alcohol on the fuel chamber of a missile, catching fire when the engine stammers on, shouting the flames of its own thrust backward, to the trenches behind the test stand where commissioners, designers, construction workers, newspapermen all sit in the richly variegated gray of orthochromatic stock, already filmed by their attendance at this botched christening, baptized by the safelight of a collapsing red star.)

(Oedipus hates when you do that, you know.

Does he? What does he hate?

He hates when you leave a modifier dangling, fail to close a dependent clause, halve a parenthesis. This is not conducive to the duties which Oedipus has taken it upon himself to perform. He feels he has the right –

Surely stronger than that.

You're right; he neither feels it nor worries about anything so fragile and liminal as *rights*, anything so subject – at what you'd call a “whim” if it didn't mean holocaust and maybe should call a “whim” anyway, since it is one – to dissolve utterly, to burn off like the aftermath of night rain under a newly-visible architecture of ancient and blinding stars.

And if he doesn't feel, and if what he doesn't feel isn't a right?

Oedipus *knows* he has the *responsibility* to pry into the dreams of his people and to correct them to such standard as his mandate has asserted. This dream-surgery used to be left up to artists and, how shall I say, other such practitioners of immanent religion, but they worked by intuition and without any preconceived orthopedics in mind, often with flagrant disregard, even contempt, for the purposes of the state.

Which will require?

*Así*, so headphones and earplugs, right, so tinted glass and industrial shields, so the blackbox dredged from the significant wreck and the box of bulletproof glass around the witness stand, where we'll permit a man to say whatever he wants or even needs to say, as long as the verdict is pretty much in before he begins, as long as we're sure enough for Vegas to make odds on it that he's going to the scaffold, the chair, or the long



and curious parole of those whose crimes are too massive for the penal system to acknowledge, much less punish – exile, long afternoons in the punctiliously trimmed gardens of Madame Thatcher’s estate, obituaries for a thousand newspapers in a hundred different countries already written and filed, since their authors are absolutely certain that nothing but your deathdate is going to change between now and your official dispersal into atoms, since they’re on intimate terms already with the worm grafted to your conditionally-vital organs, and now it’s just croquet and bad domestic cigars, extremely expensive whiskey and extremely cheap sex, the odd photo-op when a cameraman there for some other event “just happens” to catch you peering over the hedgerows, contemplating the economic policy you were taught by the Americans, the night-school classes for your own edification, let nobody say you weren’t a cultured man, let nobody claim you were a brute, studying César Vallejo and the *Canto General*, studying maybe even *Martín Fierro* so you’d have an idea of what kind of adolescent manias were apt to circulate among your underlings, and everybody was your underling, discussing the uses and misuses of history with a Jesuit lecturer at a seminary for Indians, flown in from Atacama expressly for this purpose, and gratified to find that your adopted suavity of manner, your falsely urbane and educated front, was good enough to convince this man to talk to you as if he thought you were anything but a terrifying idiot, which he probably didn’t, of course. Say *claro*.

*Claro.*

A terrifying idiot is, most likely, exactly what he found you to be. But one of the handy aspects of overwhelming power is that as soon as men who find you frightening and stupid are *allowed* to let you know how they feel, you’re doomed already, so you don’t have much time to brood over the insult, let alone much purpose for such brooding. The moment the priests start to condescend to you, and to cavil over states of grace and baptismal history when you ask – videlicet, command – them to hear your confessions and to give you absolution, you’re effectively a corpse, and the only real question remaining is this: will they insist on your actual carnal remains, will they need you hung by your feet from the metal scaffolding behind a torn-down gas-station sign, dressed in some embarrassing collation of your night-articles, twisting creakily at the end of your actual non-figurative rope, next to the equally stiff carcass of your mistress,

whom – given the monument of our psychosis called the Laws and Customs of Warfare – the partisans probably raped before she died. Say *claro*.

*Claro.*

Afterward, well, I don't know. Depends on how the gunfire scattered across the front and sides of your limousine, or whether or not you were intelligent enough to demand passage to the border in a less conspicuous vehicle, ideally beneath the false floor of a flatbed truck carrying dehydrated food and clean water to some encampment of the rebels who brought you down and, if nothing so commodious is in the offing for you, generalissimo, presidente, Milagro de Chile, maestro de los Chicos Chicagüenses, then maybe you can at least curl up with your mistress beneath the back bench seat of an Army truck, pick a couple officers who are known to play both sides in everything, men whose faces will be familiar to the partisans – and these, all sentiment and retribution aside, will be your truest successors, the alibi-laden apostles of your one and only gospel: they don't believe in a goddamn thing. They've never been so, how would you say, not childish, not naïve exactly – I suppose what I must mean is, They've never been so *inconvenient*. Convenience is their whole purpose and practice. They worked for you because you were easy to work for: act with cartoonish, outsized cruelty toward your subordinates, with absolute ass-licking subservience toward your superiors, and when you get the inevitable promotion, come down harder than ever on the men who used to be your bosses and are now only your "equals." Say –

*Claro.*

*Claro.* Pardon the sarcasm of the quotation marks, but it needs to be said before we go on any longer, and before the American economy and the newspapers in Geneva decide where you'll be buried, and in what condition of bodily integrity: there are no "equals." Not in a modern state. There are only imbalances of power which have not yet been accurately described, superiors and inferiors who may not even know themselves which is which. "Equals," to the uses of power, are only two animals pacing around the question of which one is the other's prey, and what kind of predation suits the weather.)

We have to assemble the day, as usual, from the distances and echo-ratios of sirens, ambulances' and squad cars', nerve-noise sizzling across blunt concrete synapses,

its angles of reflection and decay, ADSR as square and sawtooth waves summed in the vital signs of stars.

The beaked doctors have retreated, Empire-style, to the center of the city, each to monitor his mile of river, fishing with whatever twine or wire hanger he's managed to promote, commandeering bait from the earth and blood from the stars' debugged circulatory system, each of them sitting at a slight and awkward tilt, wounded in the upper thigh, dragging still the ghost-weight of the boar's tusk that tore their lymph nodes away at autumn's commencement.

This is not the normal American progress. We've found it useful, at times, to refer to ourselves as "pilgrims," and to talk of pilgrimage; actually, we're the exact opposite of pilgrims, and our traffic is something much more frightening than attendance on the holy sites. A pilgrim moves toward known shrines, takes roads worn so deeply into the cliffsides and open fields by other pilgrims' passage that they need never be paved, tracks the acknowledged and holy like any long-term hunter does his prey, triangulating the distance to soft flesh or tinder bones with the aid of histologic maps composed among, and torn apart, by the carnivore stars. A pilgrim knows where he's going, if not exactly how to get there.

If he dies along the way, this is no invalidation of his pilgrimage; it rather raises him to something like the status of a martyr, even, in some estimations, higher than martyrdom, because a martyr dies in supposed defense of his faith, whereas a starved or droughtstricken or insane pilgrim, frothing with heatstroke, brain boiled first to a black liquid and then to an encrusted creosote scum by the nearest star's target mutations – stiff bubbles baked into greasy soot, fissures running axial or counter to the axis, a topologic biopsy of how the rest of the world is deformed in seeking a certain site, how the distance between you and Jerusalem will tend to knot and melt – dies a supererogatory death, in defense of nothing, out of sheer excessive devotion, unusable quantities of zeal. And, in the western tradition, we have tended to associate the unnecessary with the holy – and have, in so doing, wrought better than we know. There may once have been some profounder notion of necessity; I leave that to the older dead, who'd know if anybody would. But for us, in the time we're given, which bequest comes in the form of a space called America, a massif of congealed time, lower-brain spikes,

clonic interference burbling thick dark slices of geochronology to print the stars' decomposing EKG, necessity has always and only meant usefulness to power.

We talk of need, and what we really mean is want, but only certain persons' wants. We mean the desires of this world's masters, and if one of the last genuine prophets of Europe very rightly claimed that an Accuser is the God of This World, and that we lapse into something worse than sin when we mistake the accusation for the operant resistance of godhead, the voltage-tree that splices the spine's inverted roots with stars, well, what can I say? We haven't exactly been quick to acknowledge his wisdom. He died broke and obscure, waited on only by a few devotees, themselves even obscurer men, and with his wife by his side, which is more than any of us should expect.

He also, if I'm not mistaken, got harassed on a trumped-up charge of public obscenity or something. Of course he did. We're talking about a man who once answered the theories of an Academician, the most famous portraitist of his age, with the seven most terrifying words any form of power can hear: "To Generalize is to be an Idiot." The market will bear a great deal, my good man, but some things are over the line. And even then, a couple hundred years and no fewer wars ago, there was probably at least one self-important intolerable prig who read the prophet's marginal rejoinder and thought to himself, *Oh, I say, bad art.*

Let that comment stand as epitaph, and if you require another, think of the boy in the Italian chemist's shop, Rapallo or Genoa, circa maybe 1935, being asked if he store stocked a certain kind of American toilet paper, since the Italian brand was particularly unpleasant. He said, "Si, l'abbiamo, ma il costa é di troppo – lo costa più che la Commedia Divina."

Stomach trouble, bleeding hands, digital artifacts beginning to creep by information-bleed through what used to be the analogue screens of our eyes, replacing the dielectric gases of star-neurology with the exquisitely rendered bitmaps of their own sepulture, pixel-proofed ossuaries much farther than the eye can see, and a feeling in the back of each of our throats (you haven't told me, because neither of us can talk, but I can tell from the sounds you make while you're asleep, as you can tell from the strangled mewl I emit to let myself know I'm awake, even while dreaming) like, I don't know, a clump of damp grasshalms, rank weeds recently cut and collecting at the root of speech,

voicebox retroflexed hard as the diaphragm of a microphone exposed to an atom bomb's shockwave, pollinated with the reproductive systems that pour in fractured form out of the fissionable stars.

And the birds are flaws with the edge of day, black rips in a profoundly synthetic fabric, some recent plastic innervate with artificial silicon dendrites and programmed to an absolutely smooth fade from color to color, no zone of overemphatic pigment or spilled bleach, not a spare grain out of place: the sky is purple as a freshly-healed burn at its apex, around the missing stigma of the moon, and fades through red and orange to glow the faintly greenish gold of smelted pyrite at the last possible line of the horizon, smelted costume jewelry, furnaces full of anonymities' weight-graded fool's-gold teeth.

All gold must be fool's gold when torn with pliers from strangers' mouths – although, make no mistake, illusory or real, owners foolish or wise (and when have *owners* ever been wise?), it'll still be traded, melted, recast, sold, at market value or above, and there's probably at least one solid citizen in this very town and province wearing a wedding ring made at least in part from the teeth of a murdered Jew.

"To write poetry after" which may, indeed, be "barbaric," especially if we take *barbaric* for what it actually means, and not what it appears to say: think of racist Greek merchants-marine thrown up onto the sand spits of the Libyan coast, the same from which tens or even hundreds of thousands of desperate people will launch hopeless rafts this year, this *summer*, alone, horribly needing to get to a Europe which absolutely doesn't want them and, all bad press aside, would really sooner see them drown than deal with the fact that Euroamerican policy has made so much of Africa and Asia uninhabitable, and that the global rise in temperature will soon enough take care of those few grasslands which the G8 hasn't already burned down. Soon winter's ray will fall on grass as friable as any summer sun ever set alight, and most of the population of the Middle East will have to move to Samarkand and Odessa, hoping for a welcome which they've got no reason to expect. Governments-in-exile, sure, and even more so when nobody's very certain exactly who the government *was* before the whole population of, say, Syria had to wander toward Tbilisi and Tashkent. Israel might win its war for Levantine hegemony – so shriekingly hypocritical that there's not much point even denouncing it, because clearly neither reason nor denunciation matter much in a

world where such scenarios are *thought of*, much less *occur* – just as the whole Levant becomes a wasteland not just to rival but to surpass the Rub al-Khali.

The Empty Quarter is only Empty. The east coast of the Mediterranean won't just be a desert: it'll be a desert full of synagogues, mosques, ossuaries, shrines, and trillions of dollars' worth of American-imported military and surveillance equipment, all feeding a biometric panorama of sand back into the deserted Mossad branch offices, like pyramids upload millennia-long filmstrips of baked earth and rotting bandages to the medical-incinerator stars.

But, Oedipus reminds us, you were talking about *barbarism*.

Right, right, "poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," well, think about what *barbarism* means. A bunch of glib Greek sailor boys making landfall in Africa, going to check out the local trade, smooth or rough according to personal peccadillo and the going rate for a believably virginal asshole, not that we really believe there could be one left on Earth. Male or female. These would be men, you understand, acquainted with a place like Sardis in Lydia, the modern Turkish city of Sart, just inland of Izmir-which-was-Smyrna (and you can hear the bones of the words shuffling like ossified moths' wings, under the ossified stars, beneath the tongues of successive occupiers: Greek *Smürni* becomes *Ismurni* becomes *Ismur* becomes *Izmir*), just south of the Marmara Gölü, a favorite trading post for Greeks eager to see (read: cash in on) the Empire.

Sardis was where they figured out that you could run a city not by feeding its people, or building them schools, or maintaining some minimum supply of clean water, or by making anything for either your people's use or anyone else's – no, Oedipus, you must know, Sardis said that was all subsistence-level shit, bogus and stagnant, a slightly modified and updated version of cavemen foraging for acorns. And they were right, in their way, insofar as now we desperately wish for such dignity and so contracted a radius of harm.

Sardis says, Let's get rid of that penny-ante stuff. We don't have to build, we neither need to sow nor reap, we can make money out of money and live on its arid propagation, we can force gold to breed live on stage like any other staged form of sterile coitus: horses fucking women, men fucking goats, the rich always and only fucking the poor. Interest rates, buddy. We'll get money from somebody else, some asshole

mountainside farmer with an olive press or a vineyard, and then we'll lend it to you for a fee, use your interest payments as the base for *another* loan, with its corresponding and separate (i.e., higher) interest rate, and all the sudden, we're in business. The series may continue exponentially for as long as you like, and with as little blame accruing to us as you can possibly imagine. In a couple hundred years, we'll be lending debtor nations their whole subsistence, and when they don't pay up, we'll be able to goad them into wars against still *other* nations whom we'd like to have as clients but who have resisted, so far, our pecuniary advances. OB PECVNIAE SCARCITATEM, our well-rehearsed Roman sons will say, and for good fuckin' reason.

So we get a country in debt, it fights a war to pay back the debt, and then the country it fought the war *against* (we've got a list of suggestions, natürlich) will need to borrow from us too, in which case another war, in which case another new debtor, and the cycle of Progress continues, and the sun's lateral motion is a caged and frenzied form of regimented escape, a hazardous vibration within straits we choose to grant or to revoke from the internationally-recognized standards of "daytime" and "light." There will be Peace in Our Time. And by *our time*, I mean *ours*, not anybody else's. Perfect peace is only attainable for some, because it requires elsewhere a state of perfect and perpetual war, nicht wahr?

And the first generation of Greek sailors trained in all of this, well, they would've come ashore in Egypt or Tunisia or even Morocco, and heard the thousand African languages and dialects thereof which flourished in those cities, and the Greeks would've thought the Africans sounded like they were saying, *Barbar, barbar*. Hence "barbarian" and possibly "Barbary Coast." So if writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, it is so in this sense: it is the strange language of a strange tribe, absent from your conception of history, monolithic or dialectical, Party-sanctioned or not – a language that you, who assign such epithets as "barbaric," are likely to find troubling. Good. Be troubled.

And if, by "barbaric," you meant something else, consider the barbarism of *not* writing after such carnage, of abandoning the languages and scripts to their assigned stations, among millions of tons of scrupulously documented ash.

A reflex arc of tuned horseflies, justly tempered larvae dyeing milky and obscene the spans between withered imagos, buzzes through the raw gaps in the star's crashed

glial software like a collagen tapedeck trumpeting the news of sloughed prenatal horns, blaring out of empty sockets long since marbled over with pink laminae of embryonic tissue, panes of fragile body-glass, playing down the herons, kingfishers, and cranes from monuments reverted to pale jungle: gates grown over with moss and lianas like nerves webbing the solar wound to light, staircases terminating in the roots of huge swamp cypresses, the hulks of blind decorticated gods, each with its stone and plaster eyes scratched out during the last evacuation, cauterized obelisks in which the abandoned star's spinal flight recorder may or may not be securely stored.

Gnats, now, and some addled intonation, the scales of a sunken continent recalling the dry land to tonic silt. Somebody's worked out the conversion factors between alternative mathematics (not that there's any alternative now), and I think the coefficient of evacuation came out to something like a 52-year cycle, the five petals of a small magenta flower around the sky's trepanned nexus like five lobes of an inoculated brain, never functioning at the same time, at best shocking each other to brief lucid interludes with the crosstalk of occasionally shared nerves, the biologic armature of gristle and evaporated blood soaking up what small information it may from the life-support systems of ligand-gated stars.

But it's cold comfort – or, actually, hot, humid comfort, and so no comfort at all, no relief from the constant gasping pressure of wet and searing air upon our lungs here, sweat not so much beading on us or rolling off as actively and painfully *wrung* from the flesh, as violent a distillation as the nebular hypothesis, the radiologic architecture of fissionable stars' mangled tape-memories, black crumpled vines of iron oxide and password-scabbed amino files rattling into and out of the place where gravity's dark musculature twitched to engineer a late-term star-abortion – to be told that the coefficients have been ascertained and the process of abandonment given some kind of economic sense. Don't come here and try to talk that shit.

The people who used to live here, and who vanished even before the Spaniards, English, French decreed their vanishing a historical imperative, moved out of some deeper need than any our sciences might bowdlerize. You'll hear them argue crop rotation, perishable architecture, breeze-blocks of materials strangely like skin and serum, petri-dish remainders, decomposing in the red lateral glow of the fallen sun, submitted daily to the stars' medical scans and yielding workable cell-culture for a



species part insect, part mammal, part indecipherable, paused who knows how far through its own fallible engineering, still bleeding percentages and models even when the galleons showed up and the emergency chits finally went through in Hispaniola.

Didn't take too long. Not the chits themselves, I mean, but the establishment of some permanently nettled and ontologically understaffed colonial authority, men in the ridiculous clothes derived from medieval fantasies which were themselves ridiculous even in 1518 – never underestimate the capacity of human beings to get things profitably wrong. The fact that there were still something like knights (read: mercenaries) in late-Renaissance Europe is no guarantee at all that the late-Renaissance mind had any less absurd and self-serving an image of them than we do. Translate the metals and wood into lace and velvet, ruffs, bangles, intricacies of fabric worn, in part, to signal that you could afford expensive matter so punctiliously worked, and all the failures and wasted material such intricacy implies. There's some mean constancy of outward and flagrant waste to us. As a 'civilization,' if you can still pronounce that word without acidity; as a species, if not.

We love, and maybe need, to spend what we don't have or know, and we certainly need to have witnesses to such expenditure. The destruction of our planet as a livable entity, though it will probably cause more misery and horror than most of our wars combined, is not an accident, and on some level it's not even a disaster. We want it this way. Having spent all the available coordinates of our species-wide life in glaring public daylight, having tallied up the integers of our excess as itself another form of excess, luxuriating over numbers too large to be grasped by anything but the most cynical and contrived part of the brain, lusting for still large numbers, integers themselves which approach the last and fatal, the old gods' fractions – add up the billions and billions and you come within strange sensing-range, if not exactly sight, of the final decimal zone: these numbers are significant chunks of *everything there is*, all the land, all the air, all the light, all the *money*, these are such hideous algebras as miswired angels might be assigned, calculating demiurge histology, building their portfolios for disarmament and decommissioning of the stars. You talk about a trillion of anything, and you're talking about a significant chunk of how much of that thing there can possibly be.

After that, the only step is to spend the whole condition for our expenditure. And when the central three-quarters of the world map is an incurable permanent desert,

when only the poles are left whatever mammal deformations can breathe in all that heat, don't think there won't be somebody thrilled with the bombast and muscular relief of it all, giddily planning the next assault, skin boiling and eyes watery with gruel-thick orange blood underneath the thermo- and acidophile stars.

Pluperfect, then, and strangely calm in the sight of a watery methane sky, breathing down the ventral surfaces of our vertebrae, walls of the lungs screaming for oxygen they can hardly feel, since the act of deriving it from this atmosphere actually metabolizes more oxygen than can possibly be gained in the process, so breathing has become the slow exponential crawl toward asphyxiation, a drop to a zero our cells can't quite believe in, digesting stones for an insoluble caloric archive and losing heat in the process, licking the stars' fossil record, the bones of their sedimentary warmth.

Rodents' claws on all the metal surfaces, all the new and European resonating-boards, delivered here in a mineral lust which will slowly but surely infect whatever remnant of the natives can survive all the slaughter and rape: geometries of transported *quality*, rather than *substance*, quality being much more amenable to exchange.

The people around here, well, what can you say. They know where metal grows, and they treat it much like the other growths of the earth. No special reverence for gold, silver, copper, in such startling profusion, though it's taken European minds to see profusion as *abundance*, which is to say something you can trade, something against which you can take out credit, a resource whose supply you can contract to leverage debt, a weapon, always a weapon. The natives work it into immediate shapes, precisely reverse-engineered from nature: arrowheads and cutting tools, printed backward through the wounds of edible animals, the livid vascular geology of fissile stones, astronomical implements reconstructed from the slow concentric embryology of stars, the mutagen precisions of their scanned genetic drift.

But they don't trade with a metal radical in mind, don't take metal as the medium for general exchange. It's not, in itself, to be held in higher esteem than stone, or wood, or certainly not *grain*, christ almighty or somewhat less so, more valuable than *grain*? You'd have to be out of your motherfucking mind. Indeed you would; the Europeans are. They stand at the momentary end of a long sequence of, well, you want for your

own dignity to call it “thought,” but why not, so late in the day, call it what it really is – a long sequence of compulsion. They have come to prize metal more than any of the things it might be traded for, more than anything it might be used to do or make, more, even, than the market, their young and reprehensible god, tells them to prize it. And their avarice will slip over race and class lines until ingots and doubloons need no explanation, even among people with 100% native blood, even among the few who have never suffered the old, unsurprising horror of meeting the Spanish invaders. Conquest progresses very rapidly along lines which have nothing at all to do with blood and molestation – which are *backed* by these, yes, a kind of negative collateral, but eventually their system only requires your pained and unwilling credulity, only needs you to know that you’re going to starve if you’re not clever with your metals.

All the way inland, all the way up and down, Florida to California, Sonora and Chihuahua to the tip of Patagonia. And someday, through exactly the kind of tainted ill transcendence that these white men love to dream about, metal will displace itself at the root of trade, and we’ll be arguing with and about money which is backed only by fear. Terror will usurp the gold standard, and almost nobody, by then, will have the energy to protest that the whole thing has been bugfuck crazy. There will even be some – *jesus god*, the dubious comforts – who consider themselves virtuous, even *prophetic*, for demanding a return to the gold standard. They’ll paint themselves as outcast visionaries. They’ll want to know exactly how much gold is slumping in the dark vaults of the Bank of England.

They will therefore exhaust themselves in the fatuous pursuit of a symptom, while the profounder disease (that life and death should be ‘based on’ anything but life and death, the kind of category error only humans appear to be capable of making: call us *Homo sapiens* or *Homo faber*, Man the Wise, Man the Maker, but our clearest and least controversial designation would be Man the Incorrect, the only animal who knows how to be *wrong*) goes on utterly unchecked, obscuring in its white uncontroversial way the deeper terrors, papering over the etiology of stars.

Listen to all that bone and keratin against all that bronze and tin. Rats and chipmunks, wrens’ beaks and the blunt worn-down claws of tired turtles, returning from their nests of wet sand to the sea.

And it's amazing, by the way, that no hateful and crow-wise old sophist (to print which is a libel against crows) has argued for the specifically capitalist nature of Jesus Christ. Naturally, capital and Christianity have proven amenable, but I'm talking about a root argument, not the dubious Protestant equation between external wealth and internal virtue. Goes something like this: old religious hierarchy struck down in the Reformation, check; disgusting zealots of an unseen dispensation arrive to claim that heaven and hell have been assigned their respective elect since the beginning of time, and that that there is therefore nothing to be done but to accept what God dictates to you, check; the zealots' followers, as followers will, decide that there must nonetheless be some quotidian and obvious sign of their salvation, since I've never heard yet of a Calvinist who subscribes to Calvinism because he believes he's already damned, check. So Protestants start to think of money as the outward evidence of their personal rectitude, and to think of acquisition as, if not salvation itself, a corollary, a parallel track, the kind of thing God wouldn't let you do if God didn't already like you quite a bit, and hey, if He likes you here, as a fucking exploitative louse, how much sexier will you be as a purified and simple divine parasite?

Right. You understand. And the Protestant Reformation probably did make a kind of sense at the time, even if it was really caused by Martin Luther not wanting to pay taxes on his indulgences to help some blowsy corrupt old whore of a pope, I want to say Leo X but I'd have to look it up, build a new annex to St. Peter's. As things have transpired since, however, you almost come to admire the Catholic church's spastic alternation between poverty as a virtue and orgiastic wealth as a sign of that same virtue, tonic and clonic phases stammering in turn among the back brains of those Christians closest to what Christianity originally meant, a paganized Greek way to be a Jew.

But more on that in a moment, because that's not quite what I mean. I'm talking about an argument that Christ Himself was ineluctably capitalist, and that whatever he meant to the world can only be deciphered as an act of *purchase*. Couldn't God have just forgiven us? Couldn't He, to Whom all things are necessarily possible, have erased our sin, consigned it to the only true oblivion, since what is lost to the mind of God is really and truly lost? But He didn't, did He? No. He insisted that it be *bought*. He set

up a bloody act of exchange, and He saw it through to the last detail, the final iron nail and wooden crossbar listed on the invoice for our souls.

Such a glib psychotic argument could be made, and it would probably convince a number of people who were already inclined to feel that way. It would also repeat the idiot error of the first Europeans in the Americas, who handed the Indians trinkets and glass, got gold ‘in return,’ and cackled to themselves about the childlike innocence of a race that doesn’t know gold costs more than glass. These Europeans’ minds were already too polluted by the notion of exchange to have any idea of what had just happened: the Indians were *giving* them something. A gift, a sacrifice, pure donation. They weren’t taking the glass and beads in *exchange*, they were accepting a parallel but disproportionate gift, because the ritual giving of gifts was one of their first rites of hospitality, the way they defused a strange tribe’s fear of violence. So to be given something, and to give something else, and then to be massacred by the people with whom you’d just participated in a profoundly sacred rite – well, maybe you understand why white people seem radically and irremediably evil to so much of the world. We didn’t just kill the Indians. We tore apart their ritual with the filth of our exchange.

And Christ – who, to a believer, should be the absolute gift without expectation of reward, the absolute soul of asymmetrical charity – is appraised through jewelers’ loupes and across arms dealers’ balance sheets, rotting in Golgotha wind, with nobody to give the gift of washing his corpse and closing the door of his tomb.

Black water glottal through the grilles of blood-corroded drains, black scripts of scorchmark meat stigmata where car batteries hack into and modulate the biorhythms of the people we detain, electrodes forcibly reprogramming the euthanasia stars.

You had been trained, and through no series of very great coincidences, to expect security, sheet steel, fairings smooth and stern as the sun-wasted surfaces of airplanes, radar silence guttering off the wings of stealth bombers like sheets of black mute rain, the adrenal secretions of the presynaptic stars. There was no accident there, and not much respect for your powers of deduction. We all collaborate in this, and innocence is a negative quantity, a sum to be defined inversely by the quotient of its outward and commercial perversion – innocence, that is to say, exists the same way God exists for the negative theologians, as a Great Nothing, a ravenous and sleek-sided Zero, bucking the

constraints of every descriptive phrase as stars' radiological spectra rewrite the runtime programming of the instrumentation used to measure them.

We define innocence by a series of negative statements, each of these drawn, in turn, from the pornographies of false innocence daily thrust before us. We don't know for sure whether the quality they travesty exists at all *apart* from those travesties. It may be that there's never been any such thing, and that the whole notion of innocence was always the plausible alibi for mounting another weary panorama – briny with worked-in Weltschmerz, the reek of cured leather and broken colts, the rewritten reflex arcs of exhausted military horses: hands in gloves, display sabers always and ever in their sheaths, pointless cavalry charges swinging ropy fronts of doomed men along the receiving-lines of enemy artillery, set up already to perform the mourners' role at funerals which they will both necessitate and forestall, swallowed dolor, pain by now, by such a late arrival as ours, phased down to an inferred disturbance behind the anesthetic veils, a peak flow of neurotransmitters under thick morphine and sulfa glazes, yellow and saccharine as daisies to bees, draining the heavily opiated stars for their ancient machineries of pollen.

You know. If not firsthand, well, you would've heard by now. And still we speak in the open, unprotected, all cornices and flat roofs unpatrolled, all lines of sight unimpeded, no ohms wired into *this* part of the city's plan, though god knows there are others – most of our secular architecture is a dense exclusion-circuitry, a tool for subtracting voltage from the already-swamped synapses, for damping the amperage of new tissue strung in filaments between dysplastic stars, the structures formed by their cerebral hysteresis – we still speak of innocence, and of its corruption.

Time now (we can say, knowing it's still too early, and will be too early even when there's nobody left to say it) to admit that maybe, just maybe, the innocent were only ever a cheap useful version of themselves, and that the idea of innocence only exists like the idea of mechanical perfection, an imaginary standard from which to trace our descent, the clinamen streaking sideways through the stars' mutant genetics, and the bull's horns frozen fast to Eden's winter herbage, preventing that lateral swerve from ever being forgotten or undone.

But you'll probably have no use for any of this, and you'll probably want a more direct rationale, some kind of plausible cousin to cause and effect. Fine. The expectation of glassy anonymous architecture, war-crimes chic, UN annexes modeled, as their architects will loudly announce, with no social provocation (other than the massive contracts they're getting for such assurances), on the mathematical ratios derived from, say, a pinecone, the needles of a fir tree, some piece of local biology which the policies of the UN – themselves a third- or fourth-generation photocopy of IMF and World Bank directives – are helping to eradicate. Every time you hear somebody powerful start to talk about *nature*, whether human or terrene, know that it's a rhetorical variation on the same old three-card monte bullshit, thimble riggers slyly rolling peas, the bougie snapping back and forth across the surface of a flimsy card table, something lightweight and sleek, something we can set up in a minute or two just as the sailors swarm off the destroyers and aircraft carriers for shore leave, foreign (to us, native) pussy purchased on a very favorable (to us, disastrous) exchange rate, heroin in and heroin out, the secret code-grafts of the Navy wherever it goes, the deeper and less nationalistic exchange: where you have sailors, throughout time and space, there you will also have drugs, especially heroin, which is harder than cocaine or pot or pills to smuggle across border crossings or through airport security.

So the seagoing traffic is always a more or less, often less, believable excuse for the traffic in smack, and in its subsidiary functions – weapons, military intelligence, probably a nuclear secret here and there. You will want that sentence rewritten to say that heroin is a *subset* of such apparently grave matters as national security and mutually assured destruction. It isn't. Why pretend. There may be no better, more immediately comprehensible model of inelastic demand (viz. exponentially increasing price, with no reference at all to supply) than heroin, and all the arms-dealer R&D on Earth, all the ten-point pogroms, sorry, *programs* and persuasive slideshow presentations to the Board of Directors don't change what we're doing, which is feeding a grim fucking addiction, same way any junkie does.

We were born to need the kind of economic motion that can only occur during a cold war, which is really the ideal war from an economist's standpoint: both perpetually stalemated and perpetually escalating, producing lush new monetary vegetation every time to you stop to think, because the war itself is nothing more than a form of

deleterious thinking, a patterned obsession in which any claim frightening enough to get the checkbooks limber has become, therefore, immediately true. Nothing's unjustifiable when you don't even know whom you're fighting, and when whole segments of, hey, I know it makes you feel like a stupid relic, but say the words and whiff the militant nostalgia seeping off them like acrylic migraines off the red bakelite phone in the president's office, when whole segments of *Communist infiltration* are actually CIA plots. And possibly vice versa. Not to give the Politburo too much credit.

So when you hear the ships come in, the hawsers creak with tar, build tables by the quayside and assassinate the stars, setting small-stakes bets across the equals-sign from constellations' frangible mathematic, canceling out, above and below, nouns for coefficients bearing the strikethrough's stigma as soon as they're mentioned, and sooner or later a man will come to see you about selling a brown horse from a wartorn country, real game filly, fuck your handicaps right up if she ever got the chance, yes sir, and at the moment, she's somewhere strikingly convenient.

Here's a number on a piece of paper. If anybody asks, you say it's for a hooker. Laugh. Loudly, ostentatiously. We laugh. OK? The number's actually for a body bag down in the ship's morgue, and the sweet dark horse I told you about is living in the dead meat in that bag, nestled beneath the breastbone, translating absent viscera into soft powder like their own mummifications come to ten or twenty centuries' brown sugar.

Swaddled in blankets and trundled ashore, smuggled on a handcart underneath bulky sacks of feed, the corpse stares through his thin black wrapping at the leaky gelatinous streaks of thawed in-vitro stars, constructing a thermographic film upon the obscure shadow-cameras of dead eyes, limp retinae scarred with the image of a night sky full of luminous gnarled roots, radiological equations so ingrown that they sprout thickets of dense thorns.

The racket's pretty simple, and it goes something like this: first you find a sailor you trust, though only for very specialized definitions of "trust," which really means you find a sailor whose greed or desire for intrigue will prevent him from ratting you out, not because he's got the decency to keep his mouth shut but because he'll be too stupid ever to see through the cover story you'll give him. There are always other ports, and there



are always trustworthy sailors, no? For very specialized – but you get the idea. Some speed-freak cracker Pfc. from anywhere at all. Say Utah, Nevada, rural Missouri. The emergence of meth as a drug amenable to all social strata – from the dirt-poorest con men and prostitutes living in abandoned houses in Shit Lick, Arkansas to the stockbroker abortions smoking 95% shabu flown in from the Philippines via Hawai'i, just enormously impressed with themselves for doing drugs whose pedigrees they can (and will, oh god, *will* they) describe – has been a real boon to the narcotics industry on all levels.

And don't for a second think that "industry" is a misprint or overstatement. Drugs are an intractable and even fairly respectable segment of the world's economy, always have been, always will be, and you'd best believe there are men drawing government paychecks who see to their distribution, sale, and use. Their illegality is a cute convention observed with about as much sincerity as, let's say, the "disarmament" of Germany between World Wars I and II. Somebody will protest, But didn't the Germans rearm illegally? To which the answer won't be, but ought to be, How goddamn naïve can you legally get? Who do you think *sold* them the weapons? Whose major corporations – arms cartels, car companies, all manner of construction and heavy industry – moved their labor pools to Germany, and set up a booming market in cheap German steel, between the wars, precisely to take advantage of the economic chaos imposed by the Treaty of Versailles?

And think: these same corporations, under the threadbare public guise of "government," could fuck up millions of Germans' lives, drive into fanatical nationalism and Jew-hate millions of people who, up till then, had no real stake in any Reich, Thousand-Year or otherwise, no particular Wagner fantasies or aspirations to saying Frisch, Frei, Fröhlich, und Fromm, not much more than the baseline national lust for Götterdämmerung – and yet, and yet, those same treaty-framers found it necessary to give a "concession" as to the price of steel in Germany, "to help the Germans rebuild"? You out of your fucking mind? Of course it was a plan. Destroy the German currency, which puts millions out of work, which, in turn, hugely lowers the price of labor, especially if you can pay your workers in something other than German currency – say, American dollars; then cut the price of steel imports by more than 50%, you know, "rebuilding," vital stuff, sir; then, if you're part of an industry which tends to use steel,

relocate most of your actual work to Germany, where both metal and work are insanely cheap.

And hey, don't tell anybody I told you this, but – another advantage to being in Germany? Well, if there should happen to be another war, and of course there's gonna be another war, you can sell arms under the table to the German government, get paid on this end, and then, when Germany loses the war, you can sue the German state for your lost profits, and ruin still further the already ruined German economy, which will make parts and labor even *cheaper* in the next interbellum act break. There's no reason the cycle can't continue forever. Enemies at the gates, OK, fine, but we also know that if the Germans ever decided to murder the factory owners and take back the steel, some American alliance would come in under the guise of restoring order and Making Germany Safe for Democracy, same way it did and does in Central and South America, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands.

And if, out of this architectonics of misery and avarice, you happen to set the stage for a Hitler or two? Well – imagine the leer of pure cynical evil, and then realize you don't have to imagine it, because it's the natural expression of our faces when we're absentminded or asleep – we really don't know much about German politics. We try not to get involved. (And, you know, not to put too fine a point on it, but we're really not looking to import any more Jews.)

Oxide and corrosible light – aged as the addictions it oversees, composed just as deeply of molecules gone wrong, miswired and polarized against themselves, generation loss building translucent scabs of tape-hiss over stacks of glial proteins: ligand-gated ion channels, suturing shut or dilating, till they swell porous enough for potassium access, both the transmembrane and extracellular domains of stars – thrums clonic from the harbor's rare electric lamps, dyes the sides of the weekend-liberty ships with shades of the same chemicals they use to soak their fuses and salt their meat.

Tanned hide and cured muscle, and what we should be careful not to call “corruptions,” the tar-, oil-, alcohol-derivatives extracted and refined from the living photosepulture of stars, bioactive light-tombs themselves become sources of light: turpentine and benzene, coal tars investigated till the black sludge fans out in spectra of dead subterranean rainbows, the cells on the concave back walls of foreclosed-upon

eyes, the captured star-prey still oscillating there, fine enough to throw a nerve's electric output off balance, inject an insect twinge of DC bias, small and constant enough that, after a while, you start to take zero itself for the generator, as indeed zero is.

Creosote and cordite, ashes for washing things fouled with ash, million-year earth-oils slipping off whatever fuel source the lamps run on to streak and clot upon the inner surfaces of corpse-dyed bulbs, ancient carcasses of flies and moths encrusted on the glass – pigments now themselves, proper attributes of the light, another nodular recording on the webs and helices of rotting radii, the epileptic histories condensed into an etched photomachining of neurofilamentary stars.

So, ach ja, a sailor you can “trust.” As long as we're talking about care and swift passage, best mention that we ought not pass over this one too quickly. Our history is littered with “trustworthy” sailors, and for much of what we know to have happened on Earth, the story of seagoing fictions falling apart is the story of what we've come to call “culture.” A word, not without its resonance, derived from the actual tilling of land, actual seedbeds dug for actual seeds, mules and plows, haloes of horseflies rising along with the vaporized sweat steaming off mares in the nighttime, milky coronae, the mandorla of the awful angel in one of whose angles – though we'll never get to see which – nestles the impacted protein subscript, the directory error of an ectopic star.

So to say that *culture* meant, for many hundreds of years, seamanship and bullshit in varying proportions is to say something profounder, perhaps, than most of our anthropologists have guessed at. Nobody plows the sea. Maritime agriculture is a specious and possibly nonexistent art. The sea does give, yes, and also horribly takes, and the riot of her donation, that biosynthesis of fossilized nautilus stars, tentacles and photophores, gills and absent lungs, is something nobody can predict at all, probably not even whatever god periodically hits *reset* on all that genome-machinery and brings us up again from the shore, tails falling off dead at the gummy ends of our spinal columns, oxygen overdoses searing the bronchioles black, turning the alveolar clusters to a vineyard of photo-sterile grapes, aborted cleanroom stars harsh with the camera's recent passage.

Among our best-known predecessors – Greeks, Mesopotamians, Egyptians, what little we've got left of the Gaelic and Brythonic Celts, iron-rust hints of the Aurignacians and Magdalenians – the sea was considered such a fearful tumult of life and death that

she could serve, metonymic or synecdochic depending on your operant *imago mundi*, for the chaos of the cosmos as a whole, not omitting to notice that *cosmos* literally means “order,” and that order and chaos are therefore each modalities of the other, formations extracted from an uninterrupted if very glitchy and mealleable flow, as both the oldest and latest humans have had occasion to learn. Took us, what, 25,000 years to figure out what anybody waking up before the domestication of grain could’ve told you just by looking around. But our daylight, and the things it supposedly discloses (and really angles, manicures, “suggests” like posthypnotic verbiage, implanted while you hung in the white balance between alternate terrors), is so postproduced, so violently *prepared* for us, that almost nobody can just look around anymore. Don’t think I necessarily exclude myself. I don’t know. That falls to the troubled reckoning of the angel after the last, the postultimate recorder – possibly, even, a secondary function of the exterminating angel himself, who will understand, if anybody does, that annihilation is a form of recording.

Just as order is a phase-state, potential till it’s noticed, transfused back and forth among the mineral viscera of stars, tellurium glands bleeding translation-codices of hippocampal water in mourning for the galaxy whose glow still tears the sky apart but whose mass and gravity have crawled back inside zero’s black eggs.

No farming, no sowing, neither of beasts’ bones nor of intentional seed, “the life of the significant soil,” a whole phenomenology of morals derivable from how and when and why you plant what foods you do and whom you plan to feed them to. (Or just *whom you plan to feed them*.) That’s all true, that all obtains, and we’re so far among the lost now that it’s maybe pointless to worry about which argument precedes which: these things are millions of miles distant from the speakable-in-daylight, Germaned triplicate in their enforced muteness – *unaussprechlich*, *unbeschreiblich*, *unsagbar*, where *sagen* is literally to say or speak and *sprechen* therefore means not just “unspeakable,” in the literal sense that there are certain parts of, I don’t know, Swedish or Swahili which I can’t really pronounce, but also “impossible to get into language,” maybe even “inimical to language,” though I’m not sure I believe that: better, perhaps, to say “insoluble in the medium language as we presently conceive it,” since language is so much our imagining *of* language, and of its history.

Better to say that, in order to use language around them, we'd have to stop *using* it, as aimed instrumentation, and start acknowledging the way it really works. It's not ours simply to dispose of. It's not, in that sense, a "tool." It's a living entity which requires us as its environment, a symbiosis mutable and mutagenic as the reciprocal induction of stars deformed by more-than-binary drift.

I'm guessing Oedipus would like me to return to –

He would. You seem to be learning his, what would you call them, his rhetorical compulsions.

Only by observing.

Go ahead.

Primacies, priorities of argument, OK, but the point I meant to make is that, whatever attention you do devote to planting in proper season – and it should be a vast amount of attention: sun's cord unspotted, immaculata, along with divine mind, improvvisatore, omniformis, unceasing, unstill – you can't just exclude chaos. It would be like excluding light from a catalogue of things seen; it's the medium. We've been vouchsafed the vision to try, at least, to understand, that "chaos" and "order" are only two different ways to say the same thing: in thermodynamic terms, chaos is only millions of tiny delicate orders coming and going too quickly for us to notice them, and order is only chaos moving so slowly that we perceive it as symmetrical, predictable, tragically susceptible to the kind of oddsmaking that turns into credit and debt, chaos paced so much like the anesthesia of our own regulated days that we forget to be afraid of it.

And any order built on the therefore insensible project of shutting out chaos will eventually be overwhelmed by chaos. This isn't my decree, nor is it a strictly empirical claim based on the falls of successive kingdoms; its empiricism, if that's what you want to call it, stretches beyond the example of dead Rome, "what 'went into winter quarters' is underneath our feet?," you know, and to the nature of order itself. I mean to say: I'm not just looking at dead tyrants and their assassinated successors; I look also at the preconditions of what they wanted to achieve. Or try to, anyway. I claim no mandate, except in the old Chinese sense, so unintelligible to westerners fed on the pap of pseudo-democracy and paeans to personal choice, as if fucking *buying* anything, and thus

keeping the owners rich, could ever bother the owners. There is no purchase capable of saving the world, and the fact that such a phrase ever needs to be written or spoken is perhaps evidence that it's already far, far too late.

Westerners don't like to hear about the mandate of heaven, because it strikes them as fatalist and even apathetic, because, in turn, they've been taught to believe from infancy that they can bring down the pantheon and inaugurate a condition of worldwide Switzerland by, I don't know, starting a restaurant-cleanup business or some shit. As a people, they tend to accuse any very accurate document of their own places and times of being "cynical," "defeatist," whatever you like, because they absolutely cannot afford to acknowledge how defeated they already are. The violence of their response is in inverse proportion to their confidence that what they're attacking is false. Or so you'd like to believe.

Comforting, after its own fashion, to think that the people who attack you are doing it out of private insecurities, dampened manias, complexes hardwired into them like the mutual dismemberment, the concurrent acts of botched experimental surgery undertaken by stars which have drifted too close together.

I guess. Not very comforting to me, personally, but I seem to be in the minority.

You're –

I know, I know.

Continue.

OK, the point, the point, OK, what I'm saying is this: we hold all manner of fatuous, plainly false, hell, fuck *false*, plainly *harmful*, deleterious, counterproductive beliefs, and then, though a culture-wide coaching (there's that word again, "culture") in half-assed hearsay versions of Freudian analytics, we attribute these beliefs to some secret, even un-self-aware knowledge that they're false. We hold, after Freud, that some part of every person's mind knows an absolute psychic truth, and that all surface perjury is the attempt to obscure or evade that truth. Maybe we should stop. Maybe we should admit, after this long, that it was gullible of us to believe anything so optimistic, in fact strangely neo-Platonist to hold that there's some universal standard of truth, even if it's only psychic and not cosmic or metaphysical truth, from which all our lies knowingly depart.

You build up a fair image, that way, of a species totally aware of its own destructive habits, totally dedicated, in every waking act and many of the sleeping ones, to evading the consequences of such awareness, and – with the same sigh of deductive pornography that accompanies the millions and millions of people presently swimming in the warm, almost intrauterine comfort of some Sherlock Holmes retread on network TV right now, with an operating budget roughly (and *not at all coincidentally*) equal to the GDPs of several of the countries in which we're presently fighting useless, dishonest wars – we're supposed to *want* to admit that we're lying, and to be freed from psychic bondage by the truth. This is supposed to be our goal.

Can we admit, now, that it isn't? And that the sub-egoic tensions of the individual citizen may be rather, how shall we say, a coterie concern when an entire culture's existence depends on the maintenance and upkeep of certain gigantic lies? This is not to say that such cultures aren't composed of millions or even billions of individuals, nor that operation on the one cannot produce change in the many. Of course they are; of course it can. But we tend to reduce the whole brutal lie of ourselves, living when and where and how we do, to something we all know already and refuse to admit. A lot of us don't know and never will. Still fewer ever want to. It's an extraordinary task even to find out the tiny fraction of what the fuck is actually going on, an even more extraordinary one to find out how it got that way, and perhaps the most extraordinary of all to persist in such desire for truth after discovering that the truth of our tribe is mostly horrible, and mostly consists of the liquidation of other tribes.

Doesn't it strike Oedipus as just a *bit* pat and glib, then, to pretend that everybody knows this already, that everybody is capable of seeing certain fruits arrive out of season and moderately priced and connecting their appearance to juntas over coffee beans? Doesn't he ever wonder if we've leaned too heavily on the tenth-hand psychoanalysis, and if part of the problem might not be that almost nobody really knows or cares?

...

No need to answer that. A political minefield. My client will take questions only at scheduled interviews, under conditions of his choosing. Get out of our fucking way, clear a path to the car, it's starting to rain.

And it all rolls out from under the ship's morgue, a zone of personalized claustrophobia, massive dark machinery working always just a layer of metal, stone, or plastic beyond the eyes' remit, drummed forcibly into your nerves for the whole featureless gasp of the sea-passage, gone insane with so much unpunctuated time, leaf-thin mineral biopsy slides extracted from the fossil record of ossified crinoid stars:

What once was nerve is bone now, what once conducted electricity now knots sclerotic voltage into shapes thick and blunt enough for us to know when they've been broken, and the whole mammal body afterward will be a series of just such doped and babbling transistors, a slow, woolly monologue of disconnected synapses, dead information jutting sharp-edged and frangible out into the wilderness of intercapillary space, mummified sequential-logic circuits performing time-lapse amputation on star systems' neural integrals, taking for self-sufficient principle what once worked as part of a vast compound organism, inferring a green and sun-hungry god from leaves bereft of any reference to their trees.

And what choice do you really have. The givens are given. Sure. Why not agree. And so what if it turns out, in immediate retrospect, that 99.999% of what we consider immutable and set, so neatly phrased by the German *Es gibt*, meaning colloquially "there is" but literally "it gives" – as in, There's a tree/It [presumably the world] *gives* a tree – is actually the fossilized result of human engineering, that most of our plagues are human deformations of a nature which is not in itself either beneficent or anything else, which works to massive graces and harmonies of pattern but probably doesn't have any specific plans for *you*, I mean you there, customer, a likely sort, hey rube now, sauntering down the boardwalk with a swagger stick, timing out his plausible gestures (untied shoe, cap tilted too far forward, lighter out of butane or flint, necessitating matchbook whipped from hip pocket and match struck in the same fluid curve on the bottom of his shoe, which marks him out as a real habitué, somebody you can trust to know the rackets even if, and especially if, you can't trust him at all to tell you the truth) for maximum impact, knowing that he's got to project an aura of self-sufficiency and even mild secrecy, because being a con artist is a lot like trying to pick up women in a bar, or maybe it's the other way around: you have to seem like *you're* the one getting picked up, you have to actively engineer the seduction of yourself. Anything too eager is an immediate buzzkill.



Women, says the old thief, who doesn't even know himself whether he's drunk or sober, who hasn't been intoxicated without ulterior motives in decades, and whose intoxication is always soberer than it seems, always directed toward some common bonhomie of summer-lit beer-friendliness or grinning whiskey malice, women, you know, they don't want to feel like you're *depending* on them. Quite right, too. They don't want to feel that pressure, the knowledge that your self-estimation, not just your chances for this night or the nights following but a synecdoche for your whole future luck, hinges upon them personally. That's a lot of uncomfortable implication.

Most men, they wanna go meet women, and they fuck up by immediately showing their facedown cards – first line, first glance, first bought drink. From that point on, the woman knows that you're desperately hoping she'll *allow* something to happen, and even the least self-aware woman doesn't like to feel that her entire sexual life is a series of passive incidents, things she simply *allowed* to occur. You can see both why women so often, and so justly, protest that they're treated like objects, and why men don't understand it: men have been raised to believe that they go on the hunt, and that a successful hunt is one to which the quarry acquiesces; women get sick of feeling pursued, and wish they could do a little bit of pursuing, after a while, after a while.

So, says the old con man, staring down into a drink that he's been nursing for several hours, refilling periodically with water – always get something translucent, he says, gin and tonic for me personally; that way you can water it down over the course of an evening, and everyone else will think you're getting as drunk as he or she is – garnishing with ragged dry wedges of lemon, straws and stirrers, extra ice, all kinds of spends-a-lot-of-time-on-the-lookout-in-bars techniques, proper to his trade as finger exercises to pianists or cigarettes to schizophrenics ... So, he says, you want to be a Don Juan. Fine. Sad goal, but who am I to judge. The gig, in that case, is basically the same as mine – as I said, you don't go out and *conquer*, that's an idiot's game and offensive besides, and quite apart from our personal feelings, it's also pure chance. Anybody can fuck anybody on the right night. For certain definitions of "right."

Let me rephrase that: it's a process of looking for anybody who's having the same kind of wrong night you are, and its "successes," such as they may be, depend entirely upon the fortuity of a mutually-afflicted sleep. Bad hybrid dreaming. No more.

Recombinant star-DNA called out of long bone-dormancy and set to work as spindled thread weaves shrouds in advance of funerals, suggesting to the weaver that her husband coming home from Troy may, after all, be susceptible to other knives than Trojans'.

In panicked calm, a cold that circulates like humid heat, a sense of pure somatic urgency overlaid with the gritty ambergris of her own murderous purpose, she sits and weaves, in travesty of Penelope, knowing exactly what she's doing and predicting, in the negative, what kind of hero's welcome will await slick-talking Odysseus, that glib fucking coward, that whipped dog with pretenses to lionhood. Always ready for somebody else to enact his private fantasies, always stirring up the rank-and-file with visions of a stormed Troy which he himself will never take the trouble to storm. Clever son of a bitch. And when he gets home, he'll have to lay and pantomime his way back into his wife's bed, slaughter roomsful of suitors whose crime, as far as she can tell, is having been horribly obnoxious.

Fair enough, in the instance. But if boorishness were cause for capital punishment, there wouldn't even be an executioner left to hang the last offender. We are a boorish species, and we all die, on one level or another, with hands wrapped in the wires of some machinery we've never understood, coaxing or attacking a plexus of fuses in the unsuccessful attempt to disarm the stars.

And this is what she wishes you'd understand, you who judge now and will judge again, you whom she was able to predict even before the idea of killing her husband had quite allowed itself to appear on the black root of her tongue – present, yes, but still in the state of pure potential, a dark and pitchy bubble perched on the crown of her heartward lung, an annular eclipse recording in datastreams of radiocarbon atoms' decay the partial deletion of a star. She wishes, Clytæmnestra or Klutaimnestra here, that you'd grasp this: there was always going to be a slaughter when the soldiers hit port again, and frankly, there's less honor and distinction than you'd like to think in who kills whom. People die, and then their murderers die, too. Prefer one sequence of events to another, fine, but whether it's three corpses in the Mycenaean palace or dozens of fresh kills in the banquet hall and courtyard of the Ithaka county seat, people die violently, and for no reason the survivors can be expected to believe in.

Odysseus and his son massacre the men wooing their wife and mother, respectively; Clytæmnestra kills her husband and Cassandra, his visionary whore, whose name is a lost etymology and includes the root for *andro* or *andras*, “man,” though what she does to or beside those men, or what they do to her, is left to less than conjecture. The last etymologist to take a guess suggested the Proto-Indo-European root (s)*kend-*, “raise,” which would make Cassandra the raiser of men: perhaps a bit of grim humor for the men brought low, Agamemnon and Aigisthos, and perhaps something profounder than Grand Guignol puns, a recognition of the way her kidnap, rape, and shrieking oracular dread lie at the root of all later civilization.

Maybe, just maybe, her name is an acknowledgement that the transition from isolated Greek kingdoms to a peninsula-wide federation of Greek city-states (as actuated by the development of shared legal and literary corpuses and by the spread of the Eleusinian Mysteries into a region-wide religion) begins with the Greek death-squads kicking down the door of a temple where a Turkish girl sits clutching the wooden idol of her goddess, crying and begging it for protection from whatever is stalking through her burning, her already-mourning city, and Ajax, Obersturmbannführer of the Achaian SS, raping that girl until she passes out, then bundling her up in manacles and sackcloth for transport back to the homeland and an education in Greek ideas of freedom.

Let me put it to you like this, says the old con man – face full of beard like iron filings, natty little Tyrolean hat whose band bears the feather of some partridge long since fried and sucked down to gristle and marrowless bone, old suit shiny with dirt and wear and dyed some purposefully vague color, an earth-tone which shows up differently under different light, from greenish brown under the harsh mercury and sodium glares of the quayside to almost peat-black by gentler oil- and tallow-flames to ocean-water blue-gray when the tide’s in and the public grid is out; a costume, in short, designed to suggest lapsed affluence, Old European splendor decayed into the pith of a century with which it has no idea how to cope, because what kind of fucking idiot would spend his time with a con man who looked *prosperous*, presumably from conning people?

Well (pronounce this *well* in the Texan fashion, E turned into an A flattened like the first vowel in *manslaughter*, and a glottal stop appended to the end, like you’re saying a word spelled *wahlt* and cutting it off before the final T), come to fine’ out, a

whole *lot* of people will dawdle with a rich-looking con man. The world economy, in fact, depends maybe 80% on rich con men getting richer, attracting the gulls not by any particular force of argument or personal charm but simply because power, always and everywhere, calls to power, and never does anything at all – shitting or cumming, speaking or staying silent, sleeping or dying – in the interest of anything but broader, deeper power. The powerful do occasionally collapse; they do so, however, only to elevate some other member of the powerful classes, and there’s a never-ending supply of future Gauleiters, should any of the present officeholders happen to, how you say, go queer on us. Not intended to be homophobic, oh no, please don’t make that mistake. Homophobia, as it turns out, is bad for some business. Other businesses, like the one in cheap redemption and revolting mass-produced facsimiles of grace, depend on homophobia, and then there’s a third and even more profitable industry in preying on the tensions between the first two.

And don’t think for a moment that a politician needs to be a homophobe himself (or, as in the upcoming election, herself) to be glad that there are still a few old-fashioned gay-bashers marauding around Missouri. Not at all. In a political climate whose “electable” candidates really don’t disagree on any fundamental aspect of domestic or international policy, a nation in which everyone who stands the least chance of holding real power is just thrilled to bits with the dismantling of the social contract and with the “logic” of the free market, it’s specialized issues like gay marriage that tell the good proles who to vote for. You drop your ballot in the box of whichever person feels the way you do about them gays, right, and then rejoice in your personal virtue while the destruction of every last useful or respectable institution in the world continues unabated. We all – hey, how about that – end up voting for the right opinion, as defined by the hundred loudest people around us, and we all congratulate each other for rightmindedness while the city shuts off water to a hundred thousand elderly shut-ins and the mail fails to arrive for the third day in a row.

... but I’ve lost track of a dangling clause, the con man says, what was it – oh, right, “let me put it like this.” What I was going to say was, Let me put it like this: I deal in the open secrets of civilization. Drugs, prostitution, gambling, various forms of non-statal violence, in flagrant violation of the government’s monopoly thereon. We all

know these things occur, every day, in every place worthy of being called a “place.” We all know there’s been sex for money since ten or fifteen minutes after Eden, and that there have been drugs longer than there’s been written language, and that men gambled with each other’s severed heads before the convenient invention of the poker chip. Nobody can be surprised about any of this. I simply facilitate the sale and distribution of open secrets.

And if I, in common parlance, “rip you off,” haven’t we both learned something? Let’s say, for example, that I decide to play pimp tonight, and I sell that man – see the one in the Navy uniform, mooning around the harbor wall, trying to look purposeful, casting showy glances up at the widow’s walk as if he’s waiting for somebody? That’s how people look when they need an excuse to be where they are, and when it’s a sailor at a port, that sailor’s probably looking for a prostitute, and the prostitute’s probably meant to be a man. They lose their reflexes for shame pretty quick when it comes to paying women for sex, so Jack Tar here probably doesn’t want a woman.

So let’s say I sell him half an hour with a teenage boy I know – don’t worry, he’s 19, or maybe he isn’t, who gives a shit – and let’s say that, when our sailor pulls his cock out, the boy reaches into his pants and comes out with a big fucking knife or a pistol instead, and shakes the sailor down for everything he’s got, including uncashed checks from the Navy, since the boy and I know a third person who will be happy to fence those checks for a 10% fee.

Now, you can say we ripped him off, you can say we’ve done something wrong; that’s between you and your substitutes for god. But haven’t we both learned something valuable here? Haven’t the boy and I learned just how much this sailor’s psychic integrity is worth to him – because prostitution isn’t about orgasms, come on, don’t be so adolescent, anybody can jerk off anytime he wants; prostitution is clearly about something deeper – and hasn’t the sailor, who has always assumed that money is transparently and immediately equal to the things it stands for, just learned something *very* valuable indeed about the difference between the moon and the finger pointing at it?

A blinding white conversion-sky, whiter by many orders of magnitude than the whites of our eyes, progenitor stars’ embryos ruptured and drained in high-albedo stem-

cell harvest, hormones and lactic acid heated till they bubble and then cooled so quickly that the surface topology of their boiling is preserved as a kind of flash-frozen mineral skin, each sequence of varicose circuitry a plaster deathmask hardwired to integrate stars' autopsies into some broader symptomatology.

The sky is so much whiter than our eyes' capacity for whiteness, in fact, that trying to look anywhere at all without the shelter of roofs and walls has become a constant readjustment to an inconstant strobe, pale light stinging at the epicanthic folds, xenomorph stars implanting ectopic in the wet depths of the tear ducts, salivary glands rerouted like fuel lines to the warhead's charge after directed burning cuts off and the missiles have gone entirely ballistic. Inertia seems too small a word, and is too popularly bound up with the notion of immovable sloth, though technically "inertia" would be the term.

Let that stand as the sign for your comfort, were some sign required, that there are still a few words written against the grain of their common-denominator usage, a few people in a few places who care enough to use them any way but vaguely. Then, maybe, you'll also remember that those whose employment of terminology is so anachronistically careful are also themselves in the employment of arms cartels, pharmaceutical firms, price-gouging AIDS patients in sub-Saharan Africa, working long hours (celebrated heavily thereafter in biopic and memoir) on the full-scale privatization of the American military, such that we'll eventually be able to prosecute our wars with nothing more than an offhand comment during a presidential press briefing and a massive drone-supply, -maintenance, and -operation contract to a billion-dollar international firm, whose technicians will take the news of war as a minor but ultimately useful inconvenience, the same way you'd take rain on a day when you need an excuse not to go outside but, actually, come to think of it, also need to go outside.

The employees will – and this slight sense of pomp, of restored Victoriana, punctilious rust-surgeries among the arbors of wrought iron, bioassayed stars seeding a xenosis of mineral viruses all along the map-tracks, each a clot-blocked vein in desperate shivering need of phlebotomy, by which we finally pursue the need for gold and copper beyond the edges of the known world, trust eventually to the providence of a God who wouldn't breed in us such a horrible lust for metals if he didn't also plan to supply us with them (thus blaming, once again, our own debilities and perversions on

something in the face of which we cannot be anything but passive, and who knows but that we're righter than we seem), so it's a lateral and zero-hunting shriek past the last islands in the last ocean of Europe: Gibraltar, the Canaries, La Gomera your final landfall before the first island of the end of the world, called Hispaniola then y ahora la Republica Dominicana et la République d'Haïti.

(But before that, miles and worlds before, the bricklike stacks of Los Órganos staring from the coastline, implements of an old inhuman harmonization, the real-time and slowly decaying surgery upon endoskeletons left here by the burst mainframe of sedimentary stars.)

The cosmographies, Ravenna's or another, forecast only various degrees and levels of nothing here, some early intuition of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, 'empirical' only in the sense that it *must* somehow be empirical, battering with nervous, edgy white wind the prior notions of empiricism, then, which only ever took tally of a very limited set of faculties, a constipated sanity in a very clearly defined room, measuring its pencils by square-inch volume-loss per hour's use.

Which figures are themselves distorted by the fact that each pencil is also used to write down the long-form autopsy of its own gradual diminution, such that, by the time they're finished writing, every set of numbers is invalid by the matter of some hundreds or thousandths of a square inch, and if you think the statisticians are just going to let that *go*, well, maybe you haven't spent much time around the people who invented empiricism in the modern sense: they will genuinely, repeatedly dream of this, the panic of panic's own dwindling, the bulk inaccuracies of micrometer-thick layers of glaucous pencil lead, buttery graphite scabs as used elsewhere to plug the lesion-deep cartography that lets limestone-sour water seep through a star's vertebral karst.

They'll feel stupid for such dreams, of course, and wonder about their purpose and the purposes of those who set their own, and probably even spend a few nights with their entire bodies tuned to the violent strobing of a shiver which they won't exactly be able to recognize, certainly not to describe in mathematic terms, because there will remain no unshivering limb or organ to compare the broader tic to. Maybe you've had that kind of night yourself. Look at your own hands – even touch your own eyes, auscultate by fingertip, given enough black hours and a high enough concentration of

pure chemical panic, a rich, thick, sugar-blached tincture, the exact bioactive opposite of opium, neuroelectric circuit breakers grown upon its surface for swift liquid graft to the cortical stars, thence to detect and defuse their short-outs, earth their overloads in a dense petrified overgrowth of roots once concealed by mud or stone and which, when laid bare after the flooding first washes away their overburden, then subsides itself into the final, the terminal sea, seem to effuse their own internal night.

It's hard to explain and impossible to explain 'rationally,' but it's as true as anything we've ever felt, and not getting any less so with the passage of time. Massive roots, each gnarl and bole itself as thick as a full-grown tree, all weathered by the compression-loads and secondhand rain of underground meteorology (lightless transcripts of softcoding which escape from the configuration files of data-corrupt stars), and now a uniform black-gray, darker than steel, with a kind of gritty satin finish, not so much shining or glinting as breaking the light up into constituent pixels and quanta, one- and two-bit elements of the mineralized rainbow's dormant script.

Pour one out for your recent dead, and for those suspended in some vaguer temporal state, neither the last to die nor dead anywhere near long enough to have faded to the sepia glow of spinal voltage cast like a vital-stain haze upon the stars: you're liable to look up someday, counting back to the death dates you've memorized less as days among others, ordinal numbers to be counted in sequence, year after year, till they come around again, but diamond-hard and absolutely dissociated integers – February 20, February 15, a day early in December which I think was maybe the 10<sup>th</sup> and am embarrassed not to know offhand – with no relation to any other number at all, each fixed psychotic in a one-term mathematics of which the only possible operation is repeat, repeat, repeat.

If pouring something out isn't the oldest rite, it's got to be among the oldest. The dead too are terribly thirsty, but they may only drink under certain very specialized conditions, and it takes millennia of being dead even to begin to deduce these, unspoken as they are. The dead must work backward from some inferred disturbance behind the inconstant tissue of the sky, a detonation so immense that it partakes not just of human slaughter but of some massive violence against the construction of the day, and each era has its metaphors, and none is lost to a dead man.



Rocket engines, split atom, nerve agents, biologic weapons reverse-engineering their effects from the uncontaminated subject, containment units each housing a much-experimented-upon star biopsy, still conditionally “alive,” wrought to such palimpsest by the sequential effects of tested weapons that it’s God’s guess alone which will finally kill it, and which, singly or in sum, have brought it to such a pitch of deformity and light-thirst, ravening for the illumination it gives back only as a tainted ambergris black.

Medicinal leaves fall from some wind-wrecked vantage, an aerie for dissociative angels, awful seraph-fugues in front of Eden’s gates or garden wall, flaming sword or pitch-dipped and flint-lit horns long since lost to the purpose of protecting or even interrogating Eden, such that the angel, who may actually be a bull, some nominally gentler Moloch cousin where the desert furs out into an edge of beachgrass and loamy dunes, starts to convert itself line for line of earth-code to the ripe plains around Damascus.

Once-ripe, anyway: now the odorless aftermath of sarin – appropriately odorless, in mass-produced and pharmaceutical sequel to the gentle sting of mustard gas, “lilacs, garlic, horseradish, onions,” and then diphosgene like aniseed, deathcamp Zyklon like the bitter blossoms of almond trees, plus the pre-Zyklon use of gas- and diesel-fumes backed up into windowless rooms, and what does it say that we *all* know the smell of two chemicals used in a genocide, because we both produce and smell them ourselves on every single allegedly non-genocidal day – hangs in and over the abandoned suburbs, and you should think of all values for the word “suburbs.”

There’s the American, which means the prefab moneyed places where white people move when they finally have the means to make their racism both tacit and effective (the old-guard racists, the ones with Confederate flags in truck- and basement windows, are ineffective in just such measure as they’re also loud, and power in America has long understood the equation between silence and use, such that we may enact genocidal programs of racial hatred without ever saying anything offensive ourselves); the European meaning of “suburbs,” i.e. the working- (starving-) class districts where the urban poor are forced to flock when old money refuses to abandon the Reichstag, Louvre, Centre Pompidou, whatever, in their Old World estimation, makes it worthwhile to have money at all.

And then there's the Third World sense of "suburb," which is like a much severer version of the European – desperate slums, "houses" made of pallets, box springs, the boxes the box springs came in, bits of rotting and rain-warped wood, sheet-zinc borrowed from jobs at American-owned factories, whose CEOs will occasionally visit on publicity tours, needing help to put on the hardhats under which they'll pose for working-man photo ops, and then, and *then*, these cousins not-very-fucking-far-removed of the Nazis, these alternate-timeline Eichmanns, fifty years younger and still strolling carefree and medically licensed around the Buenos Aires suburbs, may actually have the goddamn gall to complain about "the safety of [their] investments" to the government of, let's say, Mexico, and to warn that they won't get caught again, not this time, won't get wrapped up in anything so ugly that the President of the United States feels compelled, for reasons which will never have been good, to write it into his next State of the Union, to mention it off-the-cuff in some staged "chance meeting" with immigrants' rights activists, whom he's gladhanding this week to try to make himself look different from the Republicans.

He is. Very, very, *very* slightly, and in very few ways that will matter within ten or fifteen years. Gay-marriage bills will pass everywhere, immigration laws will loosen for the exact opposite of the reasons they should – not because we want or would ever try to afford anyone a better life here, after ruining their homes with economic parasitism, but because we'll realize that immigrants are likely the only people willing to do the work that keeps us in consumer electronics, and that, oh get ready, big kicker here, that the media and half-bright constituents are so hyped about "bringing jobs back to America" that, get this, the government is going to let corporations bypass labor laws, set their own minimum wages, eradicate unions, whatever they want, if they'll just bring their factories back across the border.

Landfall. Motherlode. General acclamation. Listicles mentioning the president's name alongside Roosevelt's, Eisenhower's, even, christ almighty, Reagan's. And rightly so. Their programs are only cosmetically different, and their bromides are designed to pacify different parts of the population. That's it. What goes on apart from the PR is pretty much unaltered since the '80s; our current president just has to explain (read "excuse") himself to a different demographic.

So the factory owners, on fact-finding trips from San Jose and Santa Clara, which are actually prostitute-hiring and prostitute-beating trips from anywhere at all, drug-finding and drug-buying and drug-doing trips from places so clean and featureless that they breed and comfort only a newborn race of autistic spiders, living on heat and nearly translucent – these owners may have the goddamn nerve to accost the president of, let's say, Mexico, and to threaten him with relocation of their business if he doesn't "do something about all this violence," which is right up there on the list of meaningless phrases we've managed, as a people, to believe in.

That the violence is caused almost entirely by the vampirism of such men as these factory owners, well, who wants to fuck around in ancient history? Hasn't most of ancient history gone up the smokestacks already, and isn't a lossy third-generation copy of Pompeii hung gritty and dark somewhere between here and the sun?

### Session #4

Other versions of Oedipus obtain in their moments and seasons, at the white-hot and malleable peaks of their own rigor, pain so transubstantiate to chances for real danger and irrevocable harm in the sky that it becomes something other than just pain – an injunction against the old basal states of the body; a set of birth pangs graphing, as the haruspex prints futures with raw meat, just how your own veins, bones, and sinews have been used as incubation chambers to kindle mutant stars' ectopic winter. Others do emerge.

But right now, one is definite and overbearing, and not to be argued down by any appeals to subtlety or word-surgery, any etymological sawing and cauterizing of many-times-bandaged bones: Oedipus hangs inside a hard, flat, black womb, an insect's outboard enamel uterus, a piece of mammal submitted to schematic tests within the boundary-layer model of an invertebrate, like vital-sign monitors reporting on the awful cathexis of laboratory-grown star-meat.

And Oedipus's people, Greeks if you like, yours though you don't, pursue him from all sides, upon all levels, through steel and iron geometric models slightly dented, buckled, modeling now a less Euclidian and textbook space, brittle and acrid with corrosion, sounding more frangible, more feral and untempered overtones ringing from their oxide depredation every time they're struck, every time they creak or snap beneath the bandaged feet of the war dead, future or past, who have assembled now to sing Oedipus down out of his two-dimensional black sun, his ravenous birth-wound in the loading docks and cargo bays of places his republic manufactures kindred forms of solar fraud.

Girders, trestles, trusses, two-by-fours of warped old wood so long corrupted that they're actually more rot than wood now, pure planks of vegetable necrosis, lignified stars subsisting on the slow white-sugar life-support of xylem feeds within the cellulose motherboards of trees; cowlings, fairings, sheaths and cones and helmets, plastic and

vinyl siding, noxious resins tamped down to some fluid consistency and frozen to reduce some of their awful smell, a scent not so much of death – since they're as alive as anything is – as of rapacious and horribly painful translation into another chemical domain, having the soft meat of your chromosomes, the confinement-blistered links of your own spine, swapped out for the foreign-acid backbones of xenonucleic stars.

Pronounce it in a zymurgic variant of the voice you used to employ for saying *All this useless beauty*, weathered now beyond the mere graining of tone, the cured-tobacco, varnished-wood, old-scotch implications of carefully curated rust, a voice whose content of recorded harm is not at all a matter of good taste or connoisseur cachet:

All this sleek damage – the once-solid metal surfaces and floorings gone now to individual and constituent spindles, fasciations as in decomposing muscle tissue, striate where they used to be smooth, bundles of singular and fallible rods where they used to present a unified surface, much like imaged lightworlds falling apart on the retinae of the recent dead, medical scans of star-contagion now distributed as holographic shrapnel to all the histamine and leukocytes that course the worn-out veins.

And if you wanted an image of how things do collapse, orders veering from the political to the technological, back when there was any real difference between the two, and don't bother fooling yourself that any such distance still obtains: the politicians' real job now is to get out of the way of technology's headlong and screamingly omnivorous charge, to come up with allegedly civic rationales for allowing machinery and, don't forget, machinery's human, monstrously egotistical masters, men who do have addresses and tissues soft enough to wound, even if their power doesn't, even if they've edged over into a monolectic of pure force, one side always winning, one side born more thoroughly to lose than any twelve-term fuckup with those words tattooed on his knuckles, than any meth-cooking Nevada or Missouri Nazi with a swastika stippled onto his right pectoral and a set of hairline lacerations, never quite closed, around his anus, all of which he will have gained in prison, where technology's diktat has sent him and will send him again.

It's not, as mediocre science-fiction has been prophesying for decades now, that machinery itself will ever take us over, though without doubt we will come to rely so

much on machinery that its dysfunction will cause an insurmountable, a species-wide heatwave through the genes, rashes and deformities springing up to bitch the statistics, psoriatic shielding grown like ablative carbon to shelter and secure the stars' genetic engineering, very much in progress, very much at hazard's mercy.

This is too simple a panic, and implicates us too little – and if at no other time, for no reason like decency or mercy, we ought now to be implicating ourselves as much as fucking possible, because such reflexive accusation is the only, only thing that's going to give us any chance at all of surviving on the Earth, or anywhere else, for more than a few decades. If not because we're good or even neutral, if not because we love anything at all but our own comfort, then let's start examining the conscience of the species because we're utterly fucked if we don't. Philosophy for practical men, yes, sir, Standartenführer, sir. Jawohl. No limp terror of machinery's rebellion will be enough to save our species to be, I don't know, destroyed by our own satellites or some shit.

To say nothing of the brain tumors possibly growing right now at your cellphone's behest. But then, there are so many potential sources of tumors in our everyday environment that it would be almost impossible to pinpoint a single chemical hazard, less than rigorous to trace the shapes of the chromatin strips back to a single cause of metastasis – not here, where histones sweat beneath the radiant etiology of the carcinogen stars.

So no, not just any passive notion of being garroted by a self-interested computer. That's not good enough, and we, well, we don't have enough time to be so wrong anymore. Admit. The real crisis is not a matter of any particular machine; it is rather the problem of the *techniques* these machines incarnate and employ, and the catastrophic damage to our imago mundi engineered by such techniques. It is a matter of material thought, of carbon and silicon and copper epistemology, and about the presumptions of World vs. Earth, in the old sense of Welt gegen Erde, which must prevail for such an episteme to come into its prominence.

We will not be assassinated by semiconductors; we will use them, rather, to commit a suicide so tortuously elaborate that it won't take effect until many generations after the deaths of the men who conceived it – men whose lineage goes at least as far

back as pharaonic Egypt and possibly further, to Çatalhöyük, to the Yucatan, and probably to the pro-terrestrial colonies of bacteria circulating between the stars.

No need to tell me, Herr Interlokutor, Herr Gesprächspartner (a terrifying word if you know what it literally says, what is the literal emission of its sign, like mutagen codons escaping from redshift's slow reverse-engineering of a star), that I left a dependent clause hanging back there, somewhere in what are now the hinterlands, until these too become hinterlands, and we continue to live between an Arctic and an Arctic, manufacturing with our passage still more tracts of thinly-concealed desert.

"And if you wanted an image of how things do collapse." That was, I believe, the phrase. You don't have to say, and I doubt you'll ever have to say again, that this habit of mine drives Oedipus crazy. His personal manias have been successfully implanted in me, if not yet as a corrective resource than as a guilt-inducing piece of biotech, a kind of opposite number to the forearm implant some women are now using for birth control: their device either prevents fertilized ova from implanting, or eradicates them when they do implant, or renders egg-cells chemically infertile, I don't know exactly, but one way or another it turns the mammal's memory of albumen and yolk-spot into a mothballed deathmask, a sterilized ovarian cyst of stars. Oedipus's implant does the opposite: it releases the hormonal and neurotransmitter equivalent of guilt every time you *don't* deliver on a potential pregnancy.

It has its parallels in what you'd hope to call the less blood-lit world, less a matter of transcriptase stars blooming and dying on the interface between virus and heme, plasma and antigen. At the moment, however, I can't conceive of any human world lit by anything but blood. There are surrogates and proxies, of course – oil, coal, electric current, and in some places the constant glare of ordnance, drumfire which I'm told was like a Morse code of nocturnal milk, the magnesium Pleiades hanging toxically replenished over any given block of Gaza City. These are intermediate steps; don't fool yourself that they constitute any real departure from blood as the source of light. Every one of them was discovered, invented, manufactured, extracted, postproduced, installed with blood as its primal power source, blood either shed or still in the body but most often shed.

And even coherent blood, intracorporal, exists in such a state only because it's been bought with somebody else's opened veins. A razor down the wrist's knot of gristly red roots is what secures the integrity of the beady red math lipping down the swollen, the dilated veins of those so insulated by their power and money that their biggest concern is heart disease – imagine, and you'll *have* to imagine because I genuinely can't, what it must be like to fear *death by natural causes*! Imagine being so free of the world other people have to live in that suicide, drug overdose, crimes so ill-conceived they're tantamount to suicide attempts, being murdered by police, being beaten to death for the \$9 in my wallet and the \$200 in my bank account – that none of these are what you think of when you think of how you'll die. I can't remember the last time I was afraid of death by natural causes, and though I don't rule anything out, I don't imagine I'll be afraid of that again anytime soon.

“The world is too much with us,” said the man who would be teacher, and “getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.” Close, and for some people undoubtedly true, but not the whole story. Pity, if you like, those who lay waste their own powers by getting and spending; but if you want a larger portion of the truth, think also – with a sensation closer to horror than to pity – of the rest of us, who are laid waste by others' getting and spending, who will only ever be the second and passive-voice half of somebody else's ritornello, the direct objects in a predicate we never get to choose.

I may or may not pick up the broken phrase; I am inarguably tweaked by what Oedipus would call its brokenness, he who inherits such categories of the fractured and the fixed that he's given his life, often without any dignity or purpose, no matter what the obituaries say, to enforcing his personal ideas about what's whole and what's a part. Again, you may be moved, at first, to pity. Think rather of horror. We've all gotten historically fat on pathos, and pathos is the most dangerous kind of bad magic, a spell whose secret purpose is to convince you that something has occurred. Often, nothing has.

But pathos creates a blank spot, throbbing with alleged but irretrievable intensity, a white featureless node whose contents, we're told, are the most important parts of our lives, but a node which plainly *has* no contents, which was evidently a set of conditioned



responses, and which fades again to irretrievable banality by the time you leave the theater, stand up piss-bitter and charlie-horsed from your auditorium seat, cut through the hotel bar to the loading dock for a cigarette and some brief, fitful, already incurably sour attempt to figure out whether anything actually happened just now. We're coached to this, from long before we could possibly resist, and our survival as an animal genus ("species" was probably always too narrow) may well depend on our ability to stop taking pathos as a self-evident good. Beyond pathos, horror; and beyond horror – hope to whatever god you can still hope to – mutation, restructuring, drift.

Dressmaker's dolls, burlap-swaddled mannequins, and raw geologic strata for the back wall of a stage, a bleeding and recently cut cross-section of mountain.

You will be vouchsafed such visions, given time; we've had our several already and expect more. These are white forecourts of the phase-space just before the daytime takes its customary form, a lower level of molecular translation, eon-long hydrocarbon chains locking into tune, if viewed on from a long enough distance, as the time-lapse genetic acids of xenonucleic stars. Not D- or even RNA, but something serving much the same purpose, such as "purpose" can still be defined.

Take teleology out of it, or admit that you don't know its ends, and that the traditional division of structure and function is really more a religious than a scientific one – as, indeed, much of science is misplaced religion. How the hell can you take seriously the notion that structure and function can be separated, or that mere empiricism is enough to perform such a dire severance? We start to flicker over – with deep back-lobe spikes, star-epilepsies wired up to the ambient noise of DC bias hissing over allegedly blank tape – into the realm of metaphysics when we choose to adjudicate the difference between *what* something is and *how* it works. There's probably no difference at all. Or, rather, what difference does obtain is no more (and no less) than the interval between a corpse and a live body, a graveside and a sickbed, and ontology, as ever, the question of rectifying the names on tombs.

Telos anything but ariston, not that you don't appreciate the man's work. Apollo, for one, finds it sympathetic but curiously misdirected – he likes the Stagyrte millionaire's turn of mind, he just doesn't understand why he spent so much time on all those recondite questions. Apollo wouldn't. That's not in his portfolio. And the relation

of degrees between what Apollo does and what the world is in his despite ... well, decide how you think it should play, set up some system of translations and interfaces, and that's much of the work of a cosmology done in miniature, in brief.

Apollo hides in a black and white realm, not very far removed from the general light, no matter what degree of pre-, post-, and tantum ergo you assign to him. He's pale, immobile, and emitting such a loud and constant roar that, after not too long, the noise phases over into a physical object more than an aural sensation: it becomes the day's acoustic assignment, the sonic medium in which all other (largely blotted out) noise may emerge. Some music replicates this experience, though almost always in a milder form, engineered to seem "meditative" rather than overwhelming. (Apollo feels about minimalism much the same way he feels about Aristotle.) The real thing is like catching the edge of some not unpleasant but dangerously cloying scent – lavender, honeysuckle, gardenias, magnolias – and then having every part of your skull stuffed with the saccharine violence of that odor.

Noise, mouth, eyes, ears, sure, but also the less accessible fissures: cranial sutures and fossae, individual cartilaginous strands of corpus callosum, even individual synapses hived with that particular overdose, a perfume become a read/write error in the light, a botched horizontal hold on the retinal screen, that perilous translator between surface of skin and surface of brain.

You're embalmed while you still stand and breathe, or more likely sit and gasp, and the electrical activity of neural pathways washed and dressed for burial still flickers like the viral strains itching to pollinate us when our eyes transact some vector through the wet platinum lights in the night sky, when they brush against the voltage-ripe sarcophagi of stars.

Apollo, you'd have thought, would be the quietest god, the purest differentiation between signal and noise, figure and ground, as in the slow reticulation of latent synaptic circuitry embossed upon the stars' genetic mainframe by the tender hurt of light.

And you would, after a fashion, be correct, just never when or where or how you want to be, and never in a sense capable of saving *you* in particular. This is what we meant about such visions being damaging to a sense of the world's beneficence: it's not,

certainly, that the creation is evil, or that it has any particular need to destroy you, pick you limb from limb with surgeons' professional curiosity, suspended from the mandibles and pincers of the histaminic stars. It is, rather, that the world has *no* plan for you at all, not in any specificity. The world doesn't operate on the scale of individual animals' lives; it creates any and each of us as the perfectly balanced expression of billions of years of forces on the other side of the biogenetic Zero, and then it leaves us to incarnate such patterns as we may.

Sympathetic resonance, electrical resistance, but probably never any assignment of purpose, and almost certainly no escape clause in the form of your personal preservation. If you're going to be saved, it's not because any immutable force ushers you to salvation. It's simply that you've been saved, while others haven't. Nothing much more. Soteriology was always a triumphal march: if you're still alive to contemplate salvation ...

And the guilt you feel at knowing that better men and women than you'll ever even *try* to be have died, today, in this instant, and in this one following, while you've been preserved – it may be something like the guilt of God, in a little-remarked-upon passage between the Creation and the Flood, the last moment in which the Abrahamic lord left himself any margin for error: “And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.”

Sortes Biblicae and the ownership of relics. To Apollo, and for that matter to us, the dawn is disturbingly green and gold, the sky so clearly a vast expanse of worked metal – shielding, ablative armor, to conceal and to secure (in the sense that money or laboratory samples are “secured”) the throbbing biologic frieze of stars.

It betokens bad weather ahead, and you don't need to have lived here for very long to expect that in the next hour or so will come a crack like the woodgrain of the young day splitting, lignified and spongy tissues torn apart, cicada stars wrenched off the xylem-sap life-support that kept them opiated. Basal states, sure, but not for long. A wound to know the day from the night, and a more localized lesion: night wounds time, day wounds itself, and we only know our own bodies from their last molecular conscription by counting the serial suicides of the sun, a sleepwalker if ever anybody was, and by monitoring the sympathetic tremors of the moon, who spends her time in

the sky terrified of the sun's next grand self-slaughtering gesture. She shivers and frets every night, she goes cyclically insane, she binds up hydrogen and carbon atoms in chains of increasing complexity and fractal repetition, she raises all things to the position of their own exponents, and she weaves and unweaves the aberrant star-logarithm of any given body.

She's always afraid. Her only help, such as it is, comes in the form of madness, which itself is no more than a way to say "a vision of another order," or "another comprehension of the order as it's already seen." We have graded madness, meaning its departure from sanity, by various and dubious standards for as long as we've been noticing it, and there's no real reason to think that we're about to get any better at explaining what "insane" is supposed to mean. At first it signified blunt departure from a standard of religious truth, and as long as your psychotic break or schizophrenic episode included a vision of the specifically Western European Christ, you were just an *halluciné*, a seer after the old Pentateuchal fashion. Flood warnings, altar horns, babbling molten metal hot and thick as butter at the sight of golden calves.

Then came the era of the great redogmatization, which some, with their own awful motives, have tended to call "the Enlightenment." We weren't enlightened at all and probably never have been. We were simply recommitted from Christ to our own eyes – say from Dionysus to Apollo, or from the stars' logic to the syllogisms festering as white and greenish scum atop dried blood – and raised them to the principle, if not the name, of godhead.

Our historians have tended to take this as a moment of great rectification, a rational and sensory reform. It wasn't. It was only the refashioning of our notions of truth and madness to fit the dictates of the next social-control schematic. Consider: the Enlightenment comes along just when the old religious states, and the feudal hegemonies they both required and reinforced, start to give way to the mercantile system, and thence to capitalism. "Rationality" displaces the strange combination of doctrine and revelatory tics only because it's more useful to the bagmen. There is no other way to take this seriously, and we can talk all we want about the Liberation of Reason, but no Reason ever gets Liberated unless somebody with money wants it so. Otherwise, Newton, Bacon, Locke, Voltaire would've been set on fire in public, and the variant forms of public damnation continue to operate under the sign of the cross. Now

they work sub a different rosa, an equally odd amalgam of avarice, mathematics, and cheap evolutionism, and there's no need to burn the heretics anymore: they simply starve, and, get this, we manage to resent them for starving. They've failed the Market. Their punishment is just.

No use in that diagram for any Hildegard von Bingen, demanding tax money to build a new monastery on the site of her divine visitations. (The great shift away from Catholicism was the result of just such tax-code sniping, shekel gamesmanship, and it may be that the only real argument between the Mother Church and her rebel children is about whether or not God personally assigns the amount of money you've got in your pocket.) No use, either, for a Giordano Bruno, who made the mistake of telling the truth in daylight for so long, and with such persistence, that the apocatastasis to which his work lends support, the eventual reharmonization of the light, came not from his own tissues' thermal math being reincorporated into the stars' body-heat algebra, but from the dry-wood fire that burned him alive on the Campo de' Fiori, with "his tongue imprisoned because of his wicked words," which could mean any number of things: that it was tied around with twine, or tied either to the roof or floor of his mouth using the back two molars as capstans, or that it had been mangled into uselessness, or even that the Pope of his day, Clement VIII – and, as if in god's none too subtle parody, don't *all* the Popes Clement seem to be insufferable sons of bitches? All the Clements from the Alexandrian down, with possible exceptions for Attlee and Greenberg? – had ordered Bruno's tongue cut out and preserved, a sacred instrument to be put to secular uses by the Vatican, that most violently secular organization, all the more so for pretending to occasional spasms of sanctity.

His ashes went into the Tiber, and may have eventually floated to Ostia, the door where the river opens into the sea; if his tongue's ash was among the gray payload the papal nuncios dumped into the river, then it would've become the tongue in the river's mouth, capable for perhaps the first time in centuries of wording Tiber and Ostia back to their old entanglement, when that stretch of the river was the place where the dead gathered on their way to the underworld, each to his own variable and inconstant heaven, and thence became the place where angels marshaled the Christian dead.

Bruno's tongue, therefore, as a clot of gray carbon-smelling sludge, enacted in broader form than he could've imagined exactly the parts of his philosophy which got

him set on fire. No center, only nodes; no loss or gain, only changes of state; no sun king or Imperium Solis, only the recombinant genetics of dead stars.

Neuredema stars, suspended in cold spinal gelatin, circulate slowly in the synaptic gaps, blanks in the cortical mosaic into which excess vertebral fluid has sluggishly shifted like sap into the hollow tissues of an upended tree; they burn at glacial pace (in fact at a pace almost identical to that of genetic drift, of species' differentiation, of Earth- and star-heredities growing toward shapes no section of their embryos or grown bodies could predict – a pace of real-time archaeology, and somite sections settling into chalky white stone, albumen frozen stiff as ever a camera's flare scorched it on damp contact paper) through the biotic plating on the outside of this hull, itself a model of intrauterine resonance, a stern histologic counterpoint set up to correct what flaws it may, till flaw changes the whole topology of correction, and all must be recorrected to the new ex-aberrant standard.

Mutants becoming organ-donors, cellular voltage-potentials discharged and stockpiled to render possible the passage of targeted star-downloads that would throw the body's circuit breaker hard as lightning ripping ozone from the fuseboxes and transformers we can smell for blocks and blocks once they've been struck.

A flicker in the electric grid, an anti-pulse to be swiftly corrected, and the lights went out for maybe two seconds while we stood in the sudden neural cold of those who have just had some ambient condition revoked, not even startled, merely out of place, occupying once again the rain-streaked urban desert which has been our only real home. There are delusions for our use, and there are means to pretend to some other geography, ignorance as a built-up form of chemical tolerance, an acquired autoimmunity against the deactivated masses of white-blood autologous stars. We would not, at this point, like to be saved. We cannot imagine any salvation on coordinates other than the ones we know, and if it's all the same to you, well, pardon us, but.

Ozone to singe the nostrils, a sudden inrush of blustery wet heat, a breath of the miniature and time-limited jungle thrumming down outside, where not an hour ago there were achingly dry crows squawking reedy as squeezeboxes, shouting out of their

throats' arid collations, vocal tissue come to rustle and squeal like stands of droughtstricken cane, a riverside brake signaling the hippocampal deficits of watersheds and deltas, reengineering the hard silicon and carbon graphs of hydrologic circuitry, for eventual decryption by a time-lapse tonic seizure ripping through the reefs and hives of hardwired neural-oscillator stars.

To be undone where they may, and they very rarely may. Perhaps never. Too soon and too definite for anybody around here to say. I, for one, doubt their undoing, and expect the encephalograms to keep spiking at around 3 Hz, the perilously causeless and self-directing region of the discharge that turns our limbs to rods for a white impalpable lightning, something latent in the room till we arrived to bleed its meaning, shrieking only on somatic frequencies, thorax and appendage come to broadcast a carrier wave of which the teeth and tongue stay ignorant, indecipherable by any clutch of filthy glottal silk – once-smooth fabrics so long stained and crumpled that they've settled now into the shape of their own tensile desolation, crusty as formations of limestone and schist by the roadside in the states where only drug wars and Indian reservations break up the endless Moloch continuance of roadside god-abandonments, the piles of coal stacked ten stories high and left there in the interlude between a useless – useless but brave – union strike and the hiring of meth-cooker scabs, who are thrilled to have this fatal and horribly-paid work, less because they plan to keep it (you don't *plan* very much at all when your main plan is smoking ice) than because there's all kinds of great shit to steal here, digging tools, chemical-refinery equipment, food, clothes, helmets with lamps on 'em, even the cars of some of the middle-level managers (i.e. apprentice slavemasters) who took company transportation home and plan the long, slow transition to the socioeconomic stratum where one never drives one's own car, where, in fact, one begins to say things like *one*, and to begin sentences with phrases like *one never*. One begins to find self-transportation vulgar; one is at vast pains to avoid vulgarity.

The fact that one's entire life is nothing but a grotesque outsize expression of an entire world's vulgarity, not just a nation but the world subdued by same, the rank and pus-weeping sores of an export epistemology – well, who can be expected to take full account of his own, how shall we say, transcendental condition? One would be forced nearly to suicide. Yes, *you*, *I*, *we* would. None of the non-specific third-person parole

here. We, you and me, right now, would likely be obliged to cut our own throats if confronted with even a small measure of what it takes to keep our lives the way we like 'em kept. And for too long, this has been our plea for clemency, and we've pretended that the fact of something's being unbearable means that it must be mistaken. We've decided before looking at the world that the world, above all else, must be tolerable, even aspirational, and dovetailed our *imago mundi* to suit that decision. It need not be so. It very likely isn't.

If the world were tolerable, its creatures might not die; they might, in fact, build up such chemical affinity that the freight of sour, hateful years keeps them more and more bitterly alive, Cumaean sibyls recharged nightly with the stars their own immune systems cathect.

(Dual senses: *cathexis* means, in one usage, the translation of external stimuli into electrical impulses of the nervous system, and in this sense it's probably most often used to describe the shift from external light to the alchemy of specialized cells that registers a lit world on the surface of our brains. This is a difference we pause to consider all too rarely, and renders immediately sensible Blake's dictum – 200 years in advance of the science, as ever – that “we are led to believe a lie / when we see *with*, not *through*, the eye.”

The other sense of *cathexis* is drawn from psychoanalysis, in which the word means the attribution of personal significance to some piece of physical fact, as in, for example, the swarming of memory around an apparently unremarkable place, the great accumulation of static electricity on and in the surface of a name, a phrase, a roulade of three or four notes neatly cauterizing the end of an ambiguous melody. “Napoleon,” as it sits on the page and in the mouth, probably just means “descended from Neapolitans,” though I haven't been able to prove that with any great certainty; who in the world thinks of Napoli and Italian bloodlines when he hears the word “Napoleon”? Cathexis, e.g. And however much of Freudian theory is intensely bogus, there are a few dim provinces which deserve to be retained. This is among them. The night-tuned eye snares honeycombs of wriggling prey-stars, astral larvae with which to infest the porous bones of a name.)



The entrails of some poor car-slaughtered creature, a rabbit or small fox, glow silver and luminous, moon-like, by the edges of the crumbling cones of light from whatever few streetlamps haven't been cut off yet – and at those edges, the light begins to do some temporally dislocated things, construct xenoarchaeologies of the ruined city you already live in, build depth-charts and fossil graphs of lapsed habitation's imprint, the same way you might infer cave-dwellers from the worked walls of a cave, a firepit with small beasts' blackened bones aging to coal and thence to diamond, compressed Babel disaster, vast cycles of holocaust and desolation worked now into a foot-thick black seam down the geologic strata of London, which you can still see from the right vantage, looking at the side of the right hill: it's from when the Romans burned then-Iceni London, in the process of converting it into New Troy, and in reprisal for what we'd likely now call the terrorist attacks of Boudica or Boadicea, who wasn't content to see these slick obedient empire-builders come into her city and establish various surrogates for patriarchal descent, tracing the bloodlines back as far as they need to, establishing by strange (or, if you're paranoid enough to see things pretty clearly, entirely comprehensible) combinations of military history and Etruscan mythology, gods and los semidioses whose glossolalic pedigrees they themselves couldn't have described to you, Eden panics, epidemics of stars blowing a sharp black wind of strange language through the border fence of dilapidated paradise.

And the night is a camera-drone's LED readout, a medical invasion of those same stars, subjected to biopsy now and tending, in their clipped and sterilized form, toward hysteresis, an input of successive lacerations on each further piece of cut tissue, an ovarian violence contracting the genetic heat to planar manifolds like the mismatched facets of a whole bombed city's worth of cut and shattered glass. Blown-out windows, blown-in doors, the transparent walls of airports (one in the south, one in the north), the open-plan apartments of the extremely rich, who would be extremely richer if they wanted to live anywhere but there, but whose pride in such slumlordship quite exceeds their sense of personal moderation. What's the point of being rich if you can't throw it in poor fuckers' faces, *nicht wahr*? A question which they're not likely to pursue to its reduction: what's the point of being *rich*?

Oh, you poor soul, you're fucked if you have to ask. Expect the reply to come something like that. And fucked is exactly what we are, and asking is exactly what we

have to do, so submit with whatever patience or dignity you can still summon to their one-sided repartee, and get ready to follow me when I start following them. Don't worry. I don't know where the hell we're going, so later, it'll all be deniable enough. Right now, we're going where they lead, and they're led by forces more than powerful enough to erase all trace of the Earth's chemical existence – except, possibly, for an inexplicable spike in radiation levels around a certain patch of interstellar void, about 93 million miles from the sun, a cryptic symptomatology of stars.

Anybody out on a bike this late at night, especially when he's riding it in drunk-looking circles around and around a four-way stop at the intersection of two major roads, is very likely a meth-freak, maybe coming down from his last amphetamine surge by getting loud-laughingly public drunk on the awful saccharine shit you can buy at the gas station till 1 or 2 in the morning, I can never remember, Mad Dog, Sutter Home, Boone's Farm, exactly the kind of booze whose bottles you find at the bottoms of suicide reservoirs, by train tracks where suicide is a kind of needless elaboration, a belaboring of the point, because *of course* anybody near or in these districts of the city, on anything but official business, is going to die. You wouldn't come here if you weren't already doomed. Neither would we.

I'm talking about the zone to the east, just beyond the last brightly-lit stretch of sidewalk where tourists and rich fucks from the southern and moneyed cities, in for a homeopathic dose of that hard-scrabble artistic life (read: picturesque queers, honey, many of 'em as you can stand, and we might even meet a homeless kid playin' guitar on the street and choose to hand him \$50 out of the goodness of our goddamn hearts while doing everything, and I mean *everything*, we can to make sure that more and more people become and remain homeless), are ever likely to walk. The freshly-painted, loanshark-owned buildings suddenly gutter out into hulks of raw concrete, decades old and probably never going to be altered or upkept until they're finally torn down, binary infections on the city's prone skin.

And then, after a few blocks of prison-casual architecture, just nothing. Railroad tracks, pebbles and ingots of cracked glass, the odd grain silo, very little grass, islands of starving ticks and spiders slow with age, with insect-equivalent dementia, and no protection at all from the shivering mass of arthropod stars.

Bone-fused kaaba circuitry exerts enough heat and pressure to render the resultant spinal ore as smooth as glass, an oxblood shade so deep it's nearly black, and actively counter-luminous, its lust for light visibly draining radiation from all proximate sources – and, in the red fog of an hour that may be dawn or twilight but is, more likely, just the constant state of illumination around here, varicose monoliths mass to delete the xenomorphic stars by dwindling percentages, damaged lithic files, a swarm of dangerous precipitates to be filed in a crowded, quiet vein and then forgotten.

The active quiet of the frightened crowd looms large here – nowhere near outright screaming terror, none of your edge-of-a-riot panic, only the physical sensation of such air as might be used for speech being instead sucked out of the subway car or underground bus system, all surfaces reflective but all reflections damped, mildly distorted, giving back the living bone as deformities of chrome, metalloid abortions as from the embryo-alembic at the heart of an active star. Brushed by greasy hands and greasy hair, suits on which the smoke has thickened like a layer of creosote, burlap and synthetic fabrics scratching the metal foggy with a billion microfissures, lacerations much thinner than just hairline, so that what light you do “receive,” if that's still the word, comes out of a squalling nest of wounds, an osseous structure held together only by the minute and fragile interaction of its fractures, like flos ferri harvested with pickaxes and dynamite from that same star's endoskeleton, its bacteria-crusting mass of hydrostatic bones, sea-salvage in the absolute absence of water.

You'd expect it all to play for thirst, and to a degree, you'd be right: the people aboard this machine are painfully thirsty, and have been even since before they passed through the impotable humidity of the red fog-drift outside, that limit-Tantalus condition in which there's moisture beading everywhere, every brick and ashlar is sweating, every canal of marrow effusing tainted nectar, but you can't drink any of it, because all of it is toxic. Not fatally, or not necessarily so – and some will disregard the prohibition, harvest it in barrels or from drainspouts, and get more or less sick, though who can really tell the difference? We live between varieties of fever, influenza-strains frozen on the star's genetic hard drive and called out of frigid storage by some series of necessities and chances we can hardly even begin to guess, and if you're sick from drinking tainted rain or sick from lack of water, well, is there really much to choose

from? Haven't we all spent too long in quarantine from any old standard of "health" to be very picky about our personal debilities?

Well, long isolation, yes, but it turns out that when your specific toxicity is all you've got left, you cling to it. Hard. We've learned to be proud of our medical dossiers and to divine likely shifts in presurgical imaging – MRIs, tomographies, thermal cameras, ligand-gated channels outfit with droplets of radionuclide till they outline the whole nervous system like a stained and alien vineyard – from the radiologic haloes transacted by clustered stars. A Roman condition. Having gotten where we are with the aid of later empiricisms – actually less empirical, by just such measure as they exclude dreams, visions, attacks of what we used to call psychopathy or schizophrenic delusion, and the raw inexplicable revelation of pure terror, which goes beyond any etiology and back to the place from which all syndromes must emerge – we're not to keen about keeping any information *out* these days.

(You may ask, How far in the future is this supposed to be? And the answer is another question: For which part of Earth? Because there are cities all over the world, in this exact moment and in fact for fifty years previous, which haruspicate from the viscera of Empire exactly what conditions will befall Empire's new capitals. History doesn't move at a single speed. It isn't a goddamn treadmill. You want to know about Italy or Los Angeles or Houston in fifty years, look at Kowloon or Mumbai or Kinshasa now. You want to see the future of New York, look at the past of Paris: sewage up to the knees, castrati debating the finer points of syllogism, and an exurb of exhausted men, women, and children bussed into the old power-centers to perform not-even-glorified slave labor for not much more than it'll cost them to get home, much less fed.

So if you know history moves in parallel vectors, fasciae of kindred but unidentical tissue, sympathetic resonance and crossmatched modalities, look to your metaphor, your seams of interference-ore between waking and sleep, the exobiology not *on* but *of* the stars.)

*Future*, I've heard the word, I know it's one of those in which the *tu* morpheme sounds like *chew*, but as to what it meant, search me. Not that I need to tell you to search me. There's a direct correlation, so sadly obvious that we've passed much of our

lives without feeling it required comment, between the large scale of public uncertainty, the more specialized areas of official doubt (having finally come to understand that science, for example, is more a map of our own cognitive abilities than a transparent image of the world, that nothing escapes or *should* escape the condition of metaphor, and that even the preceding statement is metaphoric), and the public/private condition of informatics, the extraction of unwilling data. The more unsure your polity, the more it's going to make "your" information its business.

Pardon the irony, or scorn, but there's really no other way to say it: such data was only "yours" because they assigned it to you, and we were all so fucking giddy to see ourselves relentlessly described, test-marketed, matched up with other cross-sections of binary variables that, well ... isn't it a little bit, just a *little* bit hypocritical of us to be so angry when they come back charging overdue notices on the biometrics they forced upon you, the checked boxes and survey questions you were so thrilled to complete and to display? If a human being is nothing but the aggregate of a million answered yes/no questions, and if you're not only amenable to the idea but actively *excited* by it, displacing whatever vital strain connects eros to mystery with a pornography of showroom- or surgical-lamp light, what are you really trying to hide, and don't they just ask the first and final yes/no question (*Are you alive or dead?*) until you stop answering?

The water more than rumbles, and it's more than overhead: millions of gallons of it, thousands of tons of pressure, in all directions, circumscribing us in a half-cylindrical Quonset hut of brooding, latent force, held in by not much more than the rotting concrete long ago moved off the city's books and into the absent hinds of private contractors, in cowed belief in that old fallacy, the invisible hand of the market, which asserts that those acting in pure economic self-interest will serve indirectly to benefit the societies in which they live – a fatuous, a glib notion even for 1776, and isn't it goddamn horrifying that *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* should've been published in America's inaugural year, and that our fortunes, in Fortuna's sense, should be so violently tied to its, in the sense of gold. No sincere man could've made that argument, not even then, not even with the old hardline separation between foreign and domestic markets – at least, not without being an unapologetic

bigot, since the Wealth of Nations, as Mr. Smith meant it, was at that point largely the Wealth of Colonies, and the huge influx of capital thus secured for Europe and America is nothing more or less than the unpaid wages and stolen property of millions and millions and *millions* of dead brown people, every shade of brown from the near-red, the ochre of some Indian tribes to the vivid, glowing black of the Somalis and Senegalese. That's how the modern world begins: white men go to lands whose natures haven't yet been prostituted, turned from parts of the world to alleged "wealth," and steal all those newly-minted "resources," and, in the bargain, pull the neat trick of bypassing all the cost and death of their extraction by forcing natives to do the work, not only destroying the whole worlds these people knew but *making them perform the destruction*, so in case you ever feel singled out for distaste as a white man, well, you should. Were you in any other position, any in the world, it would be an act of pure angelic charity, and far beyond your (or my) meager impulses, to forgive the men who'd done such a thing to you. You'd probably spend the rest of your life either cowering in their presence, pissing yourself at their command, or killing as many of them as possible, even if it were plainly obvious that no amount of slaughter would ever rescue your world from several hundred years' relentless rape, literal on every possible level – you ever wonder how we get from white Spaniards to "Hispanics," or where the *His-* comes from, the lopped prefix of Hispaniola coming back to name all its children the sons and daughters of raped slaves and raped Indians, now third- or fourth-class citizens of a republic named for a white Catholic saint, or an Arawak country with almost no Arawaks left, speaking millions of times per day the name for "mountainous land," Ha-i-ti, in a language almost all of whose other speakers, those who knew the words to move and buzz alongside "Haiti," have been systematically destroyed? When's the last time you met an Arawak?

Do you ever hear the word, except as some cod-Latin species name, INDIANA *ARROWAKUS*, in a late 18<sup>th</sup>-century engraving that treats the native Haitians as a particularly interesting subgenus of apes, all the more endearing for their adorable impersonation of human beings, and catalogues their skulls next to the other fascinating and colorful denizens of the prehuman New World?

All for sewage and concrete. None of this imaginable amount of water bearing on all from all sides, this microfiche of urban ocean, still frames and several-second strips of ratty footage excerpted from the medical films of stars, is usable anymore.

All of it's been contaminated by the waste in and around the old munitions factory, now become the B----- Road Federal Complex (laws of libel, thanks), which made its name and a huge amount of money fabricating the non-nuclear components of nuclear weapons, but which still managed to fuck the local ecology with all the tar-, oil-, coal-derivatives involved, all the thousands of tons of requisitioned and forgotten bullets, ammunition dumped not because it didn't work anymore (and *certainly* not because we didn't have anybody to kill with it: America will cease to exist the moment it no longer has anybody to kill, not improbably because there won't be any people left at all) but because somebody in this or that House or Senate subcommittee had a friend over at one or another branch of the worldwide arms cartel who intimated to him, in subtle but emphatic terms, that now would sure be an excellent fuckin' time for a mass overhaul of the entire American military's munitions, both because things are a little tight over at a company I'm not allowed to name *and* because this same company was working out a deal to sell new bullets, bombs, rockets, tanks to the Soviet Union, through a Middle Eastern interlock, say the Saudi royal family if you want to get specific —

But remember, these are men whose fortunes are built on never saying quite what they mean, and it's more than probable, in fact it's almost certain, that "Saudi royal family" is itself just another cipher, a way to name the real buyer without naming him in mixed company. Hate to see an arms gap developing, senator. By which I mean: I'd *love* to see an arms gap developing, senator, but I got a few sentimental attachments. I caught me some feelings about which nation's on the face side of the card.

If each age dreams the following, the dead are holdover sleep incarnate, precipitates of wild back-brain electrical activity, the frozen nerve-topology of thermal-camera stars. Lying, like cysts of oil, coal, ore, beneath the placid grit of the killing fields, and later under layers of coarse snow, they are become the future's larvae; whatever damaged protein code they transfer (pollen from the stem-cell garden of the star abortions) begins to kink and braid the present moment's least tangible distillates

toward shapes fit for research inside the chromosome's alembic, tenacious resins built to outlast the next heatwave in the autoclave of genes.

Lead them where you will, knowing or at least suspecting the whole time that you're actually being led, and that neither of you is the leader, that you both obey the black gravity of some unseen cynosure, the millennia-long strobe of the predatory fever-star screening dog days into the center of the summer, where we finally must meet: the gravel gutter in the middle of a red street, darker by a few shades only than the violently red sky, the color of freshly-shed blood above and blood cooled to moderate blackness underneath us, and some kind of unassignable device, a strange survival of defunct angel-machinery, is lying atop layers of piss-soaked pebbles, stones so often bathed in sewage and offal that they're no longer even filthy or disgusting, that they've simply become elements of the great dirt-mining Earth, excrement and dead flesh alchemized by the long knives of our night and day to the medium of what we walk upon and will return to: tesserae of surgical clippings from xenobiotic stars, so many times ground into other dust of their own keeping that we no longer recognize them as anything but poultices of dead leaves and rotten teeth, the corrupted canine dentistry of a street where lean curs come to rut and die.

Not that this should be taken as prohibition, or a censure of the carnal. God help you if you're still thinking that way. Only that we're led around by too much, accept too many substitutes for the season's real momentum, whatever *that* is, the heat transmitted on other frequencies than any body knows to be burned by, corpses going up a stranger and less discoverable kind of chimney, and bone-reinforced palls of fat-and meat-smoke fixed around and reinforcing the early-summer swarms of the contagious stars, their hives so damp and proximate now, near enough for their sweat to infiltrate your own and begin the subtle process of recoding, salt- and acid-decryptions jingling like the skeletons of birds all down the crusty trails of evidence they'll requisition from you in the morgue.

(Or possibly before. Always hard to say, and even harder now, where the dead are so peacefully dreaming, and where their dreams are of such violence: even that "peace" is a kind of logical fallacy, since we infer it from the way we'd look if we were dreaming and alive, and there's no reason at all to think that anything should look the



same on the other side of death, or that the least scrap of our logic still obtains without some deep internal fissure, a realignment so intense it breaks the spine, white and twisted nervous tissue of the first vertebrate stars restrung like spiderwebs down the fretwork of another biologic instrumentation, arachnid technology come finally to operate among the dreams where body heat is harshly to be prized.)

It's tempting to begin with something like "in that red annihilation," but again, there's no reason to assume that annihilation is what's happening here, or that this is at all an usual day among the dead. Who knows. They do, and what they tell is told as such oblique angles – with such compound internal velocities, starting and stopping thousands of times per line although it appears to flow more or less smoothly, summing its current density to mask (but not delete) the DC offset of the stars' synaptic noise – that we can never very solidly reconstruct the condition of what might, among them, pass for "day."

We don't even know if "day" is any longer a current term, or whether they've learned to observe it the same way you and I still mention "sundown," though we know it's only we who go down, and that the sun's cyclical death and birth is charging (in the pale stigmata of twitch-sleep, slowly thrashing star-ataxias) toward either final burnout or collision with another galaxy, which may itself be as unnoticed among the living as overwhelmingly registered among the dead, felt as a violence so enormous and serene that it knocks you out-of-body in the instant it begins, so that you might observe the rest as sometimes you can watch your own dismantling and "correction" under surgery, once they've strapped the ether-mask or chlorophyll-soaked cotton to your face, once the nitrous oxide has sucked all feeling from the back half of your jaws, an attachment of glittering orange leech-mouths, the kind of thing you might find repulsive or horrific under other conditions but, in the moment, feel strangely ambivalent about – or precisely *not* strangely ambivalent, just ambivalent, as though having the blood sucked from your jaw by limp black parasites, each growing swollen and a darker, richer red with what used to lend your gums their color and the pulp of your teeth its life, isn't really that much odder than anything else, which it isn't. More statistically unusual, perhaps, but hardly odder. Spikes and fossil botanies of tooth-pulp go freezing and

ramifying in the vital signs of comatose stars, the intercellular spaces left after small animals begin their slow translation into stone.

Which is to say: the dead may still say “day” while knowing, more keenly than usual, that they’re speaking in metaphors. (There being no other way to speak.) And sometimes, as with us and “sunrise,” they may even try to observe their own custom from the vantage of some tired and canny irony, laughing at themselves for the primitive, the bolt-on Anglo-Saxon bluntness of a term like “sunrise,” though *Morgenrot* has other valences, and the eye-rhyme between *rot* for “red” and *rot* for putrefaction may trouble their Old World suavity more than they’d admit, may screen upon the petrified glial forests of their dead retinæ – the extinct cypress-plantations of epizootic stars – a red film of such long frames that the eye, used to 24 fps, gets nervous in their presence, slowly-unfolding time-lapse shots of the sun going reddish with infection and then black with rot, decaying solar meat coming to hang in meathooked chunks above the morning, to deliver its haloes of fetid light and writhing newborn flies.

Banners and flags of bleeding meat, or skin and fat in which the veins have so long been necrotic that they stand out as an immovable and livid script, typesetting for a monograph to be run off in one unending impression, the elements of an alphabet which can say exactly one thing and is always loudly saying it – and it’s shocking, even to the dead, how quickly you do get used to this kind of thing. After a while, it seems no more horrific than anything else that you should “march” (straggle, stumble, shriek, crawl, fall down shot by snipers you’ll never see, dying less as the outcome of any definite sequence of human actions – load bullet, cock back hammer, stare through scope, squeeze trigger, gobble valium – than as the hour’s necessary quotient of loss, such that nobody even bothers to look around or take cover when you fall, and the one that gets you is treated more like the annoyance of inevitable mosquitoes than something to be feared) under such ensign than that you’re here at all, dying and killing for nobody-quite-knows-what, surrendered to the state of numb brutality past even horror, butchering and offering yourself for butchery, as an altar is truly named the City of Offerings, and sets up viscera and bones of birds and ruminating beasts to call down the blueshift stars’ terminal radiology into the rite’s cartouche.

As in the tombs we exhumed when we were neither living nor dead, lost equally to either side – and this is another complication of merely saying “the dead,” itself as much a matter of convention (of *routinizing metaphors’ charisma*) as saying “the sunset”: there are all manner of states, all up and down and across the supposed line between living and dying, and you come to treat them much as the notions of equilibrium and entropy are treated in the last half-century’s thermodynamics, states of flux, rapprochements with change so fragile and brief that, in the instant they’re decrypted by the eye or shaky hand, they’ve already started to collapse into something else.

Complete disequilibrium of thermodynamic systems is, as Dr. Prigogine has shown us, only a bewildering Edenic profusion of tiny equilibria – one-use, single-exposure Gardens of Paradise, each burned onto the film of the voiced light along with its phonography of plosive and aspirate stars, the whole linguistics of the galaxies’ acoustic distribution – and perfect equilibrium is just a moment’s interlude within the gradual evolution of chaos. Which is itself not chaos, which is itself not “order” per se, and on and on, u.s.w. Circles within circles, like anything, and eventually we recognize entropy as less a thermal than a cognitive bleed, the leading edge of an intuition that some other order or form is emergent and hungry.

Or thirsty. Christ, the thirst here. I remember. I can’t tell the difference between remembering and feeling / I refuse to acknowledge any difference between the two, sensing none myself, and suspect that such difference as has been generally acknowledged has also been a technique of control, a techno-dialectic of the *logos* tamed to *ratio* and the bookkeeper raised to apogee in kingdoms without constellations, empires defaming the live iron they wrench and wreak into the shapes of their control. We’ve slandered stone and metal too much and have heaped not nearly enough poisonous libel upon those who misuse them. An architecture like the stepwise growth of an exoskeleton, the plate-and-firing-pin insect bones of xenonucleic stars.

Base their genetics upon sugar, say, or upon another acid, neither deoxy- nor ribonucleic, some airy toxin full of oxidative damage, a recombinant species which must evolve after finches and citrus fruits, because it must constantly correct its own gene-rust with cryptoxanthin, metabolized to retinol as soon as it hits the blood: rich

saccharine eye-booze, the intoxicant ambrosia of some weaker, later god, postdated fully, left in the quiver till we absolutely need him, and by then, likely as not, accustomed to the comforts of sedation and biostasis, unable to move or even to fear outside his life-support chamber, the glucose drip of stars reaped and installed for symbiosis.

Which is something like where we must've been, a country of deities come too late or too early, responsible for nothing at all like "salvation," which is only the prerogative of a fairly decadent god. When your religion starts to turn around the linear, I'd almost say the secular notion of salvation, that each of us individually can and must be saved to continue our petty bitchery on the other side of the Big Crunch, you know you're deep in the territory of impotence, and that holy wars are coming, since we've all forgotten that god is a way to talk about the living universe, a cross-section of its massive vital processes, an assay of the stars' exobiology in motion.

Our gods were certainly so. We carried them – or their effigies; theology, on the killing fields, does not really permit such nice distinctions as between a god and his icon, between the carcass of the fowl you slaughter in his name and he himself, now become a slaughtered bird – on spikes and spits, or sometimes in small cases, wooden ammo crates requisitioned from the dead, friendly or hostile, who gives a shit. Who gave one. Either tense you like. Decadence operates as much upon the past as upon the future or the present, and it may, given time and space to work, so mutilate even our inheritance from the dead that only further mutilation gives us hope, threatens like Eden's threat to outline the anatomy of another, stranger animal left wild and latent in the archives of our meat.

Thunder, if that's what it is – could be large artillery, though I don't know that we're in a war, or that we aren't; more likely IEDs, and a city reengineered, obliquely manufactured, to compose the weapons that will destroy it; and why not think it's the terminal pulsation of the night, the vital signs of hungry quasars telegraphing radiologic data from the minerally-decomposing tombs of stars, the limestone rot and gangrenous glowing chalk – can be neither felt nor heard here, in our shelter or last gulag, depending on your preferences.

It is rather sensed like a system of metaphor, a vast and signifying pain just on the other side of sleep, gnawing at the zero underbelly of the basal threshold, climbing the y-axis like bacterial strains incorporated to form the nerves of a freshly-evolved cell: a sound transceived from air directly to the bone, an inaudible carrier wave building toward sympathetic resonance that will shriek apart the chemical architecture of the stars, soft dissections in which both scalpels and sutures are complexes of output molecules, a core-dump meant to override, dismantle, and recode the star's bionic software.

Call it sanctuary, call it condemnation, or don't bother calling it at all, still vein-tired on last night's overdose of melatonin, not particularly caring whether or not melatonin has any evil side effects at four times the recommended dosage, which apparently it doesn't, unless the whole existence of this day can be considered an unintended side effect. And why not. Mind painfully alert with as-needed injections of caffeine and red cinnamon-tasting amphetamines, injections by the cc from the glucose dripfeeds trailing off the paralytic stars, -plegic to as high a degree as your notion of their extremities attains: hemi-, para-, quadriplegia, or many times more than four, a whole subgenus of limp tentacles, the necrotized mosaic of half-fossil zooid stars clinging still to the sympathetic skeleton of a galaxy grown integral and frangible as coral.

Tired, tired, goddammit, tired. A positive drag on the blood, a resistance too whole and self-sustaining to be conceived merely as some negative condition of waking. This too is a solid, a number unto itself, and whatever mathematics exclude it from its own ordinal sequence are in just such measure incomplete, confirming on axes quite other than those intended the validity of Gödel's Theorem, mimicking by such powers as they arrogate or generate the atrocious algebra of angels, who cannot afford to be concerned with the pain of the integers and decimals they manipulate, who tend toward exactly the kind of inhuman (even *unanimal*, though by no means *inanimate*) fascination with sheer physical hurt we've been taught to expect from Nazi doctors, Holocaust surgeons locking Jews in rooms cooled as close as wartime funding and ad-hoc technical arrangements could get them to absolute zero, Jews in hypobaric and hyperbaric chambers, insane pressure drops bursting blood vessels all across faces and torsos, ribcages gone horribly prominent with starvation and abuse now ivied over with

incredible reticulæ of spilled but unshed blood, red air-rich fluid seeping out into the interstitial meat where loose oxygen does no good and clotting factors wreak a death which we can no longer consider evil, having seen so much of what men might do with life.

There comes a point at which your own survival is an insult to everyone and everything else, a point past which you wouldn't *want* to live, because it would say too much about just how far life may be degraded without quite being extinguished.

Locked into a simulated arctic, an autoclave of searing insane cold, and then released, expected to grovel before the American soldiers who are *really* here, whatever else they say, to reconnoiter Nazi techniques and instrumentation of torture, interrogation, the fledgling science of "mind control" (fledgling only under its latest name, but there you go), what we'll find useful to call "brainwashing" when a few GIs get taken prisoner in Korea and end up thinking that maybe they should never have *been* in Korea. Which doesn't really strike me as the kind of thing you'd need to have been "brainwashed" to start pondering – especially after the generals and Joint Chiefs, in whatever paper depth and sensory-deprivation chamber of documented bureaucracy, express much the same concerns.

So come streaming out of the camps, such as humans abused to the status and physiology of rinderpest cattle may "stream," and find yourselves immediately in a subtler version of the same camps, a condition of general Buchenwald, Birkenau disassembled for shipping back to the States and reconstructed in the form of control programs much more durable and even photogenic than any truck's engine backing up to cough exhaust into a shed full of undesirable Jews, any almond-blossom festival among the unthinkableably gaunt corpses, clot-apt plasma freezing to inoculate the jaundiced photoallergenic stars.

(She was allergic to light; I disbelieved her at first, though I don't know why, too drunk or too near the edge at which drunk-and-up-all-night beings to granulate, to coarsen, into hung-over-but-giddy-with-sleep-deprivation; I looked at her as the thin, the uric morning sun began to cut through the just-cleaned windows of the diner, wherever we were, near the bizarre September 11<sup>th</sup> monument, which was supposed to be a bronze cast of firemen's gloves holding the infant they implicitly saved, but which

actually looked like a hand petrified in a peat bog proffering the viewer a recent abortion, the already-mineralized light of a stillborn and ectopic star; she had her stillbirths and ectopias as well, though I didn't know it at the time, and wouldn't until after she'd already conceived and miscarried the one- or two-week old son or daughter we'd never have, which would end as what I can only guess must've been incredible pain and what I *know* was a series of confused, drunk, angry phone calls, her haranguing me for reasons I didn't understand at all, and then separation, and then the squeamish reconciling some weeks later, when she realized that she'd gotten pregnant and miscarried already, and that she'd been nearly delirious with the pain and the wild hormonal shifts – but anyway, I looked at her and realized she was embarrassed, and that's when I started to believe you could be allergic to light; we'd just spent either our first or second night together, we'd hardly seen each other at all in daylight, and she really thought I was going to be disgusted by some little bumps like razor burn or patches of roseacea; and then we went out in the light, since we hadn't brought umbrellas and were still blocks from her car and miles from my motel basement on the western side of the river, and she started to break out into a tender-looking pink glow, a touch-sensitive interface between her very white and therefore light-refusing skin and the inner sickness light may carry, the photonegatives the solar virus prints.)

No wind, according to the grassblades, dead bees, tips of ragged hairs shorn from the backs and crowns of yielding heads, too exhausted with their own slow shift from animals to useless bleeding lumber, pure encumbrances of bone and minimal fat, to do anything but yield – and still, there is some fluid force, very much like wind or impalpable water, playing over us, too cold not to be noticed, and bringing with it the chances for a new threat in the structure of the day. “New” only in the sense of “new since yesterday.” It's clearly very, very old, a semi-suppressed autumnal violence, a measured, tranquil, but predatory breathing of the world around us, suddenly all gone to forms of plant life, sun-guzzling stars filed in cellulose hives, releasing cytotoxic pollen to be neutralized or passed by our weak histamine, the body's worn-down hedges against unwanted protein invasion.

Bets called and long ago cashed. It's occurred to some of us that we might be on the sea, and that this structure we now hide in without in any sense “occupying” or

“inhabiting” might be something like an ark, the detached hull of an otherwise-destroyed ship, the landing module of a spacecraft come back from the sweet, chill liquor of madness flowing from the sores and cysts of the fouled moon, riddled with saccharine radiation-burn from flightpaths calibrated too close to the mutagenic wind roaring in silence from the stars.

So flightpath ramifies to protein structure, single chain of amino acids acquires its helical twin, two-stranded braid collapses on itself to move from linear sequence to doubled counterpoint to three- and four-dimensional topologies, and the stars’ genetic splicing carves up our own unfinished DNA until we might be almost anywhere at all – as long as, at the core of that multiple, that phasic and shivering cartography, there remains a metal egg, a dented and frost-ripped structure of girders and grilles for us to be hiding inside. It was clearly a piece of machinery at one point, active in toto. Still is, though its activities are harder to discern now, in exactly such measure as they’re inextricably entangled with *us*, who would presume to do the discerning. There are minor arguments over what the machine could’ve been for or done, who designed it, who used it, who destroyed it, and how many of these questions are really the same question – I mean, if its use was not perhaps to be destroyed, or if destruction were a side-effect of its firing ...

If design, and this is one I tend to get stuck on, grinning to myself, speaking as little as possible, cooing and gurgling deep in the throat like a mourning dove alongside the grief-line that follows a funeral older than time, a cortège printed wildly prehistoric in the stars’ transcription RNA – if design can ever really be separated from destruction, and if, by designing something, we also predicate the terms of its decay, since by specifying how it *should* work we have also therefore negatively specified all the ways it could *fail* to work (door won’t open, door won’t close, door falls down, door breaks in half, and at what point does it cease to be a door and become, let’s say, an ineffective window, and at what point would you answer this last question if you don’t know what a door’s for or don’t know that the specimen in front of you is meant to be a door? To give what seems like, but is not, a fatuous and casual example).

Arguments, yes, but no real schisms. Nobody’s got the energy for that. It’s not that we’ve evolved past sectarian nonsense or even the accompanying violence: men and women kill each other all the time inside this structure, hangar, hull, whatever it is, and



without being able to assign a reason ourselves or to wring the reason from the killers – without, quite likely, even the killers being able to say what the reason was, or being able to *know*, quite apart from the difficulties of *saying* – we might as well assume that some of these are matters of apostasy and dogma, the surgical division between heresy (an offense against the core beliefs) and blasphemy (an offense against the body of ritual built up around these beliefs), if you still believe in anything so bureaucratic as the severance of credo from factus, or that ritual won't change the belief it's meant to encode. Of course it will. It could hardly do otherwise.

And though there's no one widespread notion of the machine we're all inside, and though no theory, no matter how pretty, can be trusted for very long before it brutally betrays that trust, we've all woken on some day that seemed uniquely to isolate us, a hundred or a thousand days per person, and into the vision of the machine's underlying condition, the body-truth for which it serves as semi-estranged sign. The last time I did, it went like this:

It wasn't autumn, but the weather felt that way, a chill edge to the mild wind, a rustling of dead animals and plants, and there was a hint of reclamation in the way the wind and gray light broke across us all, a tinge of our frail substance being gathered back – not to any linear salvation, no hope for an immortal soul at all, much less its redemption, but to stars' lossy metabolism, glistening millions of miles above the orchard of the bones.

What sound like (bust must not be) geese call through the thorny interference-spikes of what look like (and may be) trees, fattening dendrites on travel grime and palpable confusion, squawking in the fog that botched the avionics in their hollow bones, dislodged their spines' altimeters to bring them down among us, living now as we do on what could be a stage set and might also, without any contradiction, be the manifest precision of wreckage, the exact reengineering from buildings as their architects conceived them to buildings as dreamt by their own materials, much like the seep of vertebral memory interposes a warm and code-rich vapor between the mutilated stars' runtime metabolism and the city of the dead.

The soundtrack here should read optically, left to right, as a de- and recryption of the necropolis horizon, analyzed for its frequency output and printed on the knurled

filmstrip margin as a catch of cysts and cairns, 5 and 10 kHz spikes for barrows and tombs, a topologically-preserved transform of afferent-to-cortical stars.

No idle nostalgia here, no house of simple regress. Not that regress every really could be simple. The city of the dead is the place where the dead violently, actively *live*, and you don't trespass upon it without taking your own death into your hands, not as a likely outcome of the older dead's intent – what harm passes here sheds little blood and may, at most, dilate or contract the gaps between the vertebrae, alter the spinal shutter-speed when photographing pale bone-xylem stars – but as a thing to be strangely and perhaps hurtfully understood.

(There are knowledges deleterious to those too young to hold them, definitely and immediately harmful as a scalding piece of metal placed, with great ceremony, in your hands by another, no longer a person, who seemed to feel nothing of its capacity for white pain, the inrushing snowblind vertigo of hypodermic stars. Wrapped hands, maybe, or simply callused over with death's rigor, now as much part of the sand and stone that house them as of any integrity known on this side of death's black rose, its tart disjunctive poppy: opiate stars massed in models of viral strains and spliced genes, printing with linear bacterial DNA the space between us and the first light, the liminal zero of illumination's awful, gorgeous voice.)

So any surface from here to the blue and orange glow on the other side of the world – the ammunition-side of sunrise, archipelagoes where leprosarium stars are still rising to fix all the sainted islanders within a certain choreography of bandages and crypts, tourniquets and permanently stiff or rotting muscles, much as pancreatic islets wash away or go perpetually numb beneath the diabetic tide, worked back to rudimentary electrons and then built up in coralline growths of deposited, and malignant, sugar – should be, and is, a model of its own sound, the precisely defined surfaces and densities capable of causing and of giving back the noise as we receive it.

Your ears too are eyes. Phrase that the other way around, if you like, if you've begun to suspect (as we have, perforce) that our age is one of violences specific to the eye, and that fewer optic claims might make the Earth a less impossible place for trying not to die.

Once-gentle birds driven to madness. Doves and sedate rural pigeons, barn swallows and starlings with golden maps of contractile and cold-blooded stars printed on their wings, poikilotherms, acidophile and methane-bingeing – they all descend on the outriding curves of your eye, like shadow-faults, accidents of blocked light playing back across the glassy cornea, dusty now with its own powdered substance, as buildings after bombardment each wear a pulverized cloak of what was once their own material, walk or collapse in a shroud of their dead skin, like defunctive stars claim for eye-time in a halo of their own dismantled light.

Mostly dead by the time their images get here, well, OK, you'd know that, we've all been told, postdate and time-lapse, an exploratory surgery on stars' medical scans, altering their own atomized corpses by altering the last coherent image those corpses left behind. Think of it that way, if it helps: the *image* is something shed by the *body*, very much like dead skin or dead hair, and though we've tended for much too long to take the metaphysics of the eye for granted – that a thing is the lit image it gives back, with all predictable ethical consequences: that you can work on such an image, deform it, torture it, starve it to bones and prolapsed hide or feed it to varicose and stretchmarked grossness, and as long as you don't touch it, you aren't culpable; that there need be no thought or felt separation between optical command and actual sympathy, which is just a disastrous fucking thing to believe; that by manipulating the sun's friable photographs, we may control all things grown in the biofeedback loop of that most clonic and hazardous star – we ought, by now, to be correcting ourselves.

So remember it this way: the image is not the thing; the image is a quality of the thing, a modality, the emission of one kind of living sign, an anatomical structure in the delicate biology of semiotics. Manos, arriba. Bien. And when we forget the difference between another living thing and the light it sheds when subjected to, bombarded with, solar radiation, we viciously contract its spectra, we deprive it of all other forms of stellar transfusion.

There have been, for medical and military purposes, some recoveries in the last hundred and twenty years: x-rays, positron-emission or computed-actual tomography, magnetic resonance, the random walks and vertical motions of gases. In the most advanced and therefore strangest sciences, they're dealing every day with the difference between an integral of light upon the surface of your eye and brain and the thing that

*reflects* such light, the medium that makes the image possible. Turns out that difference may lie at the very heart of human inquiry into reality, and that electrons themselves may be quite aware of our surveillance, that gravity and spacetime may be substances as touch- and camera-sensitive as any infirm star photographed to shreds by the bright scalpels of eclipse.

Funeral urns like jars of gritty sepia honey, canopic distilleries extracting and preserving the stars' vital fluids and soft marine snowfall of broken bones, shells, scales. Though everything appears, in the city of the dead, simply to lie upon or slightly underneath the ground, there's a huge amount of vertical activity here: the data-gravity of stars extracting heat and biologic information from lapsed tissue, the comparable and harmonized activity of information-leak back into the ground, the dirt and stones, themselves composed in large degree of dead things; the general waver of transacted warmth between all these layers, a pleasantly woozy retuning, like taped flutes and strings wavering in 50-year-old vibrato upon the black oxide decks of an old Mellotron or Chamberlin organ, the needle guttering down the grooves, jumping or sinking as playback process-anatomy demands, of an optigan disc, a phonograph record, a piece of much-screened film.

You've heard, somewhere, about the secular basis for the blues, heard it lionized by various cadres of Marxists, who generally mean well even if they mean it shakily: that musculature, plus the great degree of feedback encoded into growing tissue (how many times you've had to grin through insult, stoop to indignity, keep your mouth shut while they rape and murder your people, just keep on smilin' while genocide continues unabated), is very much the physical substrate for how you bend the strings of a guitar, the runs of a vocal melisma, the sidebands of a harmonica's notes, like a stereo bouncedown of compressed star-physiology shaken loose of its carrier wave and printed on the music's beautiful deformity, its deviation from official scales and senses of tempo.

That is, of course, the truth. It's just not all of the truth. There's also the instrument itself, and how many bends and runs and flutter-tonguings have grooved its soundward surfaces, worn down the patina, say, on the mouthpiece of a flute, soaked and chipped the reed of a tenor saxophone, etched neurologic pathways into the fretboard of a guitar. I've got guitars with fat notches in the surprisingly soft chrome

butter of their frets, and some of them I haven't played for years, so it took less than a decade for that instrument to find the common shape of overlap, the difference tone, between my anatomy and its. We worked together, often unknowing, to define a new animal, as recombinant stars edit and reorient the light's xenonucleic acid spine.

Thus also for drumheads and drumsticks, fingerboards of violins and violas and cellos (often made of softer wood than the necks themselves, rosewood or teak, usually), keys of pianos and organs, especially if they're actually ivory, cymbals' grooves and edges. I've seen cymbals played flat, ungrooved by the music's and the seasons' lathes to a condition of gently mottled rust, millions of stick-marks, acorn-shaped or flat-headed, like ballpeen hammers or blunt instruments of mastodon surgery, the greenish tinge of ammonia rinse applied and dried on and washed off or simply beaten away over the course of another six months' music; I've seen cymbals corroded from their being kept in a damp basement and then rushed into the light and noise, in the strange afternoon hour when we were on the way to play somewhere and weren't at all sure if the venue would exist by the time we arrived, haggling over records in the car, some of us needing to hear pulse-racing amphetamine tempi to get our requisite blood up, others preferring stuff to calm themselves, to find the secret heart of silence and modulated motion in the inmost cells of loud, fast, angry music.

I was one of the first and have become one of the second, though not all the time. I've learned to recognize by now the node or locus – not timeless but in fact the *generator* of time, the exact localized star-gravity from which time receives its shape – which we may be lucky enough to occupy or just touch every once in a while as the roar proceeds around and through us, of our own making, as the screams fret the edge between recognizably musical sound and raw shrieking, when nobody, audience or performers, is at all sure how much of this horror is in earnest and how much is simply theater, those moments when you know the man about to crash into your drumkit or break his guitar over his own chest *does not care and is not pretending*, wants the carnage and will accept the pain as its fee, probably not even to be paid until fifteen or twenty minutes later, adrenaline running so hot and concentrated that it won't hurt at all, not in the moment of the crash: that edge, that cusp, will be a white annihilating zero, and you very likely won't remember it afterward.

The moments before and the moments just after, yes, but not the actual impact. I've heard it's the same with being shot, though I wouldn't know. I have, for my part, been punched, thrown down a flight of steps, and carried by some atmospheric momentum to smash my head through a glass door, and I can confirm that, on each of these occasions, the impact itself is missing.

I can remember stumbling toward the door, and then brushing blood and glass from my hair, but not smashing it; I can remember the windup of the man who punched me, after much coaxing from the people around us, not because he or I was angry but because we were both drunk on whatever awful liquid affliction the girl with British pretensions (and believably British teeth) had mocked up for us, some combination of bitters, gin, and tea, wretched shit, and because I hadn't ever really been full-on punched and he was a self-defense instructor, and we were both curious about how I'd take it, and I can remember the stumble backwards after impact, but I don't remember being hit; I recall in horrible, embarrassing detail both the top and the bottom of the staircase, but nothing about how I got down it. The event itself is a charge too massive for the system to bear, an overload diffused for us by neural hardware, spine-printed strips of circuit-breaker stars.

So the skyline should be a fairly exact spectrograph of the noise this place incarnates and emits, the noise that breathes off it like hot air, still dry but not for long, on the outer edges of a green tornado dawn, when the sky is a holocaust of young brass because the sun has gotten beneath the cloud cover in the east, a cupric and verdigris'd mass of ingrown stars:

Broken walls, cracked vessels, crypts like mineralized tents, including the ripples in and stains upon the canvas, and a sense of feral but extremely disciplined animals waiting somewhere nearby, predatory but not to the point of recklessness, the way we sensed coyotes in the hills around the god's sepulcher before we ever saw them, rabid and controlled, frothing over clean yellow teeth, washed to a surgical glitter by the saliva their last prey provoked, necks and faces laced with dried sweat and spit from the massive heat-transfer of winding-sheet DNA uncoiling for acidophile stars' spectral analysis.

Back there, you timed out your steps by unprovoked tightness in the viscera, knowing that there *was* a provocation, but that only your entrails had yet sensed it: butterfly frequencies, oscillograph epilepsy altering the chemical output of neuromodulator stars, in memory-strips along the backbone and underneath the cordage of sere nerves, each crackling into life when tongued by the leading edge of neurotransmitter drizzle: potassium spikes splintering the glial stars, tonic seizures performing a hard reset on the whole system, all axon-and-dendrite hardware restored to factory spacing and a blankness of the synapses which can never be perfectly blank, which bears with it the DC bias of its own ghosts, still gnawing voltage in the dark.

Oedipus can remember, as can I, though I've got no doubt that we remember very different things. He was there on a fact-finding mission and I was there alone, with him as a qualifier of solitude, a noise-gate through which my loneliness might be bussed before it ever quite breaks to ground, like colonies of sun-fearing snakes rippling from their boreholes at night, their Earth-trepanations, to submit themselves to the exploratory surgery of extrasolar stars. Heliopause long passed.

We came to the sandstone airport in a city of tin and zinc, he with his retinue, eager to shake them, and me with no sense of linear time at all, since by then I'd forcibly removed myself from the solar progression, at least to the extent I found it possible, and hadn't slept without some kind of drugs in about five years.

(It's now seven years, and the drugs are getting stronger, and the sleep is getting more and more friable, easily crumbled, thinner at its edges, a baked-in peat lamina, a fossil of circulating gases just on the point of turning into fluid, old oil-stained and heat-scarred machine totals of bloodcount stars, summed and printed on instruments which can't be called *ancient*, since they were current only 60 years ago, but which already seem and maybe are much farther removed from us than the axes, arrowheads, awls we regularly find littered about the city of the dead. Those are not forms which can go obsolete. The stone may crumple and flake, the generations of hands smoothing the implement to some noisy difference tone of read palms and blistered fingers may transfer their propriety from skins' and sinews' grip to the buildup of the ochre dust they now compose, but axe and awl and arrowhead remain current as ever. It's rather like setting a cave painting beside, let's say, an Aubrey Beardsley. You know which is more recent, in the sense of linear time, but you *know* beyond any daylight explanation which

is more *current*, which best transmits the wild densities of voltage still crackling like harnessed lightning through a complex of caves transfused with the massive, the gravity-thirsty tincture of opiate stars.)

So we landed, separately, and he shook his handlers, and I just shook. Chain-smoking dusty cigarettes on the fake-rustic curb, designed to look like the architecture of exactly those peoples who had to be massacred wholesale for there to be an airport and curb at all, which is a fairly schizophrenic way to go about nation-building, and would look bad in comparison if there were *any* non-schizophrenic ways to go about nation-building. Twere ever thus, guv. You herd and behead and poison the people you find in the New World, then you erect a series of memorials, both maudlin and insincere, to their bravery and “rich cultural legacy,” and you miss every one of the signs the Hopi were so skilled in reading, you abort the whole glyphic technology of abjad stars and vowels grafted from Hopi throats to black anoxic sky.

If we could remember anything they knew, we might suffer something less, or at least different, than the likely end of human civilization, and the eventual (but by no means distant) rendering of the Earth’s whole middle third uninhabitable. And this is exactly why we *don’t* remember and choose not to listen. Less those plagues, we’d have to get to the root of what caused us to cause *them*, and that’s a profounder diagnostics than almost anyone on Earth wants to undertake. We’re much happier, genuinely so, going to Kyoto to bitch out the Japanese minister of finance about who was standing where for all the photo-ops at a conference “designed” to “hammer out” an agreement between the G20 nations as to how large a manmade rise in the Earth’s temperature is acceptable over the next 20 years. As if fucking *any* were acceptable! And as if we don’t know how to stop it all right now, and don’t have the necessary techniques and machinery to stop it. We do.

But it would make the old trustees very uncomfortable, and oil profits would fall catastrophically (note here the utter degradation of the word “catastrophic”: the catastrophe isn’t that we’ve got maybe a century left on this planet, no, the catastrophe is that oilmen might have to accept a margin of profit somewhere slightly south of a thousand percent), especially if we chose this historical moment to mention that actually, you know, we’ve been quite aware of how to manufacture gasoline from coal



since the late 1930s, should we still need any gasoline. It's just that there were some difficulties in market saturation and resource availability, some tendentious words exchanged between Siemens and Standard Oil, and then a nice quid-pro-quo and paperless pact that got everybody resting easy.

And while we're talking, how does 2<sup>o</sup> Celsius sound for a target? If it proves inconvenient, we can always get some academic whores to publish against it. These are the terms of diagnosis we have chosen, friend, and our medicine finds no opening for the spine-shattering syndromatics of the stars.

Shameless prostitutes all, sure (and you've got to wish that there was a word here that didn't insult actual prostitutes, who perform a basically religious service), but what good has *shame* in a prostitute (same) ever been?

Now the air is wet, with sound and with water, and what moisture does fall from it doesn't so much fall as get *wrung*, and is less like rain than like the air's sheared harmonics, brief and febrile, a buildup of massive star-transients conspiring to wreck (and in the wrecking, to rewire) your neural power lines. Smooth gray doves, looking soft as worn satin, come down from the eaves and gables where they were mourning, pick up material for nests, sometimes scatter back across the gravel with a kind of choked clucking sound, the circumspect cousins of hens scared by passing planes – cousins with memories long enough to mourn, and to distill from the sense of loss some notion of nature's continuity, the basic idea that death is not an endstop but a critical change of state, and that there are phase-states (the stars among them), visible glyphic systems of vital signs, in which we can see how death and life might interact.

The earliest metaphysics, the cosmology of elephants sadly turning and inspecting the bones of their dead, leading the youngest elephant calves to look at the skeletons first, then forming a cortège ordered roughly by age, so that the oldest elephants come last to trumpet a silent clarion of road-dust over the dead, to commit them to their native ash with a music we can hear only as brittle interference, but which the bones themselves must overhear as the stars' exchange of glittering insect code.

And when Oedipus and I were at the airport, that's the kind of day it was, an elephant funeral, a mastodon continuum wrought blank and nervous by the anti-memory systems of the city around us. City, in the substantive, was once nothing but a

memory system: it existed to keep current all that might've been lost; its shapes and instruments – houses, streets, granaries, eventually aqueducts and gutters, redirected or harnessed water, and the sites of religious observance which preceded it and were then incorporated into it, the temples and shrines, the grove of the mangled olive trees where even Oedipus might seek and find protection, come to his Furies' truce among the mutilated limbs of lignified stars, each softly slurping cold sweet sap from dripfeed bags of life-support xylem – were memory wrought into structure, and were meant to save us from oblivion.

Not from our *personal* oblivion, the world's amnesia in regard to who we thought we were; City had no use for that. City rather desired to keep us safe from larger and more dangerous amnesias, the forgetting how to live alongside nature, to understand and subsist upon her flows and fluxes, the forgetting how to keep each other safe without docility, calm without complacency. City was a memory-machine, and every piece of its architecture incarnated something that ought not to be lost to the collective imagination, some natural glyph in need of constant and revitalized decryption.

Now there's no City. There are only cities, wrenched away from any larger sense of purpose, and their existence is a precise and insane antidote to City, the Mnemonic. They memorialize forms of forgetting, which are themselves forgotten. They have nothing to do with the places in which they rise and everything, everything to do with the available capital of the era, which is itself a sense of stockpile and resource so far removed from anything real that it wouldn't be a stretch to claim that cities come into being for no goddamn reason at all. Wouldn't, that is, if the reasons weren't basically clear and basically pernicious: new cities record (and in recording, erase) some fact of labor and population density, some lode of resource-ore to be extracted, now that we're capable of thinking of the world only as a succession of "resources" to be used, and not something alive.

This is not mere holism, in the secular and feel-good sense. You want to remember that the world is alive, not just because it's true, not just because our awful lives might be some measure less awful if we were to remember it, but also because of this: a living thing, when attacked, defends itself. And after enough self-defense subroutines have gone screaming in runtime over its cortex, it may start to consider that attack would forestall the need for further defenses. So, eventually, a living thing begins

to attack *us*, and if we were busy acting unaware that the world's alive, its attacks will come, improbably but surely, as blindsides. We *will* be washed away; the Flood will return en masse, on a scale befitting the mediatized enterprise of mass inanimacy (not "death"), and there will be no Ararat, no Agri Dagi in Armenia for us to roost upon.

Water and thirst will come together, for the last time, in an extinction-mathematics whereby neither cancels the other. We will die desperately thirsty, surrounded by water which we can't drink and waterlogged food which we can't eat, screaming for reversion to some other algebra of thirst, begging the indifferent angel to reconsider his terminal calculus, appealing to the mercy of the Earth we have deformed.

## Session #5

Having eaten the stars' black machinery, eaten and swallowed their secret biotech – the extracellular matrices that connect and calibrate them, the filamentous and living circuitry that only *looks* like blank night sky to us, both because we're part of it and because the gaps between its individual elements are sometimes galaxy-wide, the logic-architecture of its star-programs and transistors may span whole nebular clusters – only a leaf-thin hammering of high-resistance genetic copper to connect the smaller binary twins, the white-dwarf microprocessor stars ...

But Oedipus is losing track of dates, getting ahead of himself. He begs your leave to request a return to the earlier story. Witness this double acumen: he asks for permission to ask another question. And though you have no real ability to withhold permission, in this instance or in any, and though even the asking for it may be a kind of power play, like a jailer asking a prisoner if he'll please return to his cell (and fondling his nightstick, taser, handcuffs while he asks, in blunt visual demonstration of what permissions must be predicated upon – *all permissions*, a horrified voice says, *not one excepted, not even in your most intimate moments of what appears to be genuine giving or communion, but is actually a mutually-annulled violence, a positive and negative pole collaborating here on comprehension or fucking as elsewhere they collaborate on lips sewn shut and jaws smashed back to individual radio-crystals of white enamel*) ... even with all that, you'll notice yourself feeling grateful for the pretended decency, and wondering why all tyrants can't be so kind. If he's being kind.

This is a limp and planar subtlety, more analogous to symbol than to metaphor: his "kindness" stands for one thing and one only, and you're meant to make the cognitive jump as soon as you notice it. Difficult, under such conditions, to discern whether the jump and the symbol which requires it are insults or compliments, whether they simply demonstrate Oedipus's ability to make you leap through as many hoops as

please him or if they're some kind of cheap fraternal token, a recognition of the fact that you *do*, despite all appearances, have a more or less working mind.

The two of us, well, we stood together in front of the glass sephiroth, which might, come to think of it, have just as well been the glass qliploth, since they were unlabeled, and that was part of the point: each was given a name, in what appeared to be loose cursive English, but the name had been largely wiped away, grime-streaked into particulate colonies of ink molecules, Windex'd down to black sleet like the hives of non-coding DNA which descend from the stars between the major rays, the primary structural elements, of light. There are chords minor and major to the light as to the music it incarnates, decrypts, recodes, since any code is both a de- and reciphering of any other, since the fabric of even the most empirical and codified reality is nothing more or less than cosmic distortion, gravity-noise, coded back and forth in different forms, the hiss of star-formation focused variously into rainbows, white noise, morgue-pale or lacerated flesh.

Or the Trees of Good and Evil, either and both, as we stood before them, half-trying to make out the wet inscriptions on the panels of glass, both knowing before we even tried to read them that they were meant to be illegible, but still making out what little we could as a kind of hopeless connoisseur's activity, an enactment of one of the artwork's major modes. You are *supposed* to find their legends incomprehensible and, if you know a little bit about mystic Judaism, to walk up, cantilever your head at whatever angle the glass demands, see if you can make out Keter, Chokhmah, Binah, Gevurah, Chesed on the two-dimensional glass eggs, the ectopic star-ova in shrieking and centrifugal exile from the smashed clay vessel, the human body made of dirt, blood, sweat, breath (in short, of the materials for song; and song is only light surging into the ear, addressing itself to a different continent upon the tectonic surface of the brain).

So we did, and we wondered at the slightly schizoid attitude thus assumed: have to think that the artist thought some viewers would genuinely try to understand the captions, but you've also gotta think that he'd be aware of a small minority in his audience who would grasp immediately that the captions were meant to be impossible to read – and then an even smaller minority who, understanding the purpose of their illegibility, would then try to read them anyway. And this last segment must, in turn, be

divided into two still smaller segments, like the dilatory severed plasma of a vermiform star: 1). those who approached the smeared language out of simple curiosity, trying to catch some morpheme long enough to confirm their suspicion that this strangely-shaped glass panel was indeed supposed to be a tree of either sephiroth or qliploth, who simply wanted to get in on the concetto; and 2). those who understood that it wasn't enough merely to *get* that the words were intentionally vague. Those who grasped that trying and failing to read them was a necessary part of the artwork, whether they *got it* or not, just as it's a necessary part of that most beautiful Judaism, which looks more and more prescient on the other side of all those ashes, a stratum of them impacted to such density and mineral rigor that they're at significant risk of forming diamonds, distilling helices of toxic golden DNA in the stars' exterminating alembic.

You could read that stratum back, had you a geological cross-section of the last century, like the archaeologists in London can read Boudica's doomed Counterforce in the black stripe that separates Roman from tribal London, the Iceni from the Mediterranean oarsmen swarming up on shore with filthy faces and clean weapons, ill-fed and eager for the real reward of war, which tends to get rather obscured in such a falsely pious era as ours: war was always about plunder, and until the modern Conventions passed, plunder was its primary benefit.

Now the soldiers starve, or spend their paychecks at the Green Zone McDonald's, or return to homelessness and a constant spinal violence of permanently wrecked nerves, malign hardwired stars, on islands 3,000 miles from the nearest VFW clinic (because, as it turns out, the laws mandating that there shall be at least one VFW clinic within *x* miles of every major military installation, well, funny thing, they only apply to distance over *land*, so if you happen to be in the Virgin Islands or American Samoa or Puerto Rico, you are – as ever, as you were born – absolutely the fuck out of luck), and the plunder is paper rape leaving real raped humans in its wake, the thrill of corporate restructuring, of working out the stock dilutions in the next and even pettier round of rape, because the raping never ends, because, because, on some level, we don't really want it to.

On some level, we Americans can only be comfortable as long as somebody just outside our line of sight is being brutally raped, but raped in silence and with nothing more than the token resistance, a sad and self-consciously futile gesture, the same

shriek of ineffectual horror that's escaped from every Indian woman's mouth since her hundred-times-great grandmother was mislabeled an "Indian."

"The chances for paradox, really, are less than you think," yes, and fewer too are the levels of power's sophistication. It's an astonishing thing to realize, for the first time and without ever having been told so by any of the institutions supposedly designed to educate you, that economics at the national and international level essentially come down to who has enough juice to borrow a huge amount of money and enough balls to say, "I fucking *dare* you to ask for it back." And political power is not really any different; its primary operators are those capable of working exactly *one* level above the heads of their subordinates, using exactly one symbol or synecdoche to get across what they mean. Too many and you become recondite, hermetic, a "loose cannon," an unreliable element; too few and, well, you might as well be another lunchbox prole doomed to fuck away his brief life in the pursuit of power which he will wrongly think is his. It isn't, and was never going to be.

Here's a lesson, and not one picked up without a fair amount of pain: power never really changes hands. It only accrues. The powerful are who they'll always be, and the circulation of their influence describes a very small circle indeed. The *members* of that circle may be replaced by death – although we really shouldn't assume that the powerful even need die anymore – but the circle is unbroken, by and by, Lord, by and by.

So those who work on power's behalf are always and only working for the powerful, never to transfer power to themselves, and if one of them is, by sheer happenstance, raised to a position of power, it will come at the precise cost of everything that used to differentiate him from the masters he so hated (and whose approval he so horribly craved). You never get to join Them, because They will make You Them by the time You do. That's it. Enunciate it as a law, if mathematics or symbolic logic get you off:  $x = x$ , principle of identity, basic Aristotle from now until the end of human time. And whatever interval once separated "the end of human time" from "the end of time in general" is now specifically and massively threatened.

Who's to say what comes out of the supercollider tomorrow, eh? What atrocities of star-carnage may emerge as the glowing slag, the twisted metal viscera of cyclotron

shit, and what addicts to heavy water and radioactive metal are already setting up their stockpiles, getting ready for a permanent desert summertime so blankly bright, so blinding, and to organs other than the eyes – skin-blind with heat, ear-blind with the constant cochlea-hammering whine of it – that it’s difficult, a half-century on, not to read our eventual fate as a direct and fairly blunt parody of the whole notion of “nuclear winter.”

We’ll have summertime, lovers, friends, exactly what you always wanted, a condition of perpetual July, hot enough to melt the ossified cartilage from the ends of the stars’ endoskeletons, from the tips of your own osteoporotic and crumbling bones. Wasn’t that the dream? Summer forever, and no consequences? Have your dream, then. Summer forever, because it will never be as cold even as middle June again, and no consequences, because neither time or space in which anything might matter or occur.

And despite all this, the rank obviousness of condescension and bad faith, you (by which I also mean *me*) will continue to find yourself fascinated, very nearly servile, in the presence of power. In the presence of Oedipus.

It will be thrilling for you to realize how truly simple are power’s machinations, and how mediocre, how utterly dull and reflex-bound a mind may successfully navigate power’s wide-open straits. You do *not* need to be bright, and after a certain point, intelligence is directly prejudicial to your chances for power. The clever boys are the ones who think they can blow up the system, refashion empire in their own image, tear down Rome to build a stylized and fascist Jerusalem. Well, we’re at year 2,700 and counting of the Roman Empire, and those clever boys have found fates that, while exalted to the normal mind, are specific and shocking indignities to them: their faces have been worked into portraits of Christ, that dubious and strangely passive Jew savior from our province of Judaea, and inserted underneath the iconography of Sol Invictus, all to passify the *senatus et populusque Romanum* who are worse than just skittish about liquidating the whole pantheon. They’ve got questions. Here’s an answer. Crown Constantine in sunlight; refer to him as deity of mercy and of grace; and while you’re at it, change his birthday to December 25<sup>th</sup>.



Read-only stars writing line after line of crumbling half-life code, radioactive as their own disintegrating light, which now tears in tic-swift flashpoint rabies at border- and firing-range fences all throughout the occupied Southwest – fences whose brittle sharp wire (more than skin-lacerating: actively *skin-unzipping*, and if you get caught on some patch of soft flesh, it keys your dermal locks as though soaking a soluble helix of hypodermic stars in rust-soured acid) has now gone unbelievably dark against an unbelievable brightness.

Not the sky's. This is no atmospheric effect, not even the sun's final paroxysm. Rather it is a brightness torn up from underground, a phosphorescence locked in, amplified, transposed to the frequencies of durable fever.

There are ghosts and there are half-lives, and there's no use trying to assign some general term for nuclear decay, attempting to dope out the alpha and omega of the radiocarbon stars' decomposition-alphabet. Glyphs change as they crumple and divide, languages smooth from logographic text with sound- and meaning-modifiers – determiners and taxograms, diacritic markets and strange un-English accents, and a whole genus of signs we don't have in English, as to differentiate, for example, between "sound" meaning "acoustic activity" and "sound" meaning "in good health," such that we might write them *sound*<sub>1</sub> and *sound*<sub>2</sub> if we were more aware of how metaphoric all language is – and they stretch out, melted, bubbling, baked back to molecular coherency, in long sheets of rubber and coal derivatives, noxious carbon-tasting taffies, some flavored with gum arabic or chemical impersonations of fruit derived from the same black grime that separates steel from iron, piles and sheets of anode sludge come shearing like dark smog-pregnant rain off the electronic-waste stars.

Technology produces garbage just as medicine does, and you'd better believe that, in some gene-splicing star's autoclave, cracked syringes and fouled tourniquets are at this very moment being hybridized with silicon motherboards, the plastic nipples under qwerty-keyed instruments, the green glass-wool and copper insulation of balanced cables, reengineered into some form of castoff and compound life: a race of gods built to be abandoned, a trash-Olympus of the deities whose power is their having been discarded and overlooked.

Call it, if you like, a new form of paganized Judaism, a kabbalistic reading of some terminally obscure midrashim, raising to the stars' exponents our vast

bibliography of garbage, just as Babylon and Egypt were once raised to mythic entities, *not* apart from time and space but *actively projected from* a particular time and space, iron-and-golden prison colonies singing brutally for their liberation by the wild thermograph input of reagent Zion stars.

The Jews, though monotheist in a pioneering way, have never lost the old, real pagan aptitude for building myth from the givens of the day and night. Some religious scholars have suggested that the ancient Hebrews were actually monolatrists rather than monotheists, i.e. that they paid the highest reverence to a single god (named Yahweh only later, after his real and 7- or 77-lettered name was lost to permanent secrecy), but that they were more than happy to pay lesser tribute and assign lesser prayers to any number of local sub-deities, picking up the rituals, the riffs and little song-quotations, of all the tribes they met out along the whole Damascus (where Eden is)–Canaan–Egypt–Babylon circuit.

(Weary and ill-fed as a touring band, sick of terrible food and ulcer-milking booze, of drugs in strangers' rooms and the inevitable moment when somebody pulls a knife and announces that you've been smoking his kif for free and that he's tired of being charitable, that it's time to appreciate your Dealer, in other words, pay up, you slithering foreign bastards, which of course you can't do; sick of cops' and promoters' bullshit, the low-rent ringmasters who I'm sure displayed the odd Jew as a zoological curiosity, sure, come see a real-life Hebrew, he only believes in one god, ain't that something – and then back in the van, which too often was only the infirmary stretcher, maybe a tent or rolling wagon full of the sick and dying, pregnant mothers who never stopped wasting after pregnancy, who lost not only their baby-weight but their baby-weight *again* past the nominal zero of their masses before pregnancy, so clearly dying, attaining the odd mix of clarity and laminar glaze that comes over the eyes of people who can no longer be saved, so that they seem to see at once more and less than their less-endangered cohort, which is probably exactly right: the terrain around them is busily transacting itself into the mythogeography of the dead, reorganized, recoded, assigned different hex values and IP addresses by the stars' biocomputation overhead, yes still miles overhead, but markedly less distant than it was before sickness entered; you can see the stars' particular anatomies now, the physiological features once lost

behind the roar of their light, and the asterisk of their rarefying rays can no longer conceal the limbs and organs that casts it, tentacular or stratified, the fossil-meat geology of the many-seamed arthropod stars – but no more time for that now, get out of the pregnant women’s tent, they’re dying, they’re horribly wounded, all the more horribly for bearing a wound we can’t heal because we cannot see and thus describe it, a fatal injury which we once would’ve dreaded to misspell, the fetal injury of stars, but which now seems not much less horrific for having accrued to the mother rather than to the child: who will keep our tribe alive if not the mothers of its young, who can possibly *remember* and pass down while all the men are busy at one or another kind of war, scriptural or iron, having their balls severed and throats cut by the various uncircumcised landholders around the ancient Levant, or otherwise terribly at each other’s throats over points of Talmudic interpretation, carrying on textual campaigns of bloodshed and discredit so long-lived and so intense they’d make the Muslim divide [if there were any Muslims yet] between Sunni and Shia seem like real parvenu stuff, an arriviste’s attempt to get in on the blood-poisoning old bitterness, and meanwhile, where are the young, where are those kids who survived even if their mothers didn’t, and what notion do they have of Egypt, Canaan, Babylon, they who can never have seen any of those places, what awful illiteracy of stars sterilizes their notion of Zion, and what happens to Ierushalom the Holy City when these children are in charge of it, when Zion succumbs to a mythologized politics out of all Egyptian proportion?)

False imprisonment, false arrest, and every day laden with the same old threats and real chances for harm in a million new guises – how far down the hedgerows do we move before somebody notices us, is the light safe, what gradient or quotient of radiation burn can we accept and defuse before we fall apart, before the day’s white extermination neutralizes our frail genetic tracer of immunologic stars?

Consider the reflex arcs that had to be picked up after Eden, the frail copper-inlaid logic architecture of filamentous stars: there *was* no danger there, hence precious little need for reflexes, and God himself, whose name is unknown and will remain that way, had told the Edenites exactly what they could and couldn’t eat, do, watch, question. What reflexes then? Only the lissome and languid glide over the coordinates the Lord of the Garden himself had set down, a stern but gentle gardener, never quite fully in view

since that first morning, always tilling and working the spade just out of both eyes' remit, in a large hat against the brittle talc sunlight, in dark clothes to soak up the heat which is finally his kingdom (thermal mathematics all, calculi and calxes of thermonuclear stars), splitting thus the difference between one and another kind of warmth, and providing you, if you had the requisite mental makeup, with some kind of lesson, though it's almost impossible to say exactly what. God is, perhaps, pattern. The workings of the patterns, and which are beneficial and which malign, is something God can only help you with up to a point. He's the pattern-maker, and leaves the rest to our variant and malleable blindness.

According to Dante, whom it feels weird to call just "Dante" now that you know his full name, Durante degli Alighieri, and whom I'd trust with this kind of knowledge before pretty much anybody else, Adam and Eve (*Adam*, man, masculine form of *Adamah*, meaning earth, so man is the earth-creature; Eve was really *Chavah*, which is significantly *not* in the nominative form, but the causative, and comes from *Chai*, life, and *Chaya*, living, so *Chavah* means "she who will cause all others to live," thus differentiating the ground or source of life, Adam-Earth, from the energy or life-force itself, Chavah-cause) only lived in Paradise from 9 a.m. to high noon until they fucked up. Three hours in Eden, and then the terror afterward, forever and ever. I can accept this, with the caveat that Adam and Eve didn't so much *sin* as literally *fall*, that there was a fissure in Heaven, an intentional design-flaw, because any perfectly equilibrated system is already given over to entropy. God, if we accept his or her or its existence at all, cannot be equilibrium, because equilibrium is only rundown, and clearly, new things keep happening. (There's a cognitive divide here too, between "chaos" and "order," which was addressed some pages back. I can't remember exactly where.) So Eden must include the possibility of chaos in order to keep changing; there must be some definite tear in the Garden, a specifically and genetically fractured Star, in order for anything to happen at all. The Fall was not Adam's fault, and still less Eve's. The Fall was engineered into Eden, and could never have been avoided.

And if you wanted to get theoretical about it, you could argue that sin has been so often and so wrongly considered Eve's creation because, and *only* because, the existence of novelty (Eve's child by Adam) constituted the fracture in Paradise, the necessary jolt out of equilibrium. For the world to continue at all, stasis was impossible, and humans

producing new humans was the first obvious ek-stasis, whence “ecstasy.” And if you get a little further into the etymology, you’ll realize that Adam and Eve’s two sons, Cain and Abel, are just as clearly Hebrew (and probably *pre-Hebrew*) metaphors, written plainly upon the page, and lost when we lost the ability to speak much Hebrew: *Cain* means “product,” and Abel is Ab-El, “from God.” So Adam and Eve mistake their first son for a mere product, a strictly causal and material consequence, but come to understand that their second son, Ab-El, is part of the larger process of nature, an integral node in the cosmic biology whose name may as well be god, an overtone shearing off the circulatory system of the stars.

All well and good, and something we might even be able to save ourselves by remembering. Except, of course, that Cain kills Abel. The causal sequence murders the incarnate and ongoing process of metaphor, which is nature’s basic action; the humanly comprehensible (cock + cunt = fluid + uterus = child) replaces any larger, any more harmonized understanding of the world, and we are permanently barred from Eden, having lost any ability to read or speak its glyphs. This is another possible meaning of the Garden and the Fall.

Any of which might nettle or might comfort you, touring Hebrews. So you want an awful ethical conundrum, and you go to *heads of state*? No, no, no. Always ask the refugees, the forcibly silent, those with no time to keep records of what they’re running from. Try this one on:

Several members of the Hebrew band are locked up on a bullshit inciting-a-riot-and-resisting-arrest charge in Canaan-land, and there you are in the hallway outside the intake zone, wondering exactly what you’re going to have to do to get Raph’el, Gibr’el, and Micha’el out of prison this time, get back on the road. The jail is already ancient by the time the ancient Hebrews get there, a gradually dissociating collation of sandstone and sere mosses, and the jailer is being very clear about what he wants in return for freedom. He wants a blowjob, but not from your wife, or your sister, or your daughter, not even from your brother or father. He wants a blowjob from one of your male children, say a 6- or 7-year old. Nothing else will get your friends out of jail. And it’s your job, as minor, transitional patriarch, not to lose a single member of God’s kingdom, never to abandon any of the children of Israel.

Is this an ethical problem, in which your decision is to let or not to let this pedophile rape a child? Of course it is. But it might also be Cain and Abel again, and a world that can only think in causes and consequences, terrifically blind and with bubbling, melting skin in the mushroom-cloud roar of the stars reasserting their imminent logic – and the problem of a cop who's always going to keep calling all the Abels Cain.

Porous core samples and circular cross-sections of star-irradiated bone, like biopsies cut from the inner rings of trees near a weapons-testing facility, are now downloaded from their diode-strobing astrobiologic sleep and used as the concrete bases, the material substrata, of new biotic hard drives, discs loaded up with melting Cold War software whose decomposition was always meant to be part of its code-architecture, much like the non-sequential logic of the stars' cell-programmed death.

Star as xenobiotic storage medium, OK, check, that much we remember. The old firing routines are worked deep among our more native reflex arcs, the factory presets of our fasciae and nerves, and though we don't expect ever to use them in anything more than a dry run, a panic-button demonstration or cute little zoological diorama for the amusement of some visiting dignitary, still, still, we could fire nuclear missiles anyplace on Earth in less time than it takes to wonder if the previous phrase is still true. And it is. Trust me, it is. Watertight containment units in submarines or under the Plimsoll lines of anti-aircraft carriers, where a friend of Oedipus's, called Creon in some stories and why not in this one, waits out his scheduled 12-hour shift every day, handcuffed to a piece of melted both bolted and soldered to the titanium walls, a gymnast's balance beam recalibrated to put right whole other datasets of disequilibrium among the vertigos of thermonuclear data-server stars.

There's a pale hairless patch around both wrists from his constant handcuffing – paler and more glabrous on the left, since he's righthanded and figured he'd leave his dominant hand free, but eventually that too gets old, and for christ's sake you've got to have something to occupy your time down there, so why not tie up the good hand and let the weak one learn to operate sonar equipment, itch at minor irritations on its own side of the body (for which the right hand would normally be wrapped around the front or back of the torso, et. seq.), masturbate (a huge amount of masturbation, and they clean

this place out with obsessive care every couple days, so there's certainly more than one custodial officer or busted-down mess cook who's personally familiar with the smell and consistency and drying-time and, hey, what the hell, even the taste of Creon's semen – which, for the record, is thin and yellowish, so much so that he suspects himself sterile, if not before all this time around the equipment that would launch a nuclear missile, then certainly afterward), chop up lines of Peruvian blue-flake cocaine with fingernail or credit card wrestled out of back left pocket and gather them up to his nose with a pinky-nail grown long particularly for that purpose, which gets some odd looks from fellow enlisted men and even from the officer corps every once in a while, but what the fuck, why not. It's an incredibly boring job.

Leave him in peace to jerk off and sniff coke. And consider, just for a moment, the hypocrisy of your (our) panic: you would prefer, I imagine, that the man who flips the final switches and keys the final launch codes for a worldwide nuclear holocaust not be ramped up on high-grade Andean snow and skin-stinging from a mammoth nine-hour session of cock-abuse? You would prefer him to be calm, educated, and indifferent? Well, friends, neighbors, "lovers," who do you think gives *him* the orders? Calm, educated, indifferent men? Fuck no. Fellow devotees of stimulants and onanism, fellow sex addicts, but these addicts have been given, for the first time, the signatory rights to the kind of social contract in which sex addiction may bloom like wildflowers and in as many chromatic varieties.

The lonely man in the weapons-hold of the nuclear ship has to jerk off all day; he may even figure out a few likely grommets and venturi to fuck when nobody's watching, or even when somebody is. The men who give the orders? To give you some idea: the best President of the United States who's held office in the last 35 years was (and is) probably a serial rapist (ask the women who went to Oxford with him while he was on his Rhodes scholarship, oh yes, ask them about funny Bill the charismatic American exchange student with the Podunk accent and the shitkicker grace), and even if he never gets *caught* for being a serial rapist, he was still so immoderately influenced by the private, internal wishes of his cock that he almost brought down the most successful American government in recent history by getting, and then lying about, a blowjob.

This indiscretion didn't *lose* his caporegime the next election, not precisely, but it did make the election *close enough to steal*, and that's all Washington or Vegas ever

needs. Don't worry about raw numbers and don't be a goddamn adolescent. Fuck the popular vote. What matters is whether or not you beat the over-under, and Mr. Gore did not.

Incipit: Secundum Bellum Babylonis, where "second" is a function of the last few decades only. There have been more wars in Babylon than anybody even wants to count, much less could count if there were someone so inclined. Intelligent men have suggested that Babylon itself is a living entity, whose major biologic product is war, and that the problem isn't peace in Babylon (which is impossible), the problem is any given culture's or government's harnessing of the Babylonian war machine for its own benefit. Everything else is headline-grabbing child's play and Veteran's Day Poppies. Thank your husband for his service. I sure would, guy, if he weren't quite fucking dead.

We come together today to celebrate the unknown soldier, while doing absolutely everything we can to fuck under, relentlessly and with zero margin for grace, all the *known* soldiers who have come back from the permanent Babylonian war, all those soldiers so known that the FBI could find almost any of them in 24 hours, and without even having found them can outline for you their individual dossiers on crippling addiction and mental illness. We prefer the unknown soldier, thanks. His past is a lot cleaner.

Erect his sepulture by the sewage outflow valve, where Babylon metabolism engineers fresh war just as the bioactive stars connect or cauterize xenotic DNA.

Creon wakes, sleeps, wakes, sleeps, splits the difference, erodes whatever margin differentiated dream from the motion of his opposite-of-hothouse day, always cold, always blue, no way at all to tell what time or season or year it is except by machinery fallible as his own body – and, also like his body, directed by men whose personal interests they've managed to amplify into the Fate of Nations, when the fate of nations, as everybody tries to pretend he doesn't know already, is to die. Nations crumble. That's it. The real question, therefore, is not their Fate, and the illusory schematics of their security; the real question is what they manage to *do* with the time before fate intervenes.

We, as Americans, have dedicated ourselves almost exclusively to a very impressive technical array designed to convince us that America will never fall and that



we personally will never die of anything but God's specified finger-on-the-nose decision, especially once we've eliminated the truly randomized disease-data (cancer, transmissible plagues, xenozoonotic stars decoding our own spliced genes to insert the runtime chatter of some animal-sickness subroutine, some infirmity so raw and brutal that nobody in the midst of it can possibly pretend that "human dignity" or "human rights" are very real beyond a certain quantum of health, an avian or porcine flu mutating as once did the microorganisms in the new and perilous gravity of the cell, evolving into organelles and then into organs, cymatically glyphed by the endosymbiosis of the stars) and consigned to horrible screaming death all the sufferers from disease we done went and got ourselves feeling *moral* about.

AIDS, for instance. There is still this equation in the American mind between AIDS and sin, as if the real sin at Sodom and Gomorrah were an act of homosexuality. Read your goddamn bible. It wasn't. It was the abuse of trust, and the sexual violation of travelers who had to rely on the Sodomites' charity. And if sexual violence and abuse of trust could cause AIDS, Americans would be 99.9% HIV+, fiending for some acid update to the reduced battery-life of the lithium-dribbling stars.

If you and I don't have AIDS, whatever meager protections we've discarded or insisted upon, it's a combination of two things: sheer fucking luck, in the first place, and very specific political programming in the second. I'm not suggesting – and this is "I" as the dead man telling you what I told Oedipus – I'm not suggesting that our government invented AIDS. I don't think it did. (I do know, however, that it was experimenting in the late 1960s with a biological weapon whose effect, the disabling of the human immune system, would've been identical with the main effect of AIDS – so if we *didn't* invent AIDS, and I don't think we did, then it's not because we *wouldn't* have invented AIDS. It's simply because nature got there first.)

I do, in passing, think AIDS was probably spread through UN vaccination campaigns, and I think there's a definite possibility that somebody in an office whose name will never be allowed to read (neither the office's nor the officer's) realized that such vaccination campaigns were likely to spread the immunodeficiency syndrome – not yet called AIDS, still then under private-property protocol, you know, operational silence, calling it Project Sahara or whatever – and said, "No no, don't stop this. Let's see what happens." I feel much the same way about the great shuddering and heave of

vapor in the sky a few Septembers ago ... not planned here, but very possibly allowed to occur. But that's all in passing. Who cares what a corpse thinks.

Who knows which corpse is thinking, or speaking, or if any corpse can perform either of these acts apart from the awful livid sphinx-machinery of stars, firing voltage down their nerves, twisting encryptions of torque into their limp decaying muscle.

But that's not what I wanted to say, and Oedipus, I know, I know, detours bother him, he's goal-oriented, well, look where the fuck *that* got him, blind among the seasonal fall of dead olive-tree branches.

Anyway, my point was this: the government need not have invented AIDS, and I don't think it did, in order to use AIDS as a weapon, which I'm absolutely *sure* it did. Consider. You've got a massive population of the descendants of slaves, none of whom have any dynastic family wealth (because the value of the goods and services that should've made Afro-Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, and Native Americans rich? All that value went into white men's pockets, and using it, they built a thing called capitalism, just in time for the Declaration of Independence). You've got, for the first time, a whole generation of these slave-grandchildren coming home from a World War with a little bit of money in their pockets, and you've got a white majority who still absolutely hates blacks, but can no longer officially enslave them. How to use AIDS?

1). CREATE GHETTOS. Move all the black people into ghettos, which is easy as hell, and requires none of the rigmarole Hitler applied to it. Trains and camps and barbed wire only attract the attention of the international community, and that's exactly what you *don't* want. Instead, you have real estate agents refuse to sell or rent certain homes to black people; you have banks refuse black people loans; then you build, in the most grossly insincere "charitable gesture" imaginable, "public housing projects" in which the now-impooverished blacks have to live. Ghetto complete. Execute phase 2.

2). TURN GHETTOS INTO SLUMS. You move jobs and businesses out of the ghetto, which will create a population constantly worried about its own survival, which will in turn create two new "black" (no pun intended by me, although by the men in power, who can say?) markets: an elastic market for weapons, since desperate people will *have to* start robbing and stealing, and an inelastic one for drugs, since desperate people desperately need some anesthesia just to starve through another day. This step turns

Ghetto, which is just where a bunch of culturally or racially similar people live, into Slum, which is an engineered Hell. Slum complete. Move on to phase 3.

3). BEGIN ENTRAPMENT. You flood the slum with drugs and guns, obviously, and you *always* do it in some way with peripheral benefits, so that a). two birds, one stone, or crack rock as the case may be, and b). there's some excuse. If you get caught, let's say, flooding the black slums of America with cocaine that becomes crack, and then inventing a private prison industry that profits massively off the crack epidemic, somebody might say to you, *Hey, isn't that entrapment?* And entrapment is exactly what it is, and I wish your interlocutor had said it with a shotgun in your mouth, but son cosas de la vida, ¿sí? But if you've got a cover story as to *why* you brought in the coke, well, nobody can ever *prove* anything, can they?

So let's say, Well, well, calm down, I know it *looks* like entrapment, but what we were *actually* doing was shipping and selling cocaine from South America in order to send guns and money to the counterrevolutionary fascists in Nicaragua, because we wanted them to stop Communism from Spreading Through the World (*always* a great excuse, though it would "terrorism" now), but we'd also passed a law against arming the Contras. So we had to get them money and arms under the table, which meant an equally under-the-table source of funding, and we decided on drugs. And if those drugs *happened* to flood the slums, and particularly the black ones, well, that's simply a side effect. Don't worry. None of this will be on the test. "Iran-Contra" is already a phrase that marks you out as paranoid or a conspiracy theorist, and nobody under 50 has any fucking idea what it means, anyway. So, Entrapment complete. Move to phase 4.

4). COMMENCE INFECTION. You find a disease which is spread by two activities which are more or less constant throughout human history, fucking and taking drugs, and then you deny any kind of education about *how* the disease is spread to the people who live in slums – the people whose slums, not coincidentally, are flooded with drugs. And that's a 4-step genocide, and almost none of it has been recognized as such. So we didn't need to dream AIDS, theorize AIDS, build AIDS, though we certainly dreamt and theorized it and probably tried to build it at some point; all we had to do was pick AIDS up off the ground and aim it.

The howling, the marrow-shattering bone-formation agony of the first synapsid stars: stem-cell cores crack and shear like black ice, or mirrors dark enough in which to see the face of your god on a looped return with his eyes cauterized, X'd out in the seasonal algebra of knives, the scalpel-geography by which the tribes must constantly relocated – dark enough also to see the deformed skeletons of the stars by which you navigate, the stars rendered four-dimensional medical waste by intelligent plasmas of radiation-burn, massive astroneurologic overloads, huge gravitational shifts compacting nerve and sinew till all ossify into the white and chalky architecture of the animals later to attach themselves to such living geology.

It was ever thus, probably with all animals: one is compressed into a data-storage apse, an exobiologic hard-drive star waiting for subsequent flesh's tenancy, the tissues which will later leach some fragment of the information encoded there, stored like leaky battery acid in the drums and chain-link helices of epigenetic data-servers, mainframe-extinctions, exterminated motherboards working out the fugal variations on xenoses stars will print on the underside of all subsequent circuitry, another pattern of photoresists and insulation, glass-wool and high-impedance copper, semiconductors grown like flos ferri and quartzite gardens in the empty synaptic gaps.

Where neurotransmitters used to flow. So we've been told. Now mineral addition piles its terms, factorials from the first meteorite-impact, bacterial colonies suspended in stars' xenobiotic sleep, the life-support of alien heat, bound here to sleep again but in detunings more massive than even galactic drift could allow, locked between layers of freshly-formed stone, itself an astral product – the frozen, the condensed exhalation of methanogen stars, thermo- and acidophile, throbbing dry and dangerous through the red impermanent atmosphere, burning off like wisps of engine exhaust whipping away on the day's wind, if there's any day and any wind left to whip them.

Red diesel, red cities, various reds and blues of panic on the highways at night when we made our western progress. There are windows to look out of, says Oedipus, and there are any number of specific things you might see through them, but the Greyhound bus is such a miserable environment that eventually you'd take any kind of anesthetic, accept any lull, however synthetically structured, to avoid noticing much of anything at all.

It wasn't necessarily the people on the bus. There were larger problems. Sad girl from somewhere in the unfiltered death-regions of northern Texas and southern Oklahoma, Arbuckle mountains like the inevitable sepulture of anybody cursed to live here, the blonde sandstone tombs of the deformed stars, each of whose medical anomalies has been worked into the shape of their interment, such that every crypt and headstone bulges with unlicensed growth, perilous neoplasm, definitely cancerous and probably inoperable star-metastases.

And the girl was wearing the generic bulk-purchase clothes of the hostess at some truly sad restaurant, the kind of place that's gotten very houseproud about being just expensive enough to *have* a hostess – I could name names, but they vary by region, and anyway, you can't really need me to. You know these places. The phony-gemutlich sports bars and mahogany-veneer booths, covering up some kind of raw unpleasant cedar-sting of cut-wood smell, or more likely particle board with no scent at all, eerie impersonations of beaver- and otter-industry, creaking into dissociation already, the interstitial space between each booth covered with more fingernail-thin (and less than fingernail-durable) mahogany veneer but already full of beaverboard dust, twists and splinters of what's not even quite wood anymore, having been so many times and at such length divorced from anything resembling a tree, so definitively cut off from any role in the xylem stars' life support that now, if left outside overnight, they'd hardly react at all, unless it was raining.

No opening of leaves and petals, no dilation of phloemic veins, no enzymes' active-sites or primed nociceptors swelling to accept the circadian stars. Nothing. And it *had* been raining, and somewhere, thousands of such booths were water-damaged, to be sold now to less commercially probable (read: more ethnic) restaurants across the country, anything run by Chinese people, for example, whether actual Chinese joints or donut shops or the oddly high percentage of Mexican restaurants that seem to be Chinese owned. Not that odd, I suppose. Huge amount of Chinese immigration to Cuba, Puerto Rico, all the sugarcane-cutting Caribbean states, after we – white men – had forced opium (an Indian product) onto the Chinese black market and then taken the Imperial opium ban as violation of a religious freedom which we'd just made up for our own purposes. So you invade China, la-de-da, suddenly the Great Mysterious Empire is open for western exploration (which always and only ever means *western money*,

*money, money*), and you don't have to worry about sending in Jesuits on semi-secretive fact-finding missions, pretending to study the rare genii of flowers and animals in Shandong and Jiangsu, anywhere easily reached by boat, but actually reconnoitering the Chinese priests for possible susceptibility to Christianity and the Chinese merchants for the noxious and tenacious seeds of capitalism. Filled out some truly hysterical questionnaires, I'll tell you.

Q: So, when one worships one's ancestors, is one properly *worshipping* them, I mean, as deities? Because clearly that wouldn't work. (For us.)

A: I don't think I really understand the question.

(And if I, mouthpiece, oracle for Oedipus, am allowed to guess at what the interrogated Chinese priest might've said if he'd had the white men's contemporary languages, French and Latin, to say it in – and maybe I shouldn't even be allowed to guess – I'd say this: "ancestor-worship" has never been real, not as you conceive it. We're not praying to fucking granddad. We're praying to the ongoing alchemy of nature, to its propensity to give birth and exact death, but all in the name of a recurrence-plus-change, an eadem mutata resurgo, the eons-long and benign mutation of the stars. "Ancestor-worship" is a white man's term for something the white man has decided, in advance, he will never understand, nor ever *want* to understand.)

Q: Are we to take it, then, that the spirit of the dead dwells specifically in his given cartouche?

A: If you're *that* literal-minded, you can take it any way you want. Which is to say, You can't take it any way at all.

Q: Literal-mindedness has its uses.

A: Such as?

Q: Well, I'm a Jesuit, I'm basically a member of the Pope's rhetoric-and-logic hit squad, we're the guys he sends out to argue other people into dust, to root out heresy, to tell him whom to burn, yes?

A: If you say so.

Q: Oh, I do. And if I, a Jesuit, claim not to be able to understand you – I, whose job is only to understand other people enough to decimate them – then you must be an incomprehensible savage, and it must be our responsibility to burn you off the face of the Earth before you do something really fuckin' strange.

A: Weren't you going to burn us anyway?

Q: Probably.

A: So why all this?

Q: There are trends and eras, there are heresies popular and obscure, but everybody burns at his own pyre, and my job is to keep the pyres sorted and to label and bag the ash. I am become the ontologist of what's left over in the oven.

Missing thus, and by design, not quite the anti- or meontology (better perhaps to call it the rheology or mutagenics) of the pulsing radioactive-waste anatomies left over, the histological remainders stored, in the stars' combination autoclave-alembic. So much gray ash simmering in so many scalding red retorts, and so much bitter Polish earth made sterile, replaced with a feet-thick topsoil of human carbon and bone in which nothing but the next century's nightmares can ever grow.

But we were apt to miss, we were given to overlook, we were just trying to get some goddamn *sleep*. If you've never been on a 10- or 12-hour Greyhound bus trip, it goes something like this: the vibrations inside the cabin aren't a lot less disorienting than those inside an airplane during liftoff, and there's the same quality of boxed ears and compressed air, the unhealthy and much-breathed air of the sickbay, and only the malign genetic splices of the infirmary stars outside your window for relief. But you try not to look out the window – try, in fact, not to look anywhere – because everywhere you *do* look throws back something too desperate to be contemplated for very long. The driver at the front is a sad man or woman, probably middle-aged, almost certainly not living anybody's dream – except for the dream of money, of raw capital, which will always need people like these.

We've been fed so deeply and so often on the bullshit of a paperless economy, a world run on pure exchanges of electrons from diode to diode, a transistor-epistemology in which the stars' biocircuitry may eventually be replaced by an atom-accurate upload to the sky, thus made predictable (“harnessed” is their word) for human uses.

*Notice that*, if you notice nothing else: the money men are always talking about harnessing and branding. Their two favorite words come from the torture of horses for sport. These are not men who use horses to till fields or to ride through the dark with something urgent to tell somebody far away, no medicine bottles clanking in the

saddlebags, no knives for a besieged tribe. They love equestrian metaphors, but only those applicable to leisure. They want to harness and to brand.

And the next time you say the word *brand*, in whatever context, remember the hiss of heated iron on horses' (and then on slaves') flesh, melting away the skin, bubbling the various intradermal layers till they get down to the raw pink striate muscle tissue which will stand out as ownership's scar from that point on, until the slave or the horse dies, and possibly afterward. I don't know enough about forensics to guarantee it, but I'd bet the 17 dollars and 75 cents in my pocket (and that's my *only* pocket) that somewhere, at some point, a dead slave and a dead horse have each been identified from the evidence of their branding, that a coroner or archaeologist has read successfully the signs implanted there by a slave- or paddock-master, and that the truer sore-and-scar glyptography of the stars has been thus effaced, backburnt, nearly deleted once again.

But despite the rhetoric of Silicon Valley junior-fascists about intelligent markets and lighter-than-air industries (these would be the spiritual inheritors of the same men who were presented, in the '40s, with a design for a car which would comfortably seat 8, get 40 miles to the gallon, produce almost no pollution, and be built in such a way as to minimize risk of injury in crashes by distributing impact around a geodesic structure – thanks, Bucky Fuller, and yes, Bucky designed the car – and these men immediately bought Bucky's design, stashed it in a drawer forever, and said, with a leer whose condescension you don't have to imagine because *you've seen it*, "Mr. Fuller, you don't really understand what we *do* here, do you?"), despite all the horseshit about how we'll all eventually work from home trading pork futures over our cellphones, there will always, always be Greyhound bus drivers, and mailmen, and sewage-processing workers, and we will always, always be defaming them, insulting them, making their lives needlessly difficult, pretending for all political and economic purposes that they don't exist.

And that's just the First World. In the third, where all the *materials* for the first come from, the situation is so dire that even to mention it is to underdescribe it, because a huge part of the problem is that it occurs in such utter silence. Two quick examples, just so you know there's no exaggeration here: in Mumbai and in Kowloon, Hong Kong, there are two slums each of which is the size of any of New York City's boroughs, and these slums and internally interconnected with improvised hallways and stairwells



made of trash, such that the people who live in them virtually never see daylight, clouds, rain. Most of their “apartments” are the size of an American janitor’s closet, and most of their “occupants” make a “living” by performing incredibly dangerous waste-treatment work, which happens to be illegal. Because it’s illegal, the huge corporations, *always* with an American buy-in somewhere or other, hire the slum-dwellers to sort through waste (medical, industrial, chemical, even radioactive) off the books, and the slum workers will do it for virtually no money, because it’s their only chance to make any money at all.

Now tell me again about the economy of information, and while you do, take a good strong whiff of the data-vapor, the bioinformatic gases, rising off the corpses of unwept, unburied, decomposing stars.

(An otolaryngeal surgery of parametric-EQ stars, sampling and holding each some specific electricity of the ear, a tympanic voltage sufficient to translate into variously-timed flutters, the wings of electrode- or moon-drunk moths, intoxicated with the heavy machinery of stars’ serologic liquor: anything from 20 to 20,000 Hz and, it may be suggested, also anything between 0 and 19.999-repeating Hz, or between 20,000.1 and  $\infty$ , though our ears wouldn’t perceive it in either of those ranges, swung as it would be into the inverted and phase-crushed rainbow of the black ultraviolet stars, so bright and high-pitched that they burn the rest of the day away and leave our eyes throbbing with the moment’s soft confusion between what’s dark and what isn’t, seeing light as purplish phosphorescence and darkness as the slow pale ashfall of nuclear winter, printing star-chromosomes on the insides of our eyelids, pollinating the active-site hives of X-rayed bone.

All that to remember. It’s really not so much, and you remember it constantly, if not often in those words. Until the brain dies, the swallow-reflex runs dry, the central pattern generators are updated with new cell-architecture out of all compatibility with their ancient star-software, you can’t really ever *forget* it. It simply happens. Which simplicity of occurrence might, in a sense, disqualify memory as well: you neither remember nor forget. Not *you* as the west has calibrated the coordinates of your personality. Other tissues, other strata, the histologies whose difficult and vulnerable overtone is your mind-as-such, these do remember, and have memories much longer

and more tenacious than a human's – more, perhaps, like the mournful recollection of the elephants spraying down each other's bones, making sure no graveyard of massive bulky gray skeletons goes without its decent shroud of road-dust, its cerecloth spindled from bone-composing sand.)

OK. Remembered. It was somewhere between Texas and anywhere else, out of the south, bound eventually west and for the corrupted notion of “the coast” but north first, for reasons I can't exactly remember – I got horribly sick after that Greyhound trip, probably *because* of that Greyhound trip, with an ear-and-lung infection it took weeks of antibiotics and horrible salt-water nasal irrigations to cure, so my sense of direction is probably a little bit skewed here. But it is with direction as with memory: I may not remember right for retrospect's sake, but what I recall *now* was exactly right *then*. Geography in motion is not geography at rest, and there is no mere mathematical facility capable of canceling out inertia, of either kind.

It is perhaps indicative of our cultural values that we only use “inertia” to mean “motionlessness” when, in fact, “inertia” simply means any kind of momentum at all, whether that momentum is toward motion or toward stillness. For motion, we say “momentum,” which is basically another way of saying “inertia,” and from this we might infer that our whole economic – and more than slightly fascist – valorization of Action would collapse if we were made to understand that speed and stillness are simply versions of the same state, exactly like chaos and order: the same substance at different temperatures, if you like, or interpenetrating metaphors, like the mutual gravitational and thermal forces exerted by binary stars.

A bullet dividing the 20 feet at whose tapering ends will thereafter lie two ruined lives, that bullet is just as much in the heavy fluid of inertia as is any corpse. Arguably moreso. The corpse's inertia is gathering it toward the center of the Earth, through translations back into Earth's intervening layers, stones and fluids, powders and vapors, reverse-engineering the xenonucleic acid backbones of the stars, thus to engineer on an opposite timescale the Earth-star growing hive-sated and fracture-prone at the center of the planet. Soon its fissures will open, its hairline cracks overplay tension's hand, and there will be shredded oceans, massive inland seas occupying the former sites of unbelievably populous cities, whole faultline towns in California where nothing grows

but lye and drug addiction, all slipping down the side of the San Andreas as into another metaphor for their own probabilities, another and sublimer set of images to incarnate what hopeless and acrid Word they've each been given to maintain. It's always a question of guarding the Word, even if it's not the word you want to hear.

Meth labs, long rides in strangers' Jeeps, desperately wanting to turn off the awful frat-rage metal they're blaring over the stereo system, which is actually a ripped-off Discman plugged into what used to be the car's built-in cigarette lighter, but not knowing how grave an offense it would be to air your musical grievances. Trust me. There are things you don't say, and people you don't say them to. Oedipus will remember this: one night, on tour, before we were Greeks, before the battle and the poem of the battle that alchemized us from separate and fearful polities to the world's first modern nation, we'd done our gig, performed our masques, tragic and comic (one for the death and one for the rebirth of the Earth-god, the god of vines and goats and sometimes fire, who milks a rich plum-dark sap from the swollen stars each summer, who is reborn in the season of their swelling and intubates them to relieve that serologic burden, that they might contract again toward winter's brittle knives, scalpel-tips marking the sky for navigational surgery, altimeter-dissections in each radiologic biopsy of star).

So we're dead tired but still hopped up on the pills we took to get on with the show, whatever variety of speed was readiest to hand, like old Martin would say, differentiating it from mere presence-to-hand. And I want to say that the show was in Tulsa, though it might've been Oklahoma City, and I want to say that the ready-to-hand speed was some prescription drug, maybe Adderall, whose pink and slightly sweet drip I'd always recognize against the back of my throat. Oedipus knows. Long bus ride, long wait, bad food and liquor, speed to perform, more liquor. We're exhausted but won't be able to sleep for hours and hours.

At this point, as any high-functioning alcoholic knows, you're faced with a choice. You can either 1). get blitheringly fucked up in the effort to go to sleep, or 2). take more speed and try to get to the next town. Each has its problems. With option 1, you *will* get to sleep, but it's probably going to be somewhere unwise, and you may do any number of unwise things en route to Morpheus's place (and Morpheus has roommates, and Jesus are they sketchy, and he very often lives in neighborhoods you've never seen before, no

matter how often you've driven around that city, in some headachy and starch-nerved Sunday desolation, seeing future newsprint in the way the colorless blunt light hits the colorless blunt concrete architecture, location-scouting every corner and housing project as the scenery for murder-photos, either the police's or the tabloids', almost able to read the black metallic blood so many times hosed off the sides of featureless slum-blocks, which seem each to breathe a kind of mineral stagnancy, a damp-but-drying limestone assurance that nothing is ever really going to change here, because powerful people have no interest in things changing, and that if you can't find the pockmarked, prematurely graying kid with the clubfoot who used to sell you drugs, pot and scrips and sometimes coke or even crack, well, there'll always be another dealer, and the ashtrays in the galvanized public park-tables will always be full of dried-in cornstarch glaze, a saccharine glass for the delectation of ravenous but lazy wasps).

Crowns of hornets, fogbanks of infant flies, teething with mandibles still half-gelatinous, only recently derived from the maxillofacial archetypes hard-saved to star-genetics – and then popsicle wrappers still stained with artificial grape and cherry, benzaldehyde and methyl anthranilate, the sickly sweet-piss smell of spilled and mostly empty beers, the deep maroon reek of flavored cigarillos unrolled, packed with weed, and smoked in the daylight, confident that if any cops take their ignorant fucking lives in their hands by walking into this courtyard, they'll have bigger things to worry about than middle-aged men sharing a spliff.

That's right, sharing. Slums are the only places it happens anymore, and the plague of police and state violence against them is not just a victim-list of individual lives fucked up, gamed out, sold full-stock to the private-prison and drug-cartel circulation industry set up by our governments to keep the dark-skinned natives (and slave imports) in check – it's *certainly* that, a list of victims. But it's also an assault on the whole ecosystem of the place, when everybody's sharing, everybody will looke after somebody else's kids at some point and have their own looked after in turn, everybody owes money to somebody else and is owed money *by* somebody else. When they do this at the highest levels of power and influence, it's called "financial wizardry," and we salivate with moron admiration. When it's done in the slums, white men and women

get on radio and TV stations wondering why The Blacks can't be more responsible with their money.

This is more just bad faith, which implies some element of behavioral separation, some con game from which the con artist is exempt. These con artists are conned, too, but always manage to survive the final reveal, to get as duped as anybody is by the magician's shuffling "honesties," his legerdemain posing as transparency – and, fooled and fuck as the poor, the rich still somehow manage to beat the magician. And don't jump too quickly to the obvious conclusion, that the magician has been secretly on their side the entire time. Not quite. It's that they *own* the magician, and that even he doesn't know whose side he's on, because it's been a long, long time since anything was that clear in a life built on minor acts of fraud, the kind of dirty tricks you can coax your victim into laughing about afterward.

Like Wall Street, again, magician-owners up and down the block, buying contorted escape-artist rhetoric from anybody who'll take money to talk. And the magic show goes on, and the popcorn gets sold no matter how stale it is, and if a certain percentage of the audience keeps getting the shit kicked out of it by police, searched for planted drugs, thrown in lockup for months and years without ever being charged, and finally coming up with 7 felony counts on a "crime" that began as "disturbing the peace," well, how much of the audience really cares? Isn't the movie still on? Do you have any popcorn left?

Of course you do. We all do. All but the disappeared, and none of them are in your bloodline, anyway. Not, at least, until we get back to slavemaster genealogies, and start to wonder how many raped African women – and *men*, no doubt, raped by force when white men had a secret vice to satisfy, and raped by circumstance when bored slavemasters' wives hit them with the old come-here-big-boy routine, oh Brutus Africanus, you must be *such* a tyrant in the bedchamber – start to wonder, I was saying, how much extremely diluted African blood may run in the veins of even very apparently white people. Enough, as it transpires, that our first black President may actually have been Warren G. Harding, and if you're thinking to yourself, *Harding, Harding, what do I know about him?*, the answer very likely goes something like this: indifferent

president, massively corrupt administration though the corruption may have been his underlings' more than his, and he died under weird circumstances.

How weird? Very weird. After appointing some black people to federal office, and attempting to establish an international commission on race relations (in which he was stymied by the Dixiecrats, which is basically a picturesque way to say the KKK – same shit now, same states, different Party), Harding “became exhausted while playing golf and complained of nausea and upper abdominal pain.” His doctors’ diagnosis? That’s the problem: they couldn’t find one to agree on. He was variously tagged for food poisoning, coronary hypertrophy, and pneumonia; for these he was slapped with a regimen including digitalis and caffeine. He recovered enough to sit up in bed and talk to his wife, so the doctors left the room – and then, in the middle of a sentence, he shuddered once and died on the spot. Nobody has ever known why, and *nobody* cares know about finding out.

Let’s just say he was partly black (an old family acquaintance from Ohio claimed that the Hardings were considered Negroes, as the terminology would’ve been at the time, and one of Harding’s great-grandmothers may have been a slave or the descendent of a slave). Under the one-drop rule prevalent in the era, Harding would’ve been fully black, and thus disqualified for most of his civil rights. So a racist country accidentally elects a black man; he appoints other black men to office and makes a serious effort to improve race relations in America and abroad; then he gets sick with something nobody can explain, is treated with strange and contradictory means (caffeine for heart problems?), appears to recover, and dies for no very obvious reason. But there’s a great movie playing tonight, that one where the other President moves his head back and to the left, back and to the left, over and over until we agree that he was shot from somewhere behind and to the *right* (?), and why in the world was I off on that tangent about Warren G.? What did the G. stand for, anyway? Will anyone who matters ever ask you if you know?

Silent heat lightning blisters the sky, processing and printing an encephalography of nuclide-swarmed star-manifolds. And when day’s allegations reach critical mass, as they always seem to do – when they cauterize the lunar rumors like a disease used to annul an incompatible disease – then even silent thunder will be forced to relent, its

embryos scraped from the uterine wall of the black iron-rich cloud, and white light will fall in nerve-shattering white blocks, friction-burn exterminating the endangered cortical stars.

Not that I could tell you what map or calendar manages to include both these extremes – and there's a redundancy here. Map is calendar. Don't forget that. Any image is a compound map, a cognitive hive performing surgical operations of conceptual geography no less unstable and alchemic than the stars' medical practice, and we make our first, our final, and our most serious mistake in missing the map in everything. Consider Calendar: evenly-spaced units, homogeneous but for what annotations manage to crawl in, small detail-infestations like the leavings of an insect Ark, unpaired termites and larvae reproducing as asexually as they can, which leads to some pretty stunted and unprepared creatures, star-deformities with incomplete mandibles hanging off the telomere of some prematurely terminated genetic script.

So calendars grid out a static sense of time, evenly divisible, punctuated only by the slightly shifted equilibrium of your concern, a form not of evolution but of multifarious stasis, masks worn against the white insufflation of the day, nasal and linguistic appendages given ornate architectures of stone, silicon, papier-mâché, plaster to work within and beneath: whole cities and in fact whole civilizations have died from the need to drain the marshes (whose groundwater, in migration, grew their food) to make more plaster, though they had other goals than ours.

They wanted to look deeper into the viscid, the anatomically-correct but xenohistologic heart of the star-reactor. We wish to evade exactly such a sight, and have gone through the really stunning insincerity of appropriating all their techniques and devices for precisely the opposite ends.

Red buildings at nighttime, when the sun bleeds, and white when she or he is reborn – they would've gendered the sun, as they did any star. The Pleiades were plants, specifically seeds, and thus probably male, since *seed* and *man* have a long association, the ground being a woman in these cases, though you might also argue that the seed is ovum and therefore female, which would make the ground either the womb, and doubly feminine, or the terrifying blankness which any ovum must face, should its luck be such as to outgrow its womb and be born, and whether that's good or bad luck, not even dead

Oedipus – up there on his semi-cross, “crucified” but not in Christ’s geometry, better to say “incorporated,” built into the Geiger-counter-clicking hulk of nonhuman machines made from xenonucleic star-metals – can tell you.

Venus was female, Xux Ek, the Star of Wasps, and was, like any real old god, neither entirely benign nor entirely evil: her motion, the five-petaled flower she traces around the omphalos of the sky, kept the year moving, but she could also send a noxious green fog to force men and women out of their houses – force them to leave entirely, to abandon still-functional cities to the jungle’s gradual encroachment, crossing out the eyes of their other deities, implanting runtime viruses derived from the spindrift of radiologic code she absorbed while spiraling so deftly around the black star, the bioactive dark-matter hardware, at the center of everything that is. When Venus is hovering, she’s doing what wasps do, and is not to be disturbed: eating what wasps eat, picking up accidentals of pollen on the hexatonic scale of her limbs, possibly harvesting bits of paper, papyrus, cotton, anything fibrous enough to build into the nest which will also be her document, the single but polymorph glyph in her one-character language, a faceted hive of star-cymatics observing in each ratio of lengths to masses to densities the exact mathematics of the constellations’ pitchy drift.

But when Xux Ek or Venus comes down among men, well, what do men do around a wasp? Some try to stay stoic, abandon whatever they’ve been eating or drinking to the wasp’s sense of nearby sugars, wave lightly in front of their faces in the attempt to scare away the insect without provoking it to sting; some, if they’re smoking, will blow smoke at the bug, which from my own observations seems to slow wasps down and make them dizzy, though who knows what the long-term effects are, and if one or two of us might’ve introduced cancer into the vespine genome, like carcinogen stars growing in the interstices of non-specific DNA, the variables in quickly-scrawled allele scrip; and others of us will freak the fuck out, stand up, throw down whatever we were eating, drinking, smoking, working on, and get the hell out of town, running long-legged but unpracticed through the patchy grass, twisting ankles on stones apparently grown in their places since the last time this happened, which was probably last summer, hurting ourselves worse than any wasp would ever think to wound us. And the wasp’s reaction to *that* shitshow is a predictable bewilderment, which often ends with a sting anyway. Animal scares animal, in perpetually loudening feedback loop, building to such



supersonic whine, such ultraviolet biopsies of rainbows as may attend the data-transfer between spliced binary stars.

So run or don't run. Up to you. Probably safest to stay still and move slowly, though there's an excellent chance, in that case, that the wasp will take you for a piece of the Earth and not another animal (which is, incidentally, what you are) and land on you, crawl over you, maybe even nibble, which of course, well, incipit shitshow v2.0, and you're stung again. I've never seen it, but I've heard stories about cicadas landing on animals who kept so still, in fear or indifference, that the cicadas took them for trees, extended their horrible mouthparts, and tried to suck the white tree-starch right out of redder veins, making thus the signal mistake – I could say, uncovering the analogy – between carotid arteries and the ribbed and flexile tubing that routes life-support to feed the xylem star.

So you do have options – fewer than you'd hoped for, but more than you'd expected – when the paranoids start telling you about the green weather rising like a windless variation on those mind-wrecking tornado dawns, when everything is so precisely picked out by the sunrise glare beneath a layer of violent cloud that you can see, probably for the first time in months or years, how absolutely fragile is the environment you've taken so much for granted: twigs, trash, dirt, bones of animals and, why not, of human animals among them, wrought iron to sit on, eat off, or kill with, arbors of raw cedar cut and planed so long ago that they now smell like nothing, no olibanum or styrax Syriae to rid the wind of its scent of incoming damp desolation, the truly ruinous smell of electrons brushing each other taut and nervous, of star-ganglia overheating, overloaded with voltage and beginning to reek like the ozone tang of burnt fuses and blown transformers. All of this might be destroyed, and by nothing more than a bit of wind. There is no safety from the fact of your own birth, and no sanctuary not made from the world which might eradicate it.

But that's what I, as a paranoid animal, would say. (The corpse – Oedipus's proxy interlocutor, the one who's been translating whatever obscure pulsations Oedipus himself emits – variations, perhaps, in body temperature or brain activity, single-frame cels of astroneurology printed just beneath the last breathable layer of the atmosphere – points to himself as he pronounces the prior sentence. Because he's a corpse, it takes a

very long time, possibly hours, though how in hell would you judge. The progress of arm to index finger to breastbone is not without its moments of exquisite sculpture, a gravid choreographic majesty like one of the stone gods who front the Valley of the Kings standing up with almost imperceptible slowness from his judgment seat, or like a man strapped to an electric chair and filmed dying at a frame-rate so incredibly high that, by the time you correct it to 24 fps for theatrical purposes, it takes several minutes for the first twitch even to begin. There would be something beautiful, and not just in cruelty's sense of beauty, about all of us having to watch such a slow movie of an execution. We would learn a great deal, and might be less likely to talk about it afterward. We might – this is giving us too much credit, I know that even as I say it, but let it stand, stet, stet, for decency's sake – we might even admit that it's ridiculous to have personal feelings about the act of capital punishment. Not whether capital punishment should be *allowed*, which is an entirely different thing – and I'll argue as long as you want me to that the State really doesn't need any more ways to kill us legally, and that we're worse than fools to arrogate it any greater portion of legitimate violence – but feelings about capital punishment itself, the red-faced law-and-order hard-ons of people who pontificate about what crimes deserve the death penalty, even the legitimately tragic revenge of, say, a murdered girl's family, who know well enough that nothing will save their daughter, but who also won't be able to sleep or breathe right until the man who killed her has been reduced to a lab cadaver. We might observe that the act of translation from life to death is something so massively outside our personal experience, though inevitably bound for it and already in progress everywhere, that we've got no right to have *feelings* about another human's conversion into a corpse. We inscribe more, in the nature of glyph and metaphor, and speak less. We might, in short, learn to shut the fuck up. But I've never been that optimistic about people, and I imagine there'd be a lot of walkouts during a 24-hour film of an execution, while a few of us, recognizing that the rules were effectively null, would tear up some seats, rip out their cushions to make improvised sleeping bags, light cigarettes, and sit there watching the killing through the smoke of our own burnt lungs, which is perhaps how any killing should be watched. Some of us would almost certainly bring booze, and there would be interludes of evil faith and self-preserving sarcasm, and some jackoff would definitely mock the dying man and his executioner, would start doing an impression of a

mannequin injected with a State-patent lethal cocktail or a dressmaker's dummy rewired to accept 2,000 volts. This is, I'm told, the electrical potential that will knock you out and stop your heart instantly. I've also been told that a fair amount of electric-chair sufferers – whom it seems off-color to call “victims,” though that's exactly what they are – live much longer than they're supposed to and can sometimes smell, feel, watch, even talk about their melting skin and fried nerves, the new and horrendous input hardwired into the spine-grown motherboard of the somatic stars.)

The corpse has completed his gesture and begins again, and for reference, his last phrase was, “But that's what I, as a paranoid animal, would say.” He's going to follow this up somehow, with some manner of excursus, and we're ready as we've ever been, or I am, and you appear to be so. But since these things take him a while, and in deference to the superior wisdom of corpses, it's hard not to let your eyes twitch around a little bit and look for a hint of green in the night sky, where heat lightning is still selecting neural pathways of and between cloud, fusing cortical wires, distilling pituitary milk, soldering new architectures of star-data and -software for the corpse to sight his linguistics along, like hungry bees' topology dancing along the curve of an altered Earth.

The silent, the liquid-geologic surge of stars' epigenetics; the 4D calculus of the stars' chromosomal undertow, both assigning to itself and being assigned to certain chreodal pathways, certain furrows cut into the side of the evolutionary hill, all of them shallow near the infinitely small blank spot on the hilltop, then just barely printed in the dust, but by the time you hit the flatland, each is reinforced, sunbaked, an earthworks of xenonucleic star-vertebrae come to shelter and to reprogram slowly the impulses of the spine.

Not that they can't be jumped, or can't crumble, fracture, decompose; they can, and all of this is called mutation, or disease, or metastasis, or any of the compound words we use the better to triangulate sources of panic, watching the surface-return sweep back over the radar like the green froth of an overheated tropic ocean, not at all sure whether we'd prefer to see some enemy installation or more pingback blankness, exhausted as we are with constant vigilance. There is this modality, this overtone, to a life of false and delicate securities, lit up on its borders with perpetual news of mass-

scale violence: at a certain point, you're sick to death of wondering when the hammer will finally fall.

You have been, too long, a roach beneath the shadow of the blunt quotidian object – shoe, hand, table-leg – which will destroy you, and you'd rather get the *Götterdämmerung* over with, rather begin, in the fashion of late-career Hitler and mid-career Speer, to abdicate whatever meager value still accrues to your living flesh, and to plan your new worth as ruins.

Depreciation or nostalgia. This was one of the most troubling aspects of the whole Nazi atrocity – and, not coincidentally, one of the least-broached afterward: Hitler knew it would never work. His daylight rhetoric says otherwise, because, of course, it had to, but there was some interference scratching in his medullar reservoirs, even in *that* dull and monothematic brain. And make no mistake, Hitler wasn't an evil genius: he was a fairly stupid man, an overgrown adolescent with the kind of hateful mind bred by a series of reverses and petty personal affronts.

At fifteen, you're likely to see conspiracy in every one of your displeasures. At sixty, some of us have learned so little – or been so reinforced in our gross and economically-viable sense of insult – that we blame the weather on the Jews, blame sales tax on The Blacks (as if there were any such thing as “just black,” as if we didn't mean the sons and daughters of raped slaves. “Black” exists because of slavery and because of nothing else. Before we enslaved the Africans, they were either “African” or known by the names of their own people, languages, tribal links, cities. To call them “black” is thus to admit your complicity in their enslavement, and to use the word “black” in the course of saying something racist is a little bit like saying, “Well, I need to get me one of those concentration-camp lawyers”).

Hitler was one such man. Stupid, insecure, and maybe not even so much “mad with power” as perpetually worried that somebody would usurp it after finding out that he was a sham. Every dictator is an effigy. If he wasn't, he'd *never, ever* be allowed to become a dictator. So our task is thus not to understand the minds of dictators (though that's a worthwhile endeavor, too) but to understand the vast and impersonal complexes of powers that prop up dictators, that find dictators useful and abundant. No man becomes the new Duke of Rome just because he stands on the Vatican steps and scares the piss out of the Pope. His enthronement was decreed in very old, very good-smelling

rooms, far out of public daylight, pleasantly reeking of cigars so sweet you don't even mind the moment when their stagnant smoke turns stale, like human fat impregnated with essences and attars for manufacture into soap.

The men who build the Duke of Rome were very calm, hard to impress, and either members or friends of families whose names you would know. Not in any precise sense, not on the edge of any aha-moment, but just names floating in your semiotic atmosphere, words you'd recognize from street signs, names of buildings, cities, universities, placards placed a seat or two away from the President at gala dinners, words to make us ask, *Who was that again? Why was he so close to The Man?*

... A brutal, prostituted, digital transform of the stars' protein semiology, circulating through interstellar space along winds and currents which only seem random, which in fact prefigure the very structure of the eye with which you're reading and the heart which might be beating a little faster, in dread or recognition; a little slower, in the cold sense of doom foretold and come to pass, of Tiresias decrees made less than good but more than true; or not at all, should you have come to the linguistics of the dead, felt them lying not upon but beneath your tongue, a black eloquent mud, a radium-laced spring where the idle rich of the silent-film-flickering interbellum dream might've come to "cure" their vague complaints, sicknesses whose names we recognize much as we do the names of the rich (the Anschutz trophy, the Cargill building, the Diebold voting machine which of course doesn't say "Diebold" anymore, not after that little hiccup in 2004, no no – now, friend, it says "Premier Election Solutions," and if the phrase *Premier Election Solutions* seems to you to *shriek* with sinister implication, then you're starting to get the idea), not as glyphs of things to be discovered, but almost as smells, the proper auras of a lost time and place.

Neurasthenia, phthisis, catarrh. They waft across a certain cortical patch of memory, a cerebral physiology dark and frozen-liquid-looking as the black gel that's been used to fix the asphalt just outside – dark and ex-gelatinous, in fact, as the mud these rich men and women used bathe in, hoping to cure afflictions which were not truly their own. They were the direct personal indicators of a species-wide pathology, and though there is a mystic element to such a pronouncement, I want you to think of the non-mystic side for a second: vague illnesses mean leisure and money, because the poor are forced to work through whatever sickness they contract; leisure and money mean

economic imbalance, because nobody can be rich unless somebody else is starving, not the way we've set things up; economic imbalance means tension both within and between nations, either in terms of class struggle or of competition for foreign markets, outsourced labor, the import/export ratio; and intra-, inter-, supranational tension don't *cause* war, but they're the breeding ground in which men who *want* war may inject their spores and bacilli.

Don't get too glib about cause and effect. Wars don't just happen. They are the result of certain powerful interests seizing upon certain sets of circumstances. Wars are *wanted* like a rich woman wants a daughter (like her rich husband wants a third decisive son).

And a generation of the idly powerful and vaguely ill will weather the whole thing out at spa towns which are technically, if you want to get Nazi about it, heh heh, in Nazi Germany, but everybody knows that above a certain age and level of wealth, there's no such thing as nation, party, polity. There's only the bored-to-frenzy self-inspection of rich women who feel, oh dear, a bit more tired than they should, and rich husbands eager to indulge them into silence, and the unimaginable calculus of slaughter already visible, already ignored, in the carnivore diagnostics of the stars.

Waste water, burst beetles and moths, and the undrained corpses of greenish infant worms, visually non-specific larvae, wavering in the lack of wind, when sluggish heat strums the silk instrumentation of decomposing spiderwebs, already geared toward collapse, like the unembalmed carcasses of stars hanging from canopic meathooks in the cores of ziggurats and pyramids. Their viscera haven't been sorted into the right jars; some of their organs haven't even been extracted; their bones are not yet washed, scented, wrapped; there's a lot of work left to be done, and if our standard for the dignity of grief is the elephant graveyard, as it probably should be, then we as a species have a long way left to go. Very few of us receive that final clarion of dust, whatever other pomp attends our passing.

But these were not the kinds of wastes and ruins Hitler had in mind (says Oedipus's corpse-interpreter, and he ought to know). Remember what I said about Hitler being a dumb bigot, not an evil genius, and then consider this: during the last days of Nazi Germany, when the pointless war of Soviet attrition had so decimated the

Führer's forces that he couldn't even defend Berlin (another dumb bigot's move: no reason to hold Leningrad like some misdirected Napoleon, not in the age of fucking tanks and rockets, no, but Hitler loved territory, he loved little plastic flags planted in big rich canvas maps, and as such he precedes and predicts the American flag planted in the lymph-dribbling fontanel of the moon, itself a presage of the surgical implants we'll soon be forcing onto meteors and stars), Hitler and Speer were not designing fortifications. They weren't trying to build up Berlin, or Munich, or Darmstadt, or Leipzig, Bonn, Mannheim, Dresden, any of the important cities, against Allied invasion or the incursion of possibly fictitious guerilla groups out of Communist Poland. They weren't worried about the Lublin regime or the ELAS/royalist skirmishes in Greece or the unreliable narration of Generalissimo Franco, who, as thirty further years of his idiot autocracy would prove, was a man who pretty much did what he wanted and let other people worry about the politics. Call him a "fascist" if you please. He was just another pampered child working out the terms of his specific privilege, and on the scale of evil, he stands much closer to a bailed-out Wall Street financier than to Satan.

(Which is not to say he's *less* evil. Satan just has a job to do. Franco and the bankers could've been anything but what they are; they also could've killed themselves and saved God the trouble.)

But no, none of that. Hitler and Speer were cranking up the bad-magical resources of Germany, that neologism-building machine with 70 million distinct pieces (and maybe Heidegger was right that if you're not going to do Greek philosophy in Greek, you've got to do it in German), and they eventually came to a design value they called *Ruinenwert*, which is normally translated as *ruin-value* but might also be rendered as *the valor of wreckage* or *the usefulness of the useless*. (*Wert* is not just *value* in an economic sense; it connotes a moral good.)

Design, they said, not for the moment's uses, not even for a hundred or a thousand years' Reich; design for the eventual collapse into ruins, so that what you build today will terrify and impress the first archaeologists of the nuclear winter, hatched like radium-addled larvae a thousand years after the general annihilation goes down, and mutually-assured destruction actually has to make good on its assurances. I don't know (this is still the corpse speaking) what Hitler would've heard about the nuclear bomb, but it's exactly the kind of thing he would've fantasized about. I can almost guarantee

you that, at some point in his life, Hitler masturbated to the idea of future weaponry; I can *entirely* guarantee you that there are Americans masturbating to the same idea as we speak.

And in order to get his *Ruinenwert* in place, Hitler planned to tear down and rebuild all of Berlin after he conquered all of Europe. See what I mean? This is the fantasy of a stupid egotist, not a mastermind of hate. “His own” Berliners, starved, raped, diseased, blockaded, desperate, would’ve torn his goddamn head off if he even entered their slums. But the victors’ narrative of World War II has no use for the notion of Germans who hated Hitler, except in the occasional big-budget Hollywood flop, and even less use for the idea that Hitler was so stupid and inept that he *had* to have a massive architecture of international money and power behind him. Somebody might start looking back there, see the brick wall at the back of the theater, and wonder who built the theater and who owns it now.

Somebody might read the name THE ORPHEUM in white neon cursive across the theater’s marquee and begin to wonder what, as a tribe, as a people, we aren’t supposed to be looking back at while we climb, allegedly out of hell.

Chlorotic stars are yellow-shifting, starved out of green equilibrium by chlorophyll sterility, singed with anoxic shock – and though there’s green weather everywhere, the chromatic scale has been somehow inverted, tortured back to acid surges under the hungry methanogen stars, reengineered from its own negatives to print the image of a void and endangered morning, a horrific storm just under the horizon’s curve, and bilgewater already gnawing at the foundations of a tent-pole city where the variously lost have come not to congregate, in any whole or consciously ritual sense, but simply to pass the night against the greasy rain spattering the canvas and plastic flaps, to heat whatever canned food they’ve got left over small and evil-smelling chemical fires, often enough to eat uncooked and dehydrated the bricks of federal-relief noodles and freeze-dried fruit, watching the dawn with a different expectation than attends the gray junk-sickness of insomniacs’ reveille, in which sunrise is the danger of another missing sleep, another dream-amnesia rolling back the fluids of spinal memory, salt- and sand-wind whipping the upper vertebrae arid and blank, infrared stars eroded to sandstone and pumice while their ultraviolet alleles scream inaudibly among the upper reaches of



the genome, causing swift and stark mutations that will warp the fledglings' wings, tear legs from insects, split the juicy black shells of roaches.

All that, yes, and still green weather everywhere. The sky is simply on the ground and vice versa. Pained light, leaves overexposed to the bleaching radiance of carnivorous stars – who should, in normal physiologies, be likewise prey themselves, but beads of lesion-pearly lymph sweat from what should be active nerves, and cortical pathways are clogged with a jaundiced sap that embalms rather than devours the potassium stars.

They may be recalled later. We can hope. A sluice, a vertebral cistern, some music or linguistics capable of pumping the spine's deepest-black mud, an unfathomably rich mnemonic loam, an etymologic peat in which the word-roots grow like coiling tips of grapevines from the dark bog-archaeology of the stars' preserved bones.

But not for now; now we wait and shiver, sick with lack of sleep or with sleep spun across the wrong coordinates, transacted between unhealthy poles, as once the sailors out of Syria and Lebanon laid down on the foredecks of their ships to string a grid of threads between the gunwales, thus to calculate by fragile star-mathematics their position and best course. The information is there, the astroneural data filters in, masses, voltages, current densities as vast as ever, but there's no guarantee at all that you're reading it right, or ever have read it right.

There is only – and only at the moments of greatest grace, the hours most firmly within the blessing of the rays, the presence of the angel who does what he does for reasons which are wholly opaque even to him – some condition of trust, an intuitive momentum, the delicate but pliant sympathy of your body with the world's and your brain with the constellations', feeling more than knowing that, for a moment, you move together, and that whatever impulses fire along the triode-bridge of your backbone are firing also where the stars' genetic strains splice at unfathomable nexus of mutation, are part of an embodied and present harmony which isn't just *comparable* to music but is the *source* of music, the ratios of strummed to muted string, of breath to bronze valves and to mouthpieces of breath-softened copper, the gravitational denominators building their black faceted hives along the basal ganglia of stars.

And who could be alive, awake, right now, and consider this the instant of maximum grace? Who could even believe in grace, outside that moment's benefice – and once it's passed, how should you presume to know what it was, or that it will ever come again? So here's where trust comes into it. And we're talking (says the corpse-interpreter, not *me*, not me) about a trust whose name and action have been almost wholly lost to the world as it is, because the successful operation of our nations and economies requires such incredible sums of false trust, things that market themselves as trust but are really just credulity, fatuousness, glib and knowing self-destruction as a flirtatious kind of answer to an even glibber threat.

Some, knowing from birth or shortly afterward that they'll be fucked, learn to enjoy the choreography of what passes for seduction and is really just gears clicking along the teeth of other gears. They acquire a taste for the scenography and screenwriting of mannequin-reproduction, the wax-on-wax dry-humping that somehow still produces children. These are the luckiest among us, and they will eventually expand their enjoyment into expertise, and their expertise into empire. The rest of us just get fucked, in pain or anesthesia, asleep or in some state that merely passes for unconsciousness, and our shelter, our security, isn't much less flimsy than sadomasochism: we either scream ourselves to pieces or go numb.

There are the trillion variables, but I challenge you (the corpse's index finger, still lifted, still hanging in place since his emphatic gesture days ago – and it's still pointing at his own chest, not at mine, but it's understood that it might take years for him to move his hand, and anyway, I know what he's trying to point to), I challenge you to find one person on Earth who hasn't done one of these three things: either join the abusers, go numb under their assault, or go insane with the pain, the indignity, and the endless repetition of it.

I dare you to point at one woman, living or dead, and tell me that she got through life without feeling like the target of somebody's rape fantasy. I fucking *dare* you to find me a woman who was never forced to realize that she was in constant danger, and who never recalibrated even her tiniest, least self-consciousness gestures to forestall some small measure of that danger. Find me one.

Ask Oedipus about his queen, but more than that, ask the dead queens in the other capital city, one crowned and stabbed to death, the other also stabbed without

ever having worn a crown. The first of these women was called Clytemnestra and was forced, in her terror, to adopt some of the terrorists' techniques, to use against a certain man the horrors that all men had taught her; the second was called Cassandra, and she's the patron saint of everyone who shrieks herself to death against a baffled, silent wall, who bears an anechoic scream back to the bio-echo reservoir of stars.

And yes, he says, I meant what I said when I said "sums of false trust." They're *sums*, not labile quantities. They've been reckoned. Their rigid serial mathematic has been piling up in the PROFIT columns of account books since before either your or my bloodline washed up legally on Ellis Island or somewhat less than legally across the sandbars and breakwaters of Galveston, San Marcos, Corpus Christi, California ports where the real sufferers from Chinese opium addiction – not the opium addicts themselves, though them as well: I mean the people raped, robbed, and displaced by the Western powers who brought in opium and then forced China into wars over its sale and use – had to climb up an escarpment of sharp matte shingle that seemed to go on forever, had to feed on fat green seedpods like the tentacles of prehuman gods, the proto-mammal deities of a world not yet committed to the face as the seat of emotion or the heart as the throne of the Good, leviathan- and kraken-gods recently downloaded from the thermophysiology of the eyeless gastropod stars.

How to rise; how to crawl; how to separate your broken meat from your awareness of its fractures. How to thirst when salt water is your only idea of the cures for thirst – how to live in a condition of need so constant, and so totally unfulfillable, that it's eventually transposed up into the supersonic octaves of other inaudible body-noise, like the black gasp of carbonized lungs, the whine in broken joints, the seafloor sway and shudder of torn cartilage between unhealing bones, the autoimmune errors of the virus-panicked stars.

But remember, like the song says, mapping both the mnemonic and the amnesiac seasons – "September – remember; October – all over" – not all of us wanted to come here. Not all of us aspired to this geography. Some were brought as slaves, and some were here already, doomed already, when the slavemasters arrived.

And when I say “us” and “here,” I trust you to understand that I’m talking about Americans and America, but that I’m also talking about Greeks and Greece. I hope that makes sense. If it doesn’t, I don’t know what to tell you. Consider: Greeks are the people from Greece, yes? The simplest possible statement. Principle of identity. A non-Greek Greek, a bald millionaire and friend to conquerors, was kind enough to codify it for us:  $a = a$ . Things equal whatever they themselves are. And if that Greek was actually a Macedonian from Stagira, at the time part of the Greek domain but now considered an entirely separate culture, and if he, in codifying his principle, also violated it, well, there you go. He was a flexible man, Aristotle: his name means “Good Purposes,” and he put his mind to several, among which one of the more dubiously good was helping Alexander the Great take over a third of the world. Judge for yourself which of his *teles* were more *ariston*.

The point I’m making, slowly as a corpse must make it, is that the Greeks would seem to be the Greeks. Except they aren’t. We have no idea who the *actual* Greeks might’ve been, before the series of wars and invasions that led to Greece as we know it, and every conjecture is viable. They might’ve been northerners coming in from the cold, or Africans riding the billowing swell of unthinkable desert heat toward some more temperate latitude; they might’ve been seafaring Levantines, the peoples who would eventually become Arabs and Jews, or Mesopotamians, Indo-Aryans (i.e. Iranians), even gypsies wandering all the way from subcontinental heat toward the kind of mild and nurturing summer warmth that grafts a culture’s whole brainstem to vinestock, of the grape and of the olive. They could’ve been almost anybody, and “almost anybody” is probably who they are.

It’s the same everywhere: the “Italians” are really Lombards and Moors, which is like saying they’re half Austrian and half Algerian; the “British” are mostly the combined descendants of the Roman occupation and the Brythonic Celts, who lived along what’s now called the coast of Brittany and who sailed to the islands for reasons we can only guess; the Irish, that apparently most closed and incestuous enclave of Europe, may actually be Egyptian or Phoenician if you go back far enough, and are definitely at least part Celtic and part Viking. We don’t know who *anybody* is, and nobody is the person or the place they seem to be. So to use the names of nations and of peoples, as I’ve just been forced to do, is to validate in retrospect the hate and greed of conquerors. A nation

is a nation only because someone subdued it with weaponry and rape and renamed it his territory; a culture, what we used to call a “race” or an “ethnicity,” is always the product of abused substrata and the “donated” sperm of their abusers. Mixed blood is the only blood, and calling it “American” or “Greek” is admitting that the conquistadors have won, and will always continue to win.

But these are the terms we use, right? Who really cares enough to insist on understanding where *anything* comes from, much less him- or herself, the most frightening nullity of which most people can conceive, the hungriest zero? The only people who seem very interested in origins are racists, and their information is absolutely always wrong. The rest of us have learned to insist that it doesn’t matter who conquered (killed, tortured, enslaved, raped) whom; the few who pretend to remember are people like the Aryan Nation and American Nazi Party, or the sorts of entitled scum that wash up at Davos and the Bohemian Grove. They maintain their pretense of memory only so that they can call themselves the sons of the conquerors, so they can circle-jerk with orotund eloquence and high volume about the fact that they can trace their genealogies straight back to Charlemagne, or who-the-fuck-ever.

It is with the murdered tribes as with the economics that murdered them: only the killers even pretend to understand, and both their pretense and their comprehension are those of killers. Only victors’ history. No stelae or cartouches for the tribes who died so that the names of nations could be born, for the unknown people whose corpses made up the dirt in which Greek grapes and olives grow so ripe and round.

The more emphatic architectures – modernist, rococo, baroque – the buildings designed to bear resemblance, to connote, serve as a glib monumental coinage, an iconography without the necessary strata of condensed and brutal time: these all abandon us, eventually, fall away across the last bridge whose underlying water is as chemically blue or picturesque Thames gray as its own postcard photo-archive; they’re sold and razed, or reappointed for the massive and false anonymity of some agribusiness giant (falsely anonymous because a few specific people, with digestive tracts and even sometimes voices of their own, *do* hide behind all that quik-dry concrete), or vacuum-sealed as kitsch tokens of their own obsolescence.

And we find ourselves, again, always again, in the ruinous and almost secret sections of the city where the buildings look like nothing but what they *do*, in grim incarnation of the Word, a dun cement glossolalia confirming Eden's gift of language on coordinates quite distant from Adam's naming of the animals: they're bare cognitive schematics of shelter and storage, leaky hoards of heat, eaten at by a bitter and permanent early-evening light as functional and violent as the wasp-logic of the acidophile stars.

(Who gather, thermally bewitched, under the sway of their own data-guzzling hex, at the last possible increment of sundown, where the vast gravity of the deeper-colored light is already more than any human body can bear; who attend the warped contraction of human bones, the bloody trash-compactor cubes rendered from mammal brains, the devolution of the infinitely intricate mammal eye back to a pigment spot on the nearly nerveless back of a seafloor worm; who record, recall, and print the invertebrate architectures logged to the stars' biocomputer, whether its suffix be biomechanical, -electrical, or -chemical, outputting shapes of molecules, neurologic voltages, or metabolic compounds, routing runtime's various and self-reflecting heats into these possible collusions with gravity, which is all any shape is. A collaboration with the messianic weight of what is, and its capacity to rename and to resurrect whatever is pulled closest to the star's Osiris core, where radiocarbon isotopes count a base-14 cardinal mathematic of strewn bones.)

This is no undiscovered country, though something of that strangeness still adheres to it; the blank parts of the city have been discovered over and over. It is rather this, a territory too much under conquest's quick-change history already, overrun too many times, whose few and nervous occupants have already forgotten under which invasion they were worst enslaved, most cruelly killed, and whether or not they preferred to be dispensed with in the massive and statistical style of the mid-century genocides or with the personal sadism of those genocides still underway in Haiti, Mexico, any poor black neighborhood in any city in the United States.

There are consolations to each, and don't for a goddamn minute (the corpse here tilts his head to the left, our right, with an audible creak and groan of sinew gone to mineral substitutes for porous, pumiced bone, a fractured noise of ossified star-

cartilage) think that I'm being arch or ironic when I talk of "consolation." When they come to kill you, as they inevitably will, and when you've been killed a million, seven million, twenty million, seventy-five million times already in recent history, whatever scraps of strangely-worded tribal memory can flutter down through the ashen light after such holocaust, you *will* find what consolation you can in the manner of your slaughter, because that's what humans do. It's *one* of the things humans do. We are offered circumstances of unfathomable and world-destroying carnage, and we pretty quickly start deciding which way we'd prefer to be murdered. Don't blame the victims, who have no other real choice, and don't *only* blame the executioners, who are mostly employees.

Blame the transnational powers that not only allow but encourage such massacres, the immovable objects who prostitute the notion of "irresistible force," acting as though there was nothing to be done about the 120 million dead Americans whose genocide turned this place into "America," the 4 to 6 million Ukrainians, the million-and-a-half Armenians, the million Indonesians, the tens of thousands of Argentinians, Chileans, Haitians, and Christ doesn't even *know* how many Mexicans, all the way from the purest-blooded dirt-farming nacos who could – if the books hadn't been burnt – trace their lineage long past Tenochtitlan back to Copan, Cholula, Chichen Itza, Tikal, Uxmal, Uaxactun, to the cellphone-groping chilangos who treat Mexico City as if it were a combination of Paris and Los Angeles until the narcoguerilla hit in broad fucking daylight, the kidnapping of a female friend, the utterly out-in-the-open rape and murder of a journalist who was counting up the female employees gone missing from the American-owned factories in the free trade zone.

You'll hear them called *maquiladoras*, and it's at once a useful and an obfuscatory word. Useful, because it does name a very particular thing, to wit, "A factory in Mexico owned by a foreign company and exporting its products to the nation of that company." (Journalistic example adduced for illustrative purposes: "These days the fishing boats are beached and the Indians and Mexican residents are in grinding poverty, forced to work multiple jobs in distant tortilla factories, *maquiladoras*, and wheat fields." Notice the false active-voice of the phrase *are in grinding poverty*. What the writer means is *have been reduced to grinding poverty*, but then he or she would be obliged to name

the agents of such reduction, and you don't sell books or newspapers by blaming the murderers for their murders.) So yes, there's a real need for the word "maquiladora."

But consider this: by saying "maquiladora," and vaguely knowing that it means *foreign-owned Mexican factory producing export goods*, we avoid ever having to say "foreign-owned Mexican factory producing export goods," and we can talk about "the miserable lives of the maquiladora workers" as if it were a regrettable fact of springtime weather trends. We don't name the owners, and we don't bother mentioning that all these people (whose lives as precarious as dandelions and heatstroke even when they *aren't* homeless, starving, raped, killed, which they very often are) have to live the way they live because *we want shit*, and we don't want to make it ourselves, and we don't live where they do.

Fake rustic furniture, pills that are 99.999% placebo, food "made from scratch," and secretly always meaning the scratches on the scar-numb hands of Mexican machine-operators working for slave wages, the branching and hugely complex river-systems of scratches found on the crow- and coyote-gnawed bodies of the failed border-crossings, each lacerated corpse a dried-blood and terrene map for some histologic realignment of the stars.

The peeled, blistered, putrefying skin itself – in this conversion-system of astrosomatic metaphor – should obviously be the sun, that central deity, the one whose cult you can't disclaim even if you hate and fear it: Mesoamericans were forced, long before their European and subsequently "American" counterparts, into an honest relationship with the solar power. All well and good for a Greek from a temperate place to insist that the Sun is the image of the Good, of Mind, Nous, whatever image of the One and True you prefer; his sun soaked the vines, ripened the fields, and generally gave him enough light to see by.

(That he often used this light to see adolescent and teenage boys performing sex acts on his person, well, it says a great deal more about our half-assed understanding of the term "homosexuality" than it does about any snickering reference to Greco-Roman sexual practices. Nobody was "gay" until about a hundred years ago, and the Bible has nothing to say about "being gay." Men engaged in sexual acts with men as part of their education, and it was understood that they'd eventually get married and produce



children of their own. When Leviticus gets blowsy about “a man lying down with a man,” it’s not condemning a “gay lifestyle,” which are two concepts – both “gay” and “lifestyle” – that absolutely did not exist when Leviticus was written. It is rather cautioning the exiled Hebrews about spending too much of their affection, time, and energy on same-sex coupling, because an endangered population always needs to be producing children. So the preachers who limply thunder, who deliver rhetorical cumshots, about Sodom and Gomorrah, and who then get caught fucking male prostitutes in motel rooms, are actually reenacting a certain facet of the scripture in a way they’re never going to understand. They don’t need to. Nothing will fuck up a preacher’s career like having read and grasped the Bible.)

And around the time the Americas were being “discovered” – and the earliest tentacle-stirrings of capitalism were, not coincidentally, depositing their slime and shiver on the equally slimy substructure of the old royal order – the Italians had just rediscovered Greek and Roman thought, thanks to the massive emptying-out of the libraries of Byzantium after Ottoman conquest of the eastern Roman Empire. It’s a mark of white Euro culture’s particular anal obsessions that, though I can’t tell you how old James Brown was when he died (and neither could James Brown), I can tell you that the Turks took Constantinople on Tuesday, May 29, 1453 A.D. I can also tell you that the Byzantine Emperor from whom they took it was named Constantine Palæologos, or rather Kōnstantinos XI Dragásēs Palaiológos, and that he subsequently became the legendary Marble Emperor who would someday slip from his mineral sedation to return Constantinople to the Roman Empire. After the Turks renamed the city Istanbul, the Marble Emperor thing seems to have rather subsided in the Western fantasy-mind.

(“Istanbul,” says the corpse, offering a sidebar in what is clearly one of his personal interests – and why shouldn’t it be yours? – is one of those toponyms whose origins are almost entirely conjectural, because the word itself doesn’t mean anything. I think of Al-Iskandriya in modern Egypt, which is just “Alexandria” as processed through the morphology and phonology of Arabic: “al” is a prefix meaning *the*, and there’s no English *x* sound in Arabic, so “Alex” becomes “Al-Isk,” and we get a city with a name which means nothing in any known language. Likewise, “Istanbul” is an unknown word, hapax legomenon till it happened to mention a city. Etymologists guess that it’s derived

from *eís tēn Pólis*, which is the medieval Greek imperative for *to the city!*, like a rallying cry. So the Turks, in dispensing with the Romans, both accidentally revive the Greek language that the Roman Empire partially displaced, and flood the original Roman capital itself with Greco-Roman literature which had been completely forgotten in the libraries of what's now Turkey. The Turks thus functioned as the accidentally memory-system of the west, like a scintigraphy of forced light recovering forgotten organs in the body of sprawled colonial Rome, a genetic trace on the exterminated stars' protein structure.

And, if you're still with me, check this out: that emperor, Constantine Palæologos? In Greek, his name means "steadfast" or "faithful," via the Roman *constans/constantius* + "ancient," *palæo*, from the Greek *palaio* + "word," Greek *logos*. So "Constantine Palæologos" is "faithful to the ancient Word." The Ancient Word is exactly what the Ottoman Turks accidentally delivered back to the Italian peninsula by besieging Constantinople, which itself is *Konstantinoúpoli* – yes, it means "city of Constantine," but it also means "faithful city," as in faithful to the memory which it took the Ottoman invasion to an unlock. A many-bit key of bewildering violence, a cryptography of compromised containment-unit stars.)

But, says corpse-interpreter (and don't worry, he'll have a name sooner or later), I was talking about the sun, and Greeks and Italians and Americans, the first Americans. The Greeks could treat it as the principle of Reason – which made sense when reason was *logos*, but when reason got Latinized into *ratio*, mere logical calculation, this equation of sun with mind became just fucking laughable; the Renaissance Italians, whose neighbors were busy raping the newly-discovered victim Americas, picked up something of that solar veneration, and tended to include it in their religious and pictorial iconography as a self-evident Good, the source and sum of Good. Fine for them. They lived along a comfortable latitude, and under nobody's occupation.

But to the Mayans, for example, the sun was a much more fearful deity, because they were much less insulated from its rages; the sun wanted blood, and killed and died every day, and was as implacable as the skin-tearing sea of shingle between the coastline and the Island of the Dead. So when we look at the corpse of a man who paid a *pollero* or *coyote* to take him across the Mexico/U.S. border but never made it, a man whose

slang *coyote* turned pretty quickly into actual and ravenous coyotes, we can see the loving Mayan terror of the sun return across and through and underneath his skin, the circulatory system hacked into now by swarms of hypodermic stars.

## Session #6

The monitors offer us dubious tremens-readings, skin-data displays from the cymatic stars, from dermal-anchor electrodes shivering in their hides of ionized gases, inferring health and sickness from the radioactive metals of their proto-skeletal cores. The styli of oscillographs stammer out vertebral mockups of unviable star-species, spine-schematics born and extinct in a single genetic roar, a broken blood-blister trickling its lapsed genome down scripts of garbage RNA.

Dakruon is the verb, says the corpse, *dakruon*, *weeping*, present-progressive, as I learned it, and there is weeping from urges other than grief, other than the sadness which is not yet mourning or the mourning not quite phased over into rite, still writhing nebular, probing itself for potential histology, an autosurgery of resultant stars. Auscultation and fingers right down to the bone at the back of the heart, which isn't the frailest of man's bones by tensile strength or acceptance of pounds per square inch, but may touch deepest to the quick his sense of being coherently alive: we like to think that things end in the heart, and that its satisfaction or discomfort are the measure by which we know beginnings and their termini, commencement and the order it made come to.

Often enough. Or apparently so. There are approximations good enough to run entire species on, and the stars' glyphic biogenesis could only have prefigured so much of its own passage through loose atoms toward minerals toward flesh, though of course the whole biome was latent in its most basic shapes, the most essential frictions of electron-against-electron, which are themselves not *things* at all, but distortions in the fabric of reality, measured quanta of God-static.

And if God himself is not static, not interference, then interference may be the only phenomenon through which He still reaches us, and may measure our capacity to be affected. If I gave you the chance to run your hands over my carcass, young resurrectionist, feeder of corpse-meat to the corpses – and I confer these titles upon you with no rancor, with nothing much but wan respect, as one might say *shalom* to a rabbi

though one has never been Jewish and has no plans to convert – you’d find patches of ruin and evolutionary wreckage which, to you, might signify chemical- or radiation-burn, scars stroked in with a scalpel’s edge so fine that the wound doesn’t even begin to ache until it has likewise begun to heal, then restroked, written over, a palimpsest of nearly identical hapax lacerations, each an illegible term, and growing rather than diminishing in its illegibility every time it’s repeated, growing like the insane gravity-hunger of the dark star, the exploratory surgeries of spacetime itself when a star collapses and all the force of its congruence rushes backward through the zero thus created by collapse.

You would find, in short, a whole somatomathematics, a whole physiological calculus transacted underneath the zero, deep down the most basal and lumbar regions of the *y*-axis, abscissas haywire, reckoning themselves backwards and forwards, panicked into a geometry for which there is no Euclidean cure, an influenza composed of manifolds much too interrelated ever to be salved by a single vaccine. We would need a compound medicine, and by the time all its components were in order, we would likely have invented a cure not for the felt malady but for life itself – the Nazis didn’t mean it this way, but there’s a horrible oracular ring in their term *die Endlösung*, the Final Solution, because of course annihilation is and always was the final solution to any animal.

Not to the Jewish Question, of course not, we’re no longer so gullible or vain. (We are no less *evil* than the Nazis, but our evil has been subcontracted, shipped out, left in the capable hands of Third World paramilitaries and factory bosses with private armies who take care of all the morally dubitable shit for us, so that we can sit back and talk about “quarterly earnings” and “economic trends” as if they were facts of nature, when they are, in fact, evidence of nature’s perversion and misuse.) The Jewish Question turned out, as perhaps you will remember, to be a problem mostly in the minds of those who would Solve it, since the Jews themselves didn’t want much more than to live without being harassed and killed. But if politics should teach us anything, well, you know by now, don’t you? Those who formulate the questions thus control the whole scope of discourse, and the linguistic bandwidth, the available cross-section of the metaphor-spectrum, is everything. It’s what we call “civilization,” when we can still pronounce that word, with or without feeling violently ill.

Ach, so. One declares the existence of a Jewish Question, *nicht wahr?* One wonders how all these Jews may live in an alien society, or rather in a cluster of alien nations. One speculates as to the survival of their language, their mores, their religion, and one draws ridiculous but uncontradicted conclusions about their being insoluble in the tincture of Europa – who was, let’s not forget (*viz.*, “let’s always forget”), a deceived and a raped woman herself, left to bear the hybrid sons of a god whose divinity she could no longer associate with righteousness or truth, if she ever had before. This is a moment we have come to know well in the centuries since dying, isn’t that right, Oedipus? And particularly well in the last hundred years, which have produced for us a larger crowd of sympathy-corpses than we’d ever have thought possible, even if some must be deduced from ash and bone-flakes like mineral snow raining upward from the decomposing marine skeletons of drowned stars.

Which moment do I mean, exactly? I mean the moment of Europa, or of Tyro and Poseidon, or of Jupiter and Semele: the moment of a double recognition, *i.e.* that 1). *yes*, the creature before you is a god, and has all the powers you’ve ever arrogated to godhead, and infinitely more; and that 2). *no*, this god is beholden to no human moral code, and his or her purposes are entirely separate from any human eschatology, any opening of the seals as we expect them to be open. The radiant documents will shine on the day of wrath; that is no guarantee that we’ll be able to read them, or that, were we thus literate, we’ll be able to make any sense of what they say. A god doesn’t love you just because he or she is a god. That’s not a god’s responsibility.

And I remember very clearly the birth of the most recent widespread god, who was named after the Muslims’ Allah and still goes by that name in certain circles, among killers on both sides of the old Ottoman/Byzantine divide, hateful American reactionaries and neo-fundamentalists whose idea of Islam is, to speak in analogies, not unlike a homophobic snake-handler’s idea of Christ. This new god is only one of many called Allah, and there have been Allahs – a word, I realize, it is hugely sinful to make plural at all – as peaceful and humanist as any Renaissance, and Allahs as obscure and withdrawn as Ein Sof, the breath disappearing backward through the respiratory apparatus of a star, the waveform distribution of galaxies just below Keter, the crown.

But this was a new Allah, and we knew of his arrival by the smoke and human ash rising over your cities, the double pillar of cloud as in mass-media’s gluttonous update of

the weather Moses followed. What I mean to say is this: the Allah of the men who hit your buildings may have been a scriptural perversion or a dogmatist's foul dream until that moment, but *after* the attacks, in the first barely-audible whispering whine of ebonite or PVC airplane nose against window glass and steel plate, a new Allah is born, and is not to be wished away simply by appealing to more peaceful gods who go by the same name. That tiny sound before the unimaginable crash and roar – so like a violin bow being barely pulled over muted strings, the sweep from nut to bridge without ever actually fingering a note, and the rosin fluttering away in moth-colonies of orange dust, sul-ponticello hives of damaged stars – is the birth-word of another Allah, the minor-keyed and tonic breath that fills the fragile uterus, pushes inaudible afterbirth from the black womb of anacoustic space.

I'd let you look at my skin as long as you liked, said the corpse, but we both already know what you'd find, already suspect the horror of your discoveries, thereby both dampening and amplifying that horror – it's not as bad, because you expected it, but it's worse, because it's not *quite* what you expected. I know men who have been shot and who've told me that the worst part was the wound itself, not the pain; I know a man who fought your country's war in Vietnam and caught a line of machine-gun fire in a perfect horizontal bough of black apples, a perfect syzygy of five interlocked stars, across his chest. Pop-pop-pop-pop-pop.

He said he felt like he'd run into a low-hanging vine, and he was dazed on the ground for a moment, wondering how he possibly could've missed the sight of a vine large enough to knock him down, when he saw the blood soaking through his cordite-scorched uniform. And only when he put his finger in one of the bullet-holes did he edge over into panic and disgust. It took the wound, not the wound's cause, to repel him. Thus, perhaps, the great success story of postwar America. We manufacture billions of bullets, and we leave to other interested parties' discretion the question of what flesh they'll find to nest in, and what underqualified field surgeons' fingers will have to dig around in that flesh like spiders sucking the liquefied vitals of the mummified stars.

Examine, probe, surveille, scope me as you like; you'll find what you think you'll find – violent immunologic reactions to the allergen stars.

(The sky's condition is such as to deny us any real sense of night or day, even of whether that distinction still obtains, but I have the definite feeling that it must be past midnight in this garden of the dead – not midnight as any known clock would reckon it, but simply a passing-over point, a crease in the unsteady continuity of time, like the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, a fossilized myelin sheath encrypting the stem cells of spinal-injured stars. We have, somehow, *gone over*, made a decision simply by being here this long, as when you hit the particular hour of night and fear and know, beyond any daytime analysis, that there can't be any sleep, that whatever Fury is on you won't direct you even toward sleep's comparable Furies. And sleep has her Furies, god knows. They haven't been much with us lately, at least not in the form of dreams – I can hardly remember any of mine, lately or at all, and I'm not really sure that I've been having them, or that I've slept for, what, it must be weeks, that can't be right, but it must be right.

It's also started to rain pretty heavily – not thickly, I don't mean it like that, not in any great density or profusion: you can see the shafts of dark blue light between the individual raindrops, but those drops pelt down heavy and cold like tasteless fruit, like the bee-salvaged ova and stigmata of flowers grown over the stars' half-life arbor. It's cold enough to get me shivering, against the thousand other forces each of which demands its own form of shiver, the tremulant star shuddering its 22 kilohertz cycle at the top of my spine, where the bulb of the brain breaks into its bony stem. There are always reasons enough to shiver, and always skeletal orchids enough to manifest their tremulance, the anatomic vibrato from which any flesh or osseous matter emerges.

The corpse, as you might expect – or might not; what the hell – doesn't seem bothered by the rain. I can tell he feels it, the impact, the cold, but that this feeling exists for him in a state of somatic metaphor, much as the living might feel some impedance fading in a certain hour of sundown but be unable to say why, might feel the structured and zoned world gone suddenly to real and well-lit possibilities for ghosts at the edge of a field, when the property deeds are in disrepair and so are the buildings they used to lay claim to, when an empty lighthouse or fire station becomes not just a place to sleep but the manifest structure of your being there at all, the Temple of a



postmortem geometer, a fadeout-cursed cadaver-Solomon, fused from the slag and wreckage he finds between the furrows of your brain.)

It doesn't look like rain, he says, though rain's predicted, and the step-phase epidemiology of stars continues overhead, blossoming and differentiating in shocking claustral bodies – no slow fade-in, no shiver of first light and gradual radial candescence, just the sudden all-at-once appearance of whole star-apparatus: transistor blocs, whole semiconductor reflex-arcs of stars, wavering in the humidity of what may or may not be their own sweat, coaxing lupine bays from dogs we used to think domesticated.

(Does this answer the question of whether or not the corpses feel the rain, snow, heat – even the red earthquake, both permanent and terminal, that shudders just under the edge of the horizon, that throws up to the surface of the Earth red cities, the most dedicated in human history to inhuman profit and animal misery, places only *meant* to look ruined, desiccated, impoverished, but which are in fact the chillingly precise architecture of maximum profit-extraction? I speak now of the bordertowns, ego scriptor cantlinæ, and of the island colonies, the labor camps we've made of the Caribbean and Andean zones. They're designed to appear unfinished or, even "worse," terminally broken, a chronic urban illness, an incurable endoscopy of stars' penetralia settling into patterns of immovable lymph and metal, like the innards of temples entered by the unholy, the viscera of the Ark exposed either by cottonmouthed "scientific curiosity" or by somebody very eager to extract whatever it was that once seemed so capable of leading the Jews in circles around the desert. These powers – and you can call them capitalist, which is true, of course, but that designation may belie a deeper and even more frightening hunger, of which capitalism is only the current and marketable face, the superface, the laminar scab which we're comfortable discussing in public, since it's possible to have *opinions* about capitalism; to perform a real and lasting diagnosis of these powers, we would have to cut back, I think, to the roots of our simplest and bluntest verbs, *take, rape, own, steal, burn*, hard monosyllables spanning the whole range of the mouth's sharpest stops like the upper- and lowermost pipes of an organ no longer accustomed to playing in any of the middle registers, which, by light's analogy, would be the green ones, the habitable and breathing. The powers are not

interested in your breathing; they're not even especially interested in their own, which they're eager to farm out to breath-colonies whenever it becomes technically possible, parasite cities of the Atemreich whose goal will be to supply rich blue and white breath to the enclaves of greatest wealth and to produce, as a side "benefit," a strictly accidental byproduct, enough thin oxygenate gruel for the workers to continue working. Anode sludge and coal-tar dyes, the benzene respiration of the cancerous aniline stars.

And these powers, to speak of Arks, Covenants, and Jews, may have registered some of the same historical switchback that we've noticed, the corpse and I and probably Oedipus, who I *do* think is communicating somehow through his dead interpreter. Couldn't tell you by what means, couldn't lay out for you a schematic of his semaphore, a violently high-contrast reconnaissance photo of the neuroelectric star-paths scattered in the air, soot, smog between them like the railway distribution networks used to scatter guns, gasoline, Jews during the second-to-last World War. The current World War, which we're cute and pompous enough to call the Third, has been going on since the moment the second one ended; it's just that World War III has learned the necessity of malleable guises, and that we began it with the USSR and Communist Infiltration, switched it over, when that mask got a little threadbare, to the Liberation of Former Soviet States by Economic Progress, and then got a whole new set of wartime blessings in the Threat of Islamic Terrorism. Make no mistake. It's one War, and even the III afterward is one of *their* conventions, a preliminary clue they hand you both as reward and as definite warning: hey, great job figuring out that World War III actually did happen – now shut the fuck up. Because, if you don't shut up, you might begin to wonder whence come these bizarre numerals, separating into a 20<sup>th</sup> Century Triptych what seems like an ongoing war, possibly older than the human species or even than the Earth, a proto-terrestrial bacillus, unwanted but resultant, incubated and elaborated in the cell-culture alembic of the laboratory stars.

*Take, rape, own, steal, burn.* Why not get right to the roots, such as they've been preserved; on the other hand, why trust anybody at all with their preservation. Well, let's see what we can do. Custodes all, rhapsodes often, and the few true oracles, whom you can recognize by the epileptic edge at which their articulate speech threatens to burn over into pure scream, some histologic equivalent of the supersonic boom, a young and fragile organelle returned to the biothermal shriek of the prokaryotic stars:

1). *Take* can be traced as far back as the Germanic root *tak-*, which may have originally meant “to touch,” so all touch is theft. If you’ve been alive and touched for very long, you may have come to suspect such an awful community of theft, and wondered how the heat-exchange between you and the one they’ve taught you to call your “lover” would look on a thermograph, hard-saved and evolving on the hard drive of the stars’ medical images, the infrared-to-seething-violet spectra of your contact and release. We can hope to god that these are more than gradations of theft; we cannot, however, deny that this is part of their meaning. Bonus track: *take* is referred to in the Oxford English Dictionary as “one of the elemental words of the language,” and there are hundreds of subdefinitions for phrases like “take up” and “take five.” When we speak, we speak always upon, and very rarely above, a substratum of touching and theft, a tangible and tangent loss.

2). *Rape* we can only take in its modern form back to Latin, where *rapere* originally meant not sexual violence but any abduction, any carrying-off – hence *The Rape of the Lock*, and the occasional queasy usage of the word as late as the 20<sup>th</sup> century to mean “kidnapped” rather than “raped” as we know it. So again, there’s theft on the lowest level of our words. And we should notice too that the Latin word for *rape* as we mean it, “to force a person to submit to a sexual act,” was in Latin the verb *stuprare*, from *stuprum*, “to disgrace.” So even our most basic definition of rape is a rapist’s: it refers not to the horror of the act, but to the social shame accruent to its victim. We don’t even know how to use the word “rape” without insulting the raped.

3). *Own* is interesting: it’s actually the lost positive form of the word *owe*, both of which come from Old English *agan*, which can be traced all the way back through Old Frisian, Old Norse, Old High German, and Gothic – *aga*, *eiga*, *eigan*, and *aigan*, respectively – and all the way to our earliest conjectured language, Proto-Indo European, in which it figured as *aik-*, “to be master of, to possess.” You may notice that this definition would also serve for *rape*, in etymological terms: theft becoming possession. I didn’t mean to choose words that all signify theft. I truly knew none of this before I started looking into it. And in just the last ten minutes, I’ve learned that all ownership is rape and all rape is theft and there may be no human act more basic, more integral to our social makeup, than *taking* – not just “taking what isn’t yours,” because before the first act of taking, there was no *yours/not-yours* binary, there was only the

*what is*, what Germans beautifully call *Es gibt*: it's how they say "there is," but it means "It gives," that the "given circumstances" are literally "the *given* circumstances," that anything at all is a cellular donation from the self-biopsied stars. And that perhaps all human activity is predicated on the theft, the rape, of something given.

For all the jokes about the innate Fascist bureaucracy of the German mind and German language, consider, for a moment, how preferable is their *Es gibt* to the French *Il y a*. Both are used, colloquially, to mean "there is," as in "there is real horror at the root of everything we say." To pick a random example. But while the German means "It gives," the French is a contorted piece of verbiage literally translating to "It, at that place, has," *y* being a pronoun you use to designate an already-mentioned locality, just like the *y*-axis in graphed functions: a given zero, a vertebral prototype from which all divergence must proceed for the stars' epigenetics to end finally in creatures with spines, capable of walking upright and thus of subjugating whatever still walks on all fours, or sixes, or eights.

*Il y a* would more fluidly be rendered as "There it has," so to give the earlier phrase about roots an horror in French, you'd write something like *Il y a de la vraie horreur à les racines que tout que nous disons*, and if you backmask that through English again, you get "It has real horror, there, at the roots of everything we say." This is a language of possession, rather than of giving. You may be getting tired, after these last few etymologies, of possession, which is ownership and therefore also rape and theft, perhaps down to the most marginal and incidental touch of one body against another. So say a brief thanks to German for basing its notion of what-there-is on the given rather than the owned.

I've heard the German mania for neologisms, its capacity to come up with a new noun for almost any new language-source, damned as "thinning further the Creation," cursed for turning words themselves into disciplines of control, as for example in those parodically long compound nouns we love to whip out as examples of Germanized incomprehensibility, as if our own nouns weren't quite as compound, as ultimately glyphic. Our language tends to compose its glyphs of associations, of metaphoric strata, whereas theirs just bolts the words together right there on the surface: *Klangfarbenmelodie*, say, or *Bauernfrühstück*, which we'd call "country breakfast" and

which they're literally calling "the early-in-the-day food-arrangement of the peasantry." OK, point taken.

But that point, like any arc, also has its point of *Brenschluss*, where its own momentum overtakes momenta designed into it. So let me suggest that this Germanian name-making force may be seen not as analytic or divisive, but as profusive, a way to bring the Creation itself more fully and vitally into language, a way to lose less of either God's work or God's body, depending on which heresy you embrace, by forgetting to give each moment of spacetime its own sign, the glottal coefficient swimming in black gravity alongside the xenoglossic star, like a pilot fish outboard a shark.

But in case that seems too hopeful, don't forget that the next word is 4). *Steal* – and that *steal* is, to the etymon, a synonym for *take*, *rape*, and *own*. Of course it is. It too goes back through Proto-Indo European, all the way to *stel-*, and in its most modern predecessor-form, the Old English *stelan*, it specifically meant "to take and carry off clandestinely and without right or leave [permission]," which is of course exactly what *rape* means. There's the interesting (i.e. horrifying fact) that the word *stele* may be from the same root, PIE *stel-* or *ster-*, and that the stelaе guarding the tombs of not just our dead but the stars' (stelaе of dead light and mass gravity, lignified cartouches feeding black sap to the sepulture of xylem stars inside the nebular core, the ravening zero) may thus be markers for *theft*. I can't go into that one any further without starting to panic myself illiterate, a body-sob transacted nowhere near the eyes and never quite on the point of breaking into a general flood of burst blood vessels and misdirected hormones, so let's move on to

5). *Burn*, which actually used to be two different words – and if you can't see why this is a source of hope, perhaps our last, then I haven't done my job – *bærnan*, transitive, "to set on fire," and *beornan*, intransitive, "to be on fire." This is one fraction of the hope; the other is that all European forms of *burn* (*bernen*, *branden*, *brinnan*, *brannjan*) may descend from the Proto-Indo European *gwher-*, "to heat, to warm," or *bhre-n-u*, "to boil forth, well up." So even after all that theft, that variously-euphemized rape, there may be definitions for fire which include the giving of warmth and the emergence of structure; there may still be a thermodynamics of the REM-quick and flicker-noised neoplastic stars.)

But you were going to say something – says the corpse-interpreter, nearly beaming – about Jews and Arks, and about whether or not I can feel the rain.

(Which is funny, because I wasn't going to *say* anything, nor have I said much at all. I was thinking it, or thought I was thinking it. But the corpse-interpreter and I seem to have developed our own dialect of tics, flinches, unwilling facial contortions, wired up surface-to-surface for each other's impedances and freak arcs of logic, like galactic protein models lining up strange idioglossiae of stars.)

Allow me, he says. You are allowed, I think; I'm only here as a transcriber, a function of the writing system, I think; I am a bit of protoplasm grown not to encompass but merely to transmit the necessary glyphs, I think; I correspond in all parts, such as I have differentiable "parts," to the topologic cuneiform, the embryo-encrypted star-histology of somite sections forming and branching, of the light in the first broken vessel, and the brokenness which is the universe, the biomagnetic architecture of the way the light moved and structured itself after the clay jar shattered, after the lachrymatory urns were glazed to some alter-substance, neither limestone nor just saline tears, with the weeping of the afflicted, or more likely of paid mourners – an interface, a laminar zone capable of reduction to neither of its constituents, a tear-duct-and-calcium-carbonate biome for the suspension and development of lithobiotic stars.

Good, he says, or I think he says. This could go on in regresses as infinite as you like, and some of us would be, have been, content merely to pursue the regress as its own purpose, to illustrate the holes at the bottom of the hole you fell down, tumbling meaninglessly in the cartilage-ringed throat of a dead star until we finally get tired of noticing and commence to live, yet again, as if none of it were true. But really there's no such thing as infinite regress, the same way there's no such thing as repetition, because it all happens *in time*, to a being and in a world both structured by the initial event and by its modified recurrences. What I mean to say is this: no logic games. No simple satisfaction with what happens when two mirrors fuck, the forced copulation of the Doppler tain, quicksilver fumes rising to ease the brain into a set of literate complacency-routines, pondering for as long as anybody likes the subtleties of the verb *to be*. We don't have that much time, nor, I hope, can we be so easily sated on our own meager achievements.

There's no regress, and no real repetition, because each recursion changes the thing, and the world around the thing changes in concert, whether dissonant or tonic, in or out of anybody's notion of the key – there is *feedback*, not regress, and the strange loops are the only loops, and I've seen them with plague-ripe lanterns on the coastline of the largest continent, beginning the inward spread of a light more pixilated and easily digitized with every inward map-inch of profusion, the real accident of plague become the paper problem of plague-statistics, the real boils and swollen lymph nodes and bloody piss, bloody shit, bloody cum, all of the seeping blood satisfied with illustrating a, let's say, a 9% reduction in the number of new cases this month, and an equal reduction in the fatality rate among established cases. I've seen that, and you will too, if you haven't. Down the longest coast of the widest land, a man moves, blaring through his tapedeck the carillons and horns of an old numerical dispensation, come to announce to all concerned (or unconcerned, if they're white and have some money) that the new disease is only the old one with different integers, and that the transition has begun, the swift and averaged-out redaction of animal suffering into loss-of-life figures we can use for banter at galas and political functions, esteeming ourselves as highly as anyone has ever esteemed himself, thrilled to death (though unfortunately not such dead as the coroners would recognize) to tell the crowd about our valiant and, what's more, unremunerated efforts to fight dracunculiasis in the South Sudan or what the fuck ever – and don't get me wrong: on a certain level, it's better than *not* fighting dracunculiasis in the South Sudan, it's just that the exact same men who garner praise for such charity were also the architects, approvers, implementers of the political and economic policies that *caused* an epidemic of Guinea worm in a place other than Guinea.

(And probably in Guinea, too, which was one name the first American slaves used for heaven: they asked their slavers where they'd come from, what the white man's word for Africa was – and Africa too is a white man's word – and were told, by one French colonial overlord or another, "Guinée." So the stolen, the confused, the beaten, the raped Africans came to refer to their spirit world as Guinée, and the practice of what we now called vodou or voodoo – essentially a collision of African religious memory, the imperfect recall of the homeland gods, the wavering amnesiac distillation of another hemisphere of stars, an ichor, a serum thick and acid-sweet as lemonade or milk infused with strychnine, all this plus the bits of Catholicism that the slaves picked up from their

slavers, such that Christ and the Virgin may live and die, as they always should've and originally dead, alongside Erzulie and the Baron, and each god may have his or her vever, the map, the biolithic circuit-schematic of descent from the star-memory in which he or she is stored, from which he or she may be called down, not necessarily to help or hurt men, since the gods are always with us, doing what they do, an activity not removed from human ethics but not constrained to any particular ethical conception; not as simple deliverers or punishers, but rather as a recognition of their already-active presence in the world, an isolation mixdown that highlights the star-formation hiss on certain tracks, at certain frequencies and timbres, of the first destroying Word, which both killed and gave birth to the light, whose carnage was creation, whose paradise was the ultrasound autopsy of stars and their dark ghosts ...)

Think about “Guinea” again, the corpse offers, smiling. Think about its suffix in French, *née*, “born,” the feminine form of the adjective, and wonder thus what the slaves, learning the stray molecules of French detached from the official Academic flow, might've made of *Gui*, since clearly *Guinée* should mean “born in or of Gui.” Maybe the same *Gi* that could've traveled across Central Africa and into the slave-trade West, the *Gi* of the last syllable of Ubangi or Oubangui, which are respectively the African and French names for the river rapids that end “the navigable waters north of Congo-Brazzaville,” and which in turn donated their *gui* to *Bangui*, the capital of the Central African Republic, though that's a white man's spelling of Bobangi – confused yet? White men just keep calling things what they like, and leave the confusion to the Africans – which is the source-language for Lingala, which, in turn, is one of the three languages spoken in the Congo now, the other two being French and a French-Lingala Creole.

Days of digging through European trash outside the UN building, letting your numb and polio-limp legs bump up against however many thousand other living casualties, dogs, birds, guns crowd the street, while you wheel yourself around on a kind of reverse-bicycle, which looks like a recumbent bike but is operated with petals for the hands rather than the feet, attached to a central gearwheel which then turns the wheels underneath you. It's hard to steer this way, as you might imagine, but then everything in life is pretty fucking difficult if you're a polio-stricken child who lives in front of the



UN building in Kinshasa, rooting through garbage for things the Europeans or rich mestizos might buy back, stealing what electricity you can from the unlocked transformers on the lightpoles at the Kinshasa City Zoo, or occasionally buying enough unofficial grid-time to do your laundry from one of the kilowatt-hour Robin Hoods who makes his living – and it’s as beautiful a living as anyone makes anywhere – stealing electricity from the rich neighborhoods, wiring up a slum for a few hours, then hooking the Cities on the Hill back into the grid they presume is theirs to own and to dispense, to offer or to deny access to.

Puncture those little lies when you can. They’re always worth puncturing, and there are women all over the city tonight who need to wash their kids’ clothes and don’t have the time or soap or clean water to do it by hand, who desperately need to make a phone call but have gotten burned on ten bum calling cards in a row, hustled on every main drag through all of Africa (and India, and the Middle East) by people just as poor as they are. So you pay a member of one of the world’s last dignified professions – stealing what the poor need from the rich who merely *want* it – and he gets you a couple hours of power before either he himself disconnects the feed or somebody from the city government (i.e. the privately contracted power company) notices what’s going on.

Occasionally, one of these “thieves” will go to jail, and most of them don’t come out. You pray for them when you can. You look up and see the code-hacking, the wild and self-designed genetic splicing of the stars, the bonesetting and autosurgical stars snapping together the skeletons of deities whose images we might otherwise forget.

Guinée, the lost, the place-we-should-still-be – why not call it Eden, or any Persian’s pairidaeza, and study with the English intellectuals of the era its derivations from the Gardens of Cyrus, find the quincunx everywhere, in the “mysticall apprehension of the letter X,” which according to Sir Thomas doth signifie the inmost understanding of the Pyramidicall forme, to wit, a dual ascent and descent, the thermal scans of the dead vertebrate being uploaded to the stars’ genetic mainframe, the stars in turn descending to comfort and to heal that dead soul upon its transition back into a source rather than a shape of energy, a force before the form, a flow before the freezing of the wave.

Why not, in short, call it Heaven. It's impossible to remember the horror of the slave trade, first because we weren't there, and second because we're both what history will call white men – I a Greek, you an American, though each is a status dubiously conferred by the least credible, the least trustworthy people there have ever been. But that's what we'll be called, says the corpse, trying to smile or maybe trying not to smile, and we'd better admit pretty quickly that we can have only a white man's grasp of what happened to the slaves, however much sympathy we may learn or have been born with.

So imagine: when those Africans were ripped away from the slaving coast for the last time, they had *no reason* to think that there would be any land ever again, anything but an endless waste of water. The Europeans didn't think so, either, until a God-crazed semi-Spaniard half-Italian general fuckup by seven or eight names, all of which sound vaguely like "Christopher Columbus," insisted upon sailing there. The Africans had *every* reason to think they'd been taken to hell, and that hell was the filthy, unbelievably hot, impossibly crowd, death-ridden hold of a closed boat, and that even in hell you could still be beaten, starved, murdered, tossed overboard along with the manacles and iron balloons of your bondage. Thus the white man proved correct all the old African conjectures about ghosts, while – in an insult whose depth of contempt we can barely understand (and still somehow live out, reenact, every day) – deriding African religion, which was not "belief" but *knowledge*, as primitive and base.

No. Christianity is *base*; the "primitive" is primitive because it's what comes to you first, what undeniable reality first flickers around the edge of the firelight or shrieks in out of the bushes before you've had a chance to arm yourself with base-metal theologies – the surgeons' leaden aprons, the subtleties of abstract sin surrounding the fall of Rome: none of that here. There is no protection from the intruding radiography of stars, their X-rays both illuminating your bones and printing them with other, earlier and later, skeletons.

And among the first of these first visitors, the earliest-developed star-photographies, are ghosts. Go anywhere you like, stay there alone for long enough, and just try to tell me that ghosts don't visit you before the image of any forgiving deity, or hell, any evil one. Ghosts are horribly real, and they may suffer horrible pain.

And remember, African boats were open to the sky; these would've been the first multilevel ships most Africans had ever seen, and the descent into their reeking bellies

would *not* have seemed like a natural part of the “voyage.” They probably wouldn’t even have had the analogy of cattle or horses, because they didn’t often send livestock by boat. This is to say that the Africans wouldn’t even have been granted *indignity* as a buffer between them and sheer horror. Nothing but the brain-gripping stench of fear, shit, and mortality, the utmost ambient violence – and behind them, the permanently vacated heaven which the slavers would eventually teach them to call Guinée, where the air was clear and the boats were open to the sky ...

And in front of them, after all the dying over and in the water, only the grimmest possible parody of the Earth from which they’d been stolen: a negative land, a contact sheet of genocide islands unprinted in the red-to-green darkroom of the chlorophyll-gorged stars.

We woke earlier than we were meant to, woke into the skin-angry and nerve-hoarse pause between two sirens, brought painfully to surface by the sudden cessation of that sweeping up-and-down noise, the envelope filter of city-architecture modulating the signal as now decompression sickness bends and warps the oxygenate stars in our spinal airlocks.

We hoped that the dry double-clack in the southeast, couldn’t be more than a few blocks away, was only a drunk taking a speedbump too fast, or the tailgate of one of the tanker trucks rattling in Doppler’d impact, played once by steel-on-steel or quilted tin against dark iron and then immediately rebroadcast by the false facings of the houses, a darker and, by such measure as it’s darker, a more merciful noise, clapping like mineral hands in the middle of a canyon made from the same stone ...

Like the ataxic drumfire of some castoff god, hardly distilled at all from the raw core-dump of the stars’ genetic slag, palms slapping helplessly against each other in a tremens from which divinity cannot be exempt, because such tremens *is* divinity, or at least part of it, and the god is defined by his or her helplessness to be anything but this one and fallible deity, subject to decay as any isotope, unrestored by even the mention of its name, much less the devotion to its cult, for thousands of years now, and just left standing in the center of some gorge which will never even be a tourist trap, thanks to the pollution in the air left by the closed-down coalmine nearby, the unbelievable heaps of rot compressed to rigid chemical formulae for heat, perfect thermal crystallographies

of stars, latticed end-to-end as a pattern that looks random only because it's so exactly *not*, because it has registered everything that's ever happened to these particular molecules, from their first seared shearing off the Word to their most recent soak in the wet black light of the desert's sunken water table, since drawn off by artificial aquifers to feed the succulent plants of the suburbs, to keep the rich men's skin wet enough to sweat if sweating need occur, keep them from the natural consequence of the place where they've chosen (or where money has chosen them) to live: death by thirst.

There's a reason the Indians didn't use that land, and that they view the Anasazi relics there with as much awe and terror as we once expended upon the Canals of Mars, the Face, the lunar seas of air cold and dark as the absent sun, drenching the lungs with black unbreathable negation, a respiratory apparatus pumping the splintered coal-dust of anoxic stars right into your zero plexus.

That's what *should* result, a canopic condition, an in-progress and desert-cured autopsy relieved by the sweat of the hyperventilating desert stars like a cool compress swiped across the surgeon's forehead, but the white people have continued the mass theft their several-times-great grandparents imported here, and are buying up the water rights to most of New Mexico and Arizona, literally out from under the tribes who were "granted" them back in the reservation-building era – yes, hard to believe now, but there was a time when nobody in America was worried about there not being enough water. Shit, how much of your body is made of water again? How many oceans have we already ignored? Haven't we damned the world, in our serial progress, for its insistence on the seas?

(While likewise and unconsciously thanking them for *making* the progress so serial, for providing such second-act lulls of vague orchestration and tonal chaos, to render that much more triumphant the final and Germanized return to tonic when we make landfall, the D Major ringing Napoleonic as Beethoven's public politics across the newly-purchased Louisiana Territory, yes, bit of historic irony there if you happen to pursue the names, that we should be buying a tract of land named for the Sun King just as Napoleon, ex-revolutionary, is declaring himself Emperor, thereby lending just a tint of the schizoid to French nominal history of the period, though god knows they had schisms and schismatics enough without our help – so thank god, under your breath, for

the presence of the oceans, the coastal feeders seeping inland to make all this unfathomable goddamn marsh and prairie so alternately damp and dry, the river systems soldering their major neural pathways in between sky-to-earth grafts of glial and potassium stars, because otherwise we'd lack major dramatic structure, and everybody knows that the violence of civilization may be altered as long as you've got drama enough to reinforce your story, as long as it seems more or less three-phased, rising and falling, goosing the audience's desire to be scared by pretending till the climax of the third act that the plane might actually crash, but then bringing them in for the same goddamn soft landing they've lived through and loved as many times as they've blinked, and are they tired of it now? Does it inspire in them that other, slightly later French export, a thing called *ennui*, not just boredom but an active disaffection with the whole of God's creation?

No, no. Not here. Americans haven't learned that yet. They love the soft landing. They're thrilled to feel the wheels squeak on the runway every time, and they now praise famous men, o, yea, they congregate in gratitude to the rich men who've been so provident as to lay down enough tarmac right here in the middle of the desert, right up there in the goat-cropping hilltop country north of the river. They're in love, the Americans, still in that giddy phase when even sex hasn't become a physical activity, when the only acts of fucking have been performed in such a blindness of excitement and booze and low light that neither partner has yet had the time or sadness to perform a thorough survey of the other's triggers and dead zones, a bioassay of the sacral-plexus stars, and then to start fucking like the fulfillment of some bleak hardware imperative, which is maybe all it ever was. Not yet.

Or not yet on *this* side. We certainly haven't analyzed the tarmac for its grain, the roads for their camber, the silos for their ownership. But we should've learned by now that they're all *products* of analysis, and that what's so adolescent-dizzy on our side – the kind of fucking that seems like a byproduct of summer, a concomitant intoxication to the wine-colored sundown and the gently corrosive booze in your veins – has always been a calculated act on the side of power. They would never have approached us, batting the correct amount of eyelashes, wearing the correct amount of clothing, if they didn't already have profiles and dossiers laid out. They wouldn't have risked that redundancy, or waste of time.

There's no honeymoon in America; there never has been; and, innocent as you may be, perhaps even believing your innocence contagious, communicable through touch or some secretion, you're still wrestling with a preset machine designed to needle exactly the correct nerves along your spine and stomach, and you're doing it on top of stratum after stratum of African and Amerindian bones, more than enough to build and crown the well from which your own sperm or vaginal dampness will emerge neither white nor clear but black and heavy as the oil made from the marrow hung in long black sundogs of rot from those cracked bones, turpentine parhelia emerging in arcs like dirty purple rainbows from the radii of improperly ossified stars.)

The cartilage doesn't quite turn to bone, the skin grows more and more porous and coarse, exhausted with its role of holding so much dread and fluid together, the sarcomeres turn brittle in their prolonged extension and threaten to snap like dry kindling, to send off sparks that would turn the whole population of myofibril stars into a blinding single-exposure brushfire, the flare of a camera burning its film past any printed recognition, not just depositing carbon on the surface or catalyzing crystals of halide silver but actually sending the whole roll up in an acrid tang of guncotton smoke.

So you wake up too early, wet all over with the sweat that night's conflicting temperatures have wrung from your tender skeleton, the turbulent but somehow still hot air beating between the blades of the fan, the dump gusts seeping in like carbon monoxide through the mesh-covered windows; you wait for the sirens to start again, and are reflex-jumpy when they don't, as in the paradoxical stage of Pavlovian conditioning, when the dog will only salivate to the *silent* bell, when the city of 9 million people pants in barely repressed terror to hear – not just be aware of, but actively to *hear* – a pause in the noise outside, a dreadful poise of silence, because it means something's coming, something's being prepared, it couldn't have gone that quiet out of sheer happenstance, it means the power grid is going down or the streetlights have stopped whining, *jesus christ*, open a window or shut the open ones, find some sheer locomotor cognate of panic, do anything at all as long as it's anything at all, just don't lie next to me fucking *breathing*, making more stark and direct with each exhalation the problem of the air we're expected to share, not just with each other but with the rats in the walls and the pulsating oxygen-sick stars, suspended so long in a LOX generator colder than any

Earthly concept of cold that they've forgotten how to take in air, have been soaking it in for such a senseless integer of millennia that their respiratory systems have atrophied, that what thoraces they have now host only shrunken lungs and arteries, small, white, useless organs, albino microbes waiting for inclusion in the symbiosis of some massive and blinding-white organism, engineered by other stars to live on a continent of absolute darkness, to fiend through its skin for any trace of accidental light.

And, having woken too early, having slipped up through the cracks in the usual noise – the in-and-out-of-phase beeping of the blind men's monitors at the intersection, which conducts a nightlong test, every night, of how many equal fractions a bar of 4/4 time can be divided into, with a louder, higher-pitched beep on the downbeat of 1, and then the confused cycling-over of the other monitors, which are somehow never quite in synch, though theoretically they're all the same tempo and should all turn on at the same time; BEEP, beep, beep, beep, and between those cardinal points, as good as any paperweight to hold down the corners of your auditory map, three other machines like cardiograph speakers slice up pliant tissue of musical time, cut across the barline as through cross-sections of hardened gristle, cartilaginous stars turned over time to phospholipid membranes; and then the sound of the gas station being restocked with Earth's vital fluids, the serology pumped by the millions of gallons per day from the absolutely dark and gravity-eating star-corpse at the center of the world, a cadaver whose whole histology and commission is the alchemy of other cadavers, a system of memory and of amnesia both – *it* remembers absolutely everything it recombines, but we see only the products, coal, tar, pig iron, and take them for self-evident principles, when each is in fact a history of slow and brutal magic, a compound sepulture forged and christened in the innermost burial chamber of a star.

Plus air hoses, screeching tires, the occasional bawl of some rich drunk in an oxford shirt and Bermuda shorts stumbling his way home from one of the expensive bars a dozen blocks to the south, lost, for maybe the only time in his life, in this liminal zone, where white people with money pass to buy condoms and cigarillos for conversion into blunts, one of the only gas stations I've ever been to in my life whose clientele is almost equally black, white, and Hispanic (since the oilmen and the city planners have

very much the same goals for segregation, redlining and petroleum byproducts aren't too hard to coordinate).

And that drunk, blubbering into his phone, trying to sing harmony vocals to a scratchy, chorus-warped 56 kbps version of *Magical Mystery Tour*, will fall flat on his well-insured fucking face, one unbelievably hard *smack*, no hands or knees or elbows to break his fall even a little bit, and as he falls, he'll miss the double clap in what for him is the *distance* and what for us is *a few streets down*. He'll never have to hope it's only a backfiring engine or some jackass with fireworks early for the Fourth of July, and he'll never know the sudden nerve-stringency, with no room left for disappointment, when the same dry crack repeats, but at odd intervals, in uneven clusters, and you know somebody's got a gun and has already used it tonight, and you know that only the blindest kind of chance is going to get you home before you become evidence to be bagged up and dusted down alongside the pistol and its spent shells.

What can I tell you? I can tell you that after waking too early, you tend to wake too late; I can tell you that, the second time, we weren't shaken out of any sleep, and didn't have to wait for the rat's-feet metal clatter of shell casings down a cambered road to tell us which was the day of our assignment and which the hour of our uneasy reveille; I can tell you that the next day was swamp-humid, and that there was a pervasive darkness in the air, even during the hottest and brightest hour, a feeling of fluid overload, as of long helices of sugars soaking through the skin, poisoning the kidneys, crystallizing pancreatic islets with rich architectures of diabetic ice, a bright microphotography of organ-failure stars.

Theirs and ours. The stars' anatomy clarified into separate zones and strata of malfunction, of striate fascicular hardware gummed up with contradictory star-programs, a clash of light as of a cymbal bowed with too little rosin on the horsehair, so the sound you get – if you get any sound at all – is not the hum of the cymbal's resonant frequency but the hoarse aspirate whinny of its coded music desperately *trying* to speak, dysphonic stars gasping aphasiac glossolalia, all potential language in the creak and whine of that desperately dry vertical song, like mourners' earthed and lithium scansion delivered to a carillon of stars' stripped-meatless ossature, a crane of abandoned calcium bells.



There's more to tell you, but what else can be told, and what else moves in that interval, between the infinitive and the passive voice – between, that is, the first rupture of the embryonic light, and the waveform of burst-eardrum star-formation hissing in its troughs and trenches, an acoustic tomb-complex many-chambered and labyrinthine as any built to disguise the true resting place of the god's remains? You feel the tympani sucked inward, not blown out by some external force but actively *recalled* into the outer layers of your brain, as might be your eyes upon an overload which works upon the fundamentals of their structure, not on their moment-to-moment reception. You feel the eye revoked and then re-granted, and drown in the condition of its givenness, what the Germans whose language we examined earlier would call its *Gegebenheit*, the electromagnetic field in which it's possible to be thus donor and donated-to, a third-hand medicine become perilously first, now inextricable from what it sees. No more so than it always was, but before, you didn't have to know.

(Light to irritated membrane to cones and rods to synaptic electricity, a cathexis of damaged and anachronistic chunks of star-circuitry, apparently bereft of their original machine, the apparatus that would explain them, though actually left open for exactly such covalent bonds as these: the middle sections of logic boards, the thoraces of software architecture waiting to reformulate themselves around the centripetal pole of a vertebral column, as once when we were in the territory of dead Indians – well, we're *always* in that territory, but as once when we *knew* it – and we could watch the rebuilt henge in the field of tick- and chigger-rich grass, watch the daytime splitting open above the solstice poles and the flat summit of the stepped pyramid, and know beyond any anthropology or guidebook euphemism that not only *were* these tangible and explicit pieces of star-machinery, not only were they active and clear a thousand or two thousand years ago, that they were *still alive* and not even waiting out their moment, that their apparent dereliction was a function of our inability to see, a blank zone east of the *y*-axis on a live oscilloscope whose western zones, the killing- and trash-burning fields of the negative numbers, throbbed with wild but patterned pulsations, a black ocean of carbonized garbage being refined and transmuted in the numerical spine's microfiche, the autoclave where photographic violence de- and reconstructs the medical waste of the stars ...)

You were allowed to presume a world unaffected by the seeing eye, and the eye as no more than a passive function of shadow's ravaging, of the passerby hungers and tonic thirst whose reassertion is the vertigo of evening – every evening, but especially these, when the bloody dismembering of the sun is preceded by a definite and undeniable change in the heat. Until a certain hour, it “beats down,” it strobes in from another latitude, it occupies a particular quarter of the sky and may be evaded for relief or out of terror.

You are, in effect, a coldblooded animal, and you regulate your body temperature by lying with the rabbits and crows (other animals whose scientific designation is inadequate to explain the real pitch and yaw of the day) in patches of sunlight or of shade, basking and unbasking, avoiding by sweat's wiles or dilating all pores and orifices to the output of the exotherm stars – whose temperature itself is body temperature, whose unthinkable heat and wild pressure-variance are also the efforts of a body trying to warm or cool itself toward some chemical synthesis. We make proteins, fats, bone from coiled cartilage, waste from the throwaway portions of the worlds we're required or merely avid to devour; the stars do all of this, make every one of these things, *and* have to build, examine, dismantle, reengineer the histologic hardware and software capable of such analysand syntheses, or synthesized analyses, as you prefer.

Read that phrase back with broken teeth or a tongue gone lax with saccharine and cold – aspartame-stung into the condition of a winter hive, some of whose honey still sticks to the molecular bonds of frost, so diluted when the springtime comes that nobody will taste it even if somebody, likely one of us, one of the dead, is forced to fawn against and to guzzle the meltstream pouring from the derelict honeycomb – and you'll get “analogue sympathies,” which is exactly right.

We have suspected, after death and even sometimes before it, that the tongue is always correct, that language is applicable at all times in all places, but that it may seem maladroit or irrelevant only because we were waiting for the answer to a different question, the resolution to a different knotted problem of the light.

So, down among the dead, if you've still got enough acid in your battery to learn, you submit yourself to this new pedagogy: you try to undertake an education of the ways in which your questions were misconceived, and of the answers streaming around you

all the time, everywhere, on every conceivable level, the mass heuristics of star-error gifting the frayed nerve with lithographies of salt.

So how are you listening, and to whom? Pardon the pedantry of *whom*, but we dead men, we're so much made of language and its uses that we have to be very careful. It's not a matter of correctness to some external standard or academicians' usage; it is rather that a word, by itself, is a lone glyph, all tentacles out, a newly-operational star – gravity's newborn, aborigine of radiation – waiting for the spherical and modulated sweep of forces that will assemble, as proteins are assembled, a star-system or whole galaxy around it, and under some conditions, in some instances, leaving things in such a state for too long can cause us very direct and physical pain.

It hurts. You wouldn't believe the way it hurts. Your experience of pain, as a more-or-less living man (he more or less smiles), is limited to certain frequencies and amplitudes, is modulated like ectopic stars' deformed new womb – the hysterectomy of spactime called the "world" it now inhabits – not to exceed certain thresholds. Of course those limits are partly illusory, and of course there's a huge amount of activity, *every kind* of activity, occurring beyond, below, above them – but an animal, a plant, a stone, a star is made in large part of its complex of limits, the gain and signal-loss which are its incarnation, and distortion isn't just *who* we are, it's *that* we are at all.

(So what's the difference in the pain?, I thought, expecting him to hear me, which he did. Does. I think. Tenses multiplex, delivered back to their real name – they are *tenses*, tensionings of tuneable elements, like tuned percussion tempered toward a higher or lower pitch, dipped in water, scarred with ammonia, branded true.)

Well – he began, shaking his head with incredible slowness and an audible creak of whatever spinal elements he had left, the burner-ring and steroid-dusty flask of his ancient collapsing bone (stained like an abandoned building with the pulverized substance of torn-apart stars, like the downdrift and sharp photography of Hiroshima carbon) – you're set up to feel pain within certain parameters. There's the sharp kind, which is horrible enough to make you scream *fuck* or very briefly think of amputating a finger, and which almost immediately fades. Biting your tongue, stubbing your toe. In the moment, you'd happily saw off your own foot not to feel that any more, happily

swallow the tongue capable of such blatant malfunction. But the pain fades almost immediately.

And you may notice, as in the situation I mentioned earlier involving guns and vines, being shot and simply falling, that there's almost always a half-instant of creeping numbness before the pain really hits. That's your body-modulation, the noise-gates and dynamics-algorithms clipping and scrubbing your neural mixing board to eliminate the gain-rich stars.

You know what I mean? Do I remember it right?

(I think you do. I sometimes try to clean myself with razors, past any outward condition of health and toward a cleanness nothing but the one wrecked moment can define, and it's very much like what you're describing: there's the initial scratch, almost like an itch, of the razorblade kissing apart the striate skin, of it picking the dermal lock to let through the gas-leak hiss of subcutaneous stars; then there's a dullness, a throb growing as the barely-marked skin wells up with blood so red it's almost green, a coppery color of raw metals; and *then* comes the actual sting of having been cut. This is specific to razors. Knives are different. And burns are a whole other parametric EQ, are either drastically more or drastically less filtered than cuts.)

I would tend to think drastically *less*, given what role heat plays in your construction, given that *anything* is only a pattern of bound heat, a voiceprint star-thermography waiting to be played so often that it decomposes into oxide tatters and audibly sculpted static. And I've been burned, of course. You might even bite the end off the participle and say "burnt," which means something different, but I never, to my knowledge, did it to myself on purpose. Maybe I should've tried. Tell me more.

(Burning, I thought in his direction, is exactly the opposite of cutting. By far the worst pain is the approach of the hot metal or cigarette tip to the skin, the hair, the outermost layer of dirt and bacteria of which it will relieve you – but don't think that any of this is obsessive compulsion, or that I'm overly worried about being "dirty." It's not like that. I'm not trying to cut or burn myself *clean* in any daylight and measurable sense.)

I understand. We used to do the same thing with the meat we offered to the god at each of our meals: we'd cut away a certain portion of the goat, ox, cow, whatever, and wrap it in a double fold of fat, and then wrap *that* around the thighbones, and leave it

burning while we ate like your priests sometimes leave incense to sting confession into somatic propriety, to reorganize the senses so as to make it seem like this dark-paneled wood-and-gilt place is the *only* place you confess, when really you're confessing all the time.

(Right. The smoke hovers and you suck it in and feel, I don't know, *clean* is a word I should stop using – how about *tempered*?)

*Tempered* will do nicely. Brought to the proper density and pitch.

(Exactly. And by the time the tip of the cigarette or the end of the heated-up coathanger is actually singeing your skin, you hardly feel anything at all, except a kind of forced grin in the pulp of your molars, the reassertion of some Silurian and bypassed jaw-archetype, saved many millions of years ago to the quickly-bloomed and quickly-dying cellulose motherboard of the drily rumbling mandibular stars, the dry thunder of their mouthparts at slow work.)

Take it for a vatic statement, if you like, if you still require that kind of isolation, but know this: between these and fever's other memoranda, you'll soon need to walk, someday less distant than its own naming, a period of rancid hours gone so overripe that their rotting stench is almost floral, and you'll do it with your chest compressed, your ribcage buckling like a crushed centipede under the sheer weight of surveillance.

Not surveillance *of you*, not in particular, but medical footage of stars detailing their bacterial differentiation, the metastasis of their cancerous cells, the oxidative damage climbing DNA's bent ladder like the slow orange tide of rust climbs the concrete pier where they lay high-water marks after every flood, down in the districts of no sun and no relief, only a barely-graded constancy of light, a strobe so slow and clonic that one human lifetime is hardly long enough to notice it changing.

And you aren't even aware you've spent that lifetime in the throes of an extreme slow-motion seizure until one day, like the white edge of a drug relocates your lost sleep, you suddenly buck a peak or roll in a trough and realize that not everybody has been feeling this way, that not every locus is the site of such molecular compression, such a pharmaceutical density of harshly reprogrammed stars.

Walk, cough, walk. Or, in terms that might strike you as more immediate, more comprehensible – and what has comprehension ever been but the initial violence of

light, the first sting that immobilizes the lit prey before the second sting enacts its total shutdown, hacks into, rewrites, disassembles the star's life support systems by simmering the spine to gelatin ductility, paralyzing the lungs, preserving the brain in a caul of biogenic shroud like another cortex, grown, like each section of our present brains was grown, as an envelope around the prior sections, until the undeliverable moment in which that envelope was sufficient to stand on its own, as a separate organ or separate section of the same organ, a spiderweb overpowering the spider, a mummified and venom-embalmed star hung on that protein silk and come to weigh the whole web down into a gummy gray wreckage, the remainders of amino-acid Icarus still taut enough to hum steely and molar-grinding in the industrial wind – in these terms, well, call it camera after camera feeding into monitor after monitor, all of them recording gray corners and gray streets which show up even grayer on the monochrome stock, a city of multiplied concrete, a doubled leaching of color so intense that the blankest zones show up as nearly blinding white, an overdose of amphetamine stars burning out the nebula that formed them.

We would pull our collars up and look in whatever direction the wind was coming from, each of us apparently alone, visually isolated, but certain in some skin-deep body-knowledge that there were others present, each waiting his or her moment to emerge, neither friendly nor hostile of any necessity, as ontically indifferent as the scared dogs around the power plant, the reverted feral city-geese fed too fat to fly south for any winter, waddling down toward the riverside to pick off what straggling chemically-addled fish they may, like the crippled king with the bleeding groin who sits behind the gashouse all day – “day” is a convention here, like “valence shell” is a self-stabilizing metaphor, a way to talk in structural terms about something impossible to fix: there are no days; there's hardly even a change in the light, though you'd know it's nighttime by the thickness of the air, the clotting of its blood, ichor and dark hemoglobin spliced to fill the feeding tubes with blood-bank motherboards of intravenous stars – and fishes in the polluted river with a stick and a piece of string, a tin can and a bit of scavenged fishing line, the cable of an old wall-mounted telephone, whatever he can get his hands on. Anything will do, which is a way of saying that nothing will do, so anything might as well pretend to. He starves.

His starvation, however, is never quite severe enough to kill him, nor ever relieved enough to make the return to it much of a burden. I can hardly tell how he survives, but he does, and will until some shudder in the order of his buried undead state renders him otiose. For now, he's as necessary as anybody can be, and there's no sense trying to argue him away or help him out. When he looks at you, it's with unfocused eyes, not so much glazed as peeled, deprived of the membrane that used to soften the shocking impact of light, the sun's whiplash atrocity muffled into a set of inferential beatings, one-sided assaults you remember the next day as you number back the bruises they left, the lesions they opened, night-sutured now, numb as long as the alcohol is still in your system.

You've woken up that way, I know, covered in yellow and purple tokens of a night you can't remember, maybe wet with your own piss in a stranger's car, unable to wake up through the spreading, the oily strata of your liquid sedation, using your own language-meat and small articulate bones to hydrofracture the likely lodes of viscous stars' dark ore. Maybe the piss had already dried, and you had to guess what had happened from its sick smell, the stiff starchy fabric, the white chemical signature of salts and sugars caked on the fake fur of the passenger's seat, watching dawn flare like an utter and final holocaust of metals in the northeast.

And you can remember trying to breathe through a throat and set of nasal passages stuffed with leather and blood, the excess blood, fat, cartilage, sinew, bone left over from otolaryngeal surgeries of stars, unfinished tracheotomies whose clipped meat hand to land somewhere, so it landed in your mouth and migrated downward to multiply your own trachea into a forcemute disc, a piece of white plastic flesh so swollen and rigid that the only sound it can possibly make is the sound of itself being surgically removed – that's its voiceprint, the Word of which it serves as Incarnation, sound encrypted as architecture, bereft now of any dampers but its own to calm the spasm of tuned mass.

Any structure is a picture of the lock to be keyed, and from its teeth and ridges, we can reconstruct the necessary device. The printed physiology of any star at all will show, in negative, what bomb-defusing kits sleep in the autoclave, what garrulous decryption software waits for the acoustic weapons' hour.

Asthmatic stigmata, small painful roses grown on the surface of her lungs like dollops of dried red-black sealing wax, the gimlet eyes, the auger holes of some long-lapsed excavation, drilling through compacted sand, sheetrock, limestone, gold leaf, alabaster, and finally long-rotten wood, cedar by the smell of it, to infiltrate the sarcophagi of sedimentary stars.

You'll want a name. Fine. But if I call her Jocasta, which is as good a name as any, there are certain things you should know beforehand. 1). There's no *J* in ancient Greek (nor, to my knowledge, in modern Greek) and there was no *J* in classical, ecclesiastic, or "corrupt Dark Ages" Latin. *J* and *I* were used interchangeably, probably the former as a calligraphic, an elaborated version of the latter, and they both made the same sound: *yuh* when in front of a vowel, *ee* when between two consonants. 2). There was also no *C* in ancient Greek; the *c* in her name should be a *k*, and if that suggests to you something about the speed of light against the measurement of mass, good. It may be you've just worked out some Greek indices, started to notice their attendance to the weight-displacement, rather than the inertial skeletons, of stars. Plato's Sun was a *mass*, a gravity-accruing body, however impalpable he liked to pretend it was, not a speed, and it would take twenty-odd centuries for anybody to figure out that speed and mass are directly related, because they're nothing more than parallel metaphors for the same basic distortion of spacetime, i.e., the distortion that anything exists at all.

Therefore: 3). Her real name is Iokasta, pronounced *Yo-kah-stah*, and nothing you're liable to confuse with the kinds of names twittering in flat-posh accents from Chelsea maisonettes, being flung over the garden walls of Knightsbridge estates where the moneyed come to pretend they don't know how they got that way. Some of them may even have forgotten. Bravo. They retain the paraphernalia, of course; what good is power without jodhpurs, kneeboots, riding crops, bridles, the leather and body-acid smells of upkeep you'll never need to worry about, the promise of gin and bitters after a different kind of sensory debauch among the hostlers and the poor, who live, oh, to be sure, a *richer* life of the senses, isn't that right, Your Grace.

Don't ever forget that: among the many ways to know the powerful, one of the least variant, most foolproof is to recognize which people periodically immerse themselves in the forced culture of the poor. Who comes to market when she could be buying from her own factory farms? Who talks out loud about his shoes being



handmade, among the people who handmade them, and who will never have the chance to wear or eat or hear or read or see or breathe anything but mass production? And who shall go to the ball, and what, oh what, shall she *wear* to the ball?

So, Iokasta, Jocasta, the orthography shouldn't matter once the phonology's been explained, but of course it does, how could it not, and I think we'll stick with Iokasta, if only because the printing of it, the optical cryptography, associates her with islands and with birds, with avian skeletons found on narrow spits of land between coral embargos, with the hollow isinglass bones shattering and fused in the cores of ossifying stars.

Which is to say not only stars turning from cartilage to bone, but stars which enact the same process upon other, more pliant materials. Iokasta feels that this morning is one such substrate of matter, and she wishes it would clarify to bone.

She's in a car, something beat-up and at least thirty years old: semen-thick smell of glue seeping from between the plastic components of a decomposing dashboard, the green glove-compartment cover, the green molding over the clock and thermostat, the shattered-and-glued glass over the speedometer and engine-temperature gauge. She's got no idea whose car it is. She can't remember having been in it before, though at the moment she also can't remember her own birthday or her mother's face, so maybe don't count too much on conscious memory at the moment. The back seat is a burned-out mess and smells like consumed butane; there are solid puddles of brightly-colored plastic, blue, green, red, dotting the fake fur and fake leather like inedible condiments, the sauce and frosting of a human being come finally to eat the things he extracts from the Earth, without that messy intermediate process of refining them into secrecy, injecting oil, one way or another, into everything he touches and uses during the course of a day, but so subtly that he rarely thinks of oil.

And if he does, it's as a black liquid in stained barrels on a dock very, very far away from here, among fenced goods and stolen firearms on a boat leaving Port Said or a tanker-truck muttering across Saudi Arabia. It's not something he'd *touch*. He never needs to consider his city as a logic of melted funerary urns, a mathematics every term of which has been reverse-engineered from the depleted ore of bacteria older than the stars they swarmed.

Sometimes, when your memory is blank, as Iokasta's is right now, "what happened" will come back to you first as "what might have happened," and you'll intuit the lost scene before remembering that it actually occurred. Thus now. She looks at the acrid black devastation of the back seat and thinks, *If I had to guess what happened here, I'd guess that somebody piled up a bunch of cigarette lighters, poured some clear liquor on them, and set the whole thing on fire, and that we drove around with horrible smoke pouring out of the back windows, in a kind of tribute to the real terms and conditions of our night, a 3 a.m. excursus on the reified petrology of stars.*

We walked, as under liquid oxygen sedation, along the gray-and-orange nuclear beach, feeling radiation burn grow like a tide of incised verdigris on every surface shadow failed to counsel, heads and faces gone to duochrome reproduction, mathematically-unstable manifolds of absolute albedo and terrible radiant thirst, while the whole history of light's infliction collapsed, restructured itself, collapsed again on the horizon, a gamma corollary to the delta Northern Lights: radio-audible, spiking wildly in the bandwidth spinal quartz derives from heterodyned stars.

Downshift them from the carrier wave to some octave our eardrums can sense, ideally in the 30-70 Hz band, just above the tectonic floor where music solidifies into stone, or at least into the sedimentary makeup of future strata, the shifting grains, the botanies of stripped bone and fossil vegetation which will foster, as an incubator does the prematurely born, zooid taxonomies of xenomorphic stars. Just ... just anything to beat against the tympanum, dilate the auricular canal, press on the lateral surfaces of our skulls as now not light but light's ingredients, the visible and actually tangible distortion of gravity, explodes in torturously slow motion across the whole rim of the Earth, much of which we can see from this outpost, which should be "the last" but is really only one rung on a horizontal ladder, none of whose individual stations can really be called terminal or doomed.

They compose a confederate and braided doom, to be sure.

They don't, however, tell you much more than that – much aside from a set of dyscalculiac inferences, birth-defective algebras that shouldn't and don't sum with any known friction of variable and coefficient, any xenoglot transmembrane glyph of

interferon stars, mutually immunoreactive, attacking each other's foreignness and obvious deficiencies until they define a substance not of correction to the other's standard but of the *attack itself*, an ongoing and self-limited explosion slow enough to call a body, a shape, a protein trigger, soluble to its own fluids, barred against the entry of some others, extracellular matrices now horribly tangled in a bewildering black gnarl of biologic wreckage, like a whole seaboard capital reduced to the ferroconcrete ossuaries its buildings have always hidden, and forced to breed on those funeral terms, to conceive and to deliver an unviable and sterile cross-species child whose only spawn will be the medical curiosity of his bones, the hospital incinerator hiccupping and hissing when it's asked to burn away the surgical waste of autologous stars.

I mean, there are places like this all over America, aren't there? All over the world, by now, though many of them are legally American – i.e. are American territory on other people's soil, Army and Air Force bases, branches of the Pakistani Intelligence Service whose buildings are secretly leased to the CIA, prisons of no obvious denomination leaning with the wind and coral drift on islands in the British Indian Ocean, which itself is of such tortuous ownership that it's really kind of pointless to try to figure out “who” is “doing” “what.” Every term self-critical, hyperaware, caffeine-singed, brushed taut and wiry by regular amphetamine injections, and ready to burst out in hysterical and apparently unprovoked laughter at the mention of certain words, none of which seem funny to anybody else – but god, oh god, jesus, do they seem funny if you're in the right (the wrong) state of mind.

(I remember – I don't remember much – I have a few still frames left to me: the bar at midnight, with champagne, sweet- and dirty-tasting stuff, probably bought in bulk from the same liquor distributor that gas stations patronize, being passed around in quarter-pint plastic cups to everybody in the bar, and the rancid air of breath's division into small, closed systems for those who will and won't fuck tonight, in couples and odd trios, occasionally quartets though these are likely divisible into two couples, and it's anybody's guess who ends up where, and nobody really cares, least of all their members – you can *smell* that in the air if you've put yourself through the necessary training, been lonely enough in large enough rooms, been hardwired for such a cortical xenosis of stars, an epizootics of disease to which most of your species is immune: it

comes over you like swine flu among horses, bird flu seeping into the human population, and you know, you sense, you're physically overcome by, you swoon with, the fact that everybody else in the room is *feeling what he's supposed to feel*, he or she, and that you alone are *aware* of that imperative but basically unmoved by it, horrendously alien even to your own adrenaline, pheromones surging milky and mosquito-swarmed to obscure the colder and less summary radiance of the winter stars, less abstractable into averages and means, a kind of light to which percentages mean nothing at all, which they really don't – you say, you've been taught to say, "20% chance of rain," which means, "If this day were to happen a hundred times, exactly as it is, it would rain on twenty of those hundred occasions," and that isn't true at all: it would do what it's going to do, and the troubled edge of potential in the air would remain potential, and the clustered neural firing of stars distilling voltage from code, or freezing code out of voltage like the junkies used to freeze the opiate out of some kinds of cough syrup, [you pour it into a plastic bag, you put the bag in the freezer, you wait for it to freeze, and as its molecules tessellate into frigid crystal, you can see which parts of it are opium, alcohol, flavoring, filler, whatever, and if you know how to read the colors, are musically versed in the chromatic scale of 1950s pharmaceuticals, you can then cut out the opiate part, boil it up for injection, do some other shit I don't understand to manufacture dry room-temperature crystals like crack rocks which you can then freebase, however you want, the options, well, the options aren't anything like *limitless*, in fact they're severely limited, but you only need *one*, don't you?] would do whatever they're going to do – and you'd be alone, still, watching the neurochemical programs drift down through the air like stratified species of vapor, hoar, snow, sleet, on your way back to a half-stranger's apartment in a well-known part of town to find what small and failed suicide attempts await you there, nostrils still flaring and contracting like a nervous horse's with the reek of all that behavioral pharmacy in the smokeless black air of the bar, where everybody's doing exactly what New Year's Eve expects, where old, old machinations are warming up to burn off the dust and spiderwebs they've accrued since their last usage, a smell like out-of-date computers startled awake in the lead-lined junkyards of the Cold War, the radiological-scan apparatus of obsolete stars shaken out of its historical coma and X-raying everything around it, everything in or out of sight ...)

That's good, and thank you for telling me, but there must be more.

(You sound like a psychiatrist.)

No, no. Though I understand your confusion. It's the other way around: psychiatrists are often obliged to sound like *me*. What do you think it sounded like when Oedipus asked me to tell him why his city was sick, and what do you think I was forced to mull over in the following days, after my exile, when I had to walk along the shrinking walls, in the outskirts, the places where the city-paid masons just stopped building because nobody worth protecting would ever occupy them, where the process of laying stone on stone and mortaring them together devolved into loose piles of rubble, and where I had to walk *at a level* with the tops of those falling walls, until finally the crown of my skull was just below the top of the loose dirt, infertile dirt, not anybody's growing-soil, no vines, neither the olive's nor the grapes, and I was walking as you'd walk aboveground but had gone beneath the Earth, into a labyrinth I created as I paced it out, a maze, in its way, more awful than any built to contain the King's deformed stepsons, the birth-defective children of his wife and God the Bull, more horrible because it was ex-centric, it contained no central chamber, and its full shape could only be defined when I died, and clearly, though I'm dead by many people's estimation, I'm also still here, still talking to you? What do you think *that* monologue was like, and how do you think it feels never to be able to end it?

(So if I were to guess your name ...)

You'd probably guess right. But please, don't. There are problems of spelling and reference, and of specifying which myths apply, between none and all – whether I have a beard on a woman's face or half a beard on a man's, whether I have wrinkled but obviously female breasts or maybe an Adam's apple and a male body but a gray shriveled vagina underneath my rags, self-sutured with disuse, forcing what progeny I helplessly bear to find other deliverance, from my mouth, my eyes, my bones, not yet from my forehead, like Athena solidified one of Zeus's proverbial migraines. Though I don't rule that one out. Imagine the comfort of it. Truly there are forms of protection which only the gods can experience, and I'm not a god, though I'm distantly related to one or another by blood. Imagine the help, the sheer raving mercy, of having your pain, your fluctuant and protoplast brain-fever, turned into a solid and living being, with a definite shape – so definite that, even two and a half thousand years later, you could tell

me that she was boyish and bookish, and had eyes that flashed like an owl's, or like the glossy underside of olive leaves. Imagine your corroded and collapsing neural pathways thus tempered and forged into the endoskeleton of a crow-analyzed star, and thence recovered, salvaged, with the flesh of a girl just become a woman, always old enough to seem wise but never quite anywhere outside of youth. Can you imagine?

(I can try.)

So can I. That's all I can do. As I say, there are forms of security to which all but gods are denied access. And there's no point bemoaning or protesting it, not that I can see; it's the difference in their species, the adaptation they have and we don't.

(If they came after us.)

Excellent point. We have tended to conceive of gods both ways: either developed beyond humanity, or preserved from humanity's later and deleterious development. And I tend to hold to both heresies, so far as that's possible. I do think that the human being has a virtù called *estrangement*, and that you – we – exist to make external what was otherwise enclosed in the hot rubric of the abdomen, the viscous star-zoology of the skull.

(I try to be a double heretic, too, but it gets hard. I should say, difficult. Sometimes the difficulty is that it's very, very soft.)

Well said. Now say more. Tell me what was left untold last time you strung me out on an ellipsis.

(I'll try. I remember all that hormonal damage in the bar, a basement bar, with a lobby up on street level where they checked IDs and let a few smokers hang around lazy as unstrung marionettes, trying either much more or much less seriously to fuck each other than the drunks were trying downstairs – these were either first flirtations, bathroom-line chatter, or they were the hard and detail-rich negotiations of people who had already decided to fuck, and who were pretending to be much drunker than they actually were; and I remember that the stumble down the steps, which switched back two or three times between street level and the bar like traintracks growing over the countryside –)

I'm glad you said "growing."

(So am I. I remember that the descent made you feel somehow anonymous, inculpable, like whatever happened belowground was possession by some earth-force, a

mineral sweat gasping off the walls, and that you wouldn't really be considered responsible for it under the forceps of any daylight analysis. I remember realizing that, although I realized all this in the moment, none of it would save me or forgive me, and that I was only a worse-constructed version of everybody else in the bar, a machine grown self-critical but not, for all that, any different, much less better. I remember the snow seeping from the sky in damp diagonal laces as I walked back to the apartment where I was sleeping that night, probably on the couch, not impossibly in its owners bed if he ended up elsewhere, and I remember that the whole walk was almost effortless, so driven by what had to happen that I've only got a single image of it left: me at a badly-planned five-way stop, not really caring about the traffic, wondering if it would be gentler for the survivors if I seemed to have died drunk in an accident, to have misread the streetlights and stepped out into the middle of a car wreck, since I'm partly colorblind and have trouble with stoplights if they aren't the vertical red-yellow-green, top-to-bottom kind. So I walked into the intersection without looking, but nothing happened. And then I remember rifling through the stranger's kitchen drawers for knives, and I remember a last cigarette and a few phone messages, and I remember being tackled and held down, and the knife thrown across the room, thunking against the hollow body of an old expensive Gibson with one pickup, a kind of Charlie Christian guitar, and then I remember uncontrollably laughing the whole way home, not because I thought anything was funny, just vomiting laughter, helplessly cracking up as I ran from the guitar to my bed, where my hesitation wounds bled cold into the sheets, and where I woke up still epileptic with laughter, reconstructing by severance the skeleton that all of this had shaken loose, bonesetting myself against my own will – it hurt horribly to laugh after a while – as in an autoimmune reaction flaring pink and tender between newly-paired binary stars.)

A flat, a planar, sterilizing heat, white surfaces and high albedo, the self-overloading sum of echo twanging all afferent nerves to feedback, and neither manual nor automatic override to prevent the abortion of stars' neural cotyledons, the black seedlings of infant oscillation charred now to clumps of dusty cellulose, dead saplings stuck in the branches of all branching veins, all capillary action paused to pant a sweet

thick vapor, clog the necessary space between, stuff synapses with bay leaves, myrrh, and thyme, embalming the inpatient stars before their surgery is quite complete.

Not even the slave-state languor of reeking magnolia and honeysuckle blooming like vegetable lust, coarse serum spun with mastic to the texture of an unwilling honey, weeping trees, none of them willows, bleeding through reduced first and second skins, bark spotted with rich milky sap like mineral assay picks out dark deposits on the stars under medical observation, placed on suicide watch, cross-referenced with the meteorites more likely to give up crops of uranium, technetium, whatever rare isotopes are actually less expensive to harvest in outer space, fruit of unterrestrial stones wheeling like ore's vertigo up and down the stock exchange, and the expense of your bread or nominally "clean" water is truly and hopelessly covariant with these estimations, rigged to the approximated yield of, let's say, pitchblende or DNA-loaded ice from the hollows and crags of some interstellar mineral, absolute-zero hives of star-genetics glaciated smooth and uniform for total perfect surface-return of all radar and sonar –

*But*, but, you know that when you get 'em heated up, laboratory conditions, all hands on deck, as preference has it, the old honeycombs will start to surface again, the old reticulations bristle out of a bee-architecture thin and sweet as pastry, honey-soaked baklava crumbling to deposit voicebox larvae, laryngoscopies of stars pearl-wild with writhing termite life.

And don't forget, whatever kind of heat you're dealing with, that this *was* a slave state, and remains so whether you're talking about classical Greece or middle America. You have never lived anywhere but slave states, and neither have I. That stain is in our blood, ineradicable as that blood's basis, and its removal would be as difficult as reconstructing your heredity from the chromosomal interchange of metaphasic stars, with their centromeres gone to friable spindles, their protein-code of spiderwebs stretched past the point of fracture. You'd have to delete anything capable of passing for your parentage, all the way down to the movement of tectonic plates, the gradual receding of the methane sea, whatever makes this place different from the last burned-out planet.



And it's hard not to believe – based less on “scientific evidence,” per se, than on observation of humanity – that we *have* ruined other places before this one and will continue to ruin the next. Venus a dim memory, Mercury still dimmer, the ultimate basal substrate, the ganglia twitching outboard of the spine either side like blackout haploid memories of wings, blackbox stars recording half the necessary alleles to regenerate a wasp.

But I'm not, says the corpse-interpreter, suggesting any theory of human habitation and migration, or lost civilizations, or whatever you like, and I'm *certainly* not suggesting that aliens landed in Peru to teach the Inca astronomy. That was another America, the place in and time at which it was possible to take such things even half-seriously, when you could form a Revolutionary Group, capitalized always, and genuinely think that the refusal of gender-based pronouns would bring down De Gaulle's Fifth Republic. I can hardly believe it, either, but there truly seem to have been cities that felt this way, and people in them doing the feeling. There seem to have been half-assed students of Lenin and Lukacs who thought that the Vietnam War would end if only they could convince parliament to institute mandatory maternity leave. We were all younger then, dangerously so, and were content to oppose *their* history on its own terms: as a succession of victories and losses, as a series of events and their prime movers. Put it on a poster and horse-glue them up all around the Latin quarter, the Venetian lido, whatever spa towns were left on the orient side of the Berlin Wall. Kidnap the prime minister of Italy and, when asked about your demands, simply say, “We want everything to change.”

The other side of which, of course, is that you then end up having to kill the prime minister of Italy, because you've got no fucking idea what to do with him once he's actually in the gas-station basement you use for a Command Center, very proud to utter those words in some semblance of sincerity, and still, as ever, trusting to the powerful to validate your own rebellion: it wasn't a real Command Center until it had a kidnapped prime minister inside it. “There will be a chance for the Revolution. The President has promised.” Have there ever been two sadder goddamn sentences placed back to back?

Yes, of course there have, but not in the same register, and not with the same fulsome tingling hopelessness of misunderstood hope. So you formed revolutionary cells, the main tenet of which seems to have been that women got short haircuts and

men let their hair grow, and you posed with Soviet Kalashnikovs as if the arms trade between the Soviet Union and the states on “the other side” of the Cold War weren’t a pretty integral *part* of the Cold War, a structural element key as any joist or support, and you sloganeered all over the districts nobody cares enough to repaint, because they – the powerful – know that those slogans will be replaced, come Mayday or the first of *any* other month, with others, and that 99% of the people walking home across those warehouse walls will be too desperate, tired, worried, hurt, fatally insulted to give a shit about some garbled bit of Marx in red spraypaint.

These should, according to the theory, be your allies. Actually they’re the allies of whatever already exists, not by their own volition, not because they’ve chosen any allegiance, but because they were born to it and have never been offered any choice at all.

Arise, ye workers of the world. But that’s the problem: they *do* rise, every morning, and they head off to the factory again.

Wipe off the sweat with a towel already too grimy and dry-damp – soaked through in some places and in others starched to a stiffness of salt and acidic skin-waste – to be of much use, and keep going.

A linear swirl of what might be dustmotes, grasshalms, midges or aphids, all progressing along straight lines toward the last edge where the light will catch and annihilate them, render them a transitive property of the eye, bioactive shadows logged on the rod-and-cone hard drive of star-cathexis, and then the gradually complicated sine of some deep bass synth coming from the knacker’s yard next door, where the circuit-breaker stars are blinking on and off in neuroleptic strobe, and where they’re shattering concrete to be reincarnated as concrete, the routes of trains to be reborn as the slightly altered routes of trains, the skulls of cattle to become sharp-smelling and strangely infertile loam, a topsoil that looks rich and black as bog-peat but is unwilling to grow much of anything at all. Chips of bone and gnarls of cerebral tissue, rank spotted hide, and the closing wooden doors of the same train cars that have been in operation since they were used to ferry Jews over the Reich-Proper line into Poland.

Somewhere in the world, at least one Holocaust boxcar is probably still in use, and in it, the ghost of the assassinated Reichsprotektor goes about the work which

assassination never really stopped, continues preaching demotic and demanding from the back seat of his open car in the Prague suburbs, Liben to be specific – you think you know pomposity, fuck me running, how about this: when Heydrich’s first and failed assassin jumped out with the submachine gun, a usually-reliable Sten, and when the gun jammed, Heydrich attempted to *argue down* the man who had just tried to kill him. His vociferations were cut short by an antitank mine lobbed at the back of the car from another angle, and then Heydrich *chased* the man who’d just killed him, though neither assassin or assassinated yet knew that the attempt had been successful.

So they took Heydrich to a hospital – helped there not by his bodyguards or an SS attaché, but by a Czech woman, a subject of the occupation, which should tell us something about the proximity to real power: there’s no way she actually *thought* about helping the Nazi autocrat of Czechoslovakia, or about letting him die; she simply obeyed the prompting hardwired into her biology over the last few months or years, the artificial diode bridge of printed-organ stars – and “a physician, Slanina, packed the chest wound, while another doctor, Walter Diek, tried unsuccessfully to remove the splinters” of the mine. “Heydrich was given several blood transfusions[;] a splenectomy was performed[;] the chest wound, left lung, and diaphragm were all debrided and the wounds closed,” and Hitler’s personal physician suggested that Heydrich be given antibiotics, but the doctor whom Himmler had flown to Prague was certain that Heydrich would survive and refused the use of the drugs that might’ve saved him.

So, after the machine gun, the bomb, the idiot gallop after the assassins, the bumpy ambulance ride, the surgeries, it was probably the petty power-struggles of Nazi bureaucracy that actually killed that poisonous old fuck, the Protektor of Bohemia and Moravia, and the man that most Nazis at the time assumed would eventually succeed Hitler. It’s not at all unlikely that, if Heydrich had survived, at least one of the embryonic coups against Hitler would’ve worked, that Adolf would’ve either been killed or paroled off to some Alpine Redoubt after having made it abundantly clear that he was incapable of bringing the Soviet campaign to any kind of resolution at all, and that Heydrich would thus have been appointed Führer. He probably would’ve had the political savvy, at that point, to accept that the campaign of world domination had failed, to accept the lands the German Reich then held, and to release the concentration-camp Jews into Palestine, or wherever the Allies liked (after quietly killing as many

more of them as he could). Heydrich was a politician, and his personal cruelty may well have been incapable of overriding his personal ambition.

So, because one physician couldn't abide being upstaged by another in the presence of top Nazi brass, Heydrich died, which meant there was no obvious successor to Hitler, which meant that the war finally hinged on Hitler's increasingly frail grasp of political and military reality, which meant that the Thousand-Year Reich got aborted in its early adolescence. Is this a victory, for us, for anyone? Or did the Reich's techniques, its real influence on geopolitical history – the absolute symbiosis of statecraft and technology – simply leak out via the same conduits who first leaked it in, the same interlocked and transnational conglomerate companies who had *always* been the real power behind that weird Oberösterreichischer Adolf, and into the nations which had allegedly just “defeated” Nazi Germany?

I don't mean to claim any clairvoyance here, says the corpse-interpreter, or to suggest alternate histories. I simply wonder if the liquidation of Reinhard Heydrich – not to downplay the bravery of the men who killed him – might actually have made it *easier* for the significant parts of Nazism to spread across the First World after the war, and if those agencies with a commitment not to German mythology or pseudo-scientific racism but to the real structure of the Nazi state might've been a little bit grateful to get all that histrionic Wagnerian bullshit out of the way, circa 1945.

There was real work to be done – on paper in this hemisphere, by slaves in the southern one – and any more stage-thunder and gold-leaf lightning bolts would've obscured its progress; there were more fruitful arrangements to seek, a more directly cooperative Gesellschaft between World Powers (U.S. vs. U.S.S.R., so much more productive than Allies vs. Axis) to be aligned, and finally no real change across the token membrane of V-E Day, no survivors who weren't earmarked to survive long before anybody bothered to declare war.

## Session #7

The crippled, dying fireflies brought to ground in the bed of desiccated mint are wrecked insect ambulances, impaled hospital stars.

So. A yew-needle crucifixion down in a city of edible cellulose architecture, and at the very worst depth of summer – when the heat turns bruise-dark, wet, undulant, syrupy-thick enough to roll between your fingers – to remind us, like the sun’s birth at midwinter, of what predicate geographies sleep in scuffed pale negative plates at the reversal-stock bottom of the world.

Most film is carbonized: you burn it with light, you afflict it with a generation-loss topography of once-histologic stars, organs reduced to their 2D printings, or rather say “translated” than “reduced,” a rendering as of painted walls after carved glyphs, a schematic plan of the buried temple complex which is not – for all the loss of stone and earth and trapped breath, the wet hymnal of the lost parishioners seeping still from the impacted dirt, the salivary output of entombed tellurium stars – any less real, nor any more.

Only real on different coordinates, in relation to another manifold of maps and organisms, any one of which may easily be mistaken for the other, any sign of which may lose some obvious diacritic mark (in the varying depths of the carvings, for instance, so that sign-element *x*, which stood out 6 inches from the ground of the rest of the glyph, loses its emphasis upon sketched 2D reproduction, as upon removal from a crèche of stars’ impinged bones to the overhead hieroglyph meaning “cave,” “shelter,” “chapel,” “entrance to labyrinth,” which itself means the projector for what’s been called eidetic cinema, a filmstrip equal parts external darkness and internal firings of the eye, rhodopsin and cryptoxanth, the molecular backbones of xenonucleic stars storming across the ceiling of the buried maze in blurry real-time multitrack, quick as time-lapse film of flowers blooming or bacteria reaching an incurable shape, viruses differentiating toward an altered protein cryptography which the medicines we currently possess will

no longer know how to unlock, and they tell me that drug-resistant syphilis is on the rise, and that we may be dying soon and in droves of diseases we thought we'd cured, pumping useless vaccines into veins already overrun with the xenozoonosis of their sequels, epizootic star-mutations).

But, for that loss, they may acquire something else: a new implied depth or distance, a shading which began as the error of some scribe's hand or the twitchy inscription-needles in the myograph scriptorium of the stars' muscular voltage, and which, over the thousand-year interval between their transcription and our reading, has clearly become part of the sign, say a horizontal black bar between the radical for *fire* and the spliced radicals for *jaguar* and *paw*, as in the name of the lost king, whose missing pyramid is still down there somewhere, sleeping bioactive along the border between Mexico and Guatemala.

You may think to yourself, "There are bigger problems right now along the border between Mexico and Guatemala," and that, from a certain vantage, is true. But you might also think, What problems currently obtain are the consequences, even the mutations, of the problematics of that missing pyramid – both its original purposed architecture and its subsequent occlusion – and *that* would be as true as anything you're likely to think while on this Earth. Or under it.

Trust me with that last part, says the corpse, himself an interpreter of corpses. The dead don't get any *wiser*, and their powers of perception do not necessarily increase. They just see things differently than the living do, and are therefore apt to stumble through some Elysium of answers to the insoluble algebra of meaning, not by any means knowing that it's Elysium or what flowers you ought to pick there, much more like the young girl with the foretroubled heart – heart oracular not of fixed events or Cassandra plagues forestructured, not of the definite sin and the trespass across the threshold of your own house, into the room where your wife and her lover will undo ten years of inexplicable safe passage across the face of war with two knives and a bathtub, she because she has no choice, he because he's an avaricious piece of shit and will get the death he deserves for it – no. Not that kind of oracle.

The girl's heart was simply heavier by a certain mass and density of shadow from her birth, what we'd now dread as a dark spot on the x-ray, a cardiogram playback-error

beeping in the triage ward and naming you, by sonar's monosyllable, for election to the frozen crystallography of hospice stars.

And she didn't know what to fear, or even to fear at all; and she didn't know how to tell anybody about it, or what there would be to tell, or how to name such that uncertainty would adhere to the name in its unstable residence upon the tympanum or tongue of any auditor; and she didn't know how any of this would sound to her mother, who was so caught up with the work of reviving the world, in constant juvenescence of the constantly born year, not yet a shifting property of Christ the Tiger, who comes under the guise of Antichrist's subduer – but don't we all know, haven't we all been given to suspect, that when Christ arrives as Tiger, it's not completely in the name of any righteous indignation, and not totally aimed at the eradication of his opposites, whatever those may be? Haven't we come, by now, to wonder if the feral Christ, the killer, arrives under that aspect only because, at certain times, he *must* – his choice in this as abbreviated and helpless as ours is, his options crippled down to one, his foreshortened mercy still beating like a diabetic ache, a pinworm coiled for winter in the kidneys?

But knowing now, both Christ and the Worm, that this is a season for slaughter and the slow reek of hot blood going cold and rotten, the smell of putrescent iron, materials not normally thought to rot come to their definite and unburied unwept putrefaction, and diagramming thus the pang-struck birth of the coal and oil and peat we've taught ourselves to need, the natal-ward alarm of the ectopic stars' life-threatening delivery?

I apologize if I seem naïve or intentionally obtuse about your Christ –  
(Not really *my* Christ, interpreter.)

But he *is*, whether or not you want him to be, just as Allah is your Allah now, and Yahweh always was your Yahweh: the profoundest assumptions of every system you have for reducing the terror of the coming hour, all the machinery and methodology of exploration along the deep-sea trench of the spine, the neural terminals hissing with the tic and flicker of their assigned afferent stars – these all include something Christian and Muslim and Jewish, and cannot be disclaimed so simply as to say, "He's not *my*

god.” He’s in your pantheon now, and only some horrendous and miraculous act of unmemory will ever remove him. Only the fiercest ashen amnesia.

(I think I understand.)

Which is why I apologize, because it all must seem strange to somebody whose life was tracked and sawed off, in part, by that Christ, long before it even began – but think of how strange it seems to *me*, to us, on this other side. And we’ve had about 2400 years, to say nothing of the time we may have actually lived before the myth recalled us, to figure out your Christ, and I don’t know about the King here, because he’s cagey since he had to gouge out his own eyes, or rather collapse them inward with his wife’s brooch-pin – replacing thus the subtracted optic equipment with a definite choreography of iron, lacquer, gold, a mineral constellation of hard-install phosphene stars – but I still don’t understand about your Jesus Christ at all, and though I haven’t given up, I don’t really expect ever to get it.

(What still confuses you?)

Well, what still confuses *you*?

(Almost all of it.)

Right. Right, right. And think of it this way: there were two traditions about gods back when I had to traffic in their half-manifestation, back when it was my job to intuit the god’s action from the weft, the vegetable growth, of all the events patterning themselves as intelligent and as without appeal as the earlier growth of galaxies, the byzantine star-genetics taking shapes neither predestined nor random, but latent within the materials themselves, as the vertebrate eye is neither ordained from all eternity nor simply the product of natural selection, but is somehow stored ab ovo in the substances which eventually compose it, is some cold-storage embryology of stars waiting for flesh warm enough to bring it to an optic thaw.

(Tell me more about the eye, if you don’t mind.)

Of course not. That’s all I’m here for, *to tell*, and I *will* tell. You’ve got your theory of evolution, the basic Darwinian one, and right now it’s so embattled by various kinds of hopeless bigots that it almost feels pointless to notate the serious problems with Darwin’s idea, because you don’t want to feel like you’re on the side of the people who bomb abortion clinics and bring GOD HATES FAGS placards to military funerals.



Incidentally: if I'm still any kind of oracle, I don't think you'll be dealing with *that* sort of fundamentalist for much longer. They'll die out. The next kind will have built itself a kind of bioinformatic immortality long before it's even born, and then the whole "fate of the planet," in terms you're comfortable hearing, truly *will* be inexhaustibly imperiled. Because the next set of fascists will improve still further on their progenitors: after Hitler and Mussolini, your real architects and clansmen of genocide learned to stop wearing swastikas and jackboots, and a comparable shift in iconography is coming to you now. The next "Nazis" won't be skinheads with prison tattoos. That's a dead end, and its huddled occupants are already dying at a furious rate.

No, the new solons will arrive from places where money, power, and youth have taken up the horribly bitter chemistry of transition into lordship, and they'll come at you – they're *already* coming at you – with a pitch designed to sound reasonable and tolerant: they don't care about gay marriage, they don't mind transgendered people, they feel a certain (by which they mean, an impossibly vague) guilt about the fact that your police kill more black people every year than there were casualties of the Trojan War, and that there are more black people in privately-owned and for-profit prisons than there ever were enslaved in your country at any given moment. They just, well, they just feel like they ought to *do* something. And the "ought" of it is enough.

Away with the old bigotries, they'll say. Equal rights for everybody, as long as the equality doesn't upset anybody's quarterly balance sheet too much. Instead, they'll simply engineer the usurpation of everything that used to be *res publica*, everything on which the whole useful half of the notion of statehood is founded, and they'll privatize it all, and pretty soon (and I mean within a few years) there will be Indian tribes paying Silicon Valley conglomerates to use the water underneath their own feet, since water rights are the hottest conceivable property in a rapidly heating world. These are your fascists, if you want to use that word, and they come to you like the pitchmen of the great Interbellum did to wrecked Germany, with visions of synthesis and control, with a grand propaganda of intelligent systems and reduced human error. They believe in the Logic of the Market, and why wouldn't they? It made them rich.

Many of these men are Christians, or at least will profess to be. And that reminds me of why I don't understand your Christ, or rather it reminds me of one corner of my incomprehension. He is, in some respects, so clearly what you call a "pagan" god, dead

and reborn with the seasons, and all nature gestating in his murder and resurrection – but on the other, he’s Hebraic, wholly entangled with questions of law and right, and that’s what I don’t get.

How can a god of nature also be a god of human justice, when that justice is so abstracted from nature that God repents of having created mankind, as He does very early in your book of Genesis, and when your entire ethical system is based on eliminating nature and installing your own vision of the Right? What Floods of your own manufacture do you expect a seasonal god to save you from?

(But the eye, el ojo, l’oeil, das Auge, oko, oculus, to mati.)

Right, right. Pangloss. Xenoarchaeologies of mineralized stars form a second trachea, a ring of alien gristle, a burial mound circled by a low stone wall amid dust the color of the dying season, whose stelae and cartouches serve bleached witness to the fact of occupation, if not to who once occupied the now-missing tumulus, which is empty and deep and circular as a dry well, a dead mineshaft in a barren country, dug out, farmed away, left now to the appetites of scavengers, working as they may for what they may – not payment nor reward on any subtler level, but only the scavenging itself, the standard candle violently reduced but not quite muted in the spine, the videofeed glitchy as underdeveloped ultrasounds, still hissing in dismantled stereo from the circuit-broken basal stars, unapprised yet of their disconnection, pumping variously sculpted static into a roadway of bone which they don’t know leads to no brain nor through feedback’s necessary mazes to the nerve endings that might feel pain or dulled pharmaceutical sleep.

Might have some conscience of when to pull back from the fire, when the tip of the cigarette is close enough to singe the hairs regrown unnaturally thick and black over your last set of self-administered burns, which is the cutting side of the razor and which the side irregularly shaped to fit its plastic holster, on the nights we spent batting away fireflies and beetles, junebugs and the same scarabs you’ve learned simply to call “dung beetles.”

They once meant salvation, and a rebirth from the primordial cyst, the first mound of earth under the first guiding moon, a black arthropod writhing, reflective as enamel, parsing the milky light into such grammars as we may ferry thence, from the

broken tomb, the lacerated mound, compound eyes' recording of the same microfilmed stars as will recalibrate eventual bees' azimuth, build the honeycomb as sets of earthed momenta, wattages brought to ground in the rustle of stiff honey-soaked leaves.

(And was this the secret of the eye?)

It was, is, one of the eye's secrets.

(But not the one you alluded to earlier.)

No. That one goes like this: the theory of evolution, as you've generally been given to know it, stipulates that beings evolve by random mutation and are weeded out by the rigors of their environment, such that each advantageous mutation eventually becomes the new standard, and new aberrations depart from there, in continual establishment of a better and better symbiosis between organism and surroundings. Now, apart from the fact that the scission between "animal" and "environment" is a completely made-up distinction, a very, very human fiction which none but a god made one way or another in rapport with man's image could believe, there are also definite instances of this Darwinian mechanism *not* holding true. The vertebrate eye is one such instance.

According to evolution as Darwin postulated it, only those mutations which confer immediate advantage should survive, and it should be statistically near-impossible for, let's say, five thousand neutral mutations to succeed each other without, at some point, getting picked off by a version of the same animal which has adapted in some more explicitly beneficial way. You know the famous story about the pepper moths: the trees are white, some moths are white, some moths are gray, the gray moths are hunted almost to extinction, then a factory moves in next to the forest and deposits ash all over the trees, which means the gray moths are suddenly the better-camouflaged, and the white moths go extinct. If there had been, we conjecture, bright purple moths in that same forest, or any moth removed from the example's simple binary of color, they should've gone, too. Dipole is inverted, gray lives, white dies. Cruel and symmetrical as all our favorite logics.

Apollo's dilatory eye, pupil always open so wide that the color of his iris (if he has one at all) is a point for schismatics and sect-makers, would approve of this example, would find its ratios aligned and its result seemly and pleasing. He knows that kind of music. The key is either minor or major and decides itself, *hard*, on the downbeat,

where the tonic lives. We don't have to imagine it: we can still see him, presiding over a courtyard of exactly identical white and black marble slabs, in front of an absolutely regular portico of photocopied columns, peering intently out of two eyes of the same exact strength, 20/20 now and forever, while overhead a data-compressed xerography of stars fails to pulse or to circulate, all genetic source-code subject to the bitrate's fierce reduction.

Do you follow me so far? Is this evolution as you've been taught it?

(Yes. "Survival of the fittest" and other convenient phrases.)

Right. Convenience was key. Is key. Remember that, whatever else you remember: science ultimately rests upon the elegance of its metaphors, and one scientific age gives way to another only because the species-wide sense of metaphor alters by some sluggish erratum of our sleep, a hibernant mutation introduced by the hardwired thermography of stars. They burn us worse or better, leave shallower or deeper scabs and scuffs upon the tender skin, and we respond in kind, finding gravity immutable, fixed, gray, sterile in one epoch, and responsive, intelligent, messianic, malleable in another. It's not because there's new data, really, and the new equations are "new" only because formulated by somebody with the metaphoric sense to give them a shot. Einstein becomes Einstein not because he knows what others don't know, but because his imagination can compass the idea of relativity, and then his whole age sleeps on the spindle-point of relativist physics, rocking back and forth to deform the night to which its speed and mass provide searing cryptography.

(I understand. Or hope I understand.)

This is, by the by, what undid Oedipus while I watched. His was the metaphor of sickness and of health, and he came to his city as a surgeon to a docile and multiple sufferer, volunteering to extract the thorn or set the malign bone. He failed to imagine that the city itself might be the disease, and he, as city's archon, the prime bacillus, the capsid star disintegrating slowly to decipher fronds of viral DNA.

The rustle and hiss of your linen and gauze you may take for the sound of the bluejays erupting over your shoulder, toward the dried vines, the starving arbor, or the padding of the rabbits' feet among the arms of fallen yews; the error-star of brown dried blood on the inside of your cornea, the wet black butterfly embalmed in your eye's glassy

humors, you make take for the source of a wasp flying too close to your face for focus to picture, between you and the minimum distance of the focal point, which may suggest something in your development – in *our* development, as animals: that anything too close to us shows up as a blur, and that there is some quantum of necessary separation for sight to function at all.

What is nearest us we cannot see, and what is too far seems, although reduced in size, too near; and I once knew a man, a scavenger like you, though with a different kind of goal, a different certainty about the purpose of his efforts, who came to me talking about cave paintings and saying, “I’ve been to the caves, I’ve crawled through the cramped tunnels” – this man was almost 7 feet tall and had to weigh nearly 300 pounds, which in my time would’ve made him borderline inhuman, but you, the newer dead, keep coming to me larger and larger, and I wonder about the day when the Earth will be forced to roar with a surplus of oversized corpses so intense that it will snag on, arrest, freeze, interlock with the flos ferri of genetic coffins bristling from the cores of depleted stars – he said, “I’ve been there, Altamira, the Dordogne, les Madeleines, Lascaux, Chauvet, and I’ve seen how these men or women painted where and *only* where you’d have to be laying a few inches from the wall even to recognize that the wall was painted. I’ve seen how they established their glyphs in places that *nobody* would find by accident, and how this was true across cultures which probably never came into contact, across thousands of years, among peoples who’d never have asked each other how or why. And it occurred to me that maybe the paintings were designed to be viewed *exactly* at the focal point, at the smallest possible distant at which our eyes can properly function” – though this man, in addition to his unusual mass, also wore thick glasses and confessed to being astigmatic, almost blind without them; he said it with some pride, and mentioned quickly that most of his friends were partly blind, myopic, presbyopic, that one had a dead eye which rolled and rolled when he talked about gay fatherhood and Rosicrucian magic, and another wore an eyepatch over an empty socket which, the big scavenger suspected, would’ve salivated like a dog’s mouth when the man with the eyepatch stuttered quick burnt lines about wood and the weight of things in his hands.

I don’t know. I haven’t met those dead men yet, if they’re yet dead, and I suspect they are. You can only last so long with a single eye, because you can only last so long, period. Look at me and Oedipus: he has none, and his sockets do sometimes cough up a

little lymphatic pearl apiece, a bioactive suspension in which to store the sample trays of in vitro stars; I have two eyes, both of them blind, and see with the tremor at the end of a stick, with the shiver incarnate as the scales and belly-ribbing of a snake. And Oedipus could see that way, too, and was learning to see thus when he died. So I can hardly help him, and he can't help me at all.

(And he, failing to inherit the eye of the amateur surgeon, inherited instead the eye of ... ?)

The charismatic, I would say, the king whose touch cured the king's evil, the king being brought lepers and psoriatics who expected their skin to clear after their audience with him, the king nightly repristinating the skin of his wife who happened also to be his mother. There's an ugly secret of eternal youth: you can be young as long as you want, but the catch is that you marry your own son, thus raising him to an infected, an ingrown royalty before his time, both prince and king as he's both son and husband, and I almost said, Both sun and moon – the central principle of light for the whole city, yes, and also the blind ruptured orb which nightly returns the sun's one-term signal, a mathematics of a single repeated decimal, as the cold tasteless wine of schizophrenia, as an alkaline soil overgrown with the acid tendrillage of filamentary stars.

(But what about the eye and evolution?)

Oh, right, I'm sorry, I'm a sidetrack, that was my only skill or livelihood, that I could be so sidetrack as to eventually approach the future from behind.

(That's OK. I think I understand.)

Well, in Darwin's scheme, etc., etc. The animal survives because its mutation is fit to its environment, thus reproducing to create more mutants like itself, until the old mutant is the new standard animal. But here's the problem: the vertebrate eye, more or less the eye you and I have, though mine are blind and yours are strangely darkened, I think, well, that eye is an organ of thousands, millions, of incredibly complicated sub-organs. Really it's an animal unto itself, a separate cerebral growth, strange to the face as is the first vertebrate star to the heap exoskeletal wreckage left across the sky by older constellations.

And none of the thousand or million parts of the eye confers *any* advantage by itself; none of it works until the entire thing is in place. That means Darwin's theory must be incomplete, because the slow aggregation of piece-on-piece can't explain how

999 useless adaptations should build up to keystone mutation #1000, which sets them all to work. There was no reason for any of the eye's predecessors to survive, but survive they did, up to the point of delivering the eye as we now have it.

This suggests one of two things: either design, that the finished eye is somehow in place from the very beginning, or an intelligence of the tissue itself, that *it knew* it could grow toward the finished eye. I suspect the latter. I suspect this both because I'm suspicious of the ideal, the Form, the pre-existent, and because I know the patterns which make up the physical world to be recombinant and intelligent.

(I'd think, as a Greek, the *deus ex machina* might appeal to you.)

Common mistake. But consider: we didn't believe in *that* kind of god on any other occasion. Our gods were powers of nature, located and named, tracked and harmonized; our myths were condensations of vast natural cycles into a single narrative. So when the playwrights came up with the god-machine, solving all the plot's problems in a single stroke, they were really admitting that human lives were so desperately fucked that they'd had to invent a new kind of god just to set them right before the drama ended. They invoked alien deity to bring about an unnatural mercy, to sever the knots and splices of our own interlocked gods.

Reassure me somewhat, if you can, as to the survival of the moon.

(Does its light not get through to your level?)

I hear the geologic rumors, the creak and osseous limbering of dry earth tide displaces, the connective tissue swelling with the moisture of the air; all Earth's rheumatism, yes, the feebled kneepan sonar of old skeletons cranked up to tension again, cartography of blind creatures relying on the pingback mapped off old ossified stars; I sometimes hear the fissures clench or gape to alter or confirm those stars' synaptic architecture, on the transmitter or the receiver side, on either coast so soaked down to the stone, now, that new fluid wears a high-water mark called inoculation or the steady state, and all subsequent tides a dark reuptake underneath that scar, an inferential dream casting dense shadow on the sleep of stars that swell the loud and glistening glial hive.

And I do know that the sun is closer every day, that we're more and more cloistered in the vines of its unbearable foliage as they settle, stiffen, occupy the state

between stone and its mimicry; and I know that its radiance is even less given to appeal, even less possible to diffract or simply hide from – all that I do know.

But the moon, no, I don't know, and on this level they can't tell me: on this level, we can speak, or can perform what here passes for speech, can bivouac in the gouges and rents left by the massive emission of glyph, but *only* in the moon's caesurae, in the black frames of its thin-veined syncope, and so our quiet must be lunar day, and every compass wounded by the rondure of a course its math can only half-construe.

(Is that all?)

No. None is all. All is all that can be told, plus all the rest, plus, then, the unthinkable remainder. All is all, and should we get that far, the vessels in our brains would burst, and their small red-black percussion, like the cordite spittle hacked up from blasting caps, compose a code of dots and dashes, a spotty guncotton semaphore, as to respace the first light whose last spacing is the biomechanical grammar of the stars, their molecular affinities as participle light. There is no all except the all + more, and we Greeks have had a hard time learning that, and a harder time denying it for so long. Those who did deny.

(So what more?)

More: there is that deduced shifting of the shorelines, all the possible coasts worn in by seafret and by seas' reduction, the sheaf of skew-matrices cut into the shingle, sand, pebbledash, like a capital X thinned and thickened by a million possible diagonal strokes in palimpsest, till their overplus, the excess of their central tangent, becomes itself a new glyph, and the stop-codon or telomere for the coast's differend genome, a phase-space radiology of all the stars' stretched sarcomeres doused each in a different nuclide, a separate radiocontrast agent, and glowing back into the X-ray machine in a strange symmetry to that one-character encryption of the coast, a single X, you'd say, if you were hunting averages – and historically speaking, you probably are – a single letter or phonogram in different sorts of handwriting, accorded to the styles of different periods, there finial and baroque, here blunt as what some slaves were forced to ink upon the contracts signifying their alleged freedom, the marriage-licenses after the war in all slaveholding Union-fighting Missouri, where black and white were about equally likely to be illiterate, but where the whites could always fall back on the prejudicial literacy of some higher power. And I'm not only talking about their god.



A governor, a lawyer, a judge, maybe the same judge who ruled that fugitive slaves could never be properly “free” because they weren’t human beings as such, not even to the 60% mark used to tabulate votes in the House, and so, if they escaped, had simply transacted themselves from the realm of specific property – belonging in fee simple to this or that minor or major agent of genocide, who invented the modern world with the money he never had to pay his slaves; and this is called “capitalism,” and will be defended at great length and with apparently sincere passion by men whose slaves they’ve never seen, because they’re all in Southeast Asia or walled up in Chinese factories with nets beneath each window to prevent “excessive” suicides, there being a rather subtle notion about suicide in China, since the land is already too dense with humanity and only getting denser ...

But the escaped slave, I was saying – and this is written on the front gate of the courthouse in St. Louis, which sits beneath the Gateway Arch like a Masonic secret under the compasses and squares cut in the stones of the sidewalks in those old and power-sick parts of the city where the earliest American names, so old they’re actually English or French, keep accumulating value, though their bearers are nowhere to be seen: a permanent brown-gray light, as of burnt butter, and a permanently sour cast to the inside of your mouth, knowing that the real purposive machinery of your city lives *here*, and that your life outside these few square blocks is more or less an alibi for what goes on within them – the escaped slave, it was ruled by Missouri’s finest legal minds, could never actually be free. He was not a “person” to have his freedom at issue. He simply slipped a certain ownership and moved into the dubious circulation of wildcatters and claimjumpers, any one of which might pounce on him and own him for nothing more than the price of the spoken words, “You’re now my slave.” Thus the wisdom of your native state, Scavenger – your birth, really, since “birth” is all that “nation” means.

And what beyond, if not above, the law? A preacher who’d have the white population’s collective back, although the preacher might be illiterate too, and trust the Bible as a monolith, a totem, an obelisk and better for being made of leather since it could, in its surface of flayed hide, better reveal the embolism-tombed stars, inhumed in blood clots and blocked arteries, the infarcted constellations still throbbing just beneath

the surface of the surface of the flesh, as soon as day- or nightlight hit the cover of the book, held high above the head in garrulous parody of its lecture, hoping past the need for hope that nobody will ever ask you to read it out loud as long as your gestures are emphatic enough – and they were, and none did.

And the wet doves will keep scattering across the gravel, dyed churchman's gray now by the incipient drizzle which never quite condenses into anything you could call rainfall, and the flame and snowflake ikons of the gas and power company will keep connoting money, machinery its owners don't know how to fix or even to explain, upon which they rely to keep them from going absolutely magnolia-crazy in the rooms they thought they knew, brains effusing a thin wild hurtful summer liquor, some violent alcohol that sets them to cutting up their own arms and chests with liberated razor blades, putting cigarettes out on the themselves, wolfing down half-bottles of whatever prescription medicine somebody else has left lying around, lying to their doctors about what they have and haven't tried.

Suicide attempt, well no, doc, not properly speaking; Xanax, never had it prescribed, don't know how it would mix (knowing exactly how: a couple of yellow-gray lines in the upstairs room of a stranger's house on the street that fronts the old Women's University, whose only students, as far as you've met them, are ballerinas, and who tend to confirm the two stereotypes you've got about ballerinas, that 1. they all smoke and 2. they've all got some strange sexual neuroses, all of them – by which you really mean “both of them,” since you only know two – necking with other women in public, for attention or in some desperate attempt to realign themselves you'll never know, then bringing those girls home to be fucked on camera by their boyfriends, and then the whole dissolute and saccharine languor afterwards, while everybody tries to keep away from making this sound like a *business* as long as he or she can, but sooner or later someone's going to say, So, should we do this again?, and the old ink-and-cotton smell of contracts and money will slip a knife-edge through the room, not quite enough to wash away the stale incense and lung-snagging leftovers of marijuana smoke, nor quite enough to sting the nostrils already coated and re-coated with line after line of pills prescribed to some other ambiguous sufferer, but just enough, enough that you or I would notice ... and none of this has even happened yet, everybody's shirt is still on,

everybody's still buzzing with fairly shapeless lust and the pink powder we've all just snorted, and at a certain point, why even divide the two, why not assign lust as a subdomain to drugs, write it in subscript, since one without the other has become nearly inoperable: pharmacy<sub>sex</sub>, and all the bitter denouement once you hit that slope-intercept point on the night's spinal graph, the intersection of your own half-raveled backbone with the hour's brutal cross-section of the autopsied star, and you know beyond all or any predescription that either you're going to get another hit of whatever we've been doing – various kinds of speed, various CNS depressants, coke freebased out of a lightbulb, meth soggy in a paper bag – or the night's about to get very stark indeed, and you can't really pretend to know what you'll do in either set of circumstances ... none of this has *even happened*. But there you are. We are. Have been. And though this gathering here, whatever its ostensible excuse – day of the week, month of the year, hour of the wolf – was basically set up to service predictable and profiled lusts, everybody's still vibrating at a high enough frequency of bone-in-flesh, calcium oscillations still encased in the nervous and tractable meat, that no one would object much to his or her lust missing its object by, say, 5%, ending up with a nearly-accurate substitute, especially those of us who came with the person we're supposedly obligated to leave with, *especially* those, because who could spit at 95% success on a Friday night in the hottest worst stretch of the year, in one of the worst and hottest states in a terminally overheated union – our politics', yes, but also our personal unions, brought down at least as low as the status of mere pacts, non-alignment and even sometimes non-aggression, mutually-assured destruction most certainly, and the wheelbarrows full of red-eyed and glare-scabbed herpes photographs already poised to tip over into some public directory, a blank white webpage listing hundreds and hundreds of pixilated .jpgs, each after the / that designates its digital address, so why not take such accuracy as the night allows, why not accept that, if the wrong limbs get wrapped around the woman or man you thought was your lover, they're likely, at least, to be patterned on yours, or to be exactly opposed to yours, and either of those outcomes demonstrates your staying-power as an image, because both are predicated on the ghost you have already shown yourself to be.

This is, and has only ever been, a trafficking in ghosts, and whatever you think your motives are, your profits or your loss, they are actually the target-lock of ghost to

plausible flesh, ghost's crosshair to feasible anatomy, biometrics adding up to sum by piecemeal synthesis the unstable integer of ghost, or rather a divided number with no denominator, 3 or 5 or 20 parts of *something* but no number underneath to tell us how much is missing, how many more of the same replicated digits might succeed in either the expulsion or the restoration of the target ghost, the core-dump of the hard drive upon which are stored the spike-and-spindle patterns of the quarantined convulsive stars).

In her aspect as huntress, she may still preside, wearing the cured skins of the animals she brought to ground and flayed, gnawing with teeth sharpened on the hard mineral edge of her own radiance at tissue which her own arrows turned from muscle to meat, from physiology to food, secured in the outer reaches of her own anatomy, that transmembrane domain, by a furious bristling of integral-protein stars.

But this is not all, nor can her deftness in the hunt forestall decay in other regions, dissolution in the logics and architectures she relies upon for her reception: the cracked tower split like a stomped arachnid, the high-tension pylons shrill as the mockingbird's most desperate imitation, and only with their own overload of voltage.

Shrill – but poised, yes. No matter what straits of pure suffocation you find yourself in, how tight the bones of the chest may cluster, what osseous hydrologies choke thoracic river systems down to the axon-threaded breach that solves the mirror-neuron stars into some capable imitation of the front of wall of your heart – all that, all the choking, all the compressed rage in the limbs, the locust-throb along every artery, till you'd do something more perilous than merely screaming for relief, till you'd need to open up each limb along the vertical axis like butterflying a crustacean and howl, atom for atom, out into the black star-domain of the extracellular matrices, the stiffened protein cringe of whatever keeps the air more or less intact and the day plausibly constant, all of that, forever or as long as befits the human notions of forever, yes ...

And still that unbearable poise. Improbable, half-tangible only, delicate and prone to change upon its notice as light's shift from ray to corpuscle, as the generation-loss of xerographed stars soaking through the bones no leaden gown nor butcher-surgeon's apron swaddled, brought sometimes to their own kind of hunted fatality (though alive, of course, long after death) by garments meant to attract them: the

bunting and tape-loops of the tomb, the impregnated linen, the infusions of mint and bay leaves and rosemary to keep the corpse from driving all of us away with its mere smell, when there's so much we should be learning from its other calculations, the quickly fragile termite-math proceeding night to night over its irregular surface, where the lowlands of sunken stomach and dust-eroded face must shelter, in their kind, lowland animals, and where the hill-country of breastbone still not quite buckled into sand or kneecap still flexile with little scraps of gristle, well, in proportion, these must be given over to the predatory birds and to the stonecrop goats.

You see here, by the way, a reenactment of the basic economics of your homeland, more specific than merely "America" – I mean river cities, and especially those of the Midwest. There's always some specific geographic fact to account for the basic distribution of power, and however perverse and baroque power's significations (and signatories) turn after that first mapping, it can always be hunted down, retrieved from the first crushed-insect cochineal streak on the first slab of half-calf, like exoskeletal stars pulverized and watered into paste with their own salivary babble, then daubed down the dead but still vein-redolent hide of their own light.

So in some cities, as with London, for example, it's distance from the coast, the river mouth, and the gradient of poverty and shrill unmanageable hurt increases the closer you get to the English Channel's inlet or outlet, since I can't remember which direction the Thames flows, since I haven't been in Roman Britain for hundreds of years now, was barely carried there at all, at first, on a litter, embalmed then against the rigors of my own transit, brought along as a curio, a personal fetish for some squadron leader or captain of the night watch who – maybe – believed that my corpse could personally protect him from the wildmen and wildwomen of that chalky island. Maybe. Or it may have been a joke, a demonstration of his personal power or aplomb for symbolism, the kind of thing you force your subordinates to do simply in order to demonstrate that you *can* force your subordinates to do it.

We all know about John the Baptist's head, brought to Salome after her incest-dance for her own father – which is curious, because that *isn't* in the Bible; maybe the midrashim somewhere; probably it comes straight from Sumer, Ishtar and her seven veils, and though you'll hear the story as many times as you like during a lifetime,

almost nobody will bother to tell you that it's not actually contained in the testaments new or old, not even in the apocrypha, the half-dubious gnostic stuff or the Coptic gospels which reveal so much more about Jesus the Theologian than anything they left *in* the Bible, and by just such a degree of revelation needed to be excluded; and there are Biblical scholars on any and all sides of you who could conjecture, more or less correctly, how a myth at least two thousand years older than Herod or his daughter or the man whose head she had cut off could've somehow gotten into the popular version of the Evangelists, how it could, to the letter, have become The Good News, but the fact of their explaining doesn't make it any less strange, nor defang the curiously and subtly fanged motion of myth's parthenogenesis, the asexual reproduction of dead stars.

We know that, and have one way or another been told a dozen times. But what happened to John's head *after* Salome received it as a kind of compound dowry, pledged by her father for marriage to her father, and so pledged circuitously to her, the bride herself? Did they just leave it in a closet somewhere? Did they pickle it or wait for the flesh to fall off, or did they learn from the Egyptians and expose it to the black filmstrips of the mastaba-wind, the open-porched tombs where the desert itself does both coroner's and mortician's work, anneals cause to effect in such tight solderings of furnace-wrought silicon stars that no one needs to seal the surgeon's wound or set the broken bone?

Thus with my corpse, for a while.

(So we may not be in Greece, I mean, not in the sense of modern politics or maps.)

Modern politics, hell, I don't even speak modern Greek. The system of sound-substitutions leaves me bewildered. Why are there so many phis between the vowels all of a sudden, and what's that sound like a phi left skewered and dying between teeth and lower lip, a phi like a trapped bee, the detachable wasp-anatomy of a curare-soaked star?

(In English it's called V. They didn't have it till after Rome. It used to sound like U, which has given us some strange ideas about the names of gods, since *Jove* must really have been *Ioue*, and so sounded something very much like *Yahweh*. We don't know how anybody spoke.)

Is it that you care and don't know, or that you don't care?

(Some few care.)

And you among them?

(I try to be.)

Try, then, to think of the enunciation of the land; try to think of it as the waveform of the pronounced word, hitting every crop of immigrant or conquistador ears differently, the glyph of such relations as the land itself contains, as the exobiology of the cymatic stars contains the inner graph of the life of the light.

By which I mean – well, by which I mean any number of things, and I could tell you about the long slog overland, when my corpse was kept in a separate tented wagon, at the head of the caravan, while the footsoldiers raked away mud and led the horses around the bogs, the malarial marshes, as we came up out of the peninsula and hit first the arid mountainous land where Italy connects to the rest of Europe, that outcropping of tectonic cartilage, some of which is now Austria, some Switzerland, some the undecided Tirol or Tyrol which seems to change hands every time you have a war, and did back then, too. And I could tell you about the uncertainty in my own mind, dead as it was (as it is), wondering if I was being treated with genuine reverence or with irony, and then ceasing to wonder, as it became clear that the kind of men with the power to transport a dead Greek a thousand miles at the head of a military expedition aren't the kind of men for whom irony and reverence have ever been particularly separate. They are men whose success, not to say their survival, has depended largely upon the ironic bowing to other powers, so much the better when those powers have lapsed, and when the act itself is a dual acknowledgement: it bows to the corpse of the obsolete king and says, You were great, and I do you homage for lost greatness; and, in the act of bowing, it winks at the present powers and says, This prolapsed old Ramses wasn't *shit* compared to *us*. And the present powers can accept that *us*, that first-person plural pronoun, which under other circumstances they would bridle at, because it comes in the course of a joke which isn't a joke. There may be no other quality so key or signal to diplomacy as this: jokes which aren't jokes, threats which are and aren't threats, and the whole hateful fruitless gamesmanship of bluff-calling and bad bets, which you can afford to make, as many and as desperate as you like, because *you* are never going to pay them off. Do you understand that?

(I begin to.)

They'll be *paid*, but like that, in the passive voice, *be paid*, because whatever debt and credit power writes itself invoices for, the actual debtors are always the larvae, the anonymous people, the massive and heaving and apparently (but only apparently) silent dead who have made up everything we've ever done, who are the actual, physical material of civilization, as the exterminated stars are the actual, physical material of any given planetary body. The Tower of Babel was made of corpses. The Sphinx was made of corpses. Alexander was a leper corpse and led the corpses of lepers. Napoleon escaped quarantine to lead the quarantined. Let none of this be ambiguous. Civilization, whatever else it is or aspires to be, is first and foremost the sculpting of corpses, the forced architecture of the dead.

(That I have come, in some small way, to understand.)

Good. You'll understand it even better when you're dead, and find yourself embroiled in schematics you'd never have consented to or even thought possible, like being dragged first from the Cadmea, the fortress where I was slotted into the wall like a cadaver into a hospital incinerator, like morbid genetic material into the medical-waste furnace of the stars – and then dragged out of Thebai altogether, off the Boiotian peninsula, the little left or right arm of Greece, depending on whether you consider Greece to be a supine body looking at the stars or a prone one staring into the Earth and the ocean.

And then to Rome, for however many hundred years, and then up and away from what I'd thought to call Rome, but it turned out that Rome was everywhere, was growing, that I could be dragged as far as it was in men's power to drag me – I could be transported to the very limits of the distances at which men might still recognize my corpse and know what it was supposed to mean – and I would never actually leave Rome. So up and up, over the coastal lands, the same trip that the Phoenicians made before there were any Greeks to use Phoenician sailors' maps as the skeleton of our *Odyssey*, and finally up into what you'd now call France and to the Breton coast.

And then across into the whitest waste I'd ever seen, the mountains most clearly made of the dead, but no longer the human dead – marine carnage, the hydrostatic



bones of the gastropod stars felled and numbered by each terribly whet ray of the old moon.

So the throat of the land stammers and catches, and the tongue of the land deliquesces as thick oil or seminal mastic bleeding where the afterburners forced it through the bark of the prone trees, and the maw of the land cracks open like a broken lobster or snaps shut like the wings of a damp bewildered butterfly, sinewy and black, an umbrella with a nervous system, wired awake to pain and pain's eventual remittance as the inner-eye population of sleep by inlaid synapses of ore wrenched from the viscera of semiconductor stars –

So the maw of the land opens and closes upon a certain catch, a wrecked decimal clot, of these medically unstable stars which may have survived reentry burn and oxygen toxicity but are now in critical condition, hooked up only to the dripfeed and diagnostic equipment of the land, the hungry, the coffin-honeycombed land.

Geodesic catafalques, lean spindly hexagons of rotting wood and rotting cerecloth, the cenotaphs sunken into the swamp like a study in the lithogenic stars' sedimentary synthesis: they were set up white, plastered or limewashed or chalked, against the indifferent green-black-gray of the bogland, intentionally so, thus to stand as some kind of mark of reclamation by (and for) men and women who believed, and sometimes still believe, in a comparable repayment of the soul's debt, those who still believe in souls, since belief in debt is such a presupposition for our even being here at all. They expected a redeemer who would reckon their accounts and, his forgiveness supposedly inexhaustible, expunge what dirt he could from the web of rarefying spinal light, the tender and cartilage-reinforced ghost-meat of star-autopsies archived in that library of bone.

They would be cleansed. In their cleanliness, they would stand out against the land they first expected to conquer, then wanted only to batter to a truce, then hoped not to anger – and, in odd spasms of revivalist zeal, to conquer again, a thorough Reconquista in the name of every kind of reclamation you'd care to read into it, including that of their immortal souls, again and again.

So the marshes are drained at odd intervals, the crumbling aqueducts rebuilt, the levees turned over to private management – which is really to say private speculation on

such money as can be raised, by credit and debt, upon the ownership of levies: one of the necessities, as I may have mentioned earlier, of a boom-and-bust system is that every business of every kind should be involved in speculation, because the slow incremental growth commensurate with actually doing their fucking jobs isn't enough, not anymore, because, in turn, they'd inevitably be bought out by some conglomerate which had happened to gamble well on anything at all, and which had chosen thence to expand its gambler's luck into the ownership of cities and their infrastructure. If your job is to produce grain, let's say, and all you do, year after year, is produce enough grain to feed the people who need to be fed, and make therefore enough money to pay your employees the value of their labor, so that they in turn might eat something like the grain they've harvested, you're doomed. Somebody else – and this may be hard to understand, since it isn't what we're taught, but listen: *it doesn't matter at all* what else that person did, whether his money is in biotech or military apparatus or simply more and more tenuous and rumor-reliant forms of thimble-riggers rolling peas under the cup by the canalside, cheating the sailors out of money they on some level do want to lose, amusing the bored staid wordless captains of turf barges with the ability to pull up the little queen of spades, there's your girl, there she shines, hand after hand, turn after turn; it doesn't matter and it never will, and if you find that thought hard to reconcile with whatever you've been told about hard work or the public interest, you shouldn't be horribly alone, though you likely enough will be – will show up to buy your granaries, silos, fields, collective-bargaining rights, and will begin to gamble not with the quality or distribution or price of next year's bread but with its very existence, and that'll be that.

And understand, this man, when he comes – and he will come – won't even show up with cash. We've been raised for that scenario, and hectored on both sides about what kind of moral dilemma it allegedly encodes: whether you sell out to the slick son of a bitch from the corporation or you insist, No, sir, thank you, sir, but this was my granddaddy's land and blah fucking blah. That, we've been instructed, is the scene that points the moral that climaxes the play that leaves the audience feeling edified for having understood the point that gives them something to agree about on the ride home as a prelude to more cheap white wine and probably a very contractual, oh, a contractually satisfying fuck on somebody's fourposter or canopy bed, since only those of us who can afford our own beds are very likely to be attending the theater these days.

Those whose performance they've just *watched* are sleeping on bare mattresses on barer floors in parts of town where it's only just become advisable to walk by yourself for any length of time or space. The actors will provide the first wave, the basic pillar to incite the structural inertia of gentrification, and money will follow them, always just a little too late to catch many of the actors themselves, although the few it does catch will get pornographically rich. The others will die of predictable blood diseases, will share and share the same half dozen STIs until somebody's oral lesions finally liquefy part of his brain, and then it'll become trendy to be seen at the clinic (the free one, obviously, where you wait for three hours, have your blood drawn by an overworked distracted young woman, and then are told, "If you have AIDS, we'll call you in *about* two weeks; if you don't, and it's been *about* two weeks, then don't worry"), and somebody sometime will sit in that plastic and naugahyde waiting room, picking at the tears in the vinyl covering of seats so thinly padded that they seem like ossified fruits with peeling pastel rinds, and try to meet an agent, a manager, a casting director, for god's sake, anybody, please, there's no more room, I've sold all the blood they'll let me, and nobody works at the grain silos anymore, although the company which owns them is terribly open for business, terrible business, just not *here*.

The work is grafted to one place, its hearsay value to another, and the sarin spreading sweetly over Kurdish crop-furrows got into Kurdistan exactly the same way the grain will get out, effendi.

The lab technician glances like a gold surveyor at the microfauna pullulating through your sampled blood, conducting her brief assay of your circulatory system's xenobiotic stars, and you may even be tempted to make some nervous and time-passing joke about obsolete diseases, tetters, kibe, the King's Evil (or fuck up and name diseases that are only obsolete between *very specific* latitudes, like malaria and hookworm), before being informed in a steady and unamused tone of voice that, as it happens, your home – the city where you were born and where apparently you've died, though nobody seems to be much troubled about mentioning it – is the continental capital of syphilis. You know, brain-rot. Killed Al Capone.

Goes nicely with our history of mafia activity, and the windows being blown out like startled swarms of glass gnats all along the waterfront, where the buildings are new-

old enough that their years of foundation are still often engraved on the keystones of their doorways, right along with the Masonic insignia, but that those years aren't especially impressive: you see *1901* a couple times, and you start to wonder about the horribly fissile and unnavigable sleep of a country younger than the reigning royal houses of most of Europe, even after a century in which almost all of them were deposed once and again. You start to worry, the same way you'd worry, for example, about the fact that there's been more technological change in the last hundred years than in the hundred thousand before them, such that we cannot possibly have even the least real idea about how it's affecting either us or the world, and that absolutely every one of that century's concomitant and not-at-all-coincidental atrocities may, in time, prove to have been the absolutely obvious consequences of such technology.

Which is to say: you're worried, intensely, almost all the time, and the specific objects of your worry often shift, from Mengele's father selling farm equipment to the invention of the player-piano roll, but there's a kind of constant underlying biorhythm, what a German of another age might've called an *Urphänomen*, to much of your anxiety. And sometime between working and sleeping, if you've got any such time left, the worry becomes so intense that you drug yourself to nodding softly giggling anesthesia with whatever's left around, much more (or less, as you like) than actual drugs, of which there are plenty – enough antidepressants and anxiolytics in this house to facilitate at least as many suicides as there are living human bodies here, *bestimmt*, enough SSRIs to reregulate and violently suppress the recombinant signal throbbing off the banks of serotonin stars.

Some of which “alternatives” to drugs, if you're still that sanguine, may include sex, violence, legal and illegal booze, pot, coke, crack, I don't know where to get heroin but I could dial three phone numbers and probably put a fourth one in your hand, I don't know if anybody uses a *phone* to buy meth but we could get on the highway headed east and hellfire could I show you a time. Not a good time. Not even *our* time. Simply one very specific season, caught and pinned in place grainy and sepia as ambrotypes, where the children never seem to age because they're actually middle-aged men and women atrophied with crystal smoke and still wearing the baggy pajamas they wore two and a half decades ago, which are bigger on them now than they were then. Missing teeth, female baldness, the constant proximity of guns and knives, and a whole

lot of aimless riding around on little trick bikes, with undersized wheels and grindrails on the back, just waiting for some shit to kick off.

Which it will. If not now, then when the cops show up to observe us doing nothing, which observance will turn nothing into something or other. Come on now, Brad, I know you ain't just fuckin' around in this parkin' lot for no reason. Where's the plug at. Same question I's fittin' to ask you, Officer Berryman, but hell, I thought maybe this time I could call you Doug, seen's we're gettin' to have somethin' like a regular acquaintance. And that kind of circuitous cornpone eloquence *has* survived, though in reduced form, much like the bodies of the people who refine, sell, buy, smoke the meth that composes almost exactly half of the central Missouri economy, the other half of which is the growth and maintenance of private-sector prisons, "necessary" to house everybody involved in the meth trade.

It's not exactly Old South garrulity, and the Greco-Roman affectations of sons named Achilles and daughters named Josephine, but it ain't entirely separate, is it. Funny how the Classical gets Francophile somewhere between Thebai and Louisiana, and how there should be so much high-minded oratory about the necessity – nay, the divine provision and divine imperative – of Negro slavery in just exactly the same years when the French were re-rehearsing their own imperial fantasies, having appointed another Napoleon not to be their emperor, who then became their emperor. Y'all could draw up parallels, if you was in the mood.

One kind of capitalism, the obvious, transparent kind – value of raw goods + surplus value of wages unpaid to slave labor = capital – gets exchanged for the much more opaque variant of which Napoleon Barbiche was so fond. And don't mistake me: his equation was exactly the same, only the actual maths were reckoned by whip, manacles, and hanging-tree in a different hemisphere, which allowed the nascent capitalist class to play a little bit more innocent and coy about, say, the ownership of railroads.

Guess which railroads, and guess what they got used for about 80 years later. But in 80 years, only our poisoned nieces and the ambitious little shits who knocked them up will be around to worry about it, and right now, all the blunter and more repellent algebras are being transacted in Haiti, Cuba, the Republic of St. Dominic, so why get

ahead of yourself. (Why worry, that is, about the continuous if fragile upload of bloodwork to the microscopes and scalpels of hemanalytic stars.)

*To his tomb*, went the old imperative, and sepulture was translated geography, and seismology the reverb-scraped account, the resonant and disruptive science, of a dialect passed back and forth between the shaken tombs, the mastaba's windy echo-chamber giving way through loss and data-storage to the quick-aureoled acoustic space of a pyramid's or ziggurat's central chamber. Let alien resonance die (so went the thinking then) over the succession of labyrinth-trenches dug into the forecourts of the dead, the pyramid's mud penetralia fossilizing to marl cuneiform of rejected echo, the better to preserve whatever does sleep in the frieze of the sarcophagus, whatever pane-on-pane of slowly suppurant star-embryos do leak now through the rigors of dropped temperature and data-replication; let the obelisk's cartridge stridulate ridges of ribonucleic star-playback.

And the worth of your life, to follow that thinking, could be measured succinctly and astutely by the state of your burial; and there was honor enough in a blood-spattered roadside and a few handfuls of dust, *if* it were the royal road, leading to the usurper's palace, and if Antigone were the one tossing the dust.

She weeps or doesn't weep; she carries out what one-woman fragments of the old rite make themselves available for that occasion, a ritual not meant to be transacted by a single woman in a field of golden dirt, meant for mass and chorus, and the long train of mourners before and after the interment, a position preserved only in New Orleans, among the cities of your states, with drums on both sides of the *missa pro defunctis* and the grave: first side is drags and ruffs, slow rolls peeling out onto the edges of the membrane, and you can know an expert drummer by the way he occludes the transition from barely-audible hiss to after-resonance of snares to total silence (though of course never total, since he or she is only one among the drummers, and the drummers only a few amid the whole band, horns, accordions, whatever's been left lying around, a music of alchemized scraps for the scrap-alchemy of the remaining body, a music to bring to lossy harmony all the stray icy shards of genetic code, melting now, all the bruised bones and defunct histology now simmering in the combination refrigerator and furnace of the reliquary star), by how he emphasizes that seam, at which the world doesn't threaten to

burst so much as to burst into flame, to take the terminal friction at its own word and so burn the skin off the remaining mourners.

This is not to say that there's only one good kind of drumroll, or that a good funeral drummer will execute every roll the same. You'd know by now, I think, that this couldn't be the case. There are all kinds of rolls, and some of them you want to bite off quick with a couple over-emphasized strokes at the end, and some you want to patter and hiss all the way off the extra-taut edge of the drumhead, right by the tension rods, whose mutual and rumor-shadowed account of tensile strength reverse-engineers the multiply overheard star at the center of the membrane, extracts vectors and species from that star's abiogenesis, at which point carbon and light somehow metastasize to form the first unicellular animals, the later infusoria for Dutch glass and Dutch eccentrics to begin notating in or around the 1600s, once lens-grinding has become a professional occupation, and there are outcast Jewish philosophers enough to die of silicosis, i.e. the gradual conversion of the torso's red wet pulsant astronomy to rigid and friction-ridden silicon stars.

And some rolls you want to end in a decisive double stroke, or with the double as the setup to an ambidextrous decision – I knew the names once and have forgotten now, but I can still tell you the sticking: RRLR, with the first two right-hand strokes bounced, the left like a communicant of the momentum remaining in the right hand's calm reserve, and the final right-hand accent to drive the whole thing home, an audible punctum, a non-pronounced part of orthography like punctuation, diacritics and taxograms attached to the first glyph-visceral stars to cool enough from the unpronounceable Aleph of the wild light.

It's been noted, and by men I've talked to, that the Hebrew bible begins with the letter *bet* or *beth*, not with *aleph*. A Christian might tend to take this for mere happenstance or the requirements of an external and irreligious logic, since Christianity has been so interbred with the presumptions of rationalists and empiricists that it now finds itself called in to support or to defame absolutely any fever of the calculating forebrain. Not "well and good," exactly, but what else can you really expect. Christians want a world predicated on external gain and its observation, and they gradually deform the few definite pronouncements of their wandering starving anarchist master to

support a cult of Protestant *evidence*, an impenetrable cityscape of domestic shells whose whiteness, uprightness, rigidity are to be taken as thermostats and odometers of the spiritual condition within. How could you help it. How much history would you have to undo, and how much of that history would, in turn, delete the person who would do all the undoing, delete the white man's knowledge of the continent upon which you propose to institute such emendations.

But the writers of the Torah, and their scrutinizing descendants, would *not* have overlooked that their prime spiritual document fails to begin with their prime letter. The alphabet has always fluttered mothlike in the Jewish mind as synecdoche for the whole Law, which itself should be construed not in the western sense of legality – here's what you can do, here's what you can't, pack your ass off to prison if you forget or trespass upon the difference, or otherwise lawyer up and plea-bargain your way into an ankle bracelet and six months of house arrest – but as something maybe irrecoverable, maybe too far distant for our ragged opaque sensibility to grasp. The Law was, is, the pronunciation of the latent Word, the making-audible of cosmic biorhythm, God's own cardio- and encephalograph readings rendered as legible glyphs for the chazzan-tone to splutter, bite, melisma on the lips and in the throats of literate men. And these men wouldn't have missed that their alphabet, the vessel of Law, and the Law itself don't begin in the same place. There are conclusions to be drawn both from the recognition and from their silence.

Give yourself a moment, Scavenger, not to consider these, but to wait for the reentry shock of their impact, to attain what balance you can on the open westward edge of the Hebrew character for *bet* or *vet* and wait for the whole West to come crashing in like history, the captivities underneath a haruspex-read Babylon of stars.

So what occurs to you, not in the nature of conclusion but that of impact, thudding or finial and intricate, what kind of ornate descant lands on the variously-tuned drumhead of the ear – and during all this, and I can say it because I can see it, we're both picking at what we think is dead skin (and in my case really should be) and surprised to find that it's really a clinker of half-living scabs, an accretion of fragile-paned leukocyte stars, and that nearly-black blood wells up when we're done scratching, and that the same mosquitoes who helped put a scab there in the first place will wake



up, drowsy but nervous, to the smell of the new blood, and come flying in from the aeries of the sundown, the birds' nests where they roost, fat with yesterday's vein-crop, if they were alive yesterday, and many of them probably weren't – so fat also with the memory of blood and of techniques for blood's extraction, a continuity of fading recall, the half-amnesic hardware of the capillary-sequenced stars, graded by nuclide and contrast agent, glittering on the X-ray, angiogram, MRI like spindly deposits of valuable minerals, coppery and porphyry and whatever other jellyfish-limbed distributions of melted ore might indicate the presence of oil.

There is this sounding of the body, too, and of the earth among the tombs, and of what crude-oil dumps might've accidentally or less-than-accidentally been left between them, what core-wipes of the petrologic stars' hard-drives, sleep-memory of bacteria that predates even the light upon which it now preys.

(But that's not what you asked me to think of.)

But everything goes into what I asked you to think of, everything at all, anything anywhere as long as it's precisely there, on the sibilant and membranous topology of the brain's surface, among the reciprocal mutations of the cortical stars, if not *yet* on any other map of the Earth. 1 cm page space = 25,000 m worldflesh, or whatever other scale you need. And it is a need, ferocious as the comedown in the throat and heart, which descent I know you're familiar with, because I, perforce, am too – that gray hour between the last hit and what may or may not prove to be the next hit, when you're back at the house you left to go twitch and scramble around the city, moderately high on what you've been assured is dirty but potent coke, lipping accidentally near the fences around building sites which don't seem, actually, to be building anything, since it's been chainlink and mud for half a generation now, eating half your own speech before it's had time to hatch on the tip of the hothouse tongue, aborting half the stars' egg sacs in the dubious voicebox incubator.

That hour is where the danger is, and though the popular accounts will blurt it later in formulaic headline phrases, like DRUG DEAL GONE WRONG, whatever they have to say *then* will be the delayed, the long dry-clap echo, of whatever happens now. Because now is the moment you either decide to gorge on sedatives and CNS depressants, whatever you've had luck or forethought or impersonal providence to leave stashed, sleeping pills and booze still in its paper bags because you had to smuggle it across the

border into this dry county, and because you planned to drink at least some of it in public, knowing that you've got no definite place to stay tonight and that the tolerance of those who own this house is a monetary tolerance only. They'll let you sleep as long as you can pay them for the privilege, and everything else is doubtful.

So you – we – rattled like skipped stones at a dig stone, white chunks of shale and calcium carbonate which some impoverished sculptor might've liked to scratch at, across the line into the next county over, whose name I can't for the fucking life of me remember – Tarrant was near there, Dallas is I think a county of its own, but whatever – and we stalked, or imitated the act of stalking, down the rows of expensive liquor in multiple imposture, both to convince the store's owner that we weren't stealing anything (yet) and to convince ourselves that we weren't, finally, going to come to the cheapest whiskey in the greatest quantity, because that would tell us a little bit more than we wanted to know about our real chances for induced frenzy tonight, wouldn't it, provide a little too lucid and hurtful an insight into what kind of "escape" we hope to plan. All of this to throw off for an instant the terror's-edge penny-stock terms of your daily persistence, and even that tawdry and deleterious unyoking bound to exactly the same terms, measuring mental ounces against mental cents, wondering because we're still hugely naïve whether \$15.99 for a fifth of bourbon is a decent price.

And then back across the county line, proud-depressed, realizing now why you so often deny yourself foresight, because it's too goddamn *sad*, because it really does eradicate any chance to pretend that tonight will be a relief, a caesura, even a blind syncope, though you might be glad later to have spent this particular \$15.99 against the 30 or 40 bucks you'd be happy to toss down, wrinkled, dirty, smelling like skin-oil, for the next bag of bad coke when the first bag has worn off.

And don't think beth and alpha have run out of this continuance, or that there aren't woeful congruencies to be established between that three-sided house and this two-walled triangle, the hollow nib, the implement of digging or inscription with which you might stab, scratch, or merely ink a given night's one-use and undecryptable script in the empty password bar that gives or denies access to a sealed source-code directory of stars.

*To his tomb:* these weren't, as I may have mentioned, rites meant to be conducted (much less recognized) alone, and their resonance is close enough already to raw overload that you can hear the locks click and the fuses turning crisp as summer's cordite in her glial hex of circuit-breaker stars.

I say, and I emphasize, *resonance*: it was ultimately a structure of resonance, because that's all structure is – shaped reverb, architectures of echo, an attempt to build bones from the proleptic drone of calcium, to ossify the echovirus cartilage of stars. You build that others, yourself among them, might have a place in which to *ring*, whether or not you've passed the point at which cultures begin to distinguish between speech, song, and the pure mammal tessitura of grief, the elephant melisma calling down reliquary stars to save some fragment of bone or tract of dust-embalmed artery, to remember by inscription or just a strange hump in the road, an odd dent, a copse of corpse-feeding trees out of place, grown oddly red and concentric on whatever adipose matter seeps from the cadaver like uncut phonograph wax, ready then for the Earth's lathe, the seasons' delicate or blunted scalpels, the whole acoustic-surgical instrumentation of the dark star at the center of the world.

And echo decays. First thing you learn about it. Call it "entropy" if you must, still relying on that mechanical view which would classify anything under the rubric of "system" and not "lifeform," which believes in mechanics and their gradual detuning rather than physiological and genetic drift, and sells heat short by numbering it under the column of caloric output rather than recognizing in it the exobiology of newborn and aborted stars. There is no "entropy," there's only the growth and death of unplanned things, and the circulation of such forces as once incarnated them. Entropy depends upon a rigorous separation, both real and conceptual, between the Zero and what lives on either side of it; we've learned enough now, I hope, to know that such a separation is neither actual nor intellectually tenable. There's just Zero and the Zero's distortions, the black star-ova hatched or devoured upon the accretion disc, the sonographic lip, of the black hole.

Everything black, including the moon, including the shroud she would've woven for her brother, had she time, had he not died under the circumstance that finally found him, fighting for or against the city as for or against another king who would also be a usurper, since the "real" king abdicated by gouging out his own eyes with the broochpin

of his suicide wife, and since, thus, those to follow can only be better and worse impostors, pretenders with pretenses more and less convincing to the throne. And read that phrase double as it does lie on the page: “more and less convincing” may modify “pretenses to the throne,” or it may refer to the suasion of the throne itself, and attribute to the physical seat of power a certain faculty of distinction and decision. That’s something we learned from the Hebrews, isn’t it, Oedipus. Very few can approach the Throne, and when they do, it isn’t sovereignty and realm they find, it’s Metatron, whose name means nothing more than “before the Throne,” the same way *profane* only means “in front of the temple.” What’s transacted on the synagogue steps may not enter the levites’ vestry, nor brush against the mutable casing of the Ark, in which lie the transcribed viscera of several autopsied fossil stars.

So you approach the throne, by any means, manners, wiles available to you, and here it becomes something like the alternate disciplines of the Indian religions: pursuit by intuition, or by scholarship, or by acts of unambitious charity; imagination, rigor, or ethical attunement so fine that it accidentally impinges on the octave of the Throne itself – and these last, in some traditions, are held to be the holiest, because the most like that which they would attain, without ever having meant to. Seems strange, in exegetic form, but there you go: lots of religions consider the idiot the prime example of sainthood on Earth, and there’s something of the idiot in Jesus Christ himself, perfect Prince Myshkin, certain until the hammers and nails actually tumbled out of the centurion’s backpack that his death would be symbolic and his resurrection a neat annulment of that symbol, the mere retraction of a black mark, gouged stigmata filling up again with spongy newborn flesh, death’s fontanel welded shut with a springy sapling histology of stars.

But he died in the spring, unlike the gods whose example he followed, and at some point up there on the Cross (or maybe the night before, in the garden, where the olives grow and, as much to the point, die, and where the wild birds and animals often eat the olives before the man who holds the cheap claim to the hilltop grove ever has the chance to harvest them – and *this*, Scavenger, this night in Gethsemane is the part of your Christianity that it’s easiest for the Greek temperament to take seriously, because it adds something definite and real to our dramaturgy, because it’s a little bit like what

happened to my friend, master, and late persecutor Oedipus, but in reverse: imagine if he'd known who his mother and father were before he fucked one and killed the other, known exactly what evil augury he was born to fulfill, *and then fucked and killed anyway*, because he believed the redemption of humanity or at least Greece or at least Thebai hung upon it) – at some point, Jesus realized that he was truly going to have bleed out on a wood plank and a tree trunk in what must've been the wet heat of the Golgotha morning.

Dew glittering on the tarnished and ill-fitting helmets of the Roman regimentals, whose gambling for his paltry personal effects – not even any fucking jewelry this time, mate; we've got one of 'em mooncalves out here, and he probably don't carry no fucking money, and he probably don't have no rich fucking friends left, neither – was not meant to be symbolic at all, as these were men who gambled for anything and everything left over when they stripped the criminals to be executed, who threw dice or played some equivalent and local game of chance (tossing chaff, picking the short straw, as you like) for rights to the women's pearls and rings, to the men's amulets and whatever weapons they'd managed to sneak into the prison system of Judaea Romanum; dew soaking into the gnarled bark of the olive sapling, as though Christ's blood-sweating meditation among riper olive trees was indeed to bear its singular and inedible fruit; dew burning off the sparse grass like sweat off his own whip-runneled skin, whole new dermal river-systems emerging to channel the aberrant output of the subcutaneous vein-archived stars.

So idiot Christ bled on the tree, like idiot Odysseus furrowed the sand. And please don't take either as an insult. "Idiot," a Latin word, same root as "idiom," *idio-*, meaning self or same; they invented the word "idiot" to describe people who only spoke their native language, not the "suave bear's-greased Latinity" of visiting proconsuls or the rougher lockjaw and burnt-tongue dialects of the Roman soldiers, and it became a term of contempt, because evidently the Romans didn't have much spare mercy lying around for anybody, especially not the subjugated peoples who refused to learn the fucking lingua franca, innit, only not franca then, and lingua in the sense only of additional tongues grafted to the raw uncauterized unsutured stump of your own, disdainful quick-fix field-surgeries of xenobiotic stars.

And the soldiers loafing around, insolent and sullen and, hey, surprise surprise, generally behaving like rapacious entitled pigfucks, because that's really what a soldier's *paid* to do in an occupation: "soldiery" isn't really even the word for it anymore; it's rather like your own police forces in America, isn't it, Scavenger, neatly pitched between "security force" and "terrorist organization," scraping a jackbooted toe on the other side of the line every so often to see who notices, to see how far the chalk can be smeared before somebody calls foul, and finding out, to no one's real surprise, that they can smudge and redraw the line every morning until policing is full-blown terrorism, and the organs of State will still demand respect for and fear of the onetime peacekeeping force as long as that force confines its terrorism to populations and parts of town for which the State doesn't have much use anyway. Keep it in the ghettos, commissioner, and who's going to know? Everybody's heard by now that no *news* ever comes from the ghetto; only the olds, the very, very olds, the same few brutal rapes and slaughters every day, from the first human demarcation of land to the last, and, given time, maybe even to forced-labor colonies on Mars or on the moon – which, if we reach them, will be reached as the condition of no repristination or redemption of mankind. Get your fuckin' head out of your ass. They'll be reached as the culmination of exactly the same technologies of control and violence that made it *necessary* for us to go there in the first place, and the odds are overwhelming that the first human occupants of the first human-inhabited non-Earth planet will be slaves. Slaves with a few overseers or conquistadors, sure, probably, but slaves nonetheless.

Who do you think actually *carried* the "Roman Empire" from Italy to the edge of Wales? Who held up the caravans by inconveniently dying, and whose shoulders crumpled under the sedan chairs and litter beds of the touring emissaries, sent out to, oh, I don't know, the Black Sea to weather out a scandal, or Hibernia as a reward for having done something scandalworthy without ever causing a public uproar? It's never a bad time to be a Roman senator, son, and the punishment for public indecency is usually something in the nature of a vacation. Check out scenic Pontus, over there in, what is it, Scythian land? Nice weather for a winter continent, truly. As soon as we invent skiing, it'll be a big skiing town. Brisk air, cold clean water, and a native population not really any more or less resistant than the rest, which means ample opportunity to mint and work new slaves. Truly the Earth is bountiful, beneficent, if

you're a slavemaster, and it's no wonder Flora Dea and Bona Dea are so often synonymous, the one the goddess of flowers (kidnapped to hell in her earlier years, but why bring that up now), the other the deity who presides over the rise of our cities, which is to say, over the anonymous and thoroughly owned heaps of human flesh that put stone on mortared stone until they just give out.

If you were of a metonymic turn of mind, you might, then, tend to see the cities themselves as massive agglomerations of dead human meat, and their architecture as a sympathetic resonance of fixed stone with castrated servitude, slave marriage with the shaping and placement of slender colonnades and the keystones of triumphal arches, unclassified scrapyards of post-anthropoid offal welded together by raw and constant hurt like the recombinant geometry of the stars' mutant biomechanics. You might look at the headdress of our goddess of cities, which is supposed to be two fortified battlements and inspired the Papal miter (and was inspired, in turn, by the double crown of the Egyptian pharaohs, which symbolized the unity of the kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt, respectively at the bottom and top of the Nile, at least in terms of Roman cartography), and see the corpse-harvest of worked-to-death men and raped women blooming where once were amaranth, hyacinth, blood-sweet poppies calling the bees to swarm sated and fat around the long-relocated tombs.

And if you presume that language circa 3 or 4 BC was at least as metaphoric as it is now – which seems like maybe the safest delusion under which a human being can operate – it's not a stretch to guess that a woman who found herself pregnant with an unplanned or unwanted child might choose to view that pregnancy as a blessing of God, or as the visitation of an angel. Humans are still doing that, right now, all over the seven or eight stratified metropolises underneath us right now – like crushed and morbid protein structure forms, with millennia of incredible heat and pressure, organelles for the endosymbiosis of the xenomorphic stars – so they probably did some version of it in first-century Nazareth.

So when Mary chose to tell her fiancée that she was pregnant with a child whose parentage could be traced directly to their God and to His announcing angel, she may also have been telling him (with a horrible combination of ferocious strength and terror which I, though made half-woman in some versions of the myth, will never understand) that the child was conceived when she was raped by a soldier of the Roman occupation,

and that she carried in her belly the strange fruit that would eventually destroy the empire which her rapist swore to serve.

Apis mellifera gnawing and sucking at pistils of opioid runes:

Sober as unreconstructed death, without next year's harvest or the forensics of a gored king to assuage her, without shield, staring between half-remembered and more than fully executed shards of the burial rites down the royal road, where the gentian condition of a violent but distant storm has massed in cloud and bent light over the ziggurat's esophageal surgery of stars.

No protection, no control, and the road dust quiet now with its conscription into battle, and the clouds of kicked-up war-earth hanging now over the city proper in replacement of the plague's miasma, which only cost her father his eyes and her mother her throat and one of her brothers his life to dispel, and the stock phrase here would be "when the dust settles," but she knows it isn't going to settle: it'll harden, ramify, set like plaster in the construction workers' molds, into a cloud of granite bees as answer to the cloud of lividly unshed rain over the palace, the stepped pyramid, the site at which her father once presided as head oncologist of stars, reading their tumors and cancers to cure comparable and parallel afflictions of his polity, palpating the cysts and sores of the publicized lepers for analogous constellations, viruses identified and neutralized among the known exobiology of stars.

And her people were starwatchers, of course, though neither the first nor the most accurate – after Zion and Phoenicia, before and worse than the Persians and Arabs, who would lend so much of our sky their names, and who would be defamed in time for such lending without interest, such debtless credit, since the idea of something given without expectation of repayment is the one neither your recent scientists nor present economists can countenance, Scavenger. Not that far west. On the sunrise side of the Earth, it might've been possible, but after so much panoramic massacre, the widescreen format and long-focus lenses invented to depict your foundling slaughter – and inspiring, in turn, slaughters still broader, till we come to admit a near identity of violence and the technology available to portray it, till we come to aim our least defensible and most defended attacks not at the specific meat to be converted into corpse meat, no, but at the survivors' capacity to record and replay what has occurred:



there are lots of efficient ways to kill 3,000 people that don't involve a years-long acquisition of amateur pilot's licenses in Florida and a perpetual gavotte of paranoia and wasted confidences with the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

(Or maybe it was already Immigration and Customs Enforcement by then, and note *that* shift, too: the former office nominally aspired to create new citizens; its successor views all human influx as a form of black-market penetration, and would, ideally, regulate them much as it does prescription drugs from Canada or the wrong kind of cocaine from the wrong Central American suppliers, since the *right* kind from the right people is such a pillar of border policy at the moment, and there might – I'm not making any promises here, chilango, don't get me wrong – but there *might* be a laundry cart rolling down the center aisle of your cellblock at about, say, 8 p.m. tomorrow, and if you were to hide on the second level of that cart, among all the dirty towels and cumriddled bedsheets, you might just make it to the laundry room, Napoleon, from which point it would be much easier to escape the prison itself than from your cell or the cells surrounding. – But haven't you already talked to the President? Hasn't he agreed to let me go? – Of course we have. Of course he did. But you're a man of influence; you understand; we need an official story for the press, you know, some bad Leatherstocking Tales narrative about the mummy's curse and an international flight taking authentic Peruvian jewelry to Dallas. Dumb shit. Shit nobody who knows anything about U.S.-Mexican politics would ever believe. – Then why do we need it? – Because almost nobody knows anything about U.S.-Mexican politics, or wants to. OK? So if we say you wrapped yourself in dirty towels and hid on a laundry cart, we can hint darkly at your personal tenacity, which buys us time in terms of 'catching' you again; we can pin the whole thing on a prison guard, who'll be either unscrupulous or incompetent, depending on how it plays across the morning-after talk shows; and we can promise, with lectern-banging sincerity, to reform the whole carceral section of our economy, when anybody who pays any fucking attention at all knows full well that prisons and drugs are the only two real growth industries in either North or South America for the last half-century, and that the entire prison system would collapse if we started screening COs for gang affiliations or histories of drug trafficking.

Listen, Chapo, I swear to god this is true – I met a maricón just the other day who did almost two years in Riker’s on a meth charge, and he was committed to the Mental Observation Ward after having the shit kicked out of him as a kind of how-do-you-do, two Bloods in holding, you know, and some fuckup administrator misread “Medical” as “Mental,” so he got sent to the crazy wing instead of the in-prison hospital, which is where he needed to be, because he was probably bleeding internally, but anyway, he said the prison nuthouse was totally run by gangs, both on the prisoner and CO sides, and that the gangs decided who ate what and when and how much, and who got to sleep, and who got outdoor exercise or got sent to the hole, and who got raped while the guards watched and cheered, and who got beat to death right there on the floor, truly, who got their skulls stomped in by lifers in non-regulation boots while the catatonics drooled ahead into the only possible future for any of us, staring down all the present moment’s vectors, oracles to this last oracular instance, eyes blank as a stock ticker in a power outage and telling us, in their shutdown depopulation, the answer to exactly the question we’d though to ask.

All that, plus who was forced into the cool-down cells where the guards “rendered problematic inmates docile” by *gassing* them with exhaust pipes threaded under the cell doors and one time, I swear to god, one time by forcing a 50-year old schizophrenic man, whose offense was having pissed himself in the corner of his cell, to take a shower so hot that it melted the meat right off his bones, and the prison morgue had to identify him by his teeth. His few remaining teeth.

The rest had been kicked out at some point, and why not guess that prison guards did half or more of the kicking, and why not guess, on top of that, that prison guards followed the spendthrift tradition of their German predecessors and saved the teeth with metal fillings, just in case they could find a fence or a chop-shop dentist, just in case they might get bored some mandatory-furlough Sunday and decide to drill a hole through a dead schizophrenic’s gold tooth and string it up on a fake-gold chain as a kind of amulet, you know, a good-luck charm to see them through the dead center of an unnamed and unrecognized Holocaust, and to keep them anonymous if ever the Shoah paperwork should come galloping in on the same trains that took the Jews to smokestacks with two names.)

Her father's state was ill-equipped to practice the forcemeat art of modern incarceration; its metonym was medicine, and her father liked to consider himself a kind of universal surgeon, oh yes, a cultured allroundman, there's ... there's something of the artist about old Ed.

Though maybe I've mentioned or maybe you've heard that we wouldn't have called him Ed back then, that his name was still Hoidipous, the two-legged, the answer bodily to any sphinx's riddle long before it was issued as a challenge of talons or words, the sliver of smashed stele to fit into the sphinx's visceral glyphwork, to reverse-engineer toward completion her cavernous burial-chamber entrails, to coil to requisite tension the astral clockwork lit when the glimmer of xenosis seeped through the sarcophagi of stars; then the Latins came along and, apart from dragging my corpse all over the world, they changed Oi to Œ, which used to sound the same as Oi but then came to denote a sound like the *e* in *bed*, a flattened E like our old *eta*, which now sounds like a long E or our old *iota*, which is now used largely in figurative circumstances to mean a very small amount of something, and this from the New Testament, when Jesus is describing himself as the fulfillment of the Torah, up there on the mountains outside whatever Galilean city, the Jews having come by then to recognize their own lost and found homeland by the partition of its Roman provinces, and to say "Judaea" and "Galilee" as naturally as loanwords like "tetrarch" and "prefect" found their way into Aramaic and Hebrew.

And Jesus says, and this is in the Book of Matthew, chapter 5, verses 17 and 18, "Do not think that I come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. Truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished," which is a tangled little piece of verbiage, conflating three timelines with two – the lifespan of heaven and earth, which we should probably take literally as the sky and the world under it; the biology of the law; and the chronology of the law's accomplishment – and giving the English-speaking world its strange notion of the meaning of *iota*, by which Jesus definitely meant "the letter *i*," but which we've since taken to mean "a quantum, a corpuscle, the smallest possible amount."

If you had some schooling in the Kabbalah, and were aware of the Kabbalist's belief that the Torah is a living organism which reveals different modes and aspects of

itself to different peoples and historical epochs, and which will only be complete with the completion of the universe itself – the accomplishment of God’s purpose, the birth of the Messiah, are sometimes referred to in Kabbalistic literature as “the filling-in of the blank spaces in the Torah” – you might read Jesus’s comment any number of ways. You could see it as an announcement that *he* was the substance of those Pentateuchal lacunae, that *he himself* filled in the Torah’s blanks; or that, while not definitive, he was the vision of the Torah his era would be granted; or that the Torah’s completion is actually *not* coextensive with the lifespan of the physical universe, and that “heaven and earth may pass away” without an iota or a dot passing from the Law, which would suggest some frightening ideas about God as truly the God of all Creation, with no particular preference or partiality for human beings, who will be abandoned in exact proportion to their abandonment of Him and His Law.

All of which is to say that you might read Christ in almost any way you like, including as an ironist – since he explicitly *was* there to overturn the Jewish orthodoxy of his day, and since the solons of that orthodoxy did eventually get him strung up for trying to overturn it – and that this is a pretty central part of Christianity. Moses had Aaron, whose name in Hebrew is frighteningly close to the Greek for *irony*, to distort the already-distorted signal received directly from the god-who-can’t-be-named and who nonetheless is, called first YHWH, then Yahweh or Jehovah, a triple interference at the very least, a fourth if you consider written script its own kind of deformity, another agent of mutation wringing five books from Zion’s tetragrammaton histology of stars.

Jesus of Nazareth had only himself, and his camp followers tended to cut off ears and accept payment in silver rather than broadcast his doctrine, faultily or otherwise, so Jesus had to speak with three or four tongues in any given moment, and to recognize, upon the cross, that none of those three or four were flexible enough to word away the nails run through his hands and feet, to barrate or seduce away the soldier’s knife run up his side to scale him like the Ichthys his lost students would adopt.

Spooked at the shadows of smoke, as might be her horses, had she any horses – she does not; given heliopause at the dark roaring edge of the cardiographed star (xenoxic plasma, aerate but with another air than we would know to breathe, sluicing out of the main arteries and up the aorta to clot, freeze, skew, disturb the EKGs of other

stars, firing wildly and neuronal on the postsynaptic side of her own blood), given a temporary and chill stillness, by the way the bodies of moths and fireflies briefly modulate the rare light beginning to glow over the horizon ...

How they fleck with the black cigarette-burns of finished reels the smolder of that pre-morning furnace, in an hour attributable neither to the old goddess Night nor to her distant relation, a queen in some other city, I've heard, not here, not now, watching the clinker and dross of the underworld's incinerator hard-drive burn to save the medical waste of stars, cast it back up overground as the faint gauzy glow of tourniquets and bone reduced to ash, the faintly-graded cremation rainbow whose range is restricted to various inflections of gray, from rubefacient-on-fishskin to gold-under-stretched-membrane, the healthy or infected tympani of the star's integral protein domain.

Spooked is the word, not fearful so much as physically aware beyond the mind's or heart's ability to stand the products of awareness, overloaded with enough adrenaline, for fear of being caught, for fear of *not* being caught, that her motions, ritualized as they may be, are also a delicately-taped filmstrip of single lucid panes between black shudders of cold blood deserting her limbs, the chill of placing your foot where there should be a bottom step or lower rung and isn't, what must've shaken up through the bone-pleached nervetree of old friend Elpenor when he tried and failed to climb down from Circe's roof, where he'd spent the night in drugged or painfully sober sleep, watchful or only pretending to be watchful, and dreamt of almost any death and fear at all except for the one that immediately found him: you drink too much wine, "logy with vine-must," you return yourself to such a vegetable condition of the blood that every heartbeat is the recharging, the satiety, of veinfuls of voracious chlorophyll stars, and you're worried about poison, starvation, shipwreck, the affairs of idle and vindictive gods, and while you're worrying about all *that*, you miss the last rung on the ladder, fall, shatter the cluster of nerves at the nape of your neck, and are dead on the pale shore of a stranger's island before you ever had the chance to die of all paler or darker things between this beachhead and the next.

You know the story from then forward, don't you?

(I've heard it, but not as you'd probably tell it.)

Good. Good on both counts. I like the Scavenger. I was a scavenger too, but asked to scavenge for the ruins of the present – not to "project" or "predict," but to roll

my blind eyes right against the ruin germinating in the obvious physical facts of the instant, something like Hitler asked his architect to do, to design not for present use or even present grandeur but with some atrophied pseudoptic gland turned toward the building's presence as a wreck a thousand years from now, a corrupt aviary of the marbled and granitite ideas of "birds" left standing underneath a sky that hasn't seen a bird in at least seven or eight hundred of those thousand years. Hitler only got that way toward the end of his war, though certainly he must've been of a certain turn of mind to, well, you know.

But I was asked to do all this in front of king and queen and plaguesuffering subjects, to auscultate the hardware-oscillations of dead stars, saved however the technology of the day allowed: sometimes as cuttings in live or dead stone (and don't think only of the glyph or letter thus incised; think also of the missing stone as biopsy, and consider what might be reconstructed from all the marble cut away from all the marble left standing, sculptural or literate, what mutant star-anatomy might hulk in mineral deformity beneath the constellation that entails Zion or Xibalba), sometimes as further incisions in a plate of cooling wax, or in the soft inner bark of recently-felled trees, or on the skins of calves, or daubed on those same skins, or written on ricepaper with quills made from the feathers of ducks and the hair of beavers, the bristles of hogs, the tails of horses, or registered as zones of de- and remagnetization on the ferrous oxide surface of a strip of audiotape, or recorded as the on-and-off of individual colored lines or pixels, spluttered by the spinning scarified tongues of six playback heads against the surface of a wrinkled shiny black worm, a helical scan stammering through stars' protein archaeology as wordings of vermin-medicine, a cure both for the worm's internal ills and for the presence of the worm itself.

However it was recorded, however they asked me to respond. Methods upon methods, sure, and we've hardly even approached your time and place, and so many more technologies of data-storage have been invented in the last 60 years than in the 6,000 preceding that I could easier trace the development of pen nibs from the ziggurat of Uruk to the one that signed the Treaty of Versailles than I could recapitulate even the shifts in basic computation from, say, 1945 to 1950.

Difference Engine, sure, jacquard loom, why not, and a sweaty death of burst blood vessels and drowning inside a breached submarine, where you'd thought it worst

to die by having to watch the water climb the floor and scale the curved walls while you were paralyzed in a corner, say, legless or bleeding out, catatonic but awake enough to fear the moment when the waterline rose above a mouth you could no longer move – that’s what you’d expected; and you weren’t told, *nobody told you*, about the other death, the one that would result from the sudden wild depressurization of the inside of the submarine if and when it was hit by enemy torpedo or, shit, even ran into the hulk of some other ally derelict, scraped too hard against the predecession of such ghosts as you’d soon join.

So, like gall spilling through the wrong veins, you photograph yourself in the act of becoming a ghost, which photographic process is also the ghost itself: the walls of the submarine shear apart, and the gases that had circulated freely through your body start to form bubbles in accordance with the loss of environmental pressure, and you die not gutshot or drowning but screaming as hard spheres of nitrogen climb your spinal column, shrieking yourself into a bloody flashbulb of decompressed musculoskeletal stars.

The pentatonic scale, in its second and major mode, blows in from some lot in the middle distance, a place easy enough to visualize as a radio surrounded by gray city-dust and broken masonry, though at the moment there’s a house upon it, and that house is probably inhabited, and the radio is probably being operated with electricity taken and paid for by somebody with credit card and Social Security numbers, somebody who might even be missed if he or she were to go missing, whose apparently forced absence might even call in a detachment of police who wish they were off duty at this hour, chatting up the new crop of thin but prematurely suspicious young white girls who work the counter at the gas station, young women often from meager backgrounds who took those menial and poorly-paying jobs in access of some definite desperation – to get out of abusive mothers’, fathers’, husbands’, boyfriends’, girlfriends’ houses; to feed and shelter a child; to pay off a loan; to buy prescription drugs, on- and off-label, though in this case mostly on- – and who have already weathered several of their better-heeled friends lifetimes’ worth of petty come-on bullshit, the kind of thing a cop says to you while he’s lining up his frozen burrito and 40 oz. malt liquor as if he’s going to have to

pay for them, which of course the pudgy buzzcut fuck isn't. Why else would cops hang around gas stations.

And he's going to lay some line on you about, Hey, baby, don't your boyfriend get jealous of all the folks come through here lookin' at a pretty girl like you, hoping you'll put on some wide-eyed Christian Fellowship Bettie Page act and say, Aw shucks, officer, I don't have no boyfriend, or hoping you'll grant him at least the kind of grizzled nicotine laugh that connotes, Nice try, buddy, but it ain't happening – the cop would *gladly* take that last, would often happily get shot down as long as it all occurred with a mutual sense of humor, as long as he can come in here tomorrow night and say the same sleazy shit, and here's the thing: *he's never going to understand how this, too, is a violence*, how his perpetual reappearance (between ignoring gunshots in some neighborhoods and driving right up to the gated guardsmen's huts of others for nothing more than a red light blinking on and off on the switchboard of a private security firm somewhere) is one of the petty but growing horrors of your day, you, the girl behind the counter at the gas station where the other you, Scavenger, used to walk almost every night, buy a pack of cigarettes, a box of allergy medicine to be used as sleeping pills, a small tin canister of Band-Aids to cover the razor-punctuated skin's necessary glyphs; the cop will never know nor need to know that this "well-intentioned," "harmless," "all-in-good-fun" badinage sounds less like a joke and more like a threat every time he rehearses it, because, believe me, these girls aren't dumb, they're tough as shit, and they all know at least one girl in comparable circumstances who's been raped by a policeman.

Look it up. Second most common complaint against cops in your country, right after "police brutality," and it says something, doesn't it, that "brutality" apparently doesn't include "rape" in American English. We're not just talking about tacit blowjob requests to tear up a speeding ticket, though we *are* talking about that; we're also talking about the sudden glitch that seems to afflict the camera in the back of the cop's cruiser every time he pulls over a female speeder, the weird pixilated muteness of his bodycam during the, say, 45 minutes between a woman's arrest and her arrival at the precinct which was never more than 3 blocks away at any point during this process, the acreage of blank videotape labeled HOLDING CELLS 1-3 and stored not *in case of* lawsuits but to *prevent* lawsuits, you see, because there's nothing *on* most of that tape, because the cops only turn the cameras on when the contents of the holding cells are of no sexual interest



to them. And hey, who are the metropolitan police to know where to find every minute of footage from a 24/7 movie that's run for, I don't know, five or six years? Can you tell me where *you* were on the night in question? And will there be any penalty if you can and I can't?

So the woman playing the music in the next lot, across the next fence, would probably harass these same police with her absence, would pull them away from what they think is the exchange of ritual pleasantries with the skinny girl at the gas station, who has the look of somebody recovering from addiction to hard drugs – she's still young, but her skin is prematurely drawn, shrunken and etched about the bone, pressed tightly to her skeleton like goldleaf to the relief of a frieze. But when the skinny girl goes missing, nobody's very likely to look for her at all. Either the cops already know where she is or they don't particularly care, and there's always another skinny girl at another gas station, just waiting for the preliminary violence of smiling cops' innuendo to stylize itself toward that final ditch or city morgue, to post a want ad in the paper and paste a red and black HELP WANTED sign to the back of the bulletproof glass.

### Session #8

Kassandra's hospital bed, half-hidden in the tall cornfield, half-attended by obscure surgeons of the earth, visited illicitly and at no certain hour by unlicensed diagnosticians of the stars.

They're qualified for visitation by their doctoral costume only, but it's flimsy, stagy-delicate, clearly made of paper where it might be polythene or some less scrutable product of oil's variously impacted rainbows, the iron-ringing and half-fossilized star-mandibles slowly worked into the mudstone's fragile tincture. Ought to be. Say imperative. Say it any way you like. I could be wrong. But I've learned the suspicion, watching your own surgeons, that they should be dressed in sterile things, the transmuted slaughter of the earth made white, slippery, stainproof, hazmat gear to be hosed down in big indiscriminate piles afterward, slopped together orange and gray in the back lots of freshly-converted medical facilities which are actually army encampments or the production-sites of arms cartels, changed over in a panic to house the exposed workers and a few of the sample-worthy victims, break quarantine that quarantine be better maintained, take biopsies from the living and what must merely be called cuttings from the dead, bits of demonstrative tissue, a carious tooth already almost fully loose in the socket, a bit of peeling skin from a radiation-burnt nose, anything that survives the simmer and stridulation of steel instruments in the autoclave alongside star-waste even oil couldn't reconcile, medical remainders left to the probing of no hospital's postmortem curiosity.

Thence cures, you'll have heard. From the landfill rises the rose that obliterates the landfill. We're made such promises. I've lately received the dim, what you'd call, well, let's the "the word" though there were no words at all, I've lately received the physiological news that some men somewhere with vast international funding and the goodwill of any government bothered enough to have an opinion, right, that these men have assured us of a certain invention, whose technicalities they won't bother to detail,

which will scrub carbon emissions from the air and use them to grow, I don't know, hothouse pharmaceuticals, to siphon or skim the curative quotient from bacterial seedbeds of penicillin stars.

And we believe them, because we're really given no choice as to our belief, because to believe otherwise would be to accept the certainty that in, say, fifty years, there will be far too little water for even half of your country to live on, that we (and this threatens the dead no less than the living – what do you think we're made of, æther, ichor of khthonos? These were always terrene substances, which is to say, always autopsy's translations of the stars' biomechanics, and their shift and blend and fission is to be found anywhere at all, around and especially underneath you; there is no special storehouse for the physical components of the "soul," if that's the word you want, if that's what the dead are – what I mean to say is, memory needs meat, some kind of possible carnage or other, and a mainframe of star-printed organs does quite as well as a neuroleptic attack of gauzy wrinkled light, a general presumption of the air to its own seizure, like when we lay on the rooftops of the rowhouses that still looked Dutch, though it's been at least a hundred years since anybody but the rich-beyond-ethnicity has owned any of them, and even longer since they were tenanted by anybody but those cursed by their poverty to be specifically and professionally ethnic – acting out the roles of White Russians, Ukrainians and Poles, stateless lascars from the Bukovina who have no idea whether or not they owe some blood allegiance to the Hapsburg empire, Greeks still agitating out of black lungs and rheum-cauterized eyes for the return of the king that the ELAS disposed, even, and in greater numbers than you'd hope, for the return of the Nazi regime that brought such kindred, such sympathetic feelings about statuary and geometry to an island otherwise wartorn, as once the multiple strafing of the British and Italians brought exactly the opposite to many-martyred Malta, blown to living hell so many times that hell survives despite the death of all its dead, and that we only need a short flight, really, hardly even an inconvenience, you can do it in a prop plane or, shit, a biplane if you've got one handy, a little jaunt over the southern Ionian Sea to see what shadow-life secures the still-standing Parthenon – though multiply burnt, though carbonized enough that the technicians sent in to restore its friezes accidentally uncover evidence that the whole iconography of that building is built out in a spiral from a previously-obscured panel in which Iphigenia is tied down to the shoreward stones,

roped to her own flesh, wrist frisking wrist as to kindle a fire from dry bones, ankles to ankles setting off the alphanumeric spark in ossified tinder like the aleph roaring through the Keter crown to begin the light's striation into branches of deformed cartilaginous stars, xenomorphic with oddities of heat and pressure; that the Parthenon, in short, is a monument to the centrality of slaughter, a very subtle, an almost tacit admission that there is no Greece and thence no *res publica* without this ongoing and permanently reenacted massacre of an innocent who *doesn't*, who *cannot*, "stand for all innocents," because the inmost point, the most recurrent quantum, of their innocence is that *they were who they were*, impossible to summarize or average, that they did have nameable faces if not names, bodies to carry language with if no language aside from their killers', and that even if you tie your daughter down to an improvised altar on the shore of a shipwreck island and cut her throat a hundred million times on a hundred million days in exact maddening succession, I mean, truly insane, you have killed *someone specific* every fucking time, and that mythology, insofar as it's alive, is not the sanding-away of these specificities, but their accretion, the recharging of a certain pane of earth or torsion of the light with their mutilated tuning, sipping lithium in a taut-lipped panic from the dirt, a bit of gold-cored gray stone melted into a thin acid river, like fuel cells in the missile silos and charges in the missiles' cones continually feed that astral habit, inject a palsied orchid of stars' many-times abraded RNA, a graft-weary transcriptase vine that barely wets the valley floor of, cuts away the loess from, the dark seam in the bathysphere-crushing depth of the bellowing vein)

Now nobody can say that isn't optimism, can they, he she, anyone? I mean really. (I'm not sure I follow.)

I might be wrong. I don't think I am, but I could be. The dead aren't preserved from being wrong, but we do seem to be saved from insincerity – I mean, the dead may be sardonic, even sarcastic, may (must often) advocate for devils, but we're chemically incapable of being insincere. Insincerity does, well, I was going to say rise around us, like the strange vortices of sundown gnats, only ever at sundown, the ones you and I accidentally swallowed while walking back across the parking lots, empty for the empty depth of the summer after the last of its very common holidays, now nothing but unmarked heat till we should have to return to whatever ancient menace is encoded in

the bronzing and setting of the summer's motile leaves, the immobility, the autumnal paralysis of the stilled spermatozoon stars in their sample vial, their petri dish, in vitro and frozen, and the face of the thing – a face like a human's, but clearly the humanity goes only as deep as the face; it is a human mask upon a body that knows only bodies' sympathy with anything called human, and when I say *sympathy*, I mean merely the attunement of such heat as swarms the quanta as connects the electrodes as architects the cells as builds the tissues as works out the histologic geography of organs as seeps alongside the blood as circulates to form, by the overtone series of its rampant lisp circuitry, the lungs which then need blood which then needs oxygen which then needs breathable world ... well ... call it sphinx and move away, though close enough to watch the last place you saw the sphinx.

(My old, I don't know what to call him, say my old colleague Oedipus, by rights my former king, he met a sphinx once, and thought to answer it by simply telling it his name, which turned out to be the solution to its riddle. He was thus celebrated and installed upon the throne. He thought to have dispensed with the sphinx that way, thought he'd never meet it nor need to again, and thought – fatally – that his own name would be the solution to all such future vexations, which was fatal not because it was incorrect, but because it was exactly right – because, one dead, sorry, one day, his city did rise unaccustomed on its hind legs and demand the answer to the rebus of its plague, demand a surgery of glyph that would click back into proper polarities the anatomic dissonance of its depolarized stars, and he only half-heard the city's question, as he but half-heard every question, confident as soon as he heard the rising interrogative tone in the voice that the answer would be *Oedipus* again, *and it was*, you see, you hear that now, he answered *Oedipus* and was right, and realized then that he would need to provide the sphinx with a new face – its last human mask having worn thin as the basal layer of the cross-sectioned skin under the temperature of his last answer, having folded like sections of torn-up railway, earthmover earth, undug encampments, the shelled-in shells of plaster monuments posing as houses, blank uninscribed obelisks mortared over with false doors and windows to look like tenements and slums but really still blank, surfaces only marked from underneath, embolistic on the verso with a swollen-artery oncology of stars.

Such stars, then, thermophile, given to affinities with acid, filial with mordants and the precision of the damage they incur upon the blind stone and mottled marble when we need to cut in, say, a bas-relief frieze of Iphigenia having her throat cut to revive the winds out of Aulis. We need to produce such a frieze so we can quickly build a temple around it and detail that temple with so many other stoneset myths – there’s this good resonance in the German, *übersetzen* for “translated,” *set over*, like a roughly beak-or-claw-torn transcript of the million lines of stars’ genetic code shoved onto the drum and roller of a different phenotypic typewriter, a new epigenetics rolling downhill in a different alphabet, maybe even one read right to left or top to bottom or boustrophedonic, following the back-and-forth path of the ox tilling the field till we should come up, for final *übersetzen* installation in the fuel-rod cores of reliquary stars, with the soil- and time-stained teeth and bones of other oxen who have tilled the exact same rows.

But the frieze, and then the friezes surrounding, alright, of course, enough to cover up the central frieze, the one that required the temple. Thus with Oedipus. He answered his own name to the last riddle, was found to be correct, was shocked to realize, was horrified to reconnect, and came to feel that his old sphinx needed a new human face, for which he, now a dead man though still walking on two of his four possible legs, was the obvious donor. So he tore out his own eyes with the jewelry of his hanged wife, thus to manufacture for that sphinx a fully transferrable face, with no extra optic matter clinging by veins or nerves to the blood-matted insides of the sockets. And he would’ve torn out tongue and teeth if he’d thought it worthwhile, or necessary, but he knew enough about the sphinx to know it can make use of any species’ orthodontia, can excavate its own tongue from the lingual archaeology of any other animal with throat enough to howl and mouth to riddle.)

Kassandra’s self-appointed surgeons come singly or in droves, arrive in lazy herds or trickles of straggling and hyperspecialized physicians, osteopaths of the conjoined and absorbed twin, orthodontists of the fetal gills long sutured shut by subsequent cell culture, forensic reverse-engineers of the misbirth and botched christening, geographers to reckon backward from the stains, dents, and position of her spare hospital bed – creaking with the cornstalks when the wind worries each of their springs, rolling a few

inches back and forth on stick wheels till divots drill the rows between the rows, dig holes for probiotic seedlings of disease – what debugging of the stars’ cannibal software might produce such a cracked apogee, so tacit-wracked an orbit of dissent.

Cellulose and microscopes’ eyes tiled over with vegetable stained glass, the osteon and sarcomere, the smallest units of contractile stars’ extension and slow growth, spanning the galaxy’s black proteinaceous spindles by coarse and windburnt phasing of the light from death to death, the drugged-raw redshift geology of autopsied stars in opium-thick afterbirth solution – as these dubious doctors now inject Cassandra with proprietary mixtures, placental powder and gold salts, camphor and talc, dummy wax for real lepers, a museum of skin diseases compressed into a spirochete microfilm:

Syringes full of nanomachined LOX generators drawn off the black gelatinous space between the optic morphine of dead stars, whose light still hangs, if in degraded form, if slowly scoured and skinless enough now to share its hanging-space with carcasses cleaned and dressed for the butcher’s window, the shockingly but obscurely glyptic logography of raw meat, “a sterner mapping of purpose” in the body stripped down past what skin might token or flayed lips “express,” the unstatic flesh behind the variously useful stases of the smile and grimace.

Not only biostatic, but that too: preserving equilibria of heat, pH, and pressure, tacked to the edges of the protuberant jaw’s hinge or the occipital bulb with thick pastes made from ground flour and atomized stones, a whole Greek referendum (knowing the answer, before the vote, in whatever wracked tenses you prefer, always-to-have-been YES) present in the powder that holds her face to her skull, more properly her face to her skin, since there’s no minimum sum of skin which necessarily makes a face. We’ve learned *that* if little else.

There was skin from here to Rotterdam, to Flanders, to the hedgerows of Normandy, all the way across the continent where history is still dying and still being reexhumed, subjected to such serial and carnivorous inquest, canister after canister of reel upon reel of test footage in which the men of the disciplines and the women damned to their shadows reenact (with tiny differences in lighting, choreography, dialogue) the stepwise depredation of the disinterred stars’ biome, overpreying way past zero and to the very unformed organs in the black hole’s slack throat, what would’ve been cartilaginous ridges and tectonic plates, strung meat enough to sever and simmer an

orphic head even after its decapitation, singing black light out of a mouth held permanently open by the inward printing of rigor mortis, the stark photomachinery of the body's manual-override stars.

Who mentioned skin, I could be wrong, I've been mistaken, prophecy is not the art of correctness, that you'll expect by now, that you'll understand, was I wrong when the goddess scratched out my eyes?

(From a distance, through proxies, and being a goddess is in part the art of keeping on hand an infinite reserve stock of proxies, so that even I, whose eyes were actually torn blind, cannot remember how it happened, whether in an instant or over years, whether presaged by a blinding flash as on your islands off the Inland Sea or simply fallen into immediate darkness as in your inland cities – and consider *that* as an interval, build that into your reconstruction of archaic scales and modes, in the attempt to find a different and a disused music: when you dropped the last bombs of the old guard, which were also the first bombs of the new, weapons retrofit to the death of history, breaking the atom in half just as any real idea of human continuity or commonality was sundered to its smallest conceivable particles in the smokestacks of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, what one wise and isolation-crazed man called your “new Altamira” – and consider *that* as an interval, etc., build that into your reconstruction, etc., that your cave paintings are whatever skim of Jew-ash and Jew-grease are still sticking to the metal and bricks of the since-disassembled deathcamps, since there's almost no way the powers of East or West would've wasted usable stone and steel in the offing of the undeclared Third World War: they got reused for *something*, they were reincorporated sphingid into some graft-thick machinery, a crane of smelted chimeridae, a vast teetering architecture overbalanced with the glial seams a hundred airplane welders' torches spread like inedible butter from the viscera of medical-incinerator stars; these are your simplest and most cardinal signs, most ordinal as well; these are to be trusted after the very word for *trust* is lost, an archaism popping up in the occasional pledge or legalistic formula, elbowing like a plague doctor through the factory-bought canebrake to appear in some nearly secularized rite of the church, which church, who gives a shit, something Christian enough not to scare the Christians, call it Episcopalian and have done with it, I don't know, we did have a priest officiate our



wedding, for the parents' sake, you know, but it might as well have been the captain of a ship or any other member of the oddly-entitled lay investiture, hell, who else is allowed to officiate marriages without taking any particular vows, surely the operators of industrial furnaces, surely the foremen of digsites for stadia that will bleed thorium and decommissioned nuclear-warhead juice into the water table of the slums, if they aren't they oughta be, and if they ought to be and aren't, well, who can blame us, only us, we the heirs and assigns of our own blemish, but I was talking about old words still in use though utterly unread, let pass like tokens of a verbal formulation's sincerity, utility, maybe, knowing that you join the legions of Francophile slavemasters and Dust Bowl grasshopper-farmers to let pass a phrase like *pledge your troth* or *in sooth* without comment, trusting that somebody somewhere knows what the fuck it means, and that it would be undignified to ask, would evince a lack not so much of culture as of tact –

And do we trust tact, o god yes, apostrophically o, we do, we have no trust but trust to tact and, rarely, to the gray grit on the lips and pipes of smokestacks of the Greater Reich, the petrochemical shibboleth to be answered in its disqualifying lisp by the speech-defects of stars' corrupted files, replayed and replayed underground till some drill or hose full of water and sand should sleep between the panes, abort the frame rate, and build a bright synthetic city to the west, where the only password, the lone necessary proof of permission, is that you don't remember and would never say *shibboleth*.)

Could I be wrong, of course I could be wrong, prophecy isn't etc., and besides, I never claimed to be a profit, sorry, prophet, I was an *oracle*, I guess, which is a different occupation, and consists of a long apprenticeship to altering your resistances, exchanging the valences of outer shells, such that human pressure is less easily transmitted – the unwarming, the dead-of-frost intensity of what they want and say they want, what they say they hate and what they truly hate, the day's million semi-necessary lies – and your veins bloom cupric, put forth aragonite stiletti, semiconductor stalactites to exhume the voltage dug up on the other side of the integral-protein stars, in their transmembrane domain.

Potentials, in whatever sense you like. And the street, better to call it the road, because it does cut out of here and into the populous wilderness, where cast concrete

replaces the nothing-very-much long since paved over, not even what you'd call prairie, a yellow-brown and sere desolation of what you wouldn't even think of as foliage, not nearly enough of it, for one thing, and what little does persist lacks that tongued quality, the testing and the swallow, from labiodental fricative (the first genitive dissonance of light) to linguopalatal liquid (the light's unclassified frenetic genome quickly self-encrypting – it only took four hundred thousand years – into the most basic subcellular structures of the stars) to, what, I guess it would maybe qualify as an interdental plosive, the soft *g* of *foliage*, not quite bitten off, enough running water, enough half-programmed blood draining from the incompletely butchered stars to trickle down your throat, fill your belly with fissile software, lubricate esophageal surgeries left later to the architectural domain, the hollow column above the pyramid's central chamber, the many-stepped ascents to the ziggurat, such that, from a distance, it appears nothing more than a collation of randomly positioned staircases, a continual climb to a place defined by other and equally confused climbs, winding up on a plateau that's only top steps of other stairs, each with a seam of sand-gritty darkness between, no inconsiderable drop, I mean, if you were to lose a fingernail or name down that interstice, it would be *gone*, by which I mean of course not gone, but immured into the structure then, not to be recovered except as all monumental architecture is itself a structure of recovery, a reconstructive surgery of stars, some branch of plastics medicine long lost till its perversion into the research that gave us nylon, modern dyes, and probably the eyes with which you're trying to hear this, the ears whereby you work out its dubious transfusion.

So it's a *road*, not a *street*, okay, though I think the sign appends the proper noun with *Avenue* or *Boulevard* – it must, in retrospect, be *Avenue*, because even the half-literate Indian-killing sadists who founded this town probably wouldn't name a road *Bolivar Boulevard*, especially given their (and their progeny's) propensity to pronounce the man's name like "Bolliver," thereby neutering whatever small charge of insurgency still clings to the correct pronunciation, Bo-lee-*var*, though now that some professionally "concerned" and sunglass-plastered rich Hollywood fuck has made a naïve documentary extolling the virtues of the men who are very, very pleased to call themselves the neo-Bolivaristas, well, how much charge could there really be.

Not that such men (and a woman among them, Señora Kirchner, relict of the much-regretted Señor Kirchner, whose funeral obsequies were 99% bullshit when they happened, but *jesus christ* if they wouldn't be a little more sincere these days) aren't worthy of some attention. I, dead and foreign as I am, have an affection for anybody who makes the daily news inconvenient. I like, on some level, to see a stalemate where would otherwise be but the smooth and interrupted functioning of the machine that uses and then crushes the larvae who actually build and do everything and are completely absent from the discipline called "history."

But let's not pretend the president of Argentina, or any fucking president of any fucking country, is really on the side of anybody but other presidents, and of "countries" en masse, en bloc, political entities which by definition exclude the larvae, who build everything within their borders, and who are themselves defined by being crushed at those borders – the borderlines themselves, you know, las fronteras to the letter of the pigment, are made like cochineal from the crushed shells and rich purplish blood of the larvae, in the decontamination stalls, on the floors of the cyanide showers, constellated in the mutually-owned dirt alongside the fossil infestations of the forcibly deloused stars.

The presidents help presidents, the countries are the partisans of countries, and you'd better believe that any foreign government of any kind, nominally hostile or allegedly in sympathy, would rather have a stable slaughter than a tenuous peace, would *always* and under any circumstances at all turn down a fragile détente for the sweet knowledge that some Generalissimo is going to go shirtless, get greased up for a public wrestling match against an allegorical representation of Communism (his name will be Ivan and he'll wear hammer-and-sickle trunks and flirt with the idea of rewriting his own choreography, which he, of course, will not do), under whose hollow and resonant ring they're going to start executing political prisoners, three shots each, head, heart, and gut, and every report of every general-issue rifle or non-issue chop-shopped sidearm indistinguishable from the flashbulbs bursting at the turnbuckles, the hoarse shouts of reporters turning in the next twelve years of juntas' news.

The quack doctors are studying for, and earning, their equivalence with crows, shushing and tut-tutting though themselves more than each other, casting doubtful diagnoses in a semaphore the moment improvises from its own sibilant scission, like the torn light of fissiparous stars reproducing cell-for-cell though with significant drift in their genetic code, a whole phylum of errors building phenotypes from misheard strands of acid.

They juggle, they split, slap, caution, coax; they wring out a gematria of possible translations between skin/bone/gristle and such words as they would use had they a mutual language in which to argue their differing verdicts, though they don't, since few (possibly none) of them are actually doctors by any accreditation but their own, not that we'd know, so shortly after death, what kind of institution's imprimatur to trust with the hospice care of the dead, the palliative radiotherapy of stars drawn suddenly so close and icily seething, though behind a sky as palpable as lymph, and no less apt to ooze from sores whose loci we can never seem find.

Not even by triangulation or the short surveillance flights of fruitflies and mosquitoes buzzing around her supine length where she stretches or hunches in a paper gown on the thin metal rack of what must've been a field-hospital bed, maybe a bed in a delousing ward for recent immigrants, some Ellis Island bunk remanded here on its historical remittance, sent back to the old country by a raft of desperate Greeks eager to show their country cousins – still nominally citizens of provinces named for the Hunter long since translated to his constituent arthroscopy of stars – what wealth there is to be hand in the Americas, the northern one primarily, I guess, see what they pin us to, see how they lay us down, you should dream of such accommodation, you should fantasize in ruined arbors and among sterile olive branches what it is you might get handcuffed to if you'd made it through the questionnaires and obligatory sterilization the way we have.

Call it a side effect. Powders, you know, indiscriminately strewn, bad makeup in the ramifying glare of the backstage mirrors, don't worry, nobody's going to notice once you're out there in front of the footlights, nobody's even paying attention, the pageantry of this is fulfilled, is, better said perhaps, is prosecuted like the priests performed it in the old Latin mass, with their backs to the congregation, with only altar and reredos before them, staring up into those metal friezes on the churches' furthest walls, the left-over armor-plating of some disposal and polyglot god-machinery, caught up in

Arthurian cycles and the *chanson de Roland* as much as anything the Bible actually says, hagiographies of mutant stars, sacred objects to be torn from between the ribs of saints whose whole costal cages lie not far from the rose blooming out of Caesar's slit throat.

Well, you know the deal, or don't you. Humming his pontifications, stumbling his harsh-R'd, his provincially rhotic way through psalms which are meant, we suppose, to flick off the tongue much like modern Italian, through written first (first?) in Hebrew, through transposed through Greek, and a whole otolaryngeal archaeology to be recovered from that series: the R starts in the throat, the Hebrew *reish* quite a bit like the liquid burr of a French R, then up to the Greek *rho*, from uvula and soft palate to tongue's flick on the alveolar ridge, as though swatting at already-flypapered flies, an assassination of the dead, a targeted gene capture of the stars' exhausted exons; and then the Latin R, nearly dental, a covalent bond with the stereotyped floridity of hands, deft pigeons winging to shit on bronze, public-minded poetry in protest of the desuetude of statuary, well, you might get around to writing that kind of thing if you had to live in, where, Venezia, Napoli, mama Roma for so long, I mean shouldn't somebody clean up the bronze bust of whoever it is, a bad poet, Tasso, maybe Petrarch, I don't know, where was Machiavelli from, have they yet had the coglioni to put up a statue of Bruno in the piazza where they burned him alive, how long did it take before they were mulling a Galileo Day at the city council?

And finally, that last and most migrainous transposition, to the sinus-ringing Celtic R, from the absolute last ridge of the linguistic skull. (We pause here to think of that line, so many times translated and so badly, in the early offing of the *Odyssey*, when Athena asks Zeus why he's letting old Odysseus get fucked around so hard, come on, dad, I thought you liked the guy, clever as hell if a bit of a pussy when it comes to actual bloodshed, but that's your kind of feller, ain't it, "he's as clever as a god," you said, and thence conclusions to be drawn, that theos is derivable from *psukhe* or possibly *noös*; Zeus comes back at her with what your native idiom, Scavenger, would probably render as, "Quit talkin' bullshit," or, "Man, shut the fuck up, you silly bitch," since you come from an ugly place and will probably die there; the original Greek, however, runs something like, "Daughter, what foolishness are you letting escape past the barrier of your teeth?," which is absolutely awful in English, and come to think of it, your natal

state – animal: mule, amphibian: bullfrog, aquatic animal: paddlefish, beverage: milk, bird: eastern bluebird, dessert: ice cream cone, dinosaur: *Hypsibema missouriensis*, fish: channel catfish, flower: white hawthorn, fossil: crinoid, game bird: bobwhite quail, grape: Cynthiana, grass: big bluestem, horse: fox trotting horse, insect: honeybee, invertebrate: crayfish, mineral: galena, musical instrument: fiddle, *not* violin, fiddle, rock: mozarkite, reptile: three-toed box turtle, tree: flowering dogwood, nut: black walnut, motto: *salus populi suprema lex esto*, and let's not even fantasize for an instant that either the *salus* or the *lex* were ever meant to refer to anything but white men's law and safety – the state where you were born, well, it doesn't really render the thing any worse than, "Daughter, what foolishness," etc., which in Greek, a Greek before me, though not by long, probably didn't sound so different from, "Now what bullshit is this, honey?," probably had Zeus mouthing, Better bite your tongue before you talk the damn thing right out of your head, skull-daughter, better bite anything at all, since teeth were given men that they might tear away at anything at all, and maybe you'll use yours to rip an artery or two from the throat of any future questions.)

Too early yet – too late, really, but for us in Greece, Hellenes not yet or already, Achaians maybe, named earlier but the name unheard for, what, a couple hundred years, who knows when I lived or *that* I lived at all, who knows that my vitality is not, wasn't, the compressed and tenuous strand, the narrow filiation, of a certain buried thing through eons of growing stone, not properly "alive" in any of them but possible to scan en masse for its vital signs, a geologic biopsy of strands of crinoid stars – too early for the Hebrew names, the Jewish girls, the Hepzibah, Hadassah, Tzipporah, the first three I find (along with an ad for a newsletter promising, and I include its final exclamation point, "Cool Jewish insight!," rather too late), Adina, Ahuva, Aliza, skip ahead, Hodaya, Idit, Ilana, skip ahead, Keren, Kinneret, Leah, you know Leah, skip skip, Milka, Miriam, Moriah, OK, last three, Yocheved, Zahava, and Zissel.

Had it been the right time, if any time were right, I mean, had they waited to kill Cassandra until after you exterminated your six or seven million Jews, yes *you*, yes all of *you*, and also all of *us* – nobody kills seven million of anything or anyone without the collaboration of the entire world, including its past – the fake doctors who now surround her might have some sense of the proper protocol. Bogus tests, an interlock or

two with the arms cartels, maybe experiments with liquid oxygen or hyperbaric chambers, waiting to see how long you can let a bullethole fester gangrenous before you apply the new German-patent miracle drug (actually it's a Swiss invention, patented in England, licensed in full to a company in the United States whose name you'd definitely know, and relicensed for \$1 per annum and "other good and valuable considerations," remember that phrase?, to the German subsidiary of that American chemicals cartel).

Fifteen minutes? Check. An hour? Check. Two hours? Oh, so a Jewess – they'd still have been using that noun, a Jüdin, not just a Jude, which like so many words has no superficial way to explain the massive bilious freight of contempt that goes with it: Jüdin, Jewess, a proper discretion, a self-evident necessity, and maybe that's the root of the obvious but half-tangible hate, that there should be a separate word for male and female Jews as if we were talking ducks and drakes, cows and bulls, since you wouldn't want to leave a fence down between the two paddocks or let the male and female prisoners start fraternizing, would you, a weird choice of words and it's yours, Scavenger, not mine, your people's: I don't speak Latin, never have – a Jewess might lose her left arm from the shoulder where we shot her. More's the, no, equal's the pity, since there is none. Let it rot.

That's what these doctors might've learned if they'd waited for your Holocaust, the only one so called in a century full of them. There are always excuses, and the crime passionel is really something for another century's yellow journalism. Since you come from the Interior, as indeed do I, you've still got, if not an appetite, than at least a comprehension of that kind of minor crime. Something for the talking heads to talk their heads off about. A 3-minute guest spot for a millionaire Baptist preacher to cry in, oh don't doubt it, he's got smelling salts on hand, and then a six-pack of bolt-together white women with degrees in Communications, capital-C, trying their best to look grave and empathetic, none of whom would have the jobs they have if they'd ever really needed gravity or empathy about anything at all. You don't get to work on the news by knowing what the fuck its sufferers are feeling.

There are those who *choose* the news, those who *tell* it, and then there are those whom the news *befalls*, those to whom it happens. The three categories never, ever blend.

At most, they rub shoulders in programmed segments, when, let's say, a mother of two of the 47 people who got killed in Chicago last weekend is brought on in bewilderment (hers) and condescension (theirs) to be asked questions that aren't questions, rhetorically slapped around, subjected to an interrogation which, in its way, is quite as bad as the off-books tête-à-tête (or main-à-tête, or pistolet-à-tête, or cintre-à-peau) her sons were treated to at the Homan Square black site, where they were handcuffed to an out-of-use radiator while officially off-duty cops beat the living shit out of them, trying to "extract" information on a drug deal or a drive-by in which neither of those boys had any role at all. Well, there was the one role: they're (were, now that they're dead) both black, and in America, the news happens primarily *to* black people, dictated *by* white ones, and enounced by whatever middle sector of the chroma key was felt to be mis- or under-represented according to the last available polling data.

We need more Hispanic women over 40 between the hours of 7 and 10 a.m. We need more Asian men between 45 and 55 on the evening broadcast. We need a fallback group of the news's subjects, in the technical sense, the populace to whom it all happens, and luckily we've got a hundred million gratis émigrés on board, all generically "Mexican" now since that's the last border they crossed, whether they actually come from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Argentina, Chile, or any of the dozen other nations it's been your pleasure and your business, Scavenger, to destroy since about 1950.

Keep them in reserve. A melanin B-reel migrating from the heart of the scorched film toward its outermost and oxidized crust, like melanocyte stars shed from the central nervous system, hardening into rind and horn, retempering the embryo for police to read as birth defect and census takers' calculators mutely to disdain.

Abandoned in close quarters with a million other missing persons, mutely screaming on a feedback loop that splints brachial arteries with shards of anatomically incorrect stars, seething through a flowerbed, a planned-in-panic garden, of missing or fictitious glands – all this till tunnel vision comes down like a small physical mercy, an impairment for which the body has prayed, filed each shiver as a sheaf of individual request, blossomed when their waveform's been transcribed as a larger entreaty, a beckoning of EKGs wired up to the dreamless static-washed sleep of epileptic stars, and



shaking the nearly featureless zinc or tin or aluminum walls of imperium (but only because the sight itself is shaking in its nest of glue and bone).

Fledged feathers, starling reliquaries, the gelatinous skeletons of fish and smaller birds left behind by kingfishers, dug into the shoreline, coring the escarpment as to wring some bitter honey from the salt bees of the sea, the endless wrack and undertow of sodium-amytal stars (dragging some truth from whatever fix of lip or micrometer-thin skin of tooth remains to tell it, even if it's not the truth they'd ring you up for while you wake, even if apparently inapplicable to the case at hand; that don't matter none, son; you get what you can and when you can get it, and all the truth they can't use comes to rest in the wreckage pile of history, where the last true flower grows, said by some to be an opium poppy and thus medicinal and amnesiac at once, by others to figure a black chrysanthemum, a multiplex cerebral implant comfortably nesting where the obsolescent zooid stars have long detached from their coral cavity, the cup of runny bone they used to hold and sum the heat of runtime, programs and performances thereof lost but for the humid cloud kept there, inside the skull, the purge of data-sweat and fog-warm reddish air beading down the fossae, inhumed and preserved in the peat bogs of the upper spine, the memorial geography of crypts eaten by the land that coughed up their contents, chalk obelisks brought back from the gulf-coast quarry to acquire in the swampland of their final reincorporation – like graphite rods scarred over, encoded by new skin whose older surrounding cells don't know the proper sequence, the necessary prayers, for its decryption, an incompatibility of biohardware stars' semiregenerate mosaic – whatever striations and varicose veins they'll need before they breathe through the black bubbling mud, cipher the insect-skin output of their lungless respiration as cysts of aging air, coal gas and sewer-smoke, organic-smelling byproducts of mineral messiahs, the once-and-ever eucharist of transubstantiations freed from doubt: you don't have to wonder whether or not the bones of the extinct will become carbon again, whether the dirt is made from the dead, if the grass can be stomped long and hard enough to lay a soft black bed for its own distant relatives, far enough apart on the family tree that they can interbreed without producing obviously disabled progeny, only a wronged gene here and there, a trace placed on the raising and lowering of some ligand's bridge like a wiretap on a motel phone used maybe once per year, decade, allowable lifetime, and whenever, if ever, the surveilled data does come

through, it'll likely as not show up on the outdated green-and-black screen of some early-model personal computer, stuttering the inked piano-hammers of a teletype machine, a punchcard pianola long unplugged from the university basement secretly a subdivision of DARPA, you're technically on military territory right now, this is, legally speaking, the United States, whatever country you'd walk into by stepping out the hall door or escaping – huh, 'escaping' – through the ventilation system; you occupy or simply work inside this room on American sufferance, testing with each test of further and further failed results our already meager tolerance, refusing to tell us what we don't just want but truly do *need* to hear, get it, since we've already acted as if we heard it ages ago, since all its consequences have already been made part of the world it will inherit, understand? Sometimes you torture people to get information about the future, OK, tell it to anybody who'll buy it, and a shocking amount of people not only will but *do* buy it right now, in this instant, ticking-clock scenarios and everything, though there's not a single recorded instance of that phenomenon, and I mean ever. Not a fucking one.

We've all seen it played out so many times that we've come, like any animal would – red-face and with eyes crumpled to crowsfooted slits, corvid scripts temporarily gouged around the epicanthic fold like deformations of space made visible, the wrinkled gravity appearing as chalk-white lazaret lightning around a collapsing star – to believe it must be based on something real. It isn't. We've never tortured anybody into averting a possible future.

We have *definitely* tortured some into creating future violence, men with no particular politics who joined, say, the Ba'ath Party because they needed jobs, who signed an oath of loyalty the same way you agree to all the unread terms & conditions of some bootlegged software you're in the process of installing, who treat their own national rhetoric with as much irony as we're accustomed to ladling upon ours. Remarkable effect of being an imperial power, we find: that you never have to take seriously anything your own mouthpieces say, but that you are allowed if not obliged to take every other mouthpiece precisely at its word, and to believe that all Iranians, for example, compose a Holocaust-denying bloc of eager buyers for offbrand decommissioned Soviet nuclear missiles, just because some fuckhead got dubiously elected and liked to affect a Fidel Castro jacket behind the podium.

Irony is very much the emperor's pleasure, allowed in homeopathic doses to his subjects, smaller and smaller as you regress toward starvation, almost inexistent on the level of the tract-housing drug deal, where the wrong double entendre is suspicious enough to get you fucked up pretty bad, if not shot outright. Go to the first of two Third World cities in the United States, the one the flood remodeled in the image of the men whose coalfire industries probably created the flood, and see how supercilious you can get away with being. Shit ain't funny, par, and even if it were, we can't really let the 12 see us laughing, and that's why they're called the 12, or so I'm told, heard it for the first time – the explanation, that is – just last night: old radio code, CB, 10-12, “visitors present, be discrete,” the well-fed corpse at the foodless banquet, the memento mori vibrant as the constant fear of death, perched up in the corner as to remind medieval kings of their mortality, reminding the ghetto with about 3 bodies dropped by cops every day this year, aiming for well over a thousand by the time the next one rolls around and we all go down to the calendar's bare limestone-famine root, to huddle shocked and shivering between the overrun of the karst's drainage, tighten up the crosshairs on our hopes: please give us anything but more cold and more dying of it, any other temperature, however long the fever's season outstays the cicada-swarmed August of the veins).

“10-1, receiving poorly; 10-2, receiving well; 10-3, stop transmitting; 10-4, OK, message received; 10-5, relay message; 10-6, busy, please stand by; 10-7, out of service, off the air; 10-8, in service, on the air; 10-9, please repeat; 10-10, transmission complete, standing by; 10-11, you're talking too fast,” and you know what's next. 10-26, disregard last message. 10-91, talk closer to your mic.

Hearing that one a lot lately. Huh? Make your whole dialect a form of wire-blown breath; render your speech a total aspirate, not a sigh or pant or grim frustrated exhalation but just the air punched out of you between vocables, that wind-battered noise of lungs coming over the phone, answering-machine xenoglossia like the stars' autogenic reproductions, the eye pressed to the universe that built the eye, feeding on a xerography of dead light, a dry transfer of sarcophagi engineered from the stars' own prior corpses, as though we should be rebuilt cell by cell every 7 years without losing any of the previous flesh, accrete and accrete until statistically probable death at 27 finds us

just a year short of four human beings, in length, breadth, all conceivable dimensions, weakened mole eyes rolling effectively blind behind four corneas' worth of cataract, heaving through four plies of toothsome ductile lung-meat to get almost no oxygenated blood to a brain wrapped in four thicknesses of cortex, wildly overgrown, a swaying Crookes tube orchid of trapped cathode stars bloomed vertical to stuff every synapse, eat alive all the neurotransmission otherwise sunk into the receiving lobes.

Bodies on bodies, no simile required, that we should wear rather than conceal the cadavers it takes to keep us aboveground in the fashion to which we're accustomed, that every one of us should have hung around his or her neck his or her own freight of strictly impersonal kills: not people we had any specific desire to hurt, or whose names we'd even heard, simply people we were never told about or, if told, then only in the vaguest possible terms, as integers of mass, oddsmade on the debit side of a bookie's ledger for the past, that horse done run, boy, them dogs already passed the greyhound gate, the fake rabbit at the end of the pole has been chewed away to metal and scraps of faux-fur by winners first and, once the track fell into disuse and the weeds grew between the fissured concrete of the bleachers, by any other dog who happened to pass through here. And there have been hundreds, thousands, why not call it a million, since a million is the number that makes things real to an American, in dollar values or estimated genocide totals, the reason you can name Darfur out of a million comparable massacres (some just as intensely overlooked, as evaded in real-time, and many committed by us while we were officially occupied with the business of not looking at them), the reason *Rwanda* has a certain resonance that doesn't, just by resonating, render you capable of locating it on a map.

I'd have to look it up, too. In my day, we called all of Africa either Libya, Ethiopia, or Egypt, and did our damndest never to ingress further than the coasts, mouthing the traders' alphabet that precursed our own (read the verb both ways), sewing the teeth not yet of dragons or dinosaurs but of their even more extinct precursors, saurian plates of armor meat nowhere yet equipped with faces, not even anthropomorphized to that degree, maybe sensing light through some chemical reaction in the individual metallic scales or maybe, plausibly, living a life in which light was not a factor.

0% illumination. Weather bodes no way at all. Stars' random-access memory ingrown, stuck in a loop of its own self-referential commands, until it hunkers down to the shape of the heat and machine-dust generated by that silicon-entropic script, brackets entrapped like FIND > COMMAND "FIND," referencing itself enough times with enough tempered fervency, shaped heat, that eventually the self of itself comes dimly awake, rasps a handless undigited limb through the dirty stone to find something not itself, which is how you know you can eat it, minimum requirement for carnivores, a meat not mine on bones of altered tuning, a white tree hung with other protein subdirectories and begging to have its plastic case split open like the rind of an overripe melon, the oil-promising shale of a hydrocephalic skull.

Meanwhile, the President who oversaw that vaguely-recalled, that one-word-motive genocide in Darfur? He's still the sitting president, currently planning the almost certainly impracticable underpinning of a pan-African NASA (no shit), despite a couple International Criminal Court indictments for war crimes and crimes against humanity (two each, as of the last time anybody cared very much, which period ended when they issued the second identical indictment, and everybody realized that he was never going to be prosecuted, not even for the Eichmannisch crimes he's accused of, since they didn't have enough to prove genocide and, some speculate, don't even have enough to prove war crimes or crimes against humanity, that it's completely a PR move, that the ICC prosecutor knows he doesn't have the emails, kill lists, or African friends enough ever to get them, that he's another goddamn politician looking to boost his profile by issuing a warrant for the arrest of a man he's absolutely sure he'll never see in court – doesn't even *want* to see in court, because to bring in such a man and then fail to convict him, well, bit like God showing up to audition a logical proof of His own inexistence: you'd rather be wrong and not know it, wouldn't you, as long as no one else knew either; second best is to be wrong and be the only one aware; third best, nowhere at all; and beyond category, the chance to look right in re: a question never to be posed, to take the one side of a single-sided issue, to follow the Earth's curvature such that your argument is the horizon and migrates as you do, refuted only by the obviously inadmissible testimony of the moon).

The summer bends back and bruise-ripe in blur-linking long exposure over this prone curve of the Earth, longer than it should be, though not by any numeral measure or catalogue of elided Caesars, fevers, dead or pseudonymous gods, light-bending sepulture of stars tombed in their own decaying images, epitaphed by their indices of refraction – same number of units, just that each of them, from year down to smallest tenable splinter of second, is tangibly too long, and the disease or injury obeys its internal sense of time, its clock of thawed isotopic stars, while the ambulance moves like the corpse of a whale through an hour thick and amber as set honey.

Not quite yet begun to rot, but getting there: a rancid edge, the stale fat of rendered flowers, the sodden perfume of used photosynthetic stars, rising in clumps of white nameless tissue to the surface of a pool scarred with its own internal dust, a surface tension of manifest odors like smokefall come to rest in diesel rainbows upon the concave surfaces of the city. No water but this water, and nothing to drink anywhere except for the reductive salt function of your own sweat, every time less water and more salt, till finally you're sipping your own process of being embalmed, constellating your constricted veins and packing between the stills of your organs' slowed frame-rate an editing software of sodium pentathol stars, a salty alcohol designed to wring from each whatever truth its hard reset and thousand-year dormancy might offer.

Glyphic sets bracketed by the black moldering bark of unpreserved skin, and morticians' makeup slightly poisoning the loose earth in the graveyards lucky enough to be at least partially vacant, seeping through the heartwood veneers of otherwise cardboard coffins, inculcating in the corpsewax-feeding worms's chemical dependence on a certain dye or powder foundation, sclerotizing each to one spiral scratch on an adipose gramophone that needles down the cancer-tracks to play back metastases of overmultiplied aniline stars.

And the summer above all of it, still sprawling toward the click of its single frame, a photo as from a higher dimension, in which objects will be known less by the light they give back to the instant's lens than by their tenability in position, the density of the light-time wherein they occupied that certain place: you may be brightly where you are, or dimly elsewhere, but if you're only there for a moment, you'll be delicately drowned beneath the burnt-out black-green sea of nearly unmoving foliage, present for the whole three months of the film's uncovering, an Ark that rerecords its own stored covenants

upon each exposure, secretly filming the bones of the Levites, ordering them to pick up trends in costume and haircut and placid ritual motion because otherwise the resultant image would be an incomprehensible wreck: get them all in the same robes and teach each of them to move as though underwater, because that's the only way we're going to get a reasonable photo from 6,000 years of light condensed into a single image.

Change too much and you'll wind up with some fractal growth of scarcely (though reconstructably) affiliated livery and gesture, a smeared oleaginous snowflake made from the variant observance of whatever's in Leviticus or whatever book it's in, that would make sense, given the name, but then I don't know why your book of Numbers is called that, either, or why Deuteronomy comes fifth, I forgive, sorry, I forget my derivations, I remember nomos as the cantons of an Egypt I never, I don't think, saw before the myths decided whether I was alive or basically undead, before they reckoned out the various cohesions of my dust to compose me a golem of barely-wet earth, hanging together mostly because it doesn't move, with no Hebrew, neither the order-word nor the autodestruct, scratched into my forehead, unmarked as yet (nor ever) with the fingernail's invocation of the stars' manual override, when mud should return to being the dullest and most use-valued human account of mud, since that's the secret of the golem, I think – there's always enough going on in even the barest dirt, the most turgid and ashenbloomed soil, to compose an anthropoid creature if you just pile it up for five or six feet and whittle its extremities into a passable impersonation of a human being. Even the scrubland was already that alive.

We generally avoid such recognitions, and for obvious reasons, like what would they say about, huh, like what does that imply as to, well, like will it really be nothing more undoes us than the revocation of the first breath's accidental moisture, sharpening and flattening the microscopic seams of metal ores in that Genesis loam, corroding up to tension or distending down to cantor black earth's pedal tone the fracture maps of copper and flayed gold, the flaring and fading polypary of iron-tinged pulmonary stars.

So golem anywhere from anything. A system of tributaries too small for even the individual ridges of the skin to decipher, were we so sensitive, and which among us has been, who, pick your pronouns, decide early and with resolve whether or not you're going to allot *who* and *whom* to plants, animals, winds, stars, light, weather, the locusts

and the honey you swallow them with, the uncultured desert of your wandering, the tracks made in that silicon blank, as to print both with the tribe's spoor and the shallow burials of its attendant dead a circuitry around which the rest of history must grow like crystal around its seed, the sand-eroded bones of a semiconductor star dipped into a supersaturated solution, thus to grow the boule, the raw ingot, from which all replicated motherboards will grow.

Then scratched apart with a diamond saw and mailed off to all corners of the Earth's only known sea along with ragged sections of the Law, copyists' handwork all, such surgery as occupies the carpals of an uncommissioned scriptorium operating, in unsterilized and contaminant-rich conditions, upon the holy city, its negative prints comatose and shallowly respiring on the underside of dead stars' architectural schematics.

Green cicada resurrection, nearly fledged from the crackling brass envelope of its own dead resonators, extends mistaken feeding tube, skin-hacking for dermal anchor into the striate xylem star, which strobes out fully black in self-defense – and so you get a day that doesn't seem like summer, a reprieve I want to swim in though I can't really move much from the waist down (or, for that matter, from the waist left or right or back or forward), clearly one of the microsecond lulls in which the light rearranges itself to daub another layer on the sweat-exposure of the season, secreting albumen from every pore of your own too-thick skin, reinforced on belly, chest, and arms with slathered coatings of scar tissue, and wasn't it, Christ it must've been, scarcely more than 12 hours ago that you wanted to go through the strange though semi-traditional rituals, dating from another year when barbers and surgeons were the same persons, all concerned with (some even licensed in) cutting into the body, whatever means you use to strap it down, right?

They're all knifemen and will gain or kill their clientele by judicious application of razors. Especially good business when there's no expected standard of recovery or even analgesia: you go to the man who strops his blades on the skin of the cow he killed with them, who maybe sings, something secular to be sure, emphasizing the difference between this employment and the priesthood, since they're at some risk of getting confused, and I don't want no mistakes, here, ma'am, I'm just a humble medical, refer to



no eternal verity but your own sense of how badly it hurts and how much you'd like to swap it out for another pain, which in turn will become the body's hurtful currency after while, after while. Best I can offer and, if we're being honest, as much as you can expect. Hope to live without suffering is hope to do something other than live, innit. You'd have to ask the doctors of the church. Them's subtle men and might could tell you something about the amount of disease to be expected in Paradise, which I've heard dialed in at zero, and maybe that's what they mean about the demotion of the body in favor of the soul: that, in a parcel of land whose plants and animals (however many have been expunged of their sympathetic sin, I guess) cause the flesh no irritation, you eventually forget that you've got flesh at all, take it as a form of ambient architecture, like, the hoveled temples and lean-to tabernacles of a city destroyed but preserved in its destruction by the pure grace of ruin, the agility of ongoing and mutable collapse, ashen stacks of honeysuckle growing from the cracks in the stars' exoskeletons, alternately thus to constellate the black space between them, for which we've tendered the metonym *night*.

Or maybe synecdoche. Can't remember, I mean, I know in theory what each word denotes but I've never heard anybody explain to my satisfaction exactly how you tell one from the other, since contiguity is also parts and wholes, and anyway, what the fuck messiah are you that you can go around determining with nothing more than a Greek relic noun what's a whole and what's simply a whole's constituent. But that's not what I meant to say. Leeches so many pennies for leech, hot cups free if you're undergoing leech treatment, eyeless mouths nibbling at eschar, the wasteland geometry of the white blood rushing to the set of the red's emergence, as a real ambulance to the soundstage of a faked wound, anachronistic medicine to doctor the crumbling test-footage of the night sky's necropolis of stars.

Many dead already, and those still alive dying of what we won't be able to see till the disease-light hits our eyes, by which time it will be thousands of years too late, and you understand where I'm going with this, so lay bare a lymph node, at armpit or neck or top of exposed thigh, and let's get the bloodsuckers working on the buildup of one of your for humors, I used to know 'em by name and now name them in the way of post-hoc diagnosis: there was blood, there were the biles black and yellow, and I think phlegm was the last, though where the choleric character comes in I can't recall.

Rotogravure reproductions of high sloping foreheads, very nearly birth-defective in the extremity of their bone-and-leather math, meant to demonstrate the sanguine temperament. I guess that must be mine. No, wait, I guess that must be yours, and my humble self designated a minor and time-limited sort of angel, pulled whole and inexplicable from god's embryonic sac, given time enough to bring to birth the gentle manners and fine minds of those with more blood than bile, and not an instant more.

Uterine rupture, ultrasound flaring into wild growth of recon-photo fields, binary stars gone recently nova and shifting green, back toward the center of the spectrum, that leaves and stems might for instant batten on their light before the red's sent to the hives for film-processing and the blue off to the far side of the sun, to be lost in the grand-mal spike and waver of solar wind.

Twelve hours. Hardly seems so long. Spent part of them asleep. You wanted to order and carry the blade, paper towel, broken safety razor, spare shirt, trashbag for the bloody napkins afterwards, and to carve a boxy rectilinear LO SIENTO just beneath the bottom of your ribcage – you did, I remember – because you'd watched the excavation of unmarked illegal tombs whose contents were blurred out to meet, or rather in fear of unwritten, FCC standards, and watched the white woman in the cowboy hat explaining to the stagily incredulous reporter that there were coffins in gridlock, more coffins in the immigrants' mass graves than earth to bury them in, and between them, like seams of bulbous unplatted mortar, skulls upon skulls, and above all this, a thick layer of biohazard topsoil, hundreds of corpses wrapped in black or white garbage bags, thence to be transported to the refrigerated container of the university's medical school, though they had all probably decomposed too much for any PhD student's toothbrush to recover a ten-digit scrap of DNA, seven alleles plus the area code, enough to place the bones' last call back home.

The constellations coil up in concentric blistered spectra, a brood of telescope-lens asps around the hard-drive recovery star called the Ark of the Lost, though called so here and only here, exclusively by people whose prayers to it would be invalidated if ever heard, migrants who have given up on the idea of the North and now need a Polaris to lead them anywhere outside the gas-chamber heat of 100%-humid air, a closer and

dying sun to nuzzle them sweet as a clove of the Earth's last orange, to save them from this brutal retuning of the dehydrated vein, the memory-sweating brain, the marrow dried to moth-powder beneath a metallurgic carillon of drought-tempered stars.

Claro: it's a 40-mile stretch of ranchland, about as many miles north of the border, and it's actually easier to get smuggled under or over the border itself (bed of a truck, cabin or cargo-load of an 18-wheeler, teeth chattering in a refrigerated container, almost certainly coming down with fevers and colds after exposure to the unremitting sun, and then the frozen box they ship you in, and then the concrete porch or grassless backyard of a safehouse before the last run, sleeping only in nightvision, singed at the visible edges with flares off the unstable thermographic stars, symptoms of their own grippe and chill, millennia of obsolete disease come to lick whichever surface you turn away from the dirty ground with the tined tongue of some nearly blind seabed nautilus, a ctenophore shelled and wriggling on the sand) than to sneak through the immigration checkpoint miles north of the official border, in some shithole called Falfurrias, I think I was, county Brooks, if I'm not mistaken, and why wouldn't I be.

Sort of place where Border Patrol agents daily update the sign by the 8-lane queue of idling cars that informs their drivers how many pounds of drugs and human flesh have been seized so far that year – and last I saw, it was 21,000 for the drogas, and around 50,000 people, so when you estimate the total of paid-out meat, make sure to account for nearly-lethal dehydration, the starving and waterless, the men who set out weighing maybe 200 lbs. and got to the border, after a month, somewhere around 150, to say nothing of the women and their children, the textbooks full of predictable and unavoidable medical problems they're going to be crucified by eventually, whether or not they manage to sneak into the precariousness of undocumented America, working kitchen jobs under the threat of deportation, getting paid off every other week and not always in money: used to know an Iranian refugee posing as an Armenian Christian who ran a pizza place out on the strip, that desolate stretch north of town where the highway, Interstate whatever, cuts in for twenty or thirty blocks with the pretense of being a city street, which it most definitely is not, place where you see the exiles who've used up all their scheduled free days at the methadone clinic wandering between fast-food franchises over grass manicured more constantly and with more care than any of the lives of the people who cut it, right, and the half-cured junkies would walk from car to

car in the drivethru lines of the burger and taco places, trying to trade whatever they could against something off the dollar menu, trying to bribe the drivers to order for them, since the restaurant itself closed at midnight and they're not allowed (or say they're not allowed) to serve anyone without a car who walks by the drivethru window, which may or may not be horseshit, what does it matter, whom are you ever going to ask. And why would that person, upon being asked, ever tell you the truth.

You don't get to be the Authority on even such a finicky sour piece of legislation by giving honest answers to the shirtless minibike-riding neck-tattooed freaks who knock on strangers' passenger-side windows at 3 a.m., wanting to know if they can trade a walletful of obsolete coupons for a chicken sandwich and large water, make sure to tell 'em *large*, man, they'll give it to you, they wouldn't give it to me, but I know they's different sizes and all that shit, just not for fuckups like yours truly, we ain't gettin' the benefit of anybody's doubt. And hey, man, while I'm here, and, like, I don't mean to be puttin' nothin' on you, I ain't tryna hassle, but there any chance you got maybe some spare change in your cupholder you wouldn't mind gettin' rid of? Last car I had, man, there was always a couple bucks sittin' there, but it was all nickels and shit, and I never did nothin' with it, always though about takin' it to one of them machines that cashes you out, but shit, I never did, course I never did, so if you got anything, man, I don't care if it's dirty, sticky, so thick with grime you can't see what state it came from in what year, who needs to know all that, anyway, man, long as it's American or looks American enough to get over the counter, shit, a Sacagawea dollar and a handful of buffalo pennies to keep the tranquilizers quiet in my belly.

(Scarred over with metal eschar so many-layered that even the crime lab can't quite extract the aspartame from the pocket lint from the atoms of shedding plastic, the hung reels of fibrotic stars exposing filmed-over playback to the night's further recording, rearranging their own dustings of nitrate in gelatin or guncotton over paper, picking up stray pixels, an injury re-injured, a razor run so many thousand times over the same 3" x 3" stretch of shoulder-flesh that you can't feel the cuts anymore and there's no residual stiffness when the scar tissue grows over them, no euphoric benzo seep afterward, no easier sleep, no panic stilled, nothing but the inconvenience of the unsociable blood, stained sleeves you'll have to explain with a lie at the next mandatory

doctor's visit, reasons for the girl behind the nightshift counter at the gas station to look at you with worry when you scramble in sweaty at 4 in the morning for a pack of their cheaper cigarettes and a box of overpriced sleeping pills, nothing but wads of bloody paper towels stuffed down the empty bag from a long-since composted cereal box, the whole of it again stuffed down some overflowing municipal trashcan as though you were planting a bomb in the subway, but it's open air here, Scavenger, or as open as any of our remaining air gets, and the net effect is only to strap a stillborn IED, conceived defused, implanted ectopic, to another relapsed mainframe of undisturbed nerve-damage stars.)

La migra sits still, as is its pleasure and, on paper, its responsibility (they pretend not to have enough manpower to send search-and-rescue missions out into the badlands, and if you wanna mouth that bullshit in the presence of the local 911 dispatcher, she probably won't even laugh, she might not even say *Lying sons of bitches*, though that's what she'll be thinking, since she's got four deputies, only one on call at any given time, to pick up dying men from the radio beacons they've left scattered throughout the ranchland, each of which is equipped with a big orange cooler of what's supposed to be emergency water, though if you're interested enough to tip the fucker over and remove the lid, you'll find it's full of massive dead roaches and locusts, a fit feast for a modern Hebrew exile, those stranded not just in space nor even only time but in history, a dangerous compound of the two, malleable but only by a certain number of people, most of whom would maul it toward the shape of their own grandeur or justification, and a few low-rent and terminally desperate crazies such as presumably ourselves, Scavenger, you and me and history, a sequence of read-only stars whose reading may yet rewire the entire logic board, overexpose semiconductor veins till blood stalls black and tinged with signal-clipping on each growth of copper leukocyte); la migra has its huts and porn and electric fans and, if you're Caucasian and innocuous enough and are driving a late-model car, will just walk up to the window in the dying daylight, without even a flashlight, and ask, "Is everybody in this vehicle an American citizen? Even the guy in the back seat?," and be satisfied with a generically news-anchor accented Yes, and that'll be the end of that. No ta coyote. No ta pollero. No tiene droga, gente, nada.

But there's an Air Force Base, maybe since pensioned off to a Lockheed-Martin research facility though still operating with the sanction of the federal government, not too many miles from here, maybe an hour if you're doing the legal 60 and somewhat less if you're driving at a more realistic speed, over absolutely barren and vituperative land, the kind of earth that clearly wants you gone, suffers very few excuses for your continued occupation, and isn't even waiting out its night to cut your throat: it bends over you every time you need a soporific or a quart of booze to knock you backward into sleep, i.e. almost every night, and whets and whets its instrument upon the upper layers of your skin till it finally strikes aortal or carotid ore and sends you underground with a death listed on the state certificate as having occurred via NATURAL CAUSES.

That's where they build and test the planes whose news arrives too late, not mentioned in public at all till they've been used to carry out several years' worth of carpet bombings and targeted assassinations in countries whose political division from, say, India is still a matter of confusion for the average American who bothers to think about it at all – who is not, therefore, the average American. Now the fuck is Bangladesh, and why's it different. Some Muslim and Hindu thing. I dunno. Sewn into the labels of most of the clothes I own, that much I can say without fear of contradiction, and you know what I don't hear when I launder, dry, and wear them? I don't hear a fire in a factory the size of a square city block, with no extinguishers and no brittle fire escapes riveted or just glued to its side, and the roof collapsing, and the air itself become cancer, a condensate of latent black-lung stars, responsible for the constant and near-unbearable summer at that latitude, a season under the permanent sign of its tropic-interrogating Canopus, tilted exactly as the world tilts, archipelagoes grown blackly metastatic over the questioned ocean.

I don't hear that at all. Screaming so intense your eardrums just shut down if they're not already punctured, and you feel dead for half an hour or so before you actually die, which you will actually do. I've been at some of those fires, Scavenger, posted inside the door or just a few feet past it, toward the reddish viscous daylight where the sentries from the fortieth subcontract of the megasupply chain aren't concerned at all with something so quaint as "worker safety," are mostly looking to prevent anybody from leaving early and to beat the living shit out of anybody who, it's rumored, has been so foolish as to try to start a Seamstresses' Union. Keep that shit in

the family, sahib. Tract housing with twenty children in each room, stitching the brand names onto the clothes passed to them by the children in the next house up the block, not occasionally leaving a stitch or two deep in the pads of their own forefingers: a dusting of soft metal to recalibrate the digit called the index, to confuse the metal detectors and the biometric scans, should any of them ever leave the country, which is anything but likely.

What's that black line inside the first finger on your right hand, miss. Have you recently consorted with any enemies of the state. Have you ever been in close contact with a religious fundamentalist, or contributed any money to religious fundamentalism.

You mean other than my taxes, by way of senatorial bribes, pork-barreling the cult that no longer needs to keep kosher? Treyf subsidies laid out on a blanket in front of the money-changers' mall, no longer any temple the profanation of which to protest, laughing through our handshakes when somebody tries to sound out that archaic word "profane"?

T'ain't nobody's favorite reaping season, sister, but nonetheless the harvest of bones rolls fallow, silent, overripe down the nearly imperceptible slope of this land, otherwise barren – dactyls in action, the triplicate rhythm of fleshless fingers unfolding joint by joint like fledgling arthropoda, the clutch-and-shiver of endoscoped stars' cartilage-snowed joints, loose tissue blowing across the lens like static, a waterpick or small surgical brush obtruding to render the image even less comprehensible though, it's hoped, eventually cleaner: clear the wreckage out, lay bare the underlying skeletal remainder, see what we've got to work with. Rudiments of spine, extrusions of marrow and calcium which would be millipede legs had they grown out of their embryonic form, an osseous plate like a cuttlefish bone somewhere near the center of the stripped mollusk star, printed in radial patterns with possible ribs as its own light once forecast the insect and crustacean forms to be taken by the cells grouping glyphic on the planet asperged with its light, a monstrosity of recombinant genetics, an index of refraction culled from starlight bent through early DNA.

Precursor acids also, and the stars themselves xenonucleic, built up sometimes around sugars, in other instances upon such trellises and transoms of molecules as we don't yet know how to imagine, much less to name and thus identify, or the other way

around, depending on which heresy you happen to embrace. Them all bein' heretical, so. What do you want. A flash of lightning distant enough that its thunder will arrive unexpected, in the low rumble of artillery over some natural bunker or hillock that couldn't possibly protect us from the guns but screens us briefly from worrying over them, and weather indistinguishable now from the green scans of the amphibious troops' goggles, the underwater cameras, the obsessively filmed water-stillbirths of the mirroring sea's most recent ectopic stars.

Strewn like pollen upon the surface of the stilled wave, the oceanic flatland, no tsunami yet though I'm told it's coming, no earthquake underfoot though we've been advised to expect one within fifty years that will leave 20,000 dead and 2.5 million without shelter, food, or water – funny that we're apt to hear such numbers in the context of crisis, in that there are already far more than 2.5 million “living” here without shelter, food, or water, and that, if an earthquake does indeed arrive to kill 20,000 people in the Pacific Northwest a half-century from now, our own cops will have killed well over twice that many people in the interim. 22<sup>nd</sup> of July, to pick a random date, and police executions were already up to 86 that month.

We figure to top out somewhere in the low thousands by the time winter strives to atone all these loose bones with our sense of their explicability, to help us mistake them for the skeletons of stripped livestock, missing sheep, errant cattle, whatever you can still pasture in a land less soaked with blood than dusted with its dehydrated remainder, whatever rubric-ready ochre can't quite rend a clean dividend from (living human body)/(impossibly thick heat and air, starvation, thirst like a reversed insect breathing, a desperate gasp through the skin of a star gone chitinous in the glare of its own binary twin), the scriptorium opened in the collapsed vein, the onetime-cinctured capillaries gaping as to plug each tapered vessel hypodermic into the nervous strata of an overloaded nociceptor star.

Not quite “insensitive” yet, but we're getting there, or rather it's getting here around us as we wait, Scavenger. Stand in any single place, hold the meaninglessly focused loci of an Earth in constant motion (scrolled over every so often, as by the stalk-eyes of the sparrow-sized surveillance drones, when cyclical coordinates rattle acid-green and edgy, raw-nerved with the innate sleeplessness of math, from the cracked



casing of any star's biocomputer, conducted by the ooze which might be lymph or in the innards of a lithium battery, refrigerator coolant, undrinkable machine-milk, the hydrocarbon sleet of broken radiators weeping), and it'll appear. Not for nothing is the world more or less a circle, and circular maps are given to show the whole visible universe, whatever shape it would actually make.

Something at least ellipsoid, ovarian, since I'm told that at the edge of what is, there'd be so much built-up gravity behind you that progressing in a straight line would eventually return you to exactly the point you started from, spacetime curving not just any way but along the specific curvature of your attempted escape, burying you among roots not stolid or inevitable but themselves distended, frayed, mutated with your passage, accidentally grafted and spliced to the tendrils of the star-tree, willow-drizzling the postsolar wind, a swamp bole washed clean of its river, staring out now like a lignified eye, and it's impossible to say whether it's waiting to open like a mammal's or has long since dispensed with mammal sight, decided on a lid of gridlock cellulose, enclosed the pupil's starveling document with rinds of bark our corneae can rarely hope to imitate, with further and thermophobe translations of horn.

Lust after acid or swear to guzzle alkaloids, whatever turns the earth in your mouth and keeps the earth turning beneath the legs grown straight down, rather than right-angled, from their pelvic sockets, thus to lead you toward food in the trees, or to eat (or abhor) whatever still crawls on all fours, and to induce in us the delusion of perspective. Imagine, just for a moment, since that's all the time we're going to be given, the horizons of an animal which never lifts its head more than a foot or two above the ground. They'd have a hard time aspiring to empire; they'd be more interested in the earth itself than in control of its sloughed iconography, which is all empire has ever been or can be. Power is the enforced respect of maps. Among other things. Should cartography at any time be deserted by the public faith, well, *civitas dei*, good luck bringing them back into the fold without some tortured kinks of logic and theology, themselves seeding the empire's other breakdown, insisting upon what was blasphemous to the founder of your own church, springloading the thousand years of impacted peasant bone to fire back as mercantilism and a trust placed in markets which was theretofore reserved for your master's God.

And yours too, sure, if you require that assurance, but you wouldn't have; His presence in the big house would've been enough; who slacks off in the vineyard, who cuts his own wrists ragged with a hundred thousand excellent reasons for doing so, when God Almighty could be just a plot or two away? – stomping awkward and disoriented through the forest He doesn't remember creating in this shape, not exactly, and shouldn't there be acorns littering the floor, and where's the food for the woodlice and worms, have men evolved to eat detritus or women been forced to forage in the black map of decomposing leaves, yes, absolutely.

Who, when God's lightheaded with the differences in atmosphere and pressure as suffered in transit from His heaven, holding His arms out to both sides to steady Himself against any tree near enough, but none of them seem near enough, none is ever solid or close enough to cushion his forward fall, the progressive disequilibrium that we've learned to call "history" and sometimes even "improvement," the vertigo grown wild in spirals of motile and sucking-wound air behind a star's slow-punctured tympanum, a hiss as to rehearse that star's dark condensation from the strangled vowel of light?

Strata of static, interference raining down in geologic troughs, and how you gonna got there, well, all I know is we gotta get there, so we will. Miles overland, past the DOC jumpsuits spiking trash on a stretch of highway "cared for" primarily by the owner of the new supermax prison, whose pitch to the city council included mandatory community service for all non-violent inmates – meaning most of them, since the prison industry exists almost entirely to house people who once sold or did drugs, and this as a result of policy worked out by many of the same men now heavily invested in the building and maintenance of new prisons, not that the prisoners get to freeload, no sir, thank you kindly, this does remain America –

(Does it?)

Apparently. I wouldn't be able to tell you this if it didn't. I know places, not people, not events, except as each is a declension of place, one syncline of its buried folds, one four-dimensional geography of DNA unraveling and reconstructed in the dead cores of the protein-modeling stars. Were we elsewhere, I'd know nothing, or only such as you would lack the ears to hear, like your prophet used to say. No offense. None

intentionally given. Though now “place” is such a dubious category, since everywhere is either America or aspires to be, and only a few of them seem to understand that, for there to be an America, there must (and not for philosophical reasons) remain large incorporated tracts of non-America, for the larvae to build and export the country in which you’ll seem to live. I qualify. I divagate. I know. I’m sorry. It’s the only thing I was built for. Oedipus called me in to send me off on several tangents, only one of which concerned the dreadful ingrowth of his blood.

Think of what that uncovered incest must’ve done – I say must’ve; they kicked me out of the city before it really fell apart, remember – to the notion of divine right. Not that we believed in exactly the same divine right as your later Europeans; more like the Chinese mandate of heaven, say, the simple observation that all forces since the beginning of time had conspired by design or accident to land this particular animal on the throne. Seems opaque to westerners, and Greece wasn’t the west yet, not quite then. Well, it seems funny to *us*, the way you drum up liberty and independence as your most important virtues while not just allowing but empowering an oligarchy to do whatever it wants, the way your notion of freedom seems to equate freedom exclusively with material success, and poverty with justified enslavement, the way you celebrate your lack of a caste system by “freely” choosing to stratify social hierarchies less soluble than the first through third estates in medieval fucking France. Duchy d’Aquitaine, or however you prefer it anachronized. *Roi je ne suis, prince je deigne absolument*, maybe list my territories for me if you’ve got them memorized, or read them off the smeared ink on the webbing between thumb and forefinger, it’s OK, my memory is shit, too, I won’t look and if I do I won’t notice, or at least will pretend to have seen nothing.

Ça va. Only thing you seem to care about: it *does* go, and will keep going, and you’ll wait in vain for the “social collapse” which you all expect as the final verdict on your own justice or iniquity. Ain’t that a bitch. To create and orchestrate and prolong billions of miserable lives, all so that the final disaster can provide a summary judgment. And what if it doesn’t come? How about a gradual and entirely predictable regression to barbarism, without any anthrax cloudburst or briefcase warhead necessary, based on nothing more than a growth like the tumorous GDP’s?

Too many people, and more than enough to feed them, but not distributed as such, because what American *really* wants to live as an equal among equals, how many

of you really and truly desire that kind of public anonymity? To be only what you do, stripped bare to the actual conduct of your days, without any bloodline's or class's narrative padding, the bad magic that renders significant so many otherwise forgettable acts? At the end of any given week, Scavenger, how much can you really remember, and how much of it is blank fact, statements of physical events, whose inner curvature and momentum you've already lost all contact with?

And does there eventually arise some critical mass of fact, a chain reaction of pure chemical transactions, a fission-reactor star working as slowly as the sun's glacial unbinding, come to gag each of us with chloroform-damp numbers, to excuse the tacit rhapsode from an epic with so many proper names?

Map's vein deep-thrombosed: even the mosquitoes can't bicker a trickle of stray or spare blood from that border, their probosces blunted with attempting to drill through the corpseless stupa, the half-egg of a misplaced constellation, an ovarian moon buried out out of any purposed sun's remembrance; legs crumpled and wings crushed with the effort of hijacking the wax-spun honeyworks of the canopic jars whose bone- and gene-exposures are long -loaded, up- to the random-access stars (the strangle of whose knotted cables itself engineers other, lesser stars of damaged recall, missing file-locations, louse-eggs grown into the polyurethane snakeskin of the shielded cords, the double-balance running parallel down pliant length to keep the DC offset more or less at zero, minimize the hum of their employment: now such stars' output bursts and crackles at some regular if off-kilter rhythm, imparts to the metal-sweaty power amp and flypapered speaker cone a plosive idiolect of clustered interference, the sound of choked cellphone transmission maybe, the audible bursting of star-eggs too hot to attain mass or too massive to maintain the requisite heat of light, stillbirths and abortions, yes, but each denting the soft uterine gravity with the shape and density of its displacement, so that all transitive light will bend strangely there before it hits its direct object, all predicates transmute to the presynaptic voltage of glyph when filtered through the missing stars' black-rainbowed xenoglossia).

Broken beetles and starved roaches, spiders sprawled so much like anatomic samples at the centers of their webs that you can't really credit the idea that any one of them might be alive, though many would panic and scuttle if the web were strummed by

anything too abrupt to be the wind. There's almost no wind here, and this the spiders know. A sagging once-wet heaviness of air, now clammy and hot, not even quite damp, simply distilling the fatigue of sweat dried into reek, salts back into the hard exile tessitura of the skin, refugee shrapnel of the central nervous system dried themselves to tessellate such root-locked stars of horn.

And you can read the border itself as a printout of blood-oxygen content, a graph of aortal input to the brain, say, spiking only when the ocean forces it, overwhelmed with that last push of stored air while blue hydrogen disperses to allow your drowning its particular shape, flows over the pale limbs in skeins of unbreathable silk, tentacular if detached from any of the skeletons that go to make up the constant nautilus snowfall of the deepest open ocean, where Eden's detonation is still so recent that its fallout has never stopped drifting down from the surgical-lamp video of those exterminated stars, shuffling off the carbon wrack of their blown fuses like the scent of gunpowder across the flatland in this month, of all months, when we on the western half of history are obliged to act for at least a few weeks at a time like probable gunshots in the distance are just drunks setting off fireworks a few days early or late, like the belly-roaring thump of a pump shotgun from Streets 60<sup>th</sup> through 69<sup>th</sup> is a cherry bomb thrown out of a joyride's window, which I suppose it could be.

But it isn't. That double-clutching *k-kunk*, and the acoustics of the robbed traphouse or gas station afterward rushing back into the room like air toward a firebombed cellar, thus to be expelled by the oxidizing flame, to asphyxiate those not simply burned to death, engineer a diode-frame of fourth-degree trauma only the lungs can feel and will hardly demonstrate to any city coroner, an autopsy of time-lapsed stars blackly unblooming in the instant of their affect.

Not that it couldn't be, or probably isn't, the cops robbing the trap, setting cruisers all up and down the cul-de-sac in preparation for a pointless and mortal raid, reports have come in that etc. etc., we have reason to believe that, well of course you do, you have reason to believe anything that might act to your benefit. The rest of us just don't have the law on our side, as prop for delusions fervently sweated-into, consummations so devoutly to be wished. Pray to that if you're done praying to whatever deity saw you through police academy and bicycle duty, if you had one then. Navy-blue shorts rustling up against the fake-granite counter at the convenience store,

inducting the new girl into the kind of queasy banter she'll have to engage in to keep her job, the late-late shift, the only one she can work, with a kid at home (her mother's place for the night) and an ex-husband at the exact 150-foot distance the restraining order mandates.

If not now, then soon. He's in that white beater of a Caddy thumping up, grill scraping ground (asphalt scratched lyre with metallic-painted plastic like star-damage wounds film's vulnerable emulsion into song), to the most distant of the 24 gas pumps in the lot, is it 150 feet away, is it *exactly* 150 feet away, I wouldn't put it past the fucker, he's exactly the kind of crazy sumbitch to come here in the daytime and measure out the distance from the counter to the last pump, y'all think I'm exaggerating, well, you ain't met the motherfucker. Hope you never have to.

Law says you won't, 'less you happened to park further away than the last pump, and shit, if you did, alls I can say is watch out for a stringy-lookin' cocksucker in a tank top and some jeans that never goddamn fit, with a tattoo of whatever the fuck dumb shit he's into now on his left collarbone, swastikas or gang signs or *god* forbid his daughter's name, lemme think, my right, yeah, so his left. My right, his wrong. Every goddamn thing was like that. And I had that dumb asshole's kid, I borne him a beautiful baby girl, cause there's all kinds of reasons to do goddamn anything anytime, shit, I probably don't need to tell you, I guess maybe I ain't tellin' you at all even though I'm tryin'.

Cause once you get to addin' up all the pros and cons, he always used to say, stupid dicksuckin' son of a bitch, now you got to add up the *pros* and *cons*, askin' the Pizza Hut cashier for a pen so he could draw the list on the back of our receipt – sorry, I'm gettin' sidetracked, but what I meant to say was, add up all the yes and no and any count you come to gonna be pretty skinny on either the high or low side of zero, 'specially if you start makin' some reasons count more'n others, start weightin' 'em out like that, like on the one hand who the fuck am I to stop a baby bein' born, like on the other who the *fuck* am I to pretend I could take care of a baby. Help it be somethin' other than me someday. Raise it, with the grace of god, to be some better kind of stranger.

Ohhh, and if that motherfucker ever does what he's always threatenin' to do, turns CI on one of his Sudafed buddies to cop a deal to expunge his record and goes and

becomes a fuckin' cop himself, I'm gonna have to leave town, take my baby girl away, enter Witness Protection, change my goddamn name – I was gonna say change it to Miss Ann Jones, no fixed address, no known abode, but hell, I might as well change it to Miss Jane Doe, cause I'd be askin' the cops for protection from another cop, wouldn't I, and what kinda dreamy horseshit is that? Might as well join the goddamn army to keep from bein' drafted, and they ain't even have the draft anymore. Shit, I wish they did. Maybe my ex would be in Afghanistan right now, sellin' slave boys to warlords for opium. That ain't beneath his level, believe you me. And if he ever got caught, he could just say his CO told him to do it, and this time he might not even be lyin'. You ever watched somebody you gotta trust with your life and the life of your child up there on the witness stand, just lyin' his ass off, perjurin' himself so many times he mighta accidentally told the truth by the time you get done crossin' out all the double negatives? His lawyer told him what to say, I was there, he said it over and over, Take the fifth, don't self-incriminate, sell out your friends if you got to, they're not your real friends anyway – like this minimum-wage McLawyer knows a goddamn thing about it, though he was right, as it happens, just playin' the odds, process of elimination I guess you'd call it: by the time *I* get a client, he's thinkin', that boy ain't got a real friend left on Earth, except maybe his baby's mom who's too scared to abandon him, and there I was, actin' the part, smokin' exactly as much as I did before I got pregnant, swear to god, I ain't never touched the bottle or a cigarette once I found out I was havin' a baby, and I thought, well that's that, then, gonna be clean forever, and maybe three weeks after she's born, I'm back on a pack a day and whiskey to get to sleep, steppin' out so much with all kinda polite *would you just pardon me for just a moment* that the public defender turned to my ex, or this is what my ex said, anyone, and asked him, Shit, you get her pregnant again?

No, you dumb nosy motherfucker, I wouldn't let him touch me for the price of a goddamn time machine, I wouldn't fuck that little psychopath again even if my reward was gettin' to go back to 2013 and never meet him. Well, I'd think about it. But no, I wouldn't do it, not even if I got to forget all about him, not even if it meant my baby got to grow up somewhere she didn't have to worry about all this, cause Jesus Christ my lord and savior, think of what I'm gonna have to tell her when she's old enough for school, think of all the warnings, now don't you ever talk to nobody outside of school

who ain't me, OK, darling, and if you see the man they call your daddy, and if he says he's there to take you home cause I got held up or had to pull an extra shift, he's lying, he's a liar, I don't know where he'd take you or what you do. Think about that for a minute and tell me things are gonna work out fine. I'm gonna have to look in my baby's eyes and say she can't never trust her own father for a 5-minute ride in a car that probably ain't even his, and if she can't take havin' a daddy for granted, who the fuck she ever gonna trust?

And was I too trusting? Was that my problem? Naw, hell, nothin' that simple. This ain't the movies. You can't write it off to one problem, you know. It's like I was sayin': there's every reason on Earth to do or not do almost anything, hand to God, and we talk about choice and thinkin' and bein' smart, rememberin' what you learnt and been told, but you know what I found out when I met the son of a bitch that gave me my baby? What I found out was, you get to the moment when you should actually be choosin', you know, the time you *know* that this is when you say either Yes I do or No sir I do not and never will, exactly the heart of the heart of the moment, and what happens there ain't choosin', or learnin', or thinkin'. Fuck all that.

In the heart of the heart of the moment, you're blind and deaf and there's wet light blarin' behind your eyes, you're asleep but ain't got sleep's excuses, you can't hear nothin' outside but got a sound in your ears like a beehive set loose, like the bees been busy honeycombin' your skull this whole time, and you get dragged along wherever the heart of the heart of the moment wants to take you. You don't choose shit, and you don't even get chosen. You just happen to a bystander to your own life or dyin'.

Drown where you stand, and maybe wake up on the rocks and sand a few years later, bruised and salt-blind and cryin' *custody*, singin' the world's oldest or the second-oldest song, called "Gimme Back the Blood from My Own Vein."



### Session #9

Burrowing through spars and struts of arched and fragile bone to sleep like ribfruit, tune dream's streaks of spinal half-life to the keystone's grinding teeth, the saurian lockjaw secured at each febrile hinge with such xenosis as a fractioned star encrypts.

Should waking ebb or somnia discharge from decay types alpha through omega, only so many of which are known, take us maybe through beta, describe for us the nucleate loss of the electron, how long an isotopic star remains radioactive after its self-engineered removal from the sky, a suicide dazzled with backlogs of vaporous light, pointed cardinal as compass-roses from all radii capable of cutting through the fuzz and bruise and pollution, a Dogstar to guide us not home but toward the center of the year's condition:

We'll have cause enough to curse at ice and sleet in a little while, and before that, maybe some brief reprieve in the months when the turned Earth discloses its newest-born metals, a post-mineral heaven splaying cooled shards of starlight briefly simmering at the bones' own temperament, an intonation just as you could ask if not perfectly even, scaled for a few weeks to the intervals of your skeleton and thus almost painless to move through, an opioid constellation gentling all the thin skin's moonward prominences – elbow, kneecap, clavicle, and skull – whenever we pass, making small luminous but almost heatless fires inside the still-standing skeletons of horses, the massive ribcage blackened but not consumed, as in some Hebrew fable of deliverance from furnace and lions' den, donor-tissue scavenged reusable from the stars' medical-waste incinerator.

Outside the hospital and waiting for some report on the black plastics we've eaten, the condensate necrotic rainbow hardened to occupy and then dissolve my whole small intestine, so that meat and water – were I ever to eat or drink again – would lie there forever, performing an analysis whose products, if known at all, are to be deduced from the data-mined blood, captured like length and destination of calls pinging off the

cellphone towers. No wiretap yet – for that they need a warrant or probable cause – but bulk collection is in style and, if completely ineffective on the level of its public justification, more than useful enough otherwise. Docility instilled like the most cardinal of virtues, the critical hinge, rustily greased at collarbone’s level in a yardang or desert arch of sandstone, seething gneiss, oil-bearing shale which would quickly collapse otherwise, abort plasmapheresis from the gasoline-rich stars.

The shadows are deep red and the light around them redder, if paler, and won’t you come in under some overhang to sip at the wound of water that trickles from some intubated boulder, won’t you pause here long enough to watch the sand wake for the night, rebuild from tesserae of shattered stone the lizards and snakes that will have to creak and slither just outside this temenos, delimited, a magical act only insofar as marking itself is magic?

As the alphabet or pictographic system is, in the desert, closer to its origins as magic, oracular bones swimming in the wreckage of strained leaves, photosynthetic stars guzzled to leave only the lignin infrastructure of their growth, that they might serve now as a radiocontrast agent for the scans of their older cousins overhead, the constellations’ hospital-photofile, archive on lost archive of medical images and radiograph scans in which the broken bone and hypertrophic organ may yet wed toward some mutant calm, a metallurgy of mistaken mammals seething their last lymph to cede disease the back brain’s viscous thrashing throne.

Come into the shadow, if shadow’s what it is, and we can stare out together: you only wanted sleep, then, and I only needed to talk to you until you could sleep, judge with some sense the day can’t locate nor the interrogating sun define that moment in which it would be safe to stop talking, reading, gardening for text, since script is blossom and the compound glyph stars’ gradual titration into membranous domains of greener light, integral proteins stocking cellulose for later use as body heat or treated nitrate film.

(He’s out there, somewhere, waiting if unwaited upon, and no more a threat to us than is anybody else, intending no more harm than the day means in its heavy damp passage overhead, the distension of the bursting air like offbooks military sorties from the Air Force Base south- or maybe it’s northeast of here, the every-Wednesday-4-a.m.

appearance of what must be some kind of massive flying fortress or refueling vessel, with three lights on its tail.

Not shrieking like the bombers do or aspirating spit-flecked like the Doppler-curved acoustics of commercial flights, no: this plane, if it's a plane, it must be a plane, breaks apart and reassembles the whole sonic mainframe of the night, comes in first as a generalized rumble, a Richter-low earthquake not even rattling the glasses against each other or their shelves but simply causing them to vibrate where they stand, so quietly and in such constricted phase that you don't even notice till you try to pick one up, or to sit down on one of the wrought-iron chairs left haphazardly bent and bracken-bandaged all around this deserted neighborhood, and notice that every object feels like a waking limb, a phantom one annexed to your sacral bone or framed for black-and-white stills in the wrist's ulnar eclipse, a pinhole camera of cartilage-tipped bone recording blocked veins' intubation with the annular biolith star: light first fanning its rays to freeze as xylem, then incorporated in the stele or lost-city cartouche, a fully sterilized and scar-elloquent wound, a patch of cauterized stone telling as it may about the birth and disappearance of the city whose incomprehensible name it offers, as if still to be read long after any chance to pronounce it has elapsed.

Long after the traced blood has dried into a cognate tree upon the sand that fronts the black riverbank soil, been washed by the Nile's seasonal flood into another phonetics of the open sea, an unknown and apparently meaningless word for the migrants on their punctured rafts to notice as they drown between Libya and the Lampedusa coast, to read with their hands as they can't with their eyes, attempt to rub it free of its oxide-facet insect casing – tympanic muscles crackling with heat to rattle the collapsible ribs of cicadomorph stars – and then discover that the casing was the whole word, that there's nothing inside the bulbous codices of grime and chalk and rust: no Ark but hull, no named beasts but the scripts they accidentally scratched upon the rotting planks and threadbare hawsers as they gushed out to be drowned.)

Run all acronyms backward; disorder the mnemonic devices as the precise cure for memory, so species links to genus, family, order, class, phylum, kingdom, descending outward, a radial fall from a sunken silo, the upended vessel babbling its potential language-contents as water replaces air, unit-for-unit, call it down to the

molecule if you like, though there it's a 2/3rds' exchange at most, percent enough to drown us, but still: it would be almost bloodless at first, the gashed side of the cedar-boarded ship bleeding only animals, paired off, partway through breeding, pregnant or even in the act of giving birth, before the red-black cloud (the ultrasound of a miscarried placental star) rose to discolor the skin of the flood, as if an inner injury to be borne wherever water's drunk, and there are fewer and fewer of those places.

So should drought obtain, and finally it will, we might have that expunged from at least the coroner's version of our records, though there probably won't be any coroners, and even the few who remain likely won't bother with keeping very good files, lining up the autopsies to hypothesize and prove the syzygy of linking crinoid stars, a circuit-breaker permanently thrown, a form of extinct vegetation. Call it what you will. How many animals left after that dispersal. What phyla lost or genera distilled into the single and multiplex population of a raindrop, any guttering hard enough against the sky's hard striate underbelly (the ribbed dissonance of the overturned beetle, the cicada's white belly meaning it's old and must soon discard its shell, leave the night sky scabbed over with a lit necropolis of exuvial stars, turn green and squalling nymph again) to fall directly into our mouths, or at least into the cracks that line our lips.

Make up our mouths, more like, at this point. A collation of eschar, all the discard-protein language sloughs in its passage, all the brittle casualties of song.

So sing low, if at all, oh hell with that "if at all," who's to pretend, why go against the advice of a man who witnessed the end of humanity (or maybe he said "the end of the world," I can't remember now) and told us there would still be songs to sing after its completion. That's as full a statement of the case as anybody can reasonably expect. No one left to mumble or audition, no one to screen, no one to hack, cough, force through tracheal infestations of gristle, the sclerotized gizzard become a dense hard hippocampal star spiked and cragged like an EKG with the temporal-lobe epilepsy of all song's and speech's passage – yet things still to be sung, and thus the impossible organ of their pronunciation, an anatomy as yet undiscovered and to be attacked by all immune systems as soon as it starts glitching out its trill.

Lay it on a table and watch it twitch, if by watching you aren't already there too late, if by relocating it you haven't made sure that it's been going on too long to survive.

I don't know, Scavenger. I'm just an oracle. I don't really *know* much of anything; I see and hear, sometimes across odd creases in the waveform of history, sometimes enough to gargle, murmur, spit out the coordinates of an histology transacted only between signal-clipped stars, built entirely in the domain of accident and overload, such that almost nobody down in the audible frequencies or desirable volumes would ever happen to hear it.

If *hear* is the verb, and not *see*, *touch*, *intuit*, and again I don't know, they all come into it, yes, and they also all go *out* of it, hit exit velocity though sluggish as the namesake invertebrate, appearing to stay still and somehow quick enough to burst through the other side of whatever small gravity kept them there long enough for me to notice, I say *notice*, I might say *imagine*, *infer*, not exactly *deduce*, *consider possible*, better *be blinded by the manifest possibility thereof*. They break over my blind eyes like a light I have to sense as fluid, being sightless, sometimes a pale acid that almost threatens to dissolve my horned-over pupils, sometimes a thick pearlescent fluid, an amniotic milk veined with opal like the drizzle of liquid soap, an inverse surgery, in that they seem to transmute the world into a continuation of my own glaucoma, transpose all light down into its eventual register as cataractic bone.

Brittle porcelain, the chalk of discarded creatures, the limestone cliffs rising from graveyards of coral and mollusk, additive glyph-detritus of broken protist stars.

And so, talked out, sung raw if not yet hoarse, voice actually higher and purer for the strain but right on the edge of breaking in your throat – a trauma only the singer can sense, an implanted egg of no known species carried atop his Adam's apple or on the root of his shuddering tongue, and it's going to crack if he reaches for the wrong note, photograph all his internal organs with a glaze of singed albumen, build an image-rich Eden of char from which his darker aerated blood will be permanently barred, and thus himself from himself.

A marriage of insolubles, water from the ducts outward and oil down all the cross-sections of the bones' deep hot biosphere, bacterial colonies older than Earth itself sweating petrol like the flares of distorted wind from the stars' open fontanelles, exuding the chewed-up genomes of worms to wriggle, stiffen, settle in an unbearable and

renewed carbon springtime, a permanent black April of the rainstorms gone necrotic underground.

Grain of the voice emphasized at the expense of any sense of where the words begin and end, word-final sigmas gone to a slurry of many-signed hiss, vocable's casing cracked to leak the cooling spools of breath-denatured DNA, the oxidative damage to be mended sore for sore by the application of retinol stars scavenged from the alcoholic eye, and stiff tongue's pick and chisel likewise half-excavating majuscules from the palate, an inverted archaeology, an intercostal dig between the morpheme's polypary ribcage blooming gasping zooid stars – but that's OK; that's not the point; it was never meant to be any other way.

She doesn't need to know about the termination and commencement, doesn't need the flux thus broken, and anyway, the idea that language or even just speech can really begin or end anywhere was always something of a delusion: it's a form of interference you tap into for a while, mute when you can, allow to blow through the bones risen like pollen, dust, and dander in the offing of a tornado, just before the sky turns green if the storm is going to arrive during daylight. But you wouldn't be speaking, and she wouldn't have asked you to speak, if it were daylight. So a masked green, then, a recentering of the chromatic scale rendered barely perceptible by the thunderheaded pall of the night's rain-threat, never actually to fall, not until sunrise and the wolves giving birth, a spatter of spare tepid drops as shaken from some baptizing aspergillum, reconsecrating to the day what night induced to scry another cult, pick up stars' interneural fractures from the overstressed corners of a black glass mirror, a sheet of cooled volcanic sweat come to glitter with the image of the heat it abdicated.

Panic now or then, voluble or silent, with the unshed voice growing matted and fibrous, a tumor of blocked vowels back on one side of the gullet or the other, an impacted test tube of tracheal stars summing their serum to reprogram the autoimmune response. You hold back too much language and you come to find word-bearing tissues strangely separate from the rest of the body, a polity of meat no longer certain as to its inclusion in the bone-leased metropolis, the mother-city grown in tendril-woven sacs from the aft side of femur and forearm, synovial fluid cracking to register star-aberration on the arthroscopic readout.

And nothing to silence, and nothing to suppress, and no cure for it but to drug ourselves to sleep again, not having spoken, leaving her deaf and desperate in the apparently blank confines of her other country, many miles northeast of here (mostly east), where you'd think the heather would grow and the monarchs gnaw milkweed without much impedance, other than the various salt strata of the variegated sea, a geological deposit of the risen watermark and starving tide, locking her moon by moon into the physiology of fossils she deposits, a postpartum histogenesis of mineralized stars.

They create subsequent species; they connect across a month or two of desperate separation, since no radiocarbon dating or guessed evidence of metals, wood, and soil can really nail things down that precisely – what's a month when we're talking subsets of the Anthropocene, or late Pleistocene if you trust to the old system – to articulate, in memory's long division and later reparative algebra, joints that were never joints, hinges to screw and tack entirely separate skeletons together, algorithms of long-decayed connective tissue that never actually existed, all in the name of counterfeiting some sense from this bizarre inexplicable pile of limestone that used to be bone, chalk returned through its first transmutation and back into incorporated calcium, an endosymbiosis of the bones' exilic atoms, an ossuary to cross-multiply the Babylonian captivity of stars in hydrostatic seafloor skeletons and cracked still-bubbling shells.

A language like that one: whatever decibel the welded ear or racks and frames of forgotten surveillance equipment could wring from the cellular structure of a fissured cuttlefish bone, the laminae of fractured abalone, the pearl's cartridge called an oyster once the firearm called its value has been thoroughly discharged. Water, air, something like blood, some kind of circulatory fluid long pooled in the intercellular spaces, in vessels so thin and short they only register as a distortion of the light, a kind of iridescence, individual strands harrowed from the rainbow's hijacked ribosome, thus to recompose the genome of xenonucleic stars. Shimmer to null. A progressive blindness fretted at each further peak of debility with the last flash and shine it could see, the crest of its most recently stolen wave.

Yesterday *that* coruscant was bright enough; today I have to name it with the demonstrative, as if you and I were waiting, timing out the crawl of moonlight across the

back of some massive dead mollusk, because I can't actually see it anymore and now have to guess from yesterday's sense of lunar weight, depressed blood keeling in the vein or come into its manic stage to scrape the walls of my male womb dry, wheresoever that should be, I don't know, I didn't have time to ask the diosa who in some accounts damned me a hermaphrodite, though really, you can't be more damned than to be sexed at all, and the most foundational mathematics have assured me that  $(2 \times \text{hell})$  still simply = (hell), damnation being a condition – like  $\infty$ , for instance – which it's impossible to palliate or harshen, to reduce or to increase except by reprieving you from it altogether.

You don't get any worse, say some historians, you just get differently damned, and come up from the river mud of the underworld incomprehensible to all the dead around you, speaking a slightly different version of their own deformed dialect, with a different final image cooked into the glazing of your eye, the shadow-bulk of a stranger predator dialed into the receivers of your deep-sea photophore stars, bioluminescence strobing baffled and, to them, entirely baffling, who were killed by some other blue or black whale, torn apart by the arrowhead skin of a different subspecies of shark, and can no more understand your distress, even in hell, than by the spasms of an uncoded semaphore, the amputated glisten of some luminous Tourette's.

The line, by the way, which I remembered as soon as I stopped trying to remember it, was actually, "There are still songs to sing / on the other side of humanity."

So the thermostat pretends to relent, the drizzle pretends not to fall, the woodlice – which, I'm also remembering, are not actually insects, but terrestrial crustaceans, of the Armadillidiidae, a word like a clan name, which technically it is, a word like the skyline of Babel come to industry, the incomplete Tower now blowing out smoke instead of languages, which themselves were also smoke, cinders to carry in the lung, thus to recombine in foreign compounds upon their exhalation, a greenhouse gas in which the overheated tongue may come blindly to probe its way thermophile through the bronchoscopy of carbon-damaged stars – the woodlice crawl at any junction of stone horizontal with stone standing up, of any kind at all, and the streets are full of plump incautious roaches that hardly move when you walk by or upon them, burst under you feet with a sound like stepped-on grapes, inedible to all but the birds who may or may



not scavenge them from the asphalt, crucified to its particulate glitter like the wings sprung out straight from both sides of a killed cicada, granular synthesis of stars come to its final tympanic conversion in the dry gristly sound of an exoskeleton stomped to the texture and density of dead leaves.

And the streets would be green if we had any daylight, since a tornado is apparently approaching, and even at night are oddly colored, swung off on some arc tangent to the straight line of the electromagnetic spectrum, a parabolic no-man's land that happens to intersect with the O and the G in ROYGBIV, eternally returning but never quite to the same place, as in any return. You will walk, have walked, do walk presently, up to the gates of the same city, over and over and over, Scavenger, you know that, I don't have to tell you, but the city's never quite in the same place or time, and you can't trust any innate knowledge, any dried-out intuition of the marrow, honeycombed with drought, any beehive lesion of permuted stem-cell stars, to guide you safely through the same-and-different city this time around.

No safe conduct, no early release for good behavior, and no clear demarcation at all between The Hole and Gen. Pop., whether your transit will be placed in or just alongside others' this time, whether you intersect or run entirely parallel, whether there even *are* others' to cut across, smack into, or avoid: the presence of ghosts is so swamp-thick and overwhelming that only some kind of ideologue could pretend to tell them from any other sort of occupant, and you're all illegitimate here, refugees or persons unknown, Illegals come for the first time to work as a substantive, a noun capable of being pluralized.

Undocumented, wanted no more here than in the land a death threat forced you to leave, smuggling your younger brother across the thousand cities of fear between El Salvador and aquí, acá, to attempt some marginal access to the Empire that made your own hometown unlivable, dictated the economic policy that led to the rise of narcotraficantes that incorporated into cartels that swallowed up otherwise dissolute street gangs for local protection rackets and profiteering that kicked the living shit out of your brother when he refused to design their gang tattoos that throbbed on the skin of the walls of the fasciate muscle of the crumbling bones of the bivouac that Jack built, all in the form of the song, choose what words you like, assonance will bloom there whether you want it to or not – and it does bloom, in the 70-mile stretch between the border

itself and the first overstaffed checkpoint, the place where your coyote abandons you, rolls you out the side of his truck and says *Que tenga* at least a little *suerte*, usted, enough that you don't get killed but not so much that you don't get deported, again and again, because I *am* running a business here. Good luck with your asylum hearing.

Your brother's bones, you're told, will be given a respectful Catholic funeral in the Laredo Municipal Cemetery. They will actually be handed off, with \$1,000 cash, to the Falfurrias coroner, who's going to wrap them in a biohazard bag if he's got any left and in a plain black trashbag if he doesn't, and then stuff them in a giant hole full of the bones and rotting bodies of half a thousand other immigrants, all of whom will be called "Mexican" regardless of their birthplace or the origin of their hopeless and necessary trek, many of whom will wind up as a bulbous mortar of skulls between coffins stacked in columns of ten in rows of ten or twenty, a tuber-crop of lightning-fractured crania detailing the bone-weather each has suffered underground between its own time in a coffin or black bag and the day when they ran out of either bags or coffins and had to start disinterring the oldest anonymous dead.

Because the new ones needed coffins, see, in case a news photographer or federal inspector (*ha*) should ever happen to come around, should refuse the local courtesy of a beer or a joint or whatever and actually want to see the graves (another *ha*, and make it dry and viciously mirthless as you can; ideally just pronounce it without any reference to the nothing of laughing, "Ha," as in the first syllable of "hot enough out here to kill you"), want to wipe the thin brown sterile dirt off the top layer of coffins and see for himself that everything's been done *con mucho respeto*, *ay sí*, *como no*, regrettably there are issues of space and the threat of public unrest – *there's* a headline to put on any day's news in the recorded history of either news or days, whether inked onto paper or shouted down helpless foreigners' throats or merely worn like water-dark clinging vines around the bone, rotogravure seaweed etching variable cell depth on the print run of each overcrowded grave.

I know he knows or feel he thinks or tell he's heard or heard he's been told that any word for *spirit* – along either the Aryan line, running from Sanskrit *atm-* (a bitten root, the gnarled exposure of the wordtree in a season of terminally low tide, coastal radices sucking a desperate poultice of barely-wet sand like the charcoal milkshakes

they force down the throats of attempted suicides, the sludge of xylem stars in pyres' decryption to undo one death by means of other, a mandatory pharmacy of pills' reversal, medicine backtracked down the vein, inched per gauss-thick decibel across the verso of the playback head, as to revoke the sin of icons by repletion of their knives, filling in the graven image with a molten plasm of the melted instruments once used to incise it, target mutations cued in backmask to a metallurgy of aborted stars) to Hindi *atman* and German *Atem*, or along the Mediterranean coast, where *ruakh* becomes *rukah* transfers somehow to *psukhe* and thence to *spiritus*, respiratio, breath the consummation of a used spiral, a worn-in galaxy revived for ember-throbbing instants by the tooth's and lung's subtractions from the sky, redacting blood-pollution to ensure a flow of black milk to the daybreak mittag sundown of the brain, the cerebral dusk's repeated rise of hematopoietic stars, stem-cells in exile brought around again though again slated for exile, which is (in "reality") merely the deduction of the sun, the aberration of that febrile claustrophobic lightsource burned off by the radiation flapping like wet wings of large seabirds in the corona of its own wind, a hurricane eyed with the hail-battered calm of a crucified kingfisher, a royal heron nailed feather-for-feather to rescale, resize, bitsmooth the chipped-off ossicles of crinoid stars subjected to the sun's murder of seas, the missing ocean ...

I've felt he's seen or said he's heard or mentioned that he murmured it, that all the spirit's words are first and finally words for breath, that there's no actual difference between one or the other, that the end of breath is the end of spirit and the *vita contemplativa* conditioned solely on the clinging of breath to soluble tissues, the oxygenate meat constrained to muteness that it might better hear the exit of air from its own pores, the crusty browning of its own overexposed blood.

And that, therefore, to speak is to extrude spirit, an industrial process like seeding raw silicon with the notion of a crystal, drawing cold cylinders of air-stained brain out of the mouth's dubious filter, combing the decentralized nerve-nets of ctenophore stars so limited to such depth of the sea that the light ebbing off their own specialized organs is the only light they're ever likely to perceive, should they "perceive" it at all, should it "seem" to them as anything but a prickle in the dim gelatinous rope of the tentacle, a phantom limb betraying false weakness to ensnare overeager prey, a feeling like the hitched cough of your own tar-blackened heart – no metaphor here: only

a daily inhalation, say 250 times per period of waking, and the IED kit of the thoracic organs waxing blacker in gibbous reversal of this late month's moon.

If thus to speak, then to write or read only is to recode lung-scripted capsid's viral haunt of linked amino stars. And rereading a denaturing, and deformation the recorded brain's main function, to gift us with neoplastic tissue, malfunctioning organs and apparently useless extremities, in that terminally lonely evolution toward no body-goal or charted Point Omega, growing and casting off the ridges of keratinous tissue or half-grown chitin shells, scabs hardening like successive essays by the blood on the subject of beetles, breaking off again, again regrown, managing scar tissue as a physiological museum. The German has it *Denkmal* for monument and *Hautmal* for mole, stretchmark, skin-tag, each a mark to recall us, any obelisk the mark left by events' discreet carcinogen, the quarried core of a defunct sarcoma-star.

But not defunct, if breathed again, and to be breathed again to live again all agencies and dates of prior dysfunction, the over- and ingrown pavane – processional and ordered as medieval censuses in paint, the guilds together, the families grouped by the forking and often doubled-back grope of their own blood, genes growing thorns like threatened desert plants, tracer-proteins wrapped to sting like rose around the base-bracketed set of histone-stars – of all the ways this dead thing has been forced to sing before and is now forced one more toward singing:

A history including its own iteration, and thus some cellular foreimage of all future mention, remembering that I have remembered, recalling (if unwanted, if declared and even illegalized extra-utile, outside pragma's lockjaw domain, bacterium to tessellate bone's tender lightward surface with a volume-limited melisma of rusty tetanus stars) that I too was made to recollect, to gather bones from the place of too many bones already, claim the rearticulate body, manufacture or counterfeit for it some sense of mutual belonging, tarsals to heel, carpals to wrist, links of possibly as many disparate spines as there are vertebrae required to build this too-late model, and the cleft halves of two skulls that may not even belong to the same species, but then who would know. Who's counting. What skull does he count out of.

And how's he so sure it's the final one, how certain that he won't have to reinvent his whole system of numeration once the integers drop like coma patients' drivels from

the shape of a different jaw, interlocked with different salivary glands, and number analogous with spit, in reference to brain and to mouth respectively.

Which is to say: as saliva to digestion, math to mind, a : :: : in doubled Morse or mumbling Braille, a fluid to help things go down easier, an acid sump of dissolution, roadside trenches full of washing-blue and other amateur abortifacients, camouflaged with a ready-to-use planter full of spider lilies and sugarcane, periwinkles popping like sweet acidic flashbulbs by the paint-chipped mouth of the outflow valve, deformed chlorophyll stars gorged to exhaustion on pollutant, each chemical oddity a photo of how industry hid bones.

The sky feels like it's about 8 feet off the ground, a phaseless downward impress of damp heat, somehow wet but without any water to cool us, swelling and collapsing the cage of once-rigid ribs now tender as babies' unclosed skulls, turning us cartilaginous, the gradual conversion into human-faced meat wrapped loosely around the skeletons of sharks, the gaping marrow-canals of hydrostatic stars, sewn up in uncured fat-greasy leather, a tanless hide to weather with rot the conversion of this new and putrefying sphinx.

And though, to the insects who use blood's scent to navigate, we must smell like blood – if the state of your legs and my face, Scavenger, is or are any indication, depending on what you take for plural, or if they're the same state, me wearing a mask made of your thin sore-spangled skin, a dapple like the gray constellations sign melanoma on a roan horse's prematurely leached skin (printed over themselves in black and white despite the invention of color photography and sorrel, pinto, piebald cousins or parents, these the best to reproduce in outdated rotogravure or sepia beasts of broken-down printing presses, the most easily read as "horse" without inspecting the text or the photo: glyph's limbs, the bone-stroke undercarriage of the ideogram surfacing through layers of false depth and forced perspective, the back-broken mare found fossilized in the pit of the lens's convexity) – but to ourselves we smell like nothing much at all. Can hardly breathe enough to smell, or have the time, in the brief relenting of the need for breath, to consider scents' analogies, compare the last fire-damaged memory with the instant accruing its own degradation, exposed too soon to too much light, an overdose of filament-boned proxy stars.

Trans-solar surrogates. Though sun's the star in question, if it still deserves that term. And breath comes short, heavy but thin, a scum of usable oxygen atop some reek of turned cream, glossy mammal butter on the point of curdling, some oleaginous wreck of species too small to tell apart once they've plugged into the failed firewalls of each lung: gnats maybe, fruitflies probably, the larvae of mosquitoes or the larval substratum upon which any city stands, the compacted ovarian schist of its basal layer, finely interleaved with skin cells and exoskeletal plates from quartzite stars' unseasonal shedding, the pick-and-formaldehyde surgery of the eyes' invasive medicine.

So that I can barely talk to get your eardrums ringing, and you scarcely gasp to respond, and the day around us just marginally, just by the least recuperative fraction, convalesce from the loss of air each one of us entails (in some view, that's all any of us is: an oxygen deficiency, to be coped with as best the day can before it eliminates us for its own health, a pure annoyance of survival, and motive to explain and no premeditation to submit to a grand jury's sieving of guilt, no need to winnow act from planning, since who would doubt that the world acts only and ever in self-defense, incinerates into redshift's slow-as-sound analogue artifacts with only its immunologic stars). Parenthesize as much as you can, because it takes less breath to mouth all that when in an undertone or whisper, doesn't it, can't you talk quieter to take fewer breaths, destroy less air, produce less dioxide if you're just barely speaking, as you might over the phone, into an answering machine, leaving as voicemails the husks of what speech would've come stranger and more mannered were there anyone to hear it, the crinkling dry exuviae of breath better meted toward the minimum usage of hiss. They've got your pulse up on the screen, or will; they've got the EKG plugged in, and the electrodes substituting graphs for sweat, lie-detector scribbles for the body's wet saline fiction; they've got a myograph needle inserted beneath the star's arachnoid matter, measuring the impedance of its muscles, seeing how hard its back legs kick when voltage tells their circuitry to kick the other way.

Against the day, as it may be, and thus clear out some space in which to gasp our fill, fish grateful to get beached, whales paying spiracle's gratuity, subtracting from our time left to live the fraction of it to be spent in small serpentine skimmings of the available air, sucking it off the top of the smog like water off a perfectly level table. Oh fuck it. Right? Interrogative or. Just fuck it, you know. Why live longer if duration is

always and only the worry that you're about to live not at all. Why place survival above the ability to fill your lungs. Tell you this, Scavenger: only in my time would it have been possible, as some philosopher or other did, to identify the Good with the Sun, if in allegory only, and to suggest that heat serve as the model for the radiance of virtue. I've lived (or been dead-but-sensory) long enough to watch *that* metaphor fall out of any respiration's fashion.

The sun wants us translated to the tonnage of ash we'll eventually be anywhere, because it fucked up here and needs another opportunity, is eager for the median age of the next-most-temperate planet to begin, so that maybe this time it can base genetics on a sugar, say, instead of an acid, its animals on shells instead of spines or evenly-distributed nerves rather than columns leading up to such fragile clumps, cancerous clusters come to dream themselves the body's health while running it into walls a brainless corpse would still be bright enough to avoid.

Braindeath, as may be, but watch a laboratory frog run on pure reflexes sometime, the turtle's limbs kicking even after you've shoved a knife into the head-hole of its shell, sawed through its tendonous neck and left the pointed upper jaw still biting violently at mud-slathered riverbank cattails, and consider what pain you might've saved yourself if you were running totally on glitches in the limbs, afferent stars' batteries entirely discharged into a colonnade of hollow senseless bone.

Across an earth once scalded, now reverted past even its own post-traumatic cooling, a winter internally leached of freeze, sky silvered over with spirals of psoriatic scales, each sore a stele-covered cell in the hive of extinction's acidophile stars – across such earth, you feel (I feel; you often feel) that you could move toward her, grayly borne, decolorized on the arid friable frequency of your own unreliable breath, eyes closed but eyelids thinned against their own resemblance to the seasonless gray sky.

Black and white now, mono speakers only, single cones rattling out the compression of both channels, stereo bouncedown come to jostle for space on a single paper cortex, as in a closed eye's emendation of whole multitrack star-array, 8 or 16 channels bloomed unaccountably, into the billions, "her lithic spawn" if not quite quoted, paraphrased, each germinant between layers of gas-fertile stone, the corpses of their ancestry, shorn atoms, an amputee galaxy's remnant shofar blaring – when lipped

by the columns of trapped air like the living veins in a defunct animals – such nuclide venography of stars, the contrast agent seething through the otherwise colorless blood, showing up on the gelatin or colloid plates as a white cannibal river system, preying endlessly on its own circulation: no sea to empty into, neither gulf to lessen pressure, stint the blockage, implant pumps of soft metals or donor tissue, xenomechanical stars slowly grafting wall of heart to plate of chrome or platinum patina to mirror-neuron's glass.

And the mercury backing, and the indices of temperature etched into its deformity of light. You get your own reflection back as a record of the fevers the mirror has suffered. Much as you might after injecting quicksilver into the phloemic system of a tree, say, thus to benchmark what six months of drought laid heavy as wet dust on the leafage, canopy once, now bare sites for the rare landing of mostly warned-off birds, seafowl confused with the prolongation of what seems to be summer, kept away from their ocean with the holdover of decorticated heat, a droning star-lobotomy that keeps the thermostat reading near 90°F all the way through November, so that none of these gulls or cranes or herons are ever going to get back to the coast:

By the time they try, the intervening lands will be so cold as to bat them down out of the air, sight them along faultlines of atmospheric freeze, a subatomic hissing, an amplified block of ice seeding the air with dicot axes of fracture, the thawing clumps of neuromodulator stars sweating through glacial scarring, a laminate of phalanxed glial ice, thus to detain the skull's trapped voltage or uncouple chains of adrenaline receptors, keep winter's face if not whatever's said to hulk beneath the plates of facial bone, the stump of featureless raw animal we all conceal like firearms with the features any ID photo uses for its smuggling.

Big wings, molted in the wrong month or kept from molting in the right one, mapping the cruel diagonals of a viciously clocked cold front, the kind of temperature change you rarely used to meet outside the offing of tornadoes: like I've said, or think I've said, or do you think so, have you thus felt, can you say it back (what signal chain of pre-tympanic star-compressor keeps the decibel count within the tongue's conceivable range), but as I was or wasn't saying, as I have or haven't said, it goes like this. Full stop.

(Full stop.)



Noted. Paratactic as a telegram, which juxtaposition ought to tell us something: that in the gaps of erased text, the inverse fossils of minerally incoherent script, there is a movement, *tele-*, a crossing through the wilderness, and a sign, *grammê*, transmitted if denatured by that movement, bent out of and back into shape, twisted and flexed, the nearly invisible quaternary structure of the written characters (their microscopic exoskeletons) deformed and recomposed within the histogenic radiance of stars, the possible organisms they're continually projecting onto the face of the world which is itself pieces of their own dead bodies come to live again, if only by continually dying.

I mean, I meant to say, chunks of their autopsies, odd unstained corners of soaked coroners' reports, inconclusive inquests ringed with coffee cups' sodden and false porcelain, burnt scorbutic with the ashfall of unminded cigarettes, or now, more likely, now that such behavior has been far as far as it may realistically be banned, simply decaying in their electronic storage, blessed with the dysplasia of data-rot, watching the stars burn through the silver-foiled underside of a compact disc which sliced and gored and analyzed them once into a mainframe's warm docility, a single-helix redaction of DNA in which the only acid bases available are 1 and 0.

Was that what I meant to say.

(Perhaps partly. You had mentioned the confused birds.)

Mmhm, uh-huh, however you transcribe it or already have or will when the intelligence agencies make you repeat all this in a small locked room, fainting at the door as if to demonstrate concretely what privilege you've abdicated by having been here, where we are, right now, such compound tenses, as-in-the-future-you-will-in-the-preterite-past-have-been-where-you-now-are. No wonder they keep it in Latin sometimes. Language of precisions, I've been told, though I've hardly learned enough to know for myself, and precision is a quality you learn, if loving, to distrust.

(If distrusting, then, also to love?)

I think so. It must be. Absolutely, which is the word, and it sounds like a Latin one, so thank you, Roman Empire: without solution, either in mathematical or chemical terms, impossible to uncouple, phased to a covalence neither shock nor strange introductions can unravel, gripping the salt, soaked through the sugar, beyond titration's reckoning, one color and consistency and smell all the way through, no matter

what else you pour in the fucker. It lays atop like oil on water and may actually be oil on water. Why not. As good an example as anything.

“Not relative to anything else; unrestricted; complete; perfect; past part. *absolvere*, to set free, to render separate.” So the Latin thought the Perfect was the Unrelated, the Without-Restriction, the Set-Chronically-Free, and don’t empire’s recent (if still inconclusive) conclusions in the atom bomb and Auschwitz oven follow, don’t they ring from the prefix that gives the lie to its own diction, *absolute* itself a compound word, a failed and violent grasp after the free radicals of history’s base element, the carbon or hydrogen or human time, thus to delouse and purge a body cadenced to plague with stars’ unpaired electrons, hugely reactive and stripped of the alibi notate as a – or a +.

You don’t even have to put your ear to the ground to hear the rare-earth metals thundering, or rather accruing the possible thunder, a charge, a potential voltage, wherever they are, rarity displaced if not overcome by the storm they’re building up in swarms of blue ions, an electronic overdose – and what’s suffered underground is to be expunged (may also offer: *redeemed*, *remade*, *discharged*) in the sky, so we should expect a terrible storm, though not necessarily terrible rain, since I can’t imagine it raining without some freak interlude of cool between now and the dusty spatter of the first drops, the twitching and twisting around in whatever heap of slag or scrap you’re using for a stoop, thinking maybe raw inedible grapes or fat just-shed cicadas have hit the ground, thinking you might need to stomp the green nymphs or their bronze shells, exuvial soundtracks of leaves, of tiny chitin or keratin bones crumpling, the image-welded audio of wilted stars succumbing to the sky’s own dehydration, a horribly dry moon scrubbing them off the night’s film medium with a sound like the whining of small mammals come to their last agony, like songbirds punctured and singing diploid now out of their beaks and from holes between their ribs, if they have ribs, I’m not sure all songbirds do, some must. The metaphase of daughter stars rending chromosomes inside the parent cell. Do you remember the last time it rained?

(Barely.)

How was it?

(I remember a season rather than an event.)

And how was it with that season?

(You couldn't go outside, you couldn't even run from shelter to shelter, it was constant, it was metallic and tasted like the leftover portion of some industrial process, the air was bitter and grainy, the hair stood up on your arms on the back of your neck, as in the opposite of when she softly breathes hot upon your skin, from deep in the throat, from a reservoir of blood-branching hunger inapplicable to any time and place but this one and this one, a groan from underneath the belly, the birthcry of an organ you'll lose as soon as it speaks, some lower trachea deposited in fractional form by an accident of evolution, a vestigial survival, thought as useless as a spinal tail or adenoids and appendix until now, when it finally catches the code of its cartilage tuning fork from her presence on and over you, biting through the fabric you had thought to carry silently against the ravages of the day – but that's not what it was –)

You were saying it was the opposite of that.

(Right, like that secret breath sucked back *in*, like the undoing inhalation of that nonconsonant nonvowel speech, an archipelago of ruinous phonemic Eden from before their separation, a spar of broken land, barely-packed sand, grains still large enough that the eye sees them as fragments of wounded stones before they register as “beach” or “sandbar,” in geologic counterpoint to the undecidable sound of her breath against your bones: *beach*, *sandbar* require familiarity, the this-is-what-that-is-called naming you pick up before ever being told that you're walking on the black alembic of all the decomposing dead before you, which was named *dirt* before you had the chance to know it as anything but dirty. Right. Right. I'm trying to tell you or think I'm trying. I've seen and been on beaches like sepia milk, sand which even when walked upon wouldn't separate into grains, a coagulation of the amniotic fluid, a fever-chart of the coastwise mammal womb, thus to recall if not return you to the secret heat of the sea, the warm blood's seizure in the depths of basking animals and vein-temperature based only on carnivore activity, the other, other metabolism, one for which the ocean should eventually need exit, like she needed me – you – me there to breathe over and *into*, an urn, a barrow, a dialysis bag of softened bone cells dilating and contracting like the ossuary linkage of the stars, a vital stain recording not just sampled tissue but also its affinity to the matter used to stain it, decreasing or settling, decohering or come to some less legible coherence.

And the last rain I can remember was the retraction of all of the above: the hair on all skin but your scalp stood up because you could feel such breath being retracted, feel the sky's trampled and buckling need for such speech as might briefly undo the severance between the open and closed phonemes, locate it all in the spectrum of a single strangled roar, consonants as grains of foreign matter, xenomorphic stars, and vowels as the vibratory medium in which they hung suspended.

And then the surface of the earth rose a few feet around you, in eddies toward no center, in loosening spirals that seemed to self-abort before they outlined any inferable column, to stop and skim upon the new baseline of the air, the lowest heart-monitor or encephalogram reading it could survive, and then to stir in panic upward again, toward the next plateau; and then the brief rain, in nonsensical bursts, in strangely spaced compressions of an hour's consistent drizzle, a dozen runny asphalt-shiny tropic nights crushed into the density of a 3- or 4-minute spasm; and then the hailstorm out of nowhere, not quite even believable, cold rocks thrown from no further than a few feet overhead, the gastric haul of shellfish sliding wet and sonorous from the slit belly of a gutted coastal cloud.)

Stars run cell-death software at a bitrate too intense for beaches' circuitry-scarred motherboards to bear (many printings, many wounds: silicon striae, strained matrices of underlying data-collagen, collapsed webs of transistor-fats) – and in the momentum that precedes complete malfunction, you'd blind yourself possible, you'd guess yourself capable of moving over sea but under earth, across the surface of a water so glazed to single glimmer by the mirrorwork of an unseen moon, edges cropped, stars' photographic noise softened to the settling haze-strata of gentian ghosts, impossible not to have drowned in already, and thus incapable of drowning you or us a second time.

If so. If not. How many fits of oxygen deprivation can a single body suffer. Subquestion: how many before deprival comes to seem like another facet of the day, a parallax along the shifting ridges of that anthrax diamond stricken pale, etiolate as the stems of the plants born too late in spring and thus suffering the rigor called summer's mortis, a genitive death claiming all the names that precede it in the phrase with nothing less subtle than a suffix, a lopped regrafted morpheme more than enough to build the pillars of the sentence's aboveground tomb (iota for the entryway, false folds of

tent fabric or geologic features modeled in rock ornately carved to imitate what it might've been if we'd never started carving it, and sigma the transitive sound, the processing back through earth's teeth and tongue after however many years subsisting on its breath, reversed B-reel of star-formation guzzling the black galaxies like seeds of pulpy fruit to germinate negatively in the esophageal tract of the first light).

How many drownings, keep it asked, defer only to other death by water, should other present itself: bones broken with the impact of the sea's surface, exactly as solid as it looked, the Gulf of Mexico by then so much paved over with shipping routes and exciting war-futures, stocks already resold a thousand times, pricing and revaluing the possible dividends to be accrued from – let's say, and we're just saying – a possible seizure of Cuba, under the pretext of containing Communism (or whatever, and that *or whatever* might as well be in the official memoranda, if any survive: spiked carbon-flimsies cremated along with the president they eventually carried under, making his flashbulb bier, a catafalque of unstable nitrate-cellulose stars, bursting into newsprint's short-fused flame the instant they're exposed to the white assassination of the daylight).

Already used, already given up for worthless, already subject to a thousand disputational appraisals, and those arguments themselves already sold-used-given up-reappraised-etc. etc., and then the appraisals of same etc. etc., and this is how the world really does work, has for some time now, a method it shows no willingness to abandon if there *are* perhaps some signs that its abandonment will be requested, then required, by the water we don't have, the air we're finding missing every morning, recorded history's most hothoused and hypertrophic June, a grotesque carnivorous plant eye-bleeding colors so psychotically vivid that to look at it is to feel your brain straining to sift through pupils' input, feverish with the runtime-heat of operating so many simultaneous cathexes of the spectra-distant stars.

So if you were to *try* to drown now, you'd do as he did: come out of your cabin without much of a sign or word to anybody, punctiliously remove coat and shoes at the guardrail, fold coat, place shoes atop to keep coat folded, sit on the rail with your back to the sea, say something matter of fact like *goodbye*, then fall backwards into the Gulf between the Isle of Pines and the Florida Keys, and hear – probably – your skeleton shatter on impact, long before there's any chance to fill your lungs with water. By the time *that* death is possible, a dozen others will have superseded it. Burst blood vessels,

cerebral hemorrhaging, a sclerosis of bone-shards interleaved with the neural matter like canceled species still embedded in the myelin-sheath gaps of Ranvier stars – and the eyes-closed certainty, before all medical specifics, that this was it, that you’d finally done it, typewritten the exeunt with the force denied to all your prior essay. The gratitude of that. I can hardly imagine.

You know – and I’m sorry to repeat myself – that I’m sometimes said to have died, sometimes said to be incapable of death, but if I ever did die, Scavenger, I don’t remember it, and if I can’t, I’ll never know. I haven’t grown any older than I ever was, I’ve been excused the Sibyl’s error in wording, I don’t appear to decay, and from that you can draw whatever conclusions you like about death or immortality; I’m no more deformed or disabled than I was three thousand years ago; I surface first, as with all myth, in stories that are actually the half-remembered retellings of other inaccurate versions of things half-overhead for as many centuries as the day’s ordinal numbers allow you to recall, which is to say I never surface “first,” that I only come up for the hundredth time without instances one through ninety-nine having stuck in anybody’s memory –

Oh him, him we know, him we’re exhausted with talking about already, him we have a certain set of neurons for, reserved, displaced, calcified to serve as his station, not a throne, not a table, more a niche or scone, a cave as to recall the geologic origins of cities, the cave-systems they extrapolate, the catacomb grown vertical and putting on display its hive of eye-autopsied stars, the sample-tissue stored in the sight’s brittle insect envelope, cured in alcohol, smeared across glass, and stamped over with a palimpsest of scar-flesh naming a dozen insincere dates:

The founding, the recognition before the founding, the first x-native immigrant to these y-foreign shores, the date of reform, the date of reform’s repeal, the campaign of improvements and utilities, the Truth and Reconciliation Committee’s first session, the tenth anniversary of same, the day we celebrate the day we celebrated the day we let the former “terrorist”-cum-world-leader out of prison. All to even out, as by an overload of noise on one side of a balanced cable, the silence of the when-before-date, the skin-destroying stellar wind of first assent’s dyscalculiac cold.

Something on our skin like dried albumen, a substance once gelatinous, translucent, sticky enough to entomb the gnats and hesitant spiders, now dried to white rankling flakes – a photosensitive medium, overexposed to the geography of our line-deepening skin, and I don't know about yours, Scavenger, but mine is hardly anything apart from a collation of distinct ridges, a topographic map of a river delta, a sinkhole of dermal hachure lines, as to mark out the excavation site for the machinery of hypodermic stars. Do you fear to dig it up?

(I do.)

I do too. I fear. Who knows what drone's been living down there, ebbing off the edges of some vestigial organelle, a transit of non-coding DNA, some unfunctional component of the cell: a backlogged symbiosis now surviving toward either its final extinction or the resurgence of its use, which is to say that every body of any kind, from the animal through the astral, is in part a museum of possible secret purposes, a timed biomechanism waiting for its automatic override to kick in. And what such bomb-defusing kits of autologous tissue might imply, well, we've got less than no idea – all "ideas," such as they are, being in part the products of the flesh that sudden activation would replace, or at least modify. I fear. I do. I'm not so old that I've forgotten how to fear.

They tell the story of fear dying, of men walking straight up to death without hesitation, and *that* I can believe, that I've actually seen: you can become numb to fear for long enough to die or to kill. You've maybe done or seen it yourself. You can feel death to be as much a part of the environment as any moonlight or vegetation, and to accept that it may seep over the moment's edge, penetrate the membranous domain of stars' integral proteins, flood up your least pensive bones like water bubbling through the floor of a dirt basement. Ankles, carpals meta- and unprefixd, the synovial fluid crackling with the planned obsolescence of body-static, the muscle cold enough within its casing to do absolutely anything and not suffer the inrush of what it thought was its own blood. But age beyond *all* fear, the possibility of living without panic, no. That I don't believe at all. I have yet to be convinced, despite my incomprehensible survival, that life itself is anything but a focused kind of panic, a sort of lock-in amplifier isolating shudders within extremes of amplitude and frequency such as to incarnate the body

capable of manifesting such anxiety. Bells for shiver, Scavenger, are what I've learned to look for.

And the sea, sky, sparse land, light of any moon or constellation are exactly the same color tonight –

(Tonight?)

No, you're right, not tonight – I mean, possibly tonight, I don't know, I'm not there, but you're right, the night the photo was taken, all the same dark blind man's blue, the kind of color you might see staring down your last sighted day, watching the hour darken behind your cataract, glaucoma like stained glass to emend your lit world to the color of a paint-thick and frigid sea. No way at all to tell what's waterline, horizon, spit of land, odd moles and spars naturally formed or built there by frightened angry men four hundred years ago, the kind of person who not only could but *wanted* to take an entire continent on hearsay and go there to haul in enough, what, herring, mackerel, trout, salmon, tuna to make himself rich by the standards of a world he'd abdicated. What kind of insanity is your country built on, Scavenger. What kind of fever did they have to have, know to know, a dizzying parallelism of the verbs timed and infinitive, the first reaching toward the second, to reach the nunc-stans of the word precedent with *to*, since your language doesn't actually have infinitive verbs, since it *proposes* them as from some tense runner's pause. What does that mean about America and English?

(I've been wondering. I've tried to wonder.)

Tried-to, with the ligature, like an outdated œ or æ, you know what I'm saying, man, nahmean, friend in a society of friends, moment's ally, hey know, there's the pink lady, here's the ace whose face is a tool for digging gardens which are graves, and there goes the king committing suicide all along the dockfront where I'm dealing you your cards, look at him run, a short stubby sword for which there's probably a more specific name embedded in the side of his skull, a wet circular wound like the mineralogy of blood drying on a straight razor, and I *know* you've seen that, firsthand and on as many other hands as you've got ordinal numbers to name, an oolith, a dawn-stone swimming up through the wrongly fathomable if unfathomed gallons of the Earth, like a fake relic, something mistaken for a knifeblade or an arrowhead when viene el Yanqui pa' put this all in a touring museum, the same kind of scalps-and-buffalo-hide shitshow I'm running



tonight, though his would be inland, citified, run off like the trashy yellow-pulp evening edition in some basement rented briefly for his purpose, with a couple Japanese drifters playing the roles of captured and converted Sioux chiefs, why not, braid their hair and teach their English to stilt differently, whatever tribes they've heard of back in London or along the Gloucester coast, Cherokee maybe, Seneca possibly, definitely Seminole and Sioux?

(Not sure.)

I just mean that you said, "I've tried to wonder," and that there ought to be some kind of visible sign for tying up the *to*, i.e., you said "I've tried-to wonder," rather than "I've tried to-wonder," that the verb, though classed infinitive if any grammarian gets ahold of it, is acting differently than it might and has before, and that your language has neither diacritics nor alternate orthographies enough to note the change.

The one gives the coordinates of your attempt; the other is a kind of tendon-strumming pause before the bloodward shove of wondering, like setting out in boats named for dead wives and their infantas for a place where every Anglo-Saxon verb is still infinitive, and most if not all of the Greco-Latin Semitic Aryan Proto-Indo-European ones too – thence for the violent and pacemaking conjugation, first-person present indicative: a proudly-claimed arm and hand tossing shards of colored glass and swinging blades of imported axes, strangling fish out of the ocean and sailors' maps out of the coast, for the privilege of dementia in the image of its owner's bawling god.

*Wine leather boat*, transcribed by idle hands, a voltage-potential lined up on the further coast of bone like a test-tube suspension of umbilical stars, in strains and coils, additive toward a paleontology of uterine blood, the intravenous bark from which the unborn would draw nutrients if there were any unborn, or any womb other than the cylinder of glass, the embryonic harp of light from which she draws the stammering assonance of that phrase, not knowing or caring where it comes from, a graft-wild algorithm, a set of clear commands given some input they can't cope with and spluttering mathematical aphasia like the videofeed image-dross that seeps from disconnected lobes of stars.

Gray then, timestamped maybe, though in some year you wouldn't recognize, counting the hours neither up nor in cycles but down, as to the end of a reel, the last

usable innards of cassettes, where soft tissues regress to insect heritage, and the chitinous external bones of early angels clog the playback head, build up a dried kingfisher nest as from the quarried coastline of an ocean long receded. Escarpment pocked with small crystallized caves. Gummy bones and rotting skin of fish built up to refract the season's Babel, clamp down skeleton's shutter speed upon some certain parallax of that tower, one and only one per cave if many caves per many many coastlines of the same sea, additive not to the original architecture but to some integer- $n$  building neither photographs nor Babel could predict: this pillar, that portico, these few galleries, and all lit from within with a flaring unstill wound-flame, the blood-resistance of distempered skin, lesion-stars oscillating their ancient death into the present moment's ossuary eyes.

*Wine leather boat*, she wrote, and heard the fledgling dove – a baby so young it hasn't yet learned to fly, feathers still matted to wet nearly black slurry with its first experience of rainfall, just yesterday, very early morning or the dead end of the night just before: sky had hung like noosed fruit for seams of hours beforehand, threadsunned, pulsing, a throb of planar bone every time we looked up to see if a storm was approaching and found ourselves in the center of an unconsummated one, that nearly green fog like a photosensitive medium coated against its own proclivities, epoxied against registering the earthed stars' coal-tar negatives – she heard, I heard, the dove scuttling through the underbrush, not yet deprived of flight because not yet having tried to fly or even knowing, necessarily, that it could.

A land animal for now. Puffed with its newborn lust for breath, parting the reddish sea of loess to look for prey it can't identify until its blood and nerves say *there*, *that one*, unbidden, imago of a worm hung in some afferent net, lighting up the logic-arcs of hollow bone till beak and stomach rumble with the dirt burnt off disused transistor stars.

This, too, the city you would show her, or that I'll try to, if I can move from this place, which I can't, so it'll have to be by other means than movement, the only ones I've really known – I never *moved* myself, Scavenger.

(I've heard that; that much got passed down.)

Someone else was always moving me, into and out of the city, and consider what comprises a sufficient landmark for a blind man, and what misconstruction of the same might occur to a sighted boy. He thought I'd know where I was because he explained how he himself knew. Said, Look, from here, the road ends in a plateau of unpaved, unplatted dirt, no cobblestones nor flags, not even loose-mortared ashlar, the temple's orthodontia of pear-feasting wasp-stars impacted into vast white chalky blocks. No road at all. We came here on the road. You understand that?

I do, I said, though how could I have understood.

Okay. The road leads to the city, except now, when the road leads *from* the city, and I'll turn you to face toward the town you've left; if your pupils were any color but white, they'd be seeing a collection of gold- and bronze-colored towers on the skyline, some of them decanting a heavy earthen wine of black soot into the sky, spreading like dye in water, aniline cancers among industrial byproducts of dead stars. That much is simple, isn't it?

I don't know, I said, but I have no reason to distrust you.

Okay. But that's not really *the city*, see, or is only a small part of it. That's what the guidebooks will refer to when there are guidebooks, what the photographs will record when there are cameras, what the Italian and British air forces will bomb when there are planes and bombs and nationalities enough to pawn us around in some war whose terms we barely understand, having been excluded for so long from the raped continent we accidentally helped to found, forced to wake up every wartime morning in annihilating and utterly discolored sunlight to crawl down the equally bleached, the massive heaps of fresh wreckage from the last air raid: mutilated statuary, cracked balusters, staircases humped now into arches, so the median footfall now composes the keystone, wrongly tuned, built to collapse. Rooms medically inverted and demonstrating the circuitry of their blood to a remorseless daytime.

No blood anywhere. The dead are under the heaped-up wood, stone, plaster, mortar, dust, other dead, and have bled, if anywhere at all, into a sewer which is precisely the obverse of this city of pale ruin: its dreamlife given stolid architecture, curved archways, brick-sunburst oriels, canals along sidewalks neater than their aboveground counterparts, the places we disposed of what *we* thought was the useless

part of our metropolis, while the bombing raids begged to differ, or really didn't beg at all. Ordered us to recognize the difference.

Down there, the geometries are clean, if their constituents are filthy, and you'd do better work with a compass and a sheet of quadrille paper than any surface world would offer you. The tangents are still known, proposed, approved, and mapped on documents that anybody could look up and no one does, and the parabolae still intersect the imagined conical plane, consign the darker half of gravity's strange loop to an underground still deeper, a recharge-depot for the batteries of drained lithium stars.

The crack in the mourning dove's voice is the crux of its song, that instant when the vowels leave the mouth and actuate the woodgrain of the throat, intubate some stored glottal colony of xylem stars, bring dry sap into fractured cantilena with a swoop up into a separate octave: the barely-fingered divisions of the string, unfretted, unpressed, wringing harmonics out of brass or steel or catgut, freeing an in-vitro stock of locusts and crickets from the friction of bridge and bow, sul ponticello, or tuning peg and resonant black belly, beak and air and small dark darting tongue, tacky to the touch as fresh varnish, though the song is anything but slippery, is so much a modality of any passing perturbation in the air that you almost might not notice it the first, oh, thousand times you hear it. Take it for a funneling of high-pressure systems. The atmospheric error righted with an inrush of cool exhalant. Backlog smoke correcting the incomplete ravages of a fire.

But the evidence of fire abandoned us just like the color of the bombed capital we lived in, Oracle, Tiresias-if-that's-your-name, he said, and you couldn't even scrape together charcoal for a fire, couldn't throw a hut of claybrick over a pile of dead trees, each one root-fed with the lost lambs bleating for their mothers' accidental abandonment, the kid goats left in exile on the far side of a trench they weren't quite old or large or strong enough to jump and so fell into, having thence to wander for miles until the trench turned into a ravine and the ravine then into grass-swollen foothills and the trickle of blood-silver water-paste along the rock-floor into an actual pool, though still undrinkable, where the lamb and the kid wait by the Tree of Eden – one of them, Knowledge or Life I can't say which, if either: Eden was full of trees, and though two are famous and one of these most famous of all, Eden was a huge garden, and it's very

nearly a miracle that Adam and Eve ever came upon the one fruit barred them, even stumbled up to the massive gnarled root-ball of the Tree of Good and Evil, washed visible by the erosion of floods that predated their Flooder, that must've rushed here when darkness was still upon the face of the deep, before the division of the waters above from the waters below and even, maybe, heretically, the light from the darkness. You can imagine, he said, how the Lord of that Garden would feel about a tree older than him, whose planting, be it engineered or natural, he couldn't remember. They'll tell you he knew every other tree from infinitely before its birth, as it's said now he knows his creatures, though there are ways to read such scripture which don't imply the cross-section of hurt which is your temporal and panicking self. Ab ovo ad whatever the right conjugation of *death* would be, ab ovo ad mortem, maybe, and "yourself," such as it was, a pigment spot upon the embryonic fluid still undivided into white and yolk, albumen enough to photograph the neural tube of rudimentary stars.

You know what I mean?, he asked.

I think so, I said. Fire, but no evidence of fire.

OK, he said, and God the same way about the tree he misremembered. Would have, himself, to recollect with a ritual of recovered limbs, hunting hacked-apart Osiris from his fifteen or twenty-odd graves in the papyrus marsh, rearticulating his rotted limbs and papery bones, cross-multiplying ossuaries to unlock salt-hived denominator stars. And clearly this is a problem for a deity, even semidios, to splice rite that way and bother with the intestate autopsy of a parallel cult. He couldn't. Oh don't trouble him. He could but wouldn't. He would but can't. He would and could and simply doesn't, as so often, restrained by some electrical resistance in the structure of the hour, a magnetic impediment that just *will not* let you say whatever needs to be said, give up what has to be renounced, throw away the life you know and dread for one less known if no more dreadful, tell the truth that anyone who's paid attention at all could've and has guessed a hundred times by now. Whatever settled starch or awkward hydrocarbon complex in the blood keeps you across the room, staring strangers down, not to frighten or to analyze them (if there's any real difference) but that each might serve as mirror, unconsciously repeat some gesture of the one you want to look at and can't, demonstrate the heat and pressure of her movements like geologic strata bear heavily encrypted

witness to the Earths they've each survived, the corvid ravening of methanogen stars across a black sky blurred red with their carnivorous approach.

I do recognize that story, I said. It sounds like navigation for the blind, though in different terms.

OK, he said, it must be, it would have to be. Lights on some expensive lawn, expensive furniture and curtains in a house that costs its owners more in annual property tax than you'll ever manage to assemble in a decade, and the adolescent gangling of assumed attitudes, test-poses, the mannequin arithmetic of twelfthhand personality, circulating scrap for scrap, till any one of us is the combined wreckage of any group of others, till each assumes the put-on choreography best suited to his skeleton, the obsessive striking of postures and fourth-degree photographs most affine to her preexisting flesh. We all become small divisors and dividends of the people our acquaintances tried and failed to be, and they act out the bitter false success of our own assayed blood found wanting, their arch custom in the light from which we found ourselves estranged.

Odd shafts and fans of light from some source overhead – which, for reasons that might or might not become clear eventually, cannot be the sun – and lashes of roots surface at great distance from the trunk, its compound cortices, cauls grown to protect the prior cerebrum themselves finally innervate, damned with or redeemed to nerves, as you like, still evolving the early pathways for the transfer and metabolism of prokaryotic stars, tough innucleate ions of potassium, sugars so long encrypted to their present brace of fixed radii that, upon decoding, some will crumble entirely, lose what notional center held them together while under the sway of cipher's tuning, provide only a heap of stars' dark discarded skeletons for patient asps to pick through, waiting out such millennium or messiah as should return meat to these oldest bones.

(White frills and ruffs of fat, grave-information, adipose matter seeping into wretched sump-earth or itself straining the loose wet soil of pollutants, sieving older recordings for whatever raw static still clings to their ridges between blasts and glottal gusts of tarnished instrumentation, the rusted horns, the voices on the point of reverting to pure shaped body-heat: a scratched silence, a flawed blank, all errors etched to fractal

branch with files lost or deleted from stars' bioinformatics, the melting of their modeled and thus obsolescent DNA.)

And so, and then, a leathery black seedpod, still moist around its inner lip with some juice that burns the fingers and would scald the teeth and tongue. Looks like nothing much. An insect glue you'd try unsuccessfully to wipe from hand to hand, just dirtying the foreign substance till it comes to lie upon the skin much like the other encrustations of dirt, and is thus forgettable, or the pulp of the crow-feinted grapes lying everywhere this month (if it's a month), camouflaging the green fledgling cicadas, nymphidae less visible than the brackish metal of their own shed shells, like exuvial light activates the eye to hide the tender dislocation of the stars. They've grown no protection. They have no help. What proteins compose them are still so young, so scarcely folded into quaternary architecture, that none can be sacrificed from the inmost radium womb – the stars' uterine incinerators giving perpetual birth to a perpetual candescence of medical garbage, canted ions, valence gashed or permanently hobbled, electron-mourning young to the five or six thousand years of night as is the night-people's own suppressed threnody, horribly renewed yet, in renewal, giving us the only path back we'll ever have, the only trail to trace, hardly distinct from the unyielding earth and slightly eroded stone through and over which it courses, not even old enough yet to have taken on the permanent shape of a footprint, hardly dented where we've laid down the millions, christ, the billions of dead bodies on the bier each of us thought improvised thought it was almost exactly the same one every time.

Hardly the slightest indentation of the petrosomatoglyph, the stone-body-sign, mammal extremity become the registered suffering of stone uploaded in some lossy hiss-bound ghost-streaked ferrotyped or simply out-of-focus replica to the mutable anatomy of stars.

And yet still. Listen. A mountain pass, in a country whose borders and names have been changing regularly (by which I must mean *irregularly, but often*) for some time, and in a region of that country which was once a country itself, some castoff ethnonym, no more suffixes to mean son- or daughter-of, no longer any hope that those raised with the common tongue might be able to recall the livid gristle of your parentage

simply by speaking a syllable or two, the dozen alternate spellings of *-vich*, the simplicity of *-sson* or *-sdottir*.

You can still wear those names, if it gives you comfort, and it might; you can hold onto them across the paper regimes, those few which last long enough and have already cemented enough slaughter to get to this place, slightly to the left of the middle of nowhere, and which will arrive in the form happy enthusiastic young men who were out of work and purposeless until the advent of the Great National Hope, and whose enthusiasm extends *far* beyond mere traditional war crimes, like rape and murder.

They will talk to you at great length, will expound the rewards to be hoped for from the new regime, both cynically and with total idealism, in both the crudest possible terms (you could get a medal of valor, you could end up with a sinecure in some meaningless ministry where they'll pay you like king collecting rents for nothing more than your promise of officious well-dressed silence, you can keep whatever you come across in the course of pillaging, there are so many uses – did you know that? – for human hair, so many industrial and household applications, and we're about to have more human hair divorced from human bodies than any group of any kind has ever possessed at one place and time, more even than the devotees of Venus the Bald, appending prefixed herm- to their Aphrôditê, altering the myth such that the queen bee mangles and extracts the reproductive organs of the stars every autumn; human hair enough to tug our entire artillery across whatever desert we come to next, and then back across the desert we've most recently manufactured, I swear, hand to Gott, it seems impossible but I've seen us do impossible things already, I've seen two engineers take out their spirit levels and perform that scarecrow choreography, you know, hands evenly out to both sides and then allowed to slide together perfectly even at arms' length from the centers of their chests, sides of index fingers rustling together callused and scabbed like a postmortem mating ritual, a forced genome of dead stars' recombinant genitals, torn away by the goddess in her horrifying aspect, no spring nor summer deity, no, and recalling her winter origins in the castrated cock or balls of her father falling into the ocean and coughing up such a filthy cum-stiffened spume on the shores of the copper-bearing island that it held its shape as it crashed on the rocky beach, build up a recognizable female body, more or less, and there were worshippers in place by sundown, you'd better believe it, you don't but you will, the way I didn't believe it when I



saw the two civil engineers out there with compasses and pincers-nez, if that's the correct plural, I don't speak that morbid degenerate Latinate language, and I thought, *They'll never do it, how could they do it*, and then thousands of young men who looked just like me swarmed over no horizon, out of no hiding place, not from underground, not airlifted from the fissure-scripted crust where the sun's flares stiffen into pools of used albumen, glossy tempera arthroscopies of stars – no, they came from *open land on every side*, you see, it was a flat place, you could look any direction and see only fields and stones until the curve of the earth censors your eye, and still the thousands of young men, boys really, still they came from that distance, jogging, happy, many shirtless, many wearing shorts and army boots, and they buzzed and wriggled all over the side of the mountain while the two civil engineers stood there with a look of tolerant distaste apiece, each as if to say, *It's ugly, but it's part of what we do*, wishing for more elegant instrumentation but relieved to take what manpower they could wrangle, and then, all the sudden, there were highways along the coast of the lake and a tunnel right through the roots of that fucking mountain, I swear to you, *ti lo giuro, ich dir schwöre*, and at the other end of the tunnel, the side of the mountain we hadn't been able to see, there were test-models of new cars, hundreds of them in a line over the flat edge of the other half of the visibly flat Earth, none of them with drivers or engines or gasoline yet, and all of them yoked together by fat hawsers of braided human hair, thick as my upper arm, I'm telling you, mostly brown and black, cut off the scalps of who gives a shit who, and you could be a millionaire with nothing but a razor and a place to stash its products when the war fails and the criminal statutes get debated, you could be a barber in the medieval tradition, leach-minister, bloodletter, bonesetter and amateur surgeon, to the actual and jaundice-ridden yellowshifting stars) ...

So yes, these crude terms, base rewards implied or outright promised, you'd never have to wear dirty shoes again, fuck dirty, unshined ones, even, you'd never have to put on another pair of creaky cobbled boots, you'd never wear anything but a starched uniform and never be embarrassed by a lack of jewelry at the breast, no sir, *Mijnheer* whatever you said your name was, if you said it, not at all, a blatant gallery of pectoral hardware tarnished just enough to seem hard-won, battle-earned, though recently buffed and restored, of course, plus a hat with a stiff brim and a face with a stiff lip, but

would you, we, be humorless? Oh no, sir, Bruder, Freund, a sense of humor is a healthy part of the standard psychological equipment, camaraderie, absolutely, worksong with lyrics about the local hookers interspersed while you bail out barbed wire and maybe the one among you with a recently broken leg (but don't worry, he'll heal fast, hearty boy, nothing but fresh milk in his veins) will also happen to be the one who knows how to play an accordion, and you'll laugh and sweat and expend your energy on sanitary male companionship in-the-service-of, we'll get to the object of that phrase later, and when you fuck the whores that night in Occupied Wherever, you'll do so with a sense of a reward well earned, in fact deserved, one to which you're violently entitled despite the reluctance or even outright refusal of the women, and isn't that what you're joining up for – I mean –

And this is where the pitch turns ideological: Isn't that the *real* reward? The knowledge that you're part of a world-historical force so vastly *right*, so *owed* whatever it can take and claim, that you'll never need to feel guilt again? That whatever you're refused marks out the refuser as a pervert at least, an opponent to progress, degenerate of course but in every sense of that word, not just the red-light-district one we toss around when we're talking about Mutti's boy down there in thigh-highs and blood-red lipstick, doing *his* national service Thursday through Sunday in the Reeperbahn – don't even need nudge or wink here, but he's going to wink and nudge you – and who's opposed to a bit of fun, who doesn't want to dominate a bit of willing boy-flesh after so much meekly female acquiescence, he says, grinning, not the least damn bit ashamed of any of this. Such is his conviction.

Or, perhaps, merely his skill in getting *you* to wish you felt so convinced about anything at all, in distilling the most rapacious adolescent fantasies you still harbor, infusing them for just long enough with the specious pingback of a Higher Ideal, so that the desire to fuck legally docile women all along the Riviera is something other than exactly what it is, so that the spread of your personal and diseased seed is actually a minor tributary, a trickle, really, but crucially important, to the great river system that will wash clean an entire continent's genetics, in Germanized Greek prosody roaring line to line like a dramatized recitation of Hölderlin, each phrase springing compact, from a crouch, into the necessary physics of the next, Triumph so deeply Willed that your own

resentful petty crook's and rapist's fantasies might seem the atomic constituents, the indivisible particles, of a substance purer even than your mostly formal God?

And that's how the pitch will go, millions and millions of times, if often en masse, often bullhorned into the stockyarded heads of thousands of penned-in young bulls. And meanwhile, in a country that's no longer a country, among people who don't especially have names – who wish for their preservation but at the moment are desperate to hide and disclaim them, that they might be preserved – there's a certain large flat stone in a mountain pass, which has become so well-known as an escape route among refugees that their killers *must* be aware of it, too, and though no single refugee has told another, they all lay their dying down on that same long smooth stone, all conduct the Kaddish Yatom in what should logically be a rushed and breathy undertone but tends, actually, to come out quiet and well-paced. Why escape at all if not to keep alive the possibility of this exact pause, keep malleus coaxing tympanum so softly at the prompting of an incus ossified from night-hung hooks of bone-cell stars.

(Yitgadal v'yitkaddash sh'mei rabba. B'alma di vra khirutei v'yamlikh malkhutei, / b'chayeikhon u-v'yomeikhon u-v'chayei d'khol beit yisrael, / ba-agala u-vizman kariv v'imru amen.

Y'hei sh'mei rabba m'varakh l'alam u-l'almei amlaya. Yitbarakh v'yishtabbach v'yitapa'ar v'yitromam / v'yitnasei v'yit'hadar v'yitaleh v'yit'hallal / sh'mei d'kudsha b'rikh hu / l'ella min kol birkhata v'shirata / tushb'chata v'nechemata da'amiran b'alma v'imru amen.)

Map-cells, rinds of cartographic lymphocytes, arise in slag-rich ridges, furnace-clinker left over from the histamine paralyzing and destroying antigenic stars, the gristly salivary sound of which is inaudible beneath the hundred-dB scream of tree-clinging cicadas, each tapped into a separate vein, extending bony mouthparts to bore through the bones of trees, etch pathways on their cortices no neurotransmitter ever meant to travel down, no receptor to receive, a jagged mutant circuitry, unfinished because never begun with any particular shape in mind, simply conforming to the laws of least resistance as applied to the geometry of hunger: they take on the framing and print of whatever offers least resistance to the white fire in the belly of that hollow resonator-

insect, heads and eyes almost the only sentient parts of them, rest of the body composed primarily of collapsible ribs, used to rake against each other and emit that shriek which presently drowns out the formation of the night's single-use atlas. An unfelt burn, a patch of hairless and glass-smooth magenta scar tissue lost to all decoding's chemistry in nociceptor stars.

And shapeless insects with hidden wings attach themselves to the flat screen, the lit bulb, whatever nearest source of light presumably confuses them about the position of the moon, which is itself banked in a steep green filmic injury of smoke, an overexposed chlorophyll slide bubbled over the surface of the night's gelatin plates: retentive rain, water-weight aggravating lunar edema, photosensitive and thus a frail hospice for the taxonomy of endangered stars. No specimen will survive.

Its light may be sorted, its color analyzed, its local twins or triplicates aligned to provide for us a graphed bear's backbone, the shape not of a swan but of the black blood whipped from its throat when it catches an arrow to replace its sharp tacky tongue, not the hunter but his instruments, the Aurora Borealis waver of the night shivering with her shot arrows, the other angles and momenta coiling unused in her quiver like a brood of aimed snakes, freshly vertebrate to obsolesce the stele-bone of unsealed nautilus stars.

And the sirens, two of them at the moment, do quaver in and out of phase and tuning, pliable bars of a useless cage, heading east like they generally do, toward something they're either too late to prevent or right on time to cause, but virtually never to help, unless they're ambulances' or firetrucks', but I don't believe so. Would you? By now? More caffeine-grainy eyesight, peering into the dashboard monitor through this specific night's acquired shiver, an autoimmune deficiency mistakenly attacking stars' cathexis into cones and rods, taking it for cancerous metastasis or the leverage of some foreign agent inches down the blood, so that you see, if at all, through a constant broken snowfall of black flakes, like ash withheld so long by the incinerator of the sky that it doesn't even register as something burnt.

Just a scatter of enamel, a buckshot peppering of fractured insect shells, rudimentary eyes of arthropods primed only to receive and process darkness, waiting on the fear or the hormonal surge of some deeper-sea organism whose blood runs to camouflage and bioluminescence, skin-imaged stars used as reporter genes to trace the

parallel decay or growth of something later to be soldered to the motherboard, fused to the tungsten filament, or left out to rot, pause, dry here as are husks of stomped-on fireflies, hollow skins of certain massive snakes, even the glow of a split tree like the commission of its own forensics, pouring out bright vials of chemicals to test the crimescene for alleged and lost blood, trace the horned mouthing of the vein where smooth muscle slipped from collagen and bellowed the repressed harmonic center, the strained vibrato of its circulating music.

Gnat-whine, taut hair drawn over brass, the hinges of old earth-moving machinery altering night's pitch, causing the constellations' wince toward a bluer light borne violet by the time the sun should rise, and rose-red hands daub the blank skyline with their real or imitative blood, the cinnabar poultice they've assumed not to heal or to close past wounds but to predict future ones – their necessity and grace, their feedback off the boxcutter's small blade and into the assayed columns of protein immunoblot stars.

And nothing but unbearable angles on the radio, a sound like light being swallowed, transcribed on the oscilloscope as strangely fading rings, gray oral haloes decomposing on the instant they're formed enough for us to recognize them, a morphology of autolytic speech. Said is consumed. Sung, then, anatomized consumption, the brutal detail of their coming-not-to-be, so that it's hard to hear the actually complex and always-transforming noise that passes for "radio silence" and not to think of it striate with the individual strands wrenched from whatever tissue once composed those missing mouths, the high harmonic like the kink in the song of certain birds, the otolaryngeal architecture of stars divorced in that moment from their other emission, higher-octave light, like iron drying out of blood or sperm from crusty semen.

Oh leave us alone. Gone, then, and only the red door of some shack, probably a storehouse of one kind or another before the edgeland grew around it: zinc and tin, unsteady walls, roof furry with the moths and flies and spiders scorched in their approach to its orange neon sign, which ululates straight past the ear's slow intake and down into your own voicebox, up into the damp root-cellar regions of the vein, growing a dirty drone in cranial fossae like a mold grown up the walls of a flooded and half-drained building, unenthusiastic city workers tired of wearing the hazmat suits they're

pretty sure they don't need and so flipping the hoods back for cigarettes and gas-station candy while they pump the bilgewater out of whatever this used to be, you ever seen the place before, don't think so, but looks like the lot next door got some chalk on it, still, you know, like lines, so maybe it was a school or the gym for a school, maybe they played football there or tried to get the children interested in soccer, save their brains, you know, concussions, though save 'em for what is a question I really can't answer you for shit.

Nobody gonna make it out of here – or even make it *staying* here – without some kinda brain damage, and you choose your personal favorite variety, and that's what they call "character," and some is better than others, least in the eyes of the Highway Patrol, who've got their own: sclerotic arteries, livers so swollen you can touch 'em where they poke out underneath the bottom right side of the ribs. That's true. Feels like a bump of spongy wood, a rotten piece of sugarcane, and then the huge backdate prescription flush of drugs they took a year ago but was never able to, what's the word, metabolize, cause their livers was so fucked up from the kind of drinkin' it takes to fuck up other people for a living that ain't nothin' but bad beer and Johnny Walker (for holidays) ever made it through the organ. Miscalculated bile, orange and white scum of half-dissolved painkillers and sleeping pills, cellulose capsules empty as the winter's eviction of honeycombed bees, and thin heparin whimpering at the black crystallographic cysts of downstream-protein stars.

Clutch at your heart or scrape the lining of your lung for some usable sample – no help coming, boss, means no help coming, and there's none, and if you hear a helicopter, it ain't anybody's medevac, and if there are planes passing over, passing over is exactly what they're doing. Alone with this, all of it, in the continuous edge, the secret emptiness that can be found, if you're either damnable enough to try or damned enough to be a target for it, in the heart of any crowd at all, not so much down but under any street, to walk distended beneath you like your reflection broken in the river, to carry the splintered and scabbed soles of ghosts upside down along the nearest geologic cliff, hanging larval from step to step, always at risk of unraveling or puncturing whatever soft cocoons they've managed to build up since they were last moved. And, under these circumstances, you do a lot of moving, so they've got to move, too.

To be drowned wouldn't be much different, and to cut your wrists only a temporary solve, a question answered too easily and thus incompletely. Not that it won't happen. I don't know, Scavenger, I don't know what else you can really do. I'm probably too old to die, or too dead to die again, but you'll have to tell me if you figure it out. The rest is what we've already heard called "silence" and isn't: the largely unnoticed, the bypassed biology of noise where you expect the kind of noise called signal, voices themselves a shaping of static, a decollation of the star-noise at its thick and bloody root, leaving a stump like the coroners will found to have hidden all this time beneath your face, an austere yellowed machinery still gnawing at what last song tissue left there to turn sour on the teeth.

And the people alongside were, are, peeled back too, though not as in death and autopsy: only the first few layers have been taken off, and there's still blood, fat, cartilage, a jungle of misled veins and steam-withered pressure gauges, disused ventilation dripping fat streams of dirty water down the stack of bones that shifts behind the throat. Slate atop slate, fissionable material, half-lives longer than the animal they're forced to wear, and no cemetery waiting for any of these, least of all yourself: Johns and Janes Doe, all closer relatives than any of them suspects, clearly branched from the same tree of blood and an old, famous one at that, named in English, probably with heraldry included in the bargain, hung as with smooth eunuch fruit, branches pendulous and crackling with the weight of white flesh photographed without interest in or reference to the "body" of which it was once a "part." They don't care about what your gashed leg means in terms of your face. They're trying to figure it out there are hesitation wounds, marks of resistance, signs of struggle, whether the cause of death was blood-loss or concomitant asphyxiation, which of the seven things wrong with your heart went wrongest first and thus paroled the others to minor infractions, thrombosed stars splitting black and unctuous as chrysalises archived in the risen river's mud.

All look down the bar the same way; all turn back to their own drinks, or to the place where neither drink nor money rests, the same way; and all crane their heads to get a view of the open door every five minutes, for which the easy analogy would be attendance on a prophet, waiting for Elijah to pull back the empty chair and creak his

way into the awkward horrified silence that I'm sure would actually follow, if he happened to show up. But it's not like that. Surely you know by now.

If they're waiting, it's not upon a sign of their salvation, or for any redress either to the city or to themselves. They will not be healed, or taken care of, or missed when they go missing, or asked after when they occupy one of the houses of half-disappearance for which so many are already primed – prison, supermax or local, and then mandatory rehab clinic in the strip mall, next to the plasma-donation center, where many will go to pick up enough money to pay for their stay in rehab, dry veins on the installment plan, false answers to the “lab tech” who doesn't give a good goddamn about any part of this but returning to her house exactly eight hours after she left and getting paid at intervals of exactly two weeks, not that she should, not that I'm blaming her. Open sores. Do you have, or have you ever had, any serious disease of the immune system. Have you ever been a user of intravenous drugs (e.g. drugs injected with a needle). Do you currently require any implanted medical device, or do you expect to require one in the near future. Has the dataminers' dragnet ripped a password from exposed pacemaker stars.



And that's all I can remember. I've said everything I know. More than what I know. You've got it all. Dream, memory, seizure, protoplasm, cellular division of the pre-linguistic stars grouped into phoneme and then glyph by light's first pained tracheal spasm.

**And guess what?**

I don't want to guess.

**It doesn't match.**

The previous account?

**Any of the previous accounts. Jesus, you don't make this easy on yourself. Or on me. Or on anybody.**

I'm sorry. I've told you –

**“All you can remember,” right, you just said that, you always give me the same shit. But it doesn't match up, OK? You understand that?**

I guess I have to.

**Right. You do. So here's what's going to happen. I'm going to leave this cell, and then you're going to start talking again, and when you're doing, we're going to compare the transcripts again, and maybe, *maybe*, something will change for you, and maybe you'll get out of here, or maybe we'll decide that you're not even worth keeping in prison and put a gun to the back of your head and bury you in however deep a grave a few Marines can be convinced to dig. You got that?**

But ... yes.

**Good. I'm leaving now. Start talking.**

I'm sorry. Bye.

**Fuck off.**

I woke up in a northern – no, I'm sorry, in the northern half of a country, with the sea to the sea to the sea to my north, with my head facing north, maybe a southern country, I can't be sure, but certainly the sea was to the north ...