A
Thousand
Apparatus

an amputation fantasy in four parts

by
Julius Nil

for Yun Soo (who slept through it the first time) with boundless love

Part One:
Readying The World

1.

A cocked-headed monkey, cigarette in hand, introduces a tamarind sun. He stands just a foot beyond the reach of the incoming tide; its foamy forward edge casually advancing on the unassuming beach. The artist has increased the darkness of the blue paint as the ocean recedes into the distance and at the horizon, seemingly on the same vertical plane as the tamarind sun, the uppermost edge of the ocean is black. In two dimensions we see darkness and height as distance. As something moves farther away, it grows darker and moves higher on the canvas. Distance also equals time – the farther away in space, the farther away in time. So darker and higher can also mean longer ago.

But I'm not painting this, I'm writing it down. There is no correlation between space and time. The top of this page doesn't imply a great distance or a long time ago. It simply implies a beginning; an arbitrary jumping off point – which is all life is: a series of arbitrary jumpings off from a series of arbitrary jumping off points. We're inclined to seek significance in the jumps we make and in where and when we make them. But, mostly, that just amounts to wishful thinking. We want to believe we're here for a reason. That somewhere, there's a plan, a script, a point, a purpose. We want to believe.

2.

The placement of the painting, above the crib, is telling. The monkey had assumed guardianship of all that would happen in the room. With a sure and graceful hand, he would conduct events; arranging moments like the passages of a slowly rising symphony. Masterfully, he would cajole seeming climaxes into temporary plateaux, always allowing the present to anticipate a more fevered future. In retrospect, it seems as if the parents-to-be placed him there, above the crib, for just this purpose. Though, at the time, they couldn't have foreseen my arrival nor the

circumstances of my stay.

Perhaps the monkey knew. Perhaps in a series of late night visitations, in the midst of their deep and expectant sleep, he suggested to the parents this placement; this role as overseer. Undoubtedly, with whirling images of the baby pinballing across their recumbent synapses, the parents would have been susceptible to intervention; would have welcomed the monkey's suggestion.

The baby was still months off. The parents were out. I was on my back on the bed, exploring the 3 square foot canvas that is the monkey's universe. I was overcome with the urge to climb into the crib; to absorb – or be absorbed by – that tamarind sun. The room went black. Shingles slid from the roof, crashing to the pavement in a cascade of exploding tiles. The house opened up like a sardine tin, exposing the sky and the stars. These were wishing stars, hanging from the constellations like fruit, their only purpose: to fulfil my desires. But I have no desires. I've given them away for others to spend. I've endowed the world with deep pockets of desperate, implacable longing. I've funded great spectacles of yearning, dug immense wells of wanting, leaving nothing for myself.

3.

Villa Forni, in Montecchio, near Vicenza, is, in more than one way, a ghost. In her current dormancy, she is a ghost of what she was: home to a Sixteenth Century Vicenzan and his family. I keep a postcard photograph of her in my wallet. Her stoves haven't been fired in many years. The steps to her front door are chipped and crumbling, betraying the trustworthy footing they once provided. But she is also a ghost of the future which the architect, Andrea Palladio imagined for her. True, she still stands and, in great part, still bears a striking resemblance to her original and sustainable self, but, at the corners, her plaster and whitewash skin, intended to mask her brickwork skeleton, have been peeled off by time and weather. Around back, windows have been shuttered or even bricked up from the inside, leaving a pair of fatuous, sightless eyes to watch

over invisible children disappearing into overgrown grass. Four hundred and fifty years of history sit in the Villa's dilapidated lap. Great men and women can't make similar claims. Neither Napoleon nor Einstein, Martin Luther King nor Greta Garbo ever cradled four and a half centuries of daily human life on their delicates. Even the greatest of us hits the clay. Sixty years, seventy, maybe more….but to the clay we all return. A life span is dismally brief by the standards of brick and mortar. We are the world's passersby. We are the extras; the walk-ons. Our creations are our more permanent offspring. In lieu of Shakespeare we have the plays. In lieu of Da Vinci, the Mona Lisa. These are the ghosts of dead men. These are the wispy, ethereal feathers which fill our pillows: Caravaggio, Basho, Brahms.

4.

As I approached Denver from the east, I took careful note of the earth and the heavens. I'd been fooled once before on a trip here, taking in the gradations of cloud and sky, admiring the marbling of gray and black and blue and realizing, suddenly, that it was not the sky, but the mountains. The Rockies can suck the sky into the earth like that. I was resolved not to be caught off guard again. I drove with my eyes fixed to the horizon, scanning for the first indication of the earth's violent upheaval. I remember the long expanse of prairie, laying itself down, mile after mile, always appearing to be on the verge of running out; of culminating in some complete absence of continuation. But that abyss never materialized, the earth just kept rolling beneath my wheels like a treadmill. I remember how the land dipped a little, as if gathering its breath to exhale upward, how the sky darkened almost imperceptibly. I watched vigilantly for these signs, ready, at their first appearance, to shift my attention upwards, to receive the open-armed welcome of the mountains.

5.

The baby's parents are old friends, people whose kindness and consistency I've abused as the needs arise. Years ago I stayed with them in their two bedroom apartment in New Haven when my landlord in Boston, five months late in collecting my rent, had suddenly dismissed me from my

apartment. In 1991, in the midst of a singularly debilitating breakup, I'd called them night after night, maybe fifteen or eighteen nights straight, often at ungodly hours, so they could tell me I wasn't as awful as I felt.

In high school we had called him Syrup and I, alone, still did. Reality, like the meanings we make of our jumpings off, is arbitrary. To me, Syrup was Syrup and I wasn't inclined to revise my reality for the sake of his growing up. I imagine my choices since college have made as much sense to him as his have to me. His home is a common red-stained ranch house nestled in the scraggly brush of the Colorado foothills. I call it the Calypso, after the great, scientific, sea-faring vessel. He works as an editor at some outdoors publication whose name, is either Modern Hiker or Mountain Hiker.

Secretly, I thought of him as Captain of the Calypso. Cattle at neighboring ranches were dolphins, chopping through green thickets of waves as they dove. I took care to tread lightly on the sandy soil of Syrup's yard, clinging to my buoyancy. My respite here was not without its dangers – sinking to the bottom of the sea chief among them. I recognized the possibility of failure. But the Calypso offered highly sensitive apparatus for collecting and analyzing my data. And, in the event – at some point, my journey complete by only a fraction – that I would be faced with an indisputable refutation of my guiding thesis, the Calypso offered an attractive base from which to convalesce and reassess.

6.

Fortunately, I do not bear the burden of my plan, nor of the potential effects of its premature demise, alone. The paramecium has long been my confidant. Some time ago, I concluded that my efforts and engagements ought to be recorded but I couldn't trust the instability of tapes or disks and I have always detested longhand. So I settled on the idea that another should be my memory; the depository of my life in service of accountability. But who? Yes, I've already divulged his identity...but can you imagine how shocked I was to find his gifts so apt? He offered his

services without pomp and suggested we start immediately. As you can imagine, I was not quick to entrust my works to just anyone. Covertly, I subjected him to an impromptu interview.

"Lariat or lasso?" I asked, indicating a rope tied in a wide loop, hung on the service station wall. "Noose," he replied, nonchalantly. The job was his.

7.

The ridge of the monkey's nose is corporeal, delineating. To its right his starchy features dilute in the glare of that tremulous sun; to its left he is hewn and leather bound: the latter what we might hope for from the face of a monkey, the former something less. And what of that cigarette? We ascribe it to belligerence (the artist's, not the monkey's) rather than vice. But what if we're wrong? Maybe this monkey's sporting a sensational jones. Or perhaps he's in cahoots with that spooky, tamarind sun. Maybe it's the sun who was smoking, who handed the cigarette off, so as not to be caught when the painter arrived.

At night, I lay my head down upon this broken pediment, this monkey's nose pummelled by the boxing glove of god. A few glasses of bourbon transform his stone work into a feathery settlement for the widening and narrowing circles of my thoughts. Both Palladio's work and mine embody the essence of being human – the building and the tearing down; life and death. But I have resolved to even the balance. Creation should no longer be the great consumer of time and energy, while destruction is just a sudden blip followed by nothing. Traditionally, death is thought of as either the moment of life's expiration or the ongoing state that follows that moment. I was determined to reveal the truth: that ending is a process as gradual, as complex and consuming as beginning. Just as Palladio had taken his time building; just as Villa Forni had waited for her gilding, her dentils, her balustrades, now, with exceeding dedication and patience, the wild was reclaiming the space reigned-in by her walls.

8.

The initial thought had aspired to flash with the genius of revelation, but gently nudged instead. It would creep up on me in the early morning or the late afternoon and whisper – Indiscernibly, at first – in my ear. I thought of it as little more than a distraction until, one day, I learned of the death of Richard Blundt. When I studied philosophy with him at the College of the Hills, Blundt and I frequently came to ideological blows, often bringing classes of sixty students to a screeching halt, as we debated Hegelian dialectics or whether the Heisenberg principle had applications in philosophy. Nevertheless, I considered him a man of significant insight and conviction. He was that rare variety of professor who appeared, at all times, aware of his mission: to impart wisdom, to enlighten, to enrich. His life and work were certainly worth more than three column inches in the New York Times obituaries. I tied myself in knots over the fact that no matter how much a man ventures to give of himself, even in a life devoted to giving, it is the world's prerogative to take nothing. I resolved to devise a more substantive method; to make the difference that Blundt could not.

The thought needed no pyrotechnics to sell its genius. The core of its meaning is so solid as to be utterly indispensable, even if presented by wisps of smoke blown in on breezes at night. As it was, it came one unusually warm April evening, on the back of the nearly-full moon reflected off the lazy current of the Charles River.

9.

Nil. A crow calls this name I share with nothing. My presence, like my absent namesake, has often been described in the negative. I can leave a room more full than I found it – simply for having departed. As a child, I specialized in separating spiders from their legs. This was not unusual, except that I pushed the experiment to abnormal extremes, removing leg after leg after twitching leg, finally piercing and plucking at the dismembered puck of a body. I wanted to know where, in the spider, lay the spider. What distinguished corpus from essence? How much of it could you take away before it ceased to be a spider; before it became nil? And, though I never

found out how much, I did find that, in every case, at some point, sooner or later, the spider did, in fact, cease to be.

10.

I hadn't come to the Calypso arbitrarily. As a scientific vessel, it was the only appropriate location for the execution of my plan. And the care the parents could and (I was confident) *would* provide was essential. But, more importantly, Syrup was the only man I knew who might understand my motives and who possessed the skills and the credibility (an attribute the otherwise-worthy paramecium lacked) to successfully communicate my message to the world. I say might because the Syrup I once knew, the man who walked with me through the hostile terrain at the inception of my journey, and the Syrup I knew now, the man who Captained the Calypso, were like identical twins born to different mothers. What I had come to expect from the earlier version was a matter of pure conjecture with the later. In any case, my certainty of his worthiness was highly uncertain; my trust more of a wager than a contract. Nevertheless, even in the face of a human failure, the Calypso's environment would provide a number of elements key to the successful pursuit of my plan.

If Syrup was a suspect partner in the progression from a priori to a posteriori, the paramecium was not. I gained his acquaintance in the Men's room at the Emperor Service Station near the Cascade River estuary on the Oregon coast in June of 1995. I was travelling aimlessly in a blue '88 Honda Civic DL which didn't mind spending the night at rest stops tucked between tractor-trailers ten times its size. Needless to say, I didn't take the paramecium at his word right off the bat. In fact, I hadn't yet become fully aware of the strapping, young insistence growing within me. But the paramecium knew it was there. He liked what he saw and knew he could help. And, yes, the possibility of my being a dupe in what was, essentially, his plan, has uneasily occurred to me. But that hardly seems to matter now. What's done is done. And whether by my design or his, whether by well-reasoned pragmatism or by foolish yearning, I've arrived at this place (if you can call it that) and have become my transformation. I have not abandoned the hope that my

cataclysm will take hold. I await evidence of my true and lasting contribution (with all attendant admiration and love).

11.

The paramecium spoke to me of the monkey. He suggested we adopt the monkey as a symbol – a mascot, if you will – for our efforts. There he is, cigarette in hand, the most unnatural combination of the raw and the processed. His smoking, seen as a gesture, is a sacrifice of the essence of his monkeyhood; the most un-monkeyish of endeavors. In his sacrifice some are tipped to their own folly. Smokers, confronted with the smoking monkey, have been known to exclaim, a burning cigarette in their own outstretched hand: "What does he think he's doing?" Ignorance, it turns out, is not, after all, bliss. Bliss can't save us anyway. "We need to see ourselves with someone else's eyes," said the paramecium, "in order to gain some perspective on our progress. We need to see through the eyes of a creature who is, at once, both completely distant and, yet, close enough to care. And those eyes belong to that very monkey."

12.

July 12, 1996: one year, one month and one day after meeting the paramecium. The weather in Cavendish, TX was spectacular. Not a wisp of cloud. The weary sun gently heating the air. I knew what daggers she was capable of and was thankful for the reprieve.

It was nearly flat; nearly two-dimensional. Its life spilled out around it on the deck of the flat bed pick up. The driver, a 50-ish man in camouflage coveralls and a three day growth of beard, walked toward the cashier, digging his wallet from an internal pocket. He appeared to have hit the deer, not with one of the rifles suspended in the gun rack in the back of the truck's cab, but with the truck itself. It had probably darted out of some roadside brush. The driver, drowsy and, perhaps a little drunk, had instinctually swerved to avoid it, but like two office workers rounding the same cubicle corner, the driver's swerve had been mirrored by the deer. The two, in unison, probably made a second move; an adjustment, jogging left this time. But at 50 miles an hour,

that’s all the dancing they’d had time for. By the looks of it, the deer didn't offer much resistance. Later, I suppose, he took it to the taxidermist just the same. A trophy's a trophy. Maybe he even served venison steaks later that month.

I sometimes wonder if I've confused the monkey and the image of the deer. Which one is the symbol of my plan? The willing accomplice monkey, dragging himself toward the precipice? Or the victim deer, blind and unwitting; reverting instantly from sinewy topography to a canvas of bloody schematics? Am I bits of both? Did I have a say in how the events of recent months played out? Did I choose my path or did a complex series of events – emotional, developmental, professional, romantic, philosophical – ordain my decision? Might I have had a different life if I’d had a different job or different parents; if I’d eaten more leafy greens or masturbated less? Would my final days have been spent, some 40 years from now, in a home for the elderly, taking pottery classes and sipping apple soda through a bendy straw? Might I have avoided this supine eternity? I wonder if I can have an impact on the regard in which I'm held. I long for guidance, but find none. The paramecium, prodded me along with simple encouragements. It is as if he feared that discussing the totality of the plan in earnest might trigger a change of heart. I, alone, was capable of determining the parameters and controls of my experiment. I, alone, could alter the outcome. I, alone, am responsible for the fate of my spider. Because I, alone, am the spider.

13.

Mimi suspected something from the start. I discovered her, on more than one occasion, going through my dresser drawers or stooping to peer beneath my bed. Mimi had been a difficult girl to get to know when Syrup and I first made her acquaintance outside of a laundromat just off campus. She was having a cigarette, waiting for her load to dry and I asked her if she had change for the machines. She pointed me to a machine in the corner of the shop which I knew existed and which Syrup and I had made a policy of ignoring in order to ask pretty girls for change. For some reason (which, to this day, I've yet to comprehend) Syrup chose to approach Mimi and divulge the strategy and insincerity of our plan. Of course, he laid the principal responsibility for its

device and execution on me – a tactic which hurt me far less (it was understood that, in the midst of a play for a girl, any unwanted attributes or actions could be ascribed to the other one without implication) than the letting of our cat out of its bag.

Syrup's instincts had never served him particularly well with women. But whatever led him to believe that the confessional approach would have an effect on Mimi, was dead on. She was a fortress locked to all comers and (I'm convinced) would have remained so had he or I taken any other tack. And although his eventual ascension required another six months and the thorough application of all Syrup's wiles, his opening gambit (despite its betrayal) was a stroke of genius.

14.

Nil. What possibilities – and instabilities – my name contains. The nicknames came easily to childhood antagonists: "Pill;" "Dill;" – (as in pickle) "Nail" (as in, “I’m gonna nail you.”) But what amuses me now is how children, oblivious to so much, miss the bigger, deeper, more substantive jokes that life plays on us, quite apart from any one’s explicit intentions. There wasn’t a single child on any single playground in any far flung corner of the globe who could deride me more significantly than genealogy and fate already had. I was already Nil.

When the paramecium arrived, he was genuinely pleased by the fortuitous collision of name and destiny. He took the coincidence as confirmation.

15.

The perennial setbacks to my plan were the cause of great dismay. But, in retrospect, I suspect they made my resolve the stronger. Because on July the 12th, 1996 at Cavendish, Texas, with no particular forethought, I slammed the ring finger of my left hand in the driver's side door of my blue, 1988 Honda Civic DL, severing the finger completely at the third knuckle. I did not cry out. I did not seek medical attention. Calmly, I dressed the wound in the t-shirt I wore for basketball and

collected the finger in a cassette tape case.

Two days later, the wound not healing, I drove to the emergency room. The doctor was incredulous that I hadn't come sooner.

- "Bacteria have had two days to set up shop," he said, "If we suture it now, we'll be trapping them in there. We'll be risking a massive infection."

I had no intention of surrendering my flesh to bacteria. When I inquired about the possibility of disinfecting the wound prior to closing it, he was dismissive.

- "We'd have to cut off your hand and start with a fresh wound. We're going to have to put our faith in antibiotics."

The following night I removed my left hand with a mitre saw. Again I dressed the wound as best I could and stashed the severed extremity - this time in a 20 ounce mayonnaise jar filled with formaldehyde. Then I drove myself to the hospital. Fortunately, my car is an automatic. Unfortunately, the same doctor was on duty. After inquiring frantically after the lost hand and finally being convinced that the hand had been mangled beyond recovery, he sutured the wound and arranged for me to speak with a member of the hospital's psychiatric staff.

16.

At the rear of Villa Forni, three conifers stand erect like a trio of mustached sentries. The villa itself divides in four, leaving one section (each marked by a window) treeless. The grass is thick and yellow and wild; and licks at the conifers lower branches like a litter of suckling pups. In the 1540's, when Palladio built the Villa for Girolamo Forni, the pines were not there. Perhaps Palladio built the Villa in anticipation of their arrival. Perhaps the trees came because he called them.

17.

My arrival at the Calypso was part of my psychiatrist's prescription. (Or so he thought). During our sessions, I spoke so glowingly of the Calypso and of Syrup and Mimi as to position it as both retreat and elixir. I had every intention of ending up there. So, with a feigned naivete and a slow and subtle development, I convinced the good doctor of the suitability of the place and of his own good sense for having thought of it.

That there was a new life expected at the Calypso made it no less appealing. The crossing of destinies seemed appropriate. In what was soon to be the baby's room – late at night, I would often catch glinting images in the colors and shapes of the monkey and the sun, hung on the wall opposite my bed. The headlights of a passing car on the street below would transform the painting's simple imagery into a shifting slate of continents, some recognizable as, for instance, Africa or North America, others, new and startling amalgams of Antarctica and Asia or Australia and Europe. In matters of seconds, the world performed for me like a time lapse ballet. The past, present and future of the Earth's land masses unfolded for me with prescient exactitude. And, I must say, its meaning was not lost on me.

On more peaceful evenings, bereft of traffic, the moon would author a more patient melodrama, reversing natural reality, assuming dominance by illuminating, for once, the sun, which threatened to crown the monkey as the once and future Solar King. Depending on the moon's phase and the frequency and patterns of the passing clouds, the acrylic, tamarind disc might be transformed into a Russian Cossack, sword in hand, maligning a thatched-roof cottage. On stormy nights, I was introduced to a gray-green python intent on spiraling around the invisible branch of a great leaning tree rooted beyond the walls of my room, beyond the Calypso itself. Once, shortly after my arrival, a hurried cold front scurried an escort of clouds across the aperture of the bedroom's lone window, causing the monkey to mouth the words to the Star Spangled Banner, occasionally replacing words like "hailed" with "smelled" and "rocket's red glare" with "fagots beware."

18.

- "I've had a bit of an accident. Would it be alright if I came out and stayed with you guys for a little while?"
- "What's happened, Nil? Are you ok?"
- "Yeah. I'm ok. I just need a place to stay for a little while. My doctor seems to think you and Syrup are the perfect prescription."
- "Why? What can we do for you?"
- "He just figures you'll be a calming influence. And, y'know, maybe you can look after me until I heal up."
- "Nil, what have you done to yourself? Are you sure you're ok?"
- "Yeah, Mimi. I'm sure."

When I arrived at the Calypso I let myself in and tracked Mimi down. She was upstairs, in a pair of white overalls, attempting to affix a wallpaper of pink, yellow, and green flying pigs to the baby's room wall. I had been standing in the doorway for a couple of minutes before she noticed me. She wasn't startled – it took a lot to rattle Mimi – but she was annoyed (which didn't take much).

- "Nil," she said, resigned to the fact. And then, unfortunately, "Could you give me a hand?"
- "Gave at the office," I said, holding up my absence of a hand.

That rattled her.

I guess rattling a pregnant woman on a ladder is not a very smart thing to do. Because before I got any sympathy or inquiries, I got a stern rebuke for my presentation. As a result, my approach with Syrup was significantly more subtle.

- "What's going on with you, Nil?"
- "Not much. You know, just trying to make my way in the world."
- "You cut your fucking hand off, Nil. What's that about?"
- "It was an accident. What the hell do you think? I'm gonna chop off my hand for kicks?"

I had to be patient. If I told him what I had in mind right off, he'd probably dismiss it or, worse yet, me. I had to ease him into it.

- "The Doctor..what's his name...Schaefer, Sheefer, whatever...he called us before you got here. He said you cut off a finger first and then your hand. Is that just a freak coincidence or what?"
- "Actually, no. It's a little tricky using a chop saw with only nine fingers."
- "Then why were you using it?"
- "Life goes on. I had things to do."
- "Like what? What was so god-damned important that you couldn't wait a few weeks until you at least got the bandages off your hand?'
- "I was building your baby a crib."

That shut him up.

19.

That they put me up in the baby's room struck me as significant. (Not that it was unusual at that time for even the smallest convergences to suggest disproportionate import). The trappings of the room acted as signposts for the portion of the journey I undertook aboard the Calypso. The mobile, for instance, hung above the crib, monotonously circling the anticipated baby like some brightly colored opposite of carrion. The figures - exaggerated elephants and lions and seals,

distended in seemingly random directions - guarded the throne of the incoming King or Queen (Syrup and Mimi hadn't wanted to know which) against any possible forgeries or prematurities. Sometimes, it seemed to me, their purpose was to drag this child; this possibility, into being. The vague, knowing expression at the corner of each of their mouths, turned slightly upwards towards a smile, was evidence of their sentience. This, I reasoned, was as certain a validation of my plan as I was likely to receive. If the suspended menagerie could oversee the transformation of promise to flesh, then, surely, the paramecium and I could handle the reverse.

The crib, itself, also seemed a soft encouragement, intended, as it was, for the nurturing confinement of a creature with so much power and so much potential, yet so incapable of tending to its own most vital functions. During the final stages of my plan, I would be just such a creature, quite possibly determining the pace and activities of millions of lives the way a baby does its parents', while unable to position myself on a toilet or bring food to my mouth or walk to the window or pick up the phone. Others would have to come to me, tend to me, interpret my extollments, become partners in my existence. What a merging of form and function I would become!

20.

The paramecium woke me up one morning at half-past five. He thought it a good idea we leave the Calypso. I thought it a good idea to go back to bed.

- "I'm quite serious about this," he said.
- "Look, now is not the time."
- "Au contraire, my woozy, one-handed friend, now is precisely the time. You know as well as I do, that if you try to leave in broad daylight, that ingrate and his brooding mound of a wife will submit you to the fucking Spanish Inquisition. What's worse, they'd probably try to keep you here against your wishes."
- "Who says it's against my wishes?"

- "Well it damn well ought to be. That meddling mullet-head can't be trusted."
- "Syrup? Yes he can. He may not sign on for the journey, but I'm sure he won't interfere. He's a good friend."
- "No, of course not. Why would he? Most people, upon learning of a friend's plan to dismember himself for the good of mankind, would probably throw a party, give him a new set of steak knives, and step aside so the fun can begin."
- "Maybe you're right. But I haven't told Syrup anything yet. And I won't until I know I can trust him."
- "Trust me. What do you need him for?"
- "We've been through this. I need someone to communicate my deeds to people. If people don't understand my motivations, this whole thing will be nothing more than a slow motion suicide. Besides, you lack the motor skills to change my bandages."

21.

One morning, I woke to find the sky black and the air howling. The daisy-flecked curtains flailed as the wind cascaded through the open window. The entire house bowed and curtsied to the storm's thunderous applause. I struggled to rise to my feet, claim my balance and stumble to the window. Enormous waves, six or seven men high, lashed the prow of the Calypso. Amidst the tumult, I could hear the scurry of feet on the deck. Syrup yowled instructions to batten the shutters, to secure the instruments. I was stricken with a debilitating fatalism: the Calypso was going down and we three with it. Though I couldn't prevent or even forestall the inevitable, I was determined not to surrender alone. I set out to find Syrup and Mimi; to share with them our final, sodden moments.

The pitching of the vessel made walking nearly impossible, so I resorted to hands and knees. I turned left in the hallway, but a breach in the starboard was committing water to the corridor at an alarming rate. To the right was the master bedroom and I harbored some hope of finding them there. The door would not budge. Undoubtedly some piece of furniture had shimmied out in front

of it. I regained my feet and lowered my shoulder into the door with full force. It sizzled with a minor crack, but remained firmly moored. I delivered another blow. Inside I could hear Syrup desperately urging me on. Another whack. And another. And finally the wood tore loose from its hinges, swinging and twisting and toppling into the room.

The storm ended suddenly when the door gave in, revealing Syrup and the pregnant Mimi in full coital disarray; Mimi clambering to gather a sheet around herself, Syrup turning toward me like a compass swinging North and bellowing.

22.

I was twenty-six when I met Gabrielle in line at the DMV. She was twenty-one and replacing a license she'd lost. For nearly an hour we'd occupied adjacent places in the slowly advancing army of license replacers and renewers. At various junctures a DMV employee would thin our ranks by instructing "road tests" to follow the blue line or "those applying for state ID's" to follow the green. Each time new instructions were delivered, I silently prayed that Gabrielle would continue to follow my line (the red one). Finally, after mulling the possibilities, deciding first on one approach, then rejecting it as too obvious, adopting a second, subtler strategy, deeming the second too subtle, and re-claiming the original idea, I found myself suddenly, inexplicably coughing up three words that I hadn't even considered: "Replacing or renewing?" I asked, knowing immediately that I'd stumbled on perfection. The question was so natural and appropriate as to arouse no suspicion. Yet it promised an answer that was bound to lead to further questions, exchanges of driver's license experiences, and personal divulgings. In short, I struck up a conversation with the only pretty girl in the entire Department of Motor Vehicles. And by so doing, had quite satisfied myself.

But, as she happily related her lost license story; how she'd been invited to a friend of a friend's house over the weekend – a house in the country just off a beautiful, tree-canopied lake – and how they'd arrived late on a Friday, had a light supper and sat on the porch taking in the stars

before turning in around midnight; and how they'd gotten up early the next morning to the bright sun and the cool, fresh air and walked barefoot to the lake where the friend's friend kept a small motor boat for water skiing – she'd never been before, but she was so excited to try (so excited, in fact, that she'd forgotten to take her money and her license out of her shorts' pocket and had promptly deposited both in the lake at first tumble); as she casually introduced me to her life, my satisfaction went away. It fled. Like a dog after a sharp and sudden, violent blow, it cowered and whimpered and headed for cover. And before I was even fully aware of its departure, I began to wrestle with the recognition of the creature presently taking its place. Things could not have been worse. My cool, fulfilling satisfaction had been replaced by a scalding, furtive desire. I was doomed.

Why her? She was lovely - her manner, her face, her legs. I can sometimes still feel her skin beneath my fingers as I stroke the vacant air. She tingled with an electric warmth. I am a man and, as such, seek in women the obverse of what I perceive to be my malest attributes. I may be educated, modern, even enlightened, but I am powerless to overcome the primal longing to possess something sweet and soft and pure. The inescapable magnetism that draws me to girls—for it is, in fact, the *girlishness* in even the most mature women to which I am attracted—is not sexual in nature, or at least not predominantly sexual. It is a manifestation of a deep yearning for tenderness. I suspect all men are possessed of this yearning, some being simply more equipped to deny or hide it. But it surfaces, on occasion, in all but the most hardened – at the birth of a child, say, or the retirement of a beloved athlete. Otis Redding's heart breaking ballad "Try A little Tenderness" speaks directly to this yearning. And, I for one, can't hear the song, what with its dervishesque organ revving the song's climax to a fervored pique – ecstatic sexuality in service of an anti-sexual plea – without a clench rising in my throat and, frequently, a tear. Before we left the DMV I'd managed to convince her to have a cup of coffee with me. I waited for her as she sat for the digital camera, watching how she gently adjusted her bangs and engineered her posture. As the photographer fixed the camera's lens upon her gaze, it was as if Gabrielle was capturing the camera and not the other way around. I sat, mesmerized by the command of her

countenance. The hard, ugly architecture of the DMV; its cold, gray counters, its industrial floors and ceilings, the beaten stanchions and ropes of its corridor and lobby, the building's very utility, all turned wistful and compliant in her tender bask.

Even then I'd had my fair share of experience with women. I'd always managed, despite lacking the aggressive tactics or full-frontal, bullshit charm of other men, to attract female company. And the women I attracted were often beautiful and smart, often successful or ambitious, worldly and, sometimes, wild. But almost immediately - around fourteen, when I'd first been talked into the shower by my then-fifteen-year-old-girlfirend – I knew that what I sought in a physical relationship was a very delicate balance. The robustly sexual girls, although they inspired a not-wholly-uncompelling flare of carnal curiosity in me, soon wore out their individual and collective welcomes. I came to realize that, without exception, these women had arrived at their appetites not by means of their own sexual need, but by a desire to please or to accommodate or to compensate. They were deeply unhealthy and sadly inadequate when it came to the acts of love that didn't rely on unusual flexibility or muscle control. By and large they were bad kissers – an unforgivable shortcoming.

On the other hand, the women with whom I've shared the deepest emotional intimacy; who proved themselves capable of incalculable trust and sympathy (attributes I seem to test in my partners), routinely displayed little or no sustained interest in a sexual, or even sensual, life. For me, the touch of a woman's fingers gently stroking the small of my back or the crest of my shoulder; or, equally, the sensation of running my prostrate hand along her leg or through her hair, is the truest experience of joy and fulfillment I am capable of experiencing. I have nothing against orgasms, but their finality and their aftermath dissipate their power. A caress whether given or received, suggests the possibility of endlessness.

So we went for coffee, even though I don't drink it – which I didn't feel like admitting after initiating the activity – and I nursed a latte, consuming only two or three sips. She sat on one side of the

little cafe table and I on the other. I think I might have had a little piece of cake.

23.

Trouble comes in different forms, more or less recognizable. But when trouble leaves it's always the same and always unmistakable. It could be a tactic of some merit to hold on to one's troubles, to never let them leave. In so doing, one would hold their true identity at bay. One would never be absolutely sure that it was, in fact, trouble which had dropped by. Sitting there on the couch, it's muddy feet sprawled across the coffee table, trouble would simply be another current guest in one's life, something to be hosted courteously as a matter of etiquette. In so doing, one might make a simple fact of trouble and not allow it to blossom into evidence of one's failings and unfulfilled desires. It might, in fact, be best of all to take trouble to bed, to make love to it repeatedly through the night, to wake up and make it breakfast. In so doing, trouble might slowly or suddenly merge with love, become indistinguishable from it, maybe even take its place. Maybe.

24.

Aboard the Calypso, the morning after the storm, I heard Mimi and Syrup through the wall.

- "Cyril, there is nothing we can do for him. He needs professional care."
- "He had professional care and they told him to come here."

The paramecium leapt upon this opportunity to renew his jealous appeals.

- "We should go someplace else."
- "Like where?"
- "I don't know, a bigger market. A media center."
- "We could go to L.A.," I suggested, "I could pitch my plan to the networks. Maybe they could turn it into a series. Every week I could lose another body part. How many

weeks in a T.V. season anyway?"

- "I'm serious, Nil. I don't think this is the right place for us."
- "Us!? How could any place be the right place for us, for god's sake? Does it ever occur to you how absurd this whole thing is? We're living out a second-rate buddy movie starring a paramecium and a man bent on dismembering himself. How could there possibly be a right place for us? We make no sense. This whole god-damned story makes no sense!"
- "Alright, forget it. This talk is getting to you. You've got to stay focused. Don't forget the seriousness of what you're doing."

He never mentioned leaving the Calypso again.

25.

The speed of light: 186,000 miles per second. The speed of silence is faster. How do I know? Because I can turn light off and reach darkness; light can be overtaken. But silence? No. I can not turn it off. I can not overtake it. Its enormous hands circle my head, clawing relentlessly, burrowing voraciously into my tender skull. They withdraw, but never leave completely. Can you imagine silence raining constantly down upon you? Drenching you in sheets of numbness? Separating you from people and memories and experiences and joy? No, I'm sure you can't. That is what makes my silence so devastating. It is mine and no one else's. No one can know what it sounds like to me. When I say to someone, a friend, perhaps, or an acquaintance, "I am in such pain." When I slosh those words out beyond the brim of my cup, hoping desperately that the one beside me might catch my errant splash gently on his tongue, shelter it in the haven of his mouth, and, finally, swallow it so as to truly make it his own, to feel it as completely as I do, I am unfailingly betrayed. "Oh, it can't be that bad," or "Things'll look up. Trust me, you'll see," or "Shit, Nil. You're so fucking dramatic." The silence: blacker than the most starless night, more expansive than all of space, more endless than time. This is my silence and mine alone. Only an "I love you" can disrupt it. But I've given up hope of such a reprieve. To love me, one would need

to share my silence. Yet no one can. And even if they could, it would be too much for me to ask of them. I have absorbed its blows. No one else should have to.

26.

Villa Forni is a jealous mistress. From her eternal resting place on a slight blush of hill near Montecchio she curses me. Her breath, reeking of garlic and red wine halfway to vinegar, skims the waves of the Atlantic and strafes two thirds the width of the North American continent just to curse in my ear. She hates the Calypso does Villa Forni. She derides its building methods, its facile asymmetry, its undistinguished bloodlines. I point out that her own bloodlines are in dispute; that, though she has been attributed to Palladio for years, many now believe she was built by a student or admirer or, worse yet, a plagiarist. This, as you can imagine, makes the Villa furious.

She speaks to me when I lie awake at night in my bed in the baby's room. She points to the monkey and says,

- "Look at that rat, you gonna trust him?"
- "It's a monkey," I say.
- "Species, smecies. He's a rat. And that other friend of yours…he's a maggot."
- "He's a paramecium."
- "Paramecium. Your parents must be proud."
- "Listen Forni," I say reminding her of her place in my Pantheon of Beauty, "you can be replaced."
- "It seems I already have been. And by that split level monstrosity you absurdly call Calypso. I just hope you're detention doesn't last the full seven years."
- "Seven years?"
- "Calypso…the nymph who detained Odysseus. Please tell me you've read Homer. Petrarch? Dante? Milton? How about John LeCarré? Anyway, the detention lasted seven years."

- “I’m not being detained. I’m here by choice. The Calypso offers a great many advantages.”
- “But has she my eyes?”

27.

The throbbing pain which had taken the place of my left hand had not abated by the time Syrup and Mimi threw their annual summer party. They converted the oceanic yard into a combination barbecue pit and volleyball court. Friends from work and couples they’d met at Lamaze mingled over grilled pork and portabellos and casually batted a disenchanted ball back and forth across a net. Drinking was restricted to grenache and, out of deference to those with child and, therefore, on the temporary wagon, kept to a respectful minimum. This did not suit me. I retired to a safe haven amidst a low thicket of wild blackberries behind the tool shed and struck up a conversation with a bottle of gin. We discussed the rights of the unborn before moving on to other pressing matters of the day: nuclear disarmament, racial unrest, etc. – when a certain Dr. Kantor, to whom I’d been introduced an hour or so before, reintroduced himself.

- “I had you pegged. When you turned up missing, I figured you had a bead on the booze.”
- “Like some?” I offered.
- “Don’t mind if I do. Say, what happened to your hand.”
- “I lost it,” I said.
- “It’ll turn up.”
- “What kind of doctor are you?”
- “Orthopedist. Specialize in spinal trauma.”
- “You must have access to some powerful pain killers.”
- “Hand giving you trouble?”
- “Hurts like a mother fucker.”

- “Well, I’ve got some doozies. Y’ever tried morphine?”
- “Can’t say I have.”

But I couldn’t say it for long. Kantor had a needle in my arm later that very afternoon. Soon, excursions aboard the SS Morphine became my favorite way to spend a lazy summer’s afternoon.

At first, I dosed only for pain. But, as the pain dissolved, I looked to the syringe for distraction from the stillness of the summer air. The morphine passed over me like an intravenous breeze and quenched my thirst like lemonade. The paramecium, though somewhat concerned by the loosening effect the morphine had on my grip on reality, nonetheless foresaw the lubricating effects the drug might have in facilitating the next episode of our program. He took to referring to shooting up as “greasing the wheels.” And he called Kantor “Dr. Spock,” because, as the paramecium put it, “he’s helping to raise our baby.”

28.

It was during the period of my morphine predilection that Syrup and I discovered a latent commonality. One night after Mimi had gone to bed, Syrup and I sat on the poop deck (he simply called it the deck) sipping the mountain flowers from the air and single malt Scotch from a pair of cut-glass tumblers. Since my arrival, I’d made a habit of avoiding serious conversation with my old friend. I harbored a private disappointment in many of the choices Syrup had made in his life and, with the fate of my plan contingent upon his good will, didn’t wish to create any friction between us. In the parlance of seafaring, I didn’t want to “rock the boat.” But, subconsciously, I think I also feared I might inadvertently divulge. Though the paramecium had been a trusted confidant, I believe that, at that time, I had developed a deep craving for human understanding. I needed another person to validate the worthiness of my endeavor, to react to my intentions the way I hoped the world would someday react to my accomplishments. I didn’t dare speak with Syrup about life and ambition and meaning, for the fear I might let something slip. It was surely

too soon for that. As they say: “loose lips sink ships.”

But that night on the poop deck, whether by dint of drink or fraternity, I let my guard down. We spoke of what we had been and of what we had become. And I asked that most dangerous question:

- “Are you happy?”

He said that, by and large, he was. He loved Mimi resolutely and looked forward with the most joyful expectancy to the birth of their child. He said that sometimes, when alone in a quiet room, he could feel his heart actually swell. He said it was as if his heart was reaching out to the new baby, trying to meet it half way, to accept a portion of its journey’s burden. He said that if it would do his son or daughter even the slightest good, he would, without a second thought, rip that heart from his very own chest and lay it at the new baby’s tiny feet.

- “I can’t explain to you, Nil, how it feels to love something so much that you would disembowel yourself for it; tear yourself limb from limb. You can’t imagine it.”
- “No,” I said, looking away, lying to the stars, “I can’t.”

29.

At dusk in the forest, shadows cross boundaries. The cast of a towering Douglas Fir traverses the bed of its own discarded needles and climbs the torso of the lone man within its reach. The conical finality of its farthest point lands squarely on the tip of his nose, designating this man as the subject of its dreams.

- “You believe you are observing me; that your role here tonight is active and mine passive. But I say the reverse is true.”

The man tries to speak, but can not.

- “I say that the forest is my domain and that at night, dormancy is imposed on you by sleep, whereas I am dormant always. You are in my domain, approximating my dormancy. You are a specter, a shadow. I am substance. I am absolute.”

The man tries to run, but can not. It begins to rain. The tree imbibes the showers with wild abandon, becoming drunk and defiant.

- “Now who defines whom!? Does the rain fall *on* you or *for* you? Do you take it in or fend it off? If it falls for forty days, who will drown? You and your petulant disregard for everything beyond your overcoat, or me who shelters the fauna from the sun and nests the swallows in my hair? Who will drown when the water rises only to my lowest limb? Who, I ask, you? Who!?

The man tries to scream, but the rising water floods his open mouth and rushes into his lungs. He struggles ineffectively to free his feet from the earth. As the last rays of the setting sun, refracted through the water, recede beyond the forest’s most distant pine, he casts his eyes to the ground. His legs, now one, united as a single trunk, are cast in bark which, as his eyes flicker to a close, is crossing his groin on its way to his lumbering mid-section. Before long everything is black. Is it sleep or death or the advancing bark?

30.

One Wednesday, prior to removing what remained of my left arm, I decided to go to Denver. I had Syrup drop me at the local bus station, a converted one story house on the corner of Rural Route 12 and an unpaved road known locally as “Feather’s Dirt,” after, Deacon Feather, the farmer who once owned the land to either side. The ride into the city rambled through the low hills which preface the Rockies to the east. The bus was full. A dozen or so people stood in the aisle,

clinging to the metal seat frames or overhead straps. As the bus turned left, they swayed to the right like the oversized spine of some enormous wheeled beast. When the bus slowed, they uniformly angled themselves forward, all at the same degree, all subject to the same strain. A woman stood to my left moored fiercely to the seat in front of me; her knuckles white with the effort. She was small, maybe 5'2" and thin. Her wrist, functioning like a little hinge, couldn't have been much bigger across than two of my fingers. I glanced up at her. Her hair was short and perfectly straight. So unlike my own hair. Mine, like that of most of my people, is wavy, coarse and petulant. Hers fell toward the ground as if an illustration of gravity; each strand perfectly parallel to the next and the last, so plain; so exotic. Her features were unassuming. Her nose was small, her lips fleshy and pale. Her eyes stared through the bodies of those in front of her, seeming to inquire of something out ahead of us, in the road before the bus, or further off, at the horizon. It was as if she saw something the rest of us did not. But, in return, she seemed to be unaware of a great deal going on within feet of her. When a man wished to move past her, up the aisle, toward the door, as his stop approached, he had to beg her pardon three times before she absently shifted her slight torso to allow him by.

I tried to fix my gaze on some absent point out the window of the bus, but telephone poles and farmhouses periodically galloped through my field of vision, dragging my attention back to the mundane real-ness of the bus and the passengers. I noticed her hand again, fixed with singular purpose to the curved metallic tube only inches from my face. So close I could have licked it. And I quite nearly did. I made no effort to resist the sways of motion which lured my mouth closer to her fingers and her pasty wrist. I imagined what might ensue if I were to issue my moistened tongue from its perennial enclave and gently run it from the base of her palm, tracing the contour of her sinewy forearm, culminating at the crook of her elbow where the apple bough ended and her lime green sweater sleeve began. I thought of her hand releasing the metal bar and resting, open, against the side of my face; softly tracing the slope of my cheekbone, as her detached gaze suddenly regained purpose, returning my longing. I even imagined her hand probing my torso in a southerly flow which came to a slow and satisfied stop in the valley of my lap. In thirty-

five minutes I seduced and won the young woman. I made her mine and gave myself in full to her. We lived a life others chase in vain. We became intimate in every sense of the word, careful to introduce fresh nuances as familiarity threatened to breed discontent. I championed her virtues and she ignored my failings. We were one and two equally and so fulfilled. I made a half-hour life with this fragile, preoccupied stranger and she never knew. We had been – as I had been with so many other women I'd seen in movie theaters and crowded city squares, on elevators and in restaurants – absolutely perfect together.

31.

As a child I spent a great deal of time in an enormous sandbox my father had built at the bottom of a great hill in our backyard. I remember the sandbox as an endless desert, seemingly boundless in all directions. In fact, it must have been no more than twenty feet square, containing in one corner, a small jungle gym in the form of a brightly colored geodesic dome. My parents had populated my private Sahara with various metal trucks and plastic pales and shovels. But my favorite plaything, from the time I could stand until my early-teens, was a gilded Roman chariot made of wood, so exacting in detail that all it lacked to be fully functional was a horse. I helmed the elaborate toy in a multitude of battles, slaying rampaging invaders from the North and enslaving the uncivilized peoples to the South and West. But it was our neighbors to the East, the D'Agostinos, who proved to be my most dangerous adversaries. Paul, two years my senior, ritually humiliated me in games of strength and tests of cunning. On the rare occasion that I would best him, he would, in the retelling, reverse our fortunes, forcing reality to conform to his will. Even my closest friends were inclined to believe him, his domination of me having been so complete. To make matters worse, his little sister, Laurel, also abused me with regularity. She knew that any attempt, on my part, to dispel her by force would bring swift and unrelenting retribution form her kin and that, as a result, I was essentially defenseless.

32.

At college I studied philosophy, but could never get past the fact that most well-expressed ontologies were merely self-justifying systems of reason with no practical application. The only ethical system of any value or truth is the Golden Rule: *do unto others as you would have them do unto you*. It originates with the self and is applied relative to the self (the primacy of the self being the only unbending human truth). Ayn Rand, Machiavelli, Nietzsche notwithstanding, our actions – positive or negative – can not be justified. We are simply biological freaks; the impossible result of a random series of fantastic mutations. That we can question our own existence is an unintended and extremely useless by-product of the evolution which enabled us to dominate all the other species of the earth. The irony of the fact that my own life is proceeding, at present, under the guidance of a paramecium and a painting of a monkey is not lost on me. On the contrary, it bolsters my conviction that the human faculties for so-called reason, are squirrely, at best, and downright corrupt, at worst. Just don't do anything stupid. Don't hurt another man if you don't want him hurting you back. Try to keep your organs inside your body. And, before you die, make a baby. That's it. It's so simple. And yet the whole damn world forgot it.

In the midst of buying and selling tiny little portions of insanely big corporations and deciding between boot cuts and flares; while we landscaped our front lawns and ordered pay-per-view movies beamed to our houses via satellite, we forgot that kicking a man when he's down is simply wrong. We forgot that doing unto others as you would have them do unto you is phrased in the affirmative. "Do"… not "don't do." When that other man is down it's not enough *not* to kick him. You've only acted ethically if you help him up, just as you'd want to be helped up if you were down. But how do we relearn that most basic lesson? Not from a book. The bible, after all, has been disseminated to the farthest corners of the globe, placed into the hands of emperors and chieftains, peasants, madmen and lepers, yet it hasn't changed a thing. A living example must be set; a living testament to the good within us; a gift, a sacrifice, an epiphany.

33.

Despite my fairly nomadic life – I've never lived any one place more than two years – I've always

preferred being there to being on my way there. This contradicts one of my favorite quotes, “It is a far better thing to travel hopefully than it is to arrive.” Robert Louis Stevenson said that. And, though I’ve never read another word he wrote I’ve always marveled at the eloquence and efficiency and accuracy of that statement. I take Mr. Stevenson’s remark as a truthful exposition of the disappointment of achievement. They say getting there is half the fun, but with regard to achievement, getting there is all the fun. Staying there is a chore. As far as travelling is concerned, arriving really is the point. The simple act of flopping onto a Parisian hotel bed – no different in significant detail from any other hotel bed – after a nine hour flight is a delight rarely achieved by other means. The bed says, not only “you are finished travelling” but, also, “you are here, in Paris now.” And being in Paris really is preferable.

34.

I knew one thing. In order to remove my remaining limbs, I would need to invent and construct a device. The device would need to be designed in such a way as to enable me to operate it with as little as my teeth. Because by the time I reached my final limb – my left leg, say, or my right arm – I would have no other limb to use but the one being severed. Even at the point of this realization, with only one hand missing, it was going to prove exceedingly difficult to continue the job. I consulted the paramecium.

- “I’m no carpenter,” he said, “but I would recommend you design the device to resemble some other thing. A table, perhaps, or a credenza or…” and here he paused for dramatic effect, to imply that, indeed, this was the perfect answer, “…or a crib for the baby. You’ve already told old Muttonhead that you were building a crib when you lost your hand. You’re just trying to finish the job…which you are, of course, just not the job he thinks.”

He was right, as usual. It was the perfect cover. Typically, cribs have slatted side walls which slide down to allow easy access to the child. This sliding action would be the perfect decoy for my

makeshift mini-guillotine.

34.

The day I rode the bus to Denver I visited a bookstore and bought a book of woodworking projects. The book included plans for a lovely Shaker-inspired baby crib, complete with sliding side wall, wheels for easy transportation, and a drawer beneath the bed of the crib intended for diapers and blankets and such, but easily adapted to the purpose of catching the dismembered limb and collecting the attendant blood. I tucked the book into my valise and visited the Denver Art Museum.

I had read about an exhibit by the Cypriot artist Lukas Karopolis and had been drawn by the review to see the work for myself. An entire room, some 1,000 square feet, was filled wall-to-wall with identical wooden chairs, all facing the same direction, all bolted to the floor in perfect rows. The chairs were straight backed and square and no space existed between any one chair and the ones beside it, in front or behind it. Additionally, the dimensions of the chairs and of the room had been meticulously measured so that no space existed between the outermost rows and the walls. The chair seats had rendered the floor of the room unreachable and obsolete. Each of the chairs was a uniform natural blonde wood, probably maple. But in the exact center of the room, equidistant from each wall and each corner, was a single chair, exactly the same as the others, but painted fire engine red. A wide doorway had been cut in each of the room's walls allowing patrons to view the room from left, right, front and back. The museum's visitors shuffled past the wide portals, occasionally stopping for a moment or two to absorb the sea of chairs and to ponder the purpose of the single red one. But no one lingered long. The exhibit's title, "Take A Seat" seemed an open invitation.

I stood in the doorway at the front of the room for half a minute before I mounted the first chair and began to traverse the choppy terrain towards my destination. A security guard moved instinctively from his post in the hallway to the doorway to my left. The visitors who happened to

be passing by the room at that moment crowded into the openings to observe my journey. Their attention shifted nervously from me, as I made my way across the seats and backs of the chairs, to the guard who stood in his doorway uncertain of how to proceed. He shouted a few times for me to get off the chairs; to exit the room, but I ignored him. He spoke into his walkie talkie, but I paid no attention. It took me no more than 45 seconds to reach the red chair. I stood atop it before lowering myself into a cross legged position, as there was no room between it and the chair in front of it to sit normally, with my legs hanging off. When I had come to rest in the cradle of the chair and had laid my hands in my lap, the crowd of onlookers burst into spontaneous applause. The security guard paced the width of the West side opening, apparently waiting for a museum official to show. But before an administrator could arrive, two policemen were already charging across the chairs with far less care and delicacy than I had shown. They went to cuff me but, finding my left had missing, decided, simply, to bully me out the same way they'd come in, grappling my good arm behind my back and spitting admonitions and warnings about "monkey business."

I was detained at the 12th Precinct of the City of Denver Police Department. I was charged with Criminal Mischief. I remarked to my jailor that I would cop to a plea of Misdemeanor Tomfoolery if they'd let me out with time served. He responded by shoving me to the floor of my cell and slamming the door behind me. Later, bail was set at $2,500 and I was given my one phone call. I was prepared. Before leaving Syrup and Mimi's, I had called directory assistance and acquired Lukas Karopolis' home phone number in East Hampton, Long Island. I made my one call to the artist whose invitation I had so enthusiastically accepted. He took the call from Precinct 12 without hesitation and proceeded to post bail without reservation. My assumptions were confirmed, my ghost-like suspicions about the world's intentions and it's capacities were given substance. I knew my plan was sound. The world was now ready and so was I.

Part Two:
It Is God To Which Consciousness Aspires

1.

Shortly after arriving at Syrup and Mimi's I phoned Gabrielle. The number I had for her in Boston was more than two years old – it had been nearly that long since we'd spoken. I got a recording with a new phone number in the 207 area code. I looked it up: Maine. It was late; past midnight in Denver, which made it past two on the east coast, though, that night, I hadn't bothered to do the math. Her voice was unmistakable. I have a built-in verification device: if a sharp, insistent contraction, somewhere between an orgasm and acute constipation, seizes my loins at the first syllable's utterance, it is her. And, though sleep had sanded down her voice's corners and replaced them with unfamiliar contours, it was certainly her.

- "Hello?"

And I suddenly realized I didn't know why I'd called.

- "Gabrielle?" I said, knowing that virtually no one called her by her full name.
- "Who's this?" The dagger lodged between my last two ribs, just above the contraction.
- "Don't you recognize my voice?" To this point: all questions, typical of our time together.
- "It's two o'clock in the morning. Who is this?"
- "Nil," I said, as if it was a question, "It's Nil."

- “Nil?” she asked, as if it was all too certain, “what the fuck are you doing calling in the middle of the night?”
- “I’m out in Denver. At Syrup’s. How are you?”
- “I’m fine, Nil. Can’t we talk tomorrow? I’m half asleep.”
- “Yeah, I just wanted to let you know about my…” and I stalled, lost for the proper word, settling after a pause for the obvious one, “my accident.”
- “What accident?” I could hear her sitting up in bed, maybe turning on the light. “Nil, are you ok?”
- “Yeah, I’m fine. I lost my left hand.”
- “Oh my god, Nil! How did it happen?”
- “It’s a long story. I’ll tell you about it tomorrow. I just wanted you to know.”
- “Well, ok. Call me tomorrow at work.” She gave me the number. “If there’s anything you need, Nil…”
- “Thanks, no. I’m fine.”

The following day I failed to call. She phoned Syrup and Mimi’s the day after that. I told them to tell her I was sleeping.

2.

One afternoon in late September, the leaves just beginning to suck the russet of autumn into their veins, I got on Syrup’s seldom used mountain bike with a backpack full of cans of chocolate pudding and a syringe-worth of Dr. Kantor’s morphine. I rode up the early stages of the mountains until the grade turned inhospitable. I settled for a small clearing some 300 yards from the road. I was probably at a height of some 7,000 feet as I just began to feel the effects of the altitude. I took up residence beside a small mountain brook and beneath a towering coniferous fir. I caught my breath and absorbed an hour or so of sun before turning to the syringe. The elements were perfect and I anticipated a transcendent high. I assumed the thin air, already making me light headed, would contribute to the intensity of the experience; the sun, forcing a natural dilation

and a fair bit of sparkling refraction off the cavorting stream. And the chocolate pudding would prove indispensable. Nothing in the world is quite so ecstatically delicious, so sensually fulfilling as a mouthful of chocolate pudding with a veinful of morphine.

I was no second-rate street junky. I had a system. I tied off with a thin black tourniquet I'd fashioned from a strip of Velcro I'd found in Mimi's sewing box. The simple device proved remarkably effective in overcoming the absence of my hand which, normally, would have been used to hold a conventional tourniquet taut while the injection was administered. Before long a ripe, enthusiastic vein crested on the buttery inside of my forearm; its plum-blue taint rearing up like a spooked stallion. I eased a drop from the syringe's beak, forcing out the air, but as little of my "sweet miracle" as possible. I don't care how many times you do it, when the needle first pricks the skin there's an instinct to pull it out. The body doesn't like intruders. It wants to expel them like rowdy fans at the ball game. But the mind, damned and determined, insists on the fix. And the greater the yen, the less that instinct to pull out the needle matters. So you ease it into the vein, already trying to slow things down, to sink into the pillow of air that you know is about to inflate around you. As the plunger is depressed, there's the sense of tiny cats nuzzling with their claws against your insides. It's faintly uncomfortable, but warm and welcome. You can feel the liquid flowing from needle to vein. The syringe is drained and the needle withdrawn and traded for a can of pudding and a plastic spoon.

But before I could thread the can's tab with my finger and pop the top, I was overcome by an unexpected urge. I stood up and took a quick look around. No one in sight. I unbuttoned my shorts and dropped them to the ground, carpeted with browning fir needles. I pulled my shirt up over my head in one swift motion, kicked off my shoes, tugged off my socks and yanked off my underwear. In seconds I was perched on a soft and smooth, submerged rock, navel-high in the rushing water of the brook. The pudding was there too. And my aqueous throne was as fitting a place as any to indulge my sweet-chocolate-morphine.

3.

At the tail end of a morphine high, the visual plane takes on strange, Einsteinian characteristics. The outer edges of the frame distort, sometimes bending forward, sometimes back; creating an obscenely plastic scene, either convex or concave. If, for instance, I stand close to the painting of the monkey—so close that I can see nothing else but what exists on canvas—the palm trees on the scene's periphery close around my head, encircling me. They move as I watch, swaying as if in a breeze and they shimmy forward like slow motion, animated automaton dervishes. The ring of smoke issuing from the monkey's mouth moves too, not advancing exactly nor receding either, but hovering; simply displaying the potential to come or go. And the monkey himself, cigarette ever in hand, totters, drunk with this newfound ambulatory power. He taunts me with the possibility he may leap forward and embrace me. The glint in his eye is impossible to read—whether his intentions are affectionate or malicious; whether he plans to lodge himself on my face, sucking the life from within me, like the protozoan space creature in some horror film or simply to deliver a kiss.

4.

A week had passed since I had phoned Gabrielle; five days since she'd phoned me. Syrup and Mimi were out. I had the Calypso to myself. I sat in an armchair by a window in the den. The window framed a scene that caused the rarely used word *sylvan* to dance in my head. The word poked and prodded, searching for a way out. But there are certain words which live in silence; on the page or simply in one's mind as a description or a category. These words are seldom, if ever, called upon by the tongue. They don't come up in conversation. They don't describe the weather or express lust or hunger. They bide their time as headings; as words which govern other words. In a sense, they are linguistic monarchs. Sylvan rules other seldom-uttered words such as deciduous and coniferous. But it also oversees poplar and elm, leaf, bark and branch. Words, like nymph, canopy or dappled, occasionally fall under its auspices.

The sylvan forest outside the window was densely green. At the front edge, where the forest had

been truncated by chainsaws to allow a suitable plot for the Calypso; to frame a piece of controllable, mowable ground, wherein a tool shed and, eventually a jungle gym might comfortably reside – at that artificially-created edge, the green was translucent and corpuscular. Even from my vantage point at the equally artificial edge of the house, I could make out the spider web veins criss-crossing the leaves' bodies and distinguish their heavier, more rigid outer edges from their wispy interior flesh. Further back, deeper in the woods, the green turned musky and dank. Ivy garments adorned the trunks of trees. Dense underbrush camouflaged the dark earth. It was easy to imagine the forest continuing to grow denser as it grew deeper. One could predict a point where the verdant flora turned opaque; where animals and insects, unable to find suitable purchase, were forced out into the forest's more spacious outskirts. At some deep and distant point near the center of the woods, the thickness might exclude all light. An unfathomable, dark green would prevail, suffocating the air under an enormous blanket of moss.

I picked up the phone. I wedged it between my shoulder and my cheekbone. In my hand I squeezed the crumpled corner of a note pad page. I took an edge of the scrap in my teeth and, with my remaining hand, pulled the paper taut, reinstating its roughly triangular shape. Gabrielle's number. I dialed. Her machine answered. Her voice crackled with a faint sadness which seemed unwilling to grant itself legitimacy. It sounded as if, in spite of her sadness, she still recognized the goodness of her life as a whole. I guess what I'm talking about – the sweet sensation through which disappointments are filtered – is called melancholy.

- "Hi. You've reached 866-4329. We can't take your call right now. Please leave your name and a brief message and we'll call you back when we can."

- "Gabs, it's Nil. It's Thursday. Early afternoon. Something like one, one-thirty. I've been meaning to call. I didn't mean to drop that bomb on you and then disappear. But, as you might imagine it's been a pretty rough time. I mean I'm O.K. and all. I'm actually feeling pretty good and I'm in good spirits. But Syrup and Mimi are taking it

hard. They've got a baby on the way – I don't know if you knew that – and the last thing they need is to be absorbed in my little drama. But I just wanted to call and say hi, see how you're doing, catch up. How's Vermont? Maine? Shit, I can't keep it straight. To me they're both these foresty, mountainy states with quaint little towns with general stores selling rock candy and bulk goods in burlap. What the hell do I know? I guess it's Maine. You mentioned the coast and I'm pretty sure Vermont doesn't have a coast. Say, listen, do you remember that time in the grave yard in that little tourist town? I'm sorry about that. If I could go back in time… Anyway, I guess there's no sense in dwelling on the past. I hope you're doing well. Give me a call sometime. Okay, bye."

So, it began innocently enough. A simple exchange; practically the archetype of both the outgoing and incoming answering machine message.

A week later Gabrielle returned my call. It was mid-afternoon and I was sitting in the same chair from which I'd called her. Syrup and Mimi were again out, as they tended to be in the mid-afternoon on weekdays. I didn't answer the phone. I simply wasn't in the habit. I was a guest at the Calypso and in the time I'd been there had received but a handful of phone calls – mostly from insurance companies and health care service providers. The machine picked up:

- (Mimi's voice) "You've reached Mimi and Cyril's house. We're probably wallpapering the nursery. So leave a message after the tone."

- "Hi Mimi. Hi Cyril. This is Gabrielle. I'm calling for Nil. Umm…Nil, I got your message. I'm glad you called. I'd been…concerned about you. But you sound good. I mean, considering…Anyway, I'll try you again soon. Or you can call me. Take care. Umm…Hey, Mimi, Cyril – good luck with the baby. Congratulations. Okay. Talk to you soon. Bye."

I sat and listened to her voice. There was the palpable sense that she wanted to say more than she was saying. She fumbled for words, knowing that they might very well reach Mimi's or Syrup's ears before they reached mine. I didn't pick up. I just listened; eavesdropped on a conversation I was supposed to be part of. The moment was too sweet – listening to Gabrielle trying to convey and connect through a series of filters: the phone, the machine, Syrup and Mimi, her melancholy. She struggled to choose words mild enough to pass through those filters unharmed, yet still be potent by the time they reached me. I called her back the following afternoon. Again I got her machine:

- "Hi. You've reached 866-4329. We can't take your call right now. Please leave your name and a brief message and we'll call you back when we can."

- "Gabs, it's Nil. Thanks for calling back. It was good to hear your voice. And, hey, just so you know, I'm always the first to check the messages. I'm almost always home, so if the machine picks up, I'm probably just in the bathroom or outside taking a walk or something. But I always get back before Syrup and Mimi. So…it'll be me that hears it. Anyway…

There was a delicate balance to be struck. I sensed in Gabrielle's tone a yearning. I imagined there were things she wanted to say; things she'd come to realize in the intervening years. But, as must be clear by now, it's easier to reach a realization than it is to share it. She was cloistered in a thick psychological cocoon. Her fragility and mine conspired to suppress her tongue at the very moment it yearned to break free, to rain words down upon me like a diluvian rain. The worst thing I could do was solicit. The decision to confront the space and time between us had to be hers. Not that I couldn't cajole:

- " … It's been a while. I mean, there was that call last week. I'm sorry about that. I just

felt like you should know. There are just some people I've known in my life – not a lot of them, but a few – who I feel connected to. You're one of those people. And, well, it struck me as weird that you didn't know. It's just that when you go through something as traumatic as this…for god's sake I've been altered, literally. When you go through something like this you feel as if your relationship to the world has changed. You're no longer Nil, the able-bodied; Nil, the average. I've become something unaccounted for. I frighten small children and *require assistance*. You know me, I've never required assistance. So, when you go through something as altering as that, as transformative – that's the word transformative – you want people to know. I called Trager. You remember Trager. I went to high school with him. Me and Syrup and Trager. He lives out in San Francisco now. He makes a ton of money in software. I called him and I called Mr. Shallon, one of my old professors. I thought he'd understand. It was just important to me that you knew; that you could think of me the way I am now. I always wanted you to know who I was. That hasn't changed."

5.

I'm not a consummate craftsman. During college, when I worked in the preparator's shop at the University museum, my boss, a fourth generation Finnish carpenter who'd grown up curling on the lakes of northern Minnesota, devised what he called the Nil Rule. For any project I worked on, he would triple the time required. His theory – more often true than not – was that I needed three tries to get any woodworking project done; one to get it wrong, a second to overcompensate for my mistakes and make equal but opposite mistakes, and, a third, to get it right. But with the guillotine crib, I really took my time. I notched out a 1 & 3/8 deep, 14" long piece of the crib's side panel's base and routed out a 1/16" wide by 1/2" deep slot along the bottom edge of the notched-out area. The panel hinged down, bringing its top even with the bed level or up, so its lower edge reached the level of the other three sides' tops. I bought a top of the line, professional 14" butcher's knife (the salesman assured me it would move through bone like butter) and very carefully removed the blade from the handle. At the handle end, the blade sported a 2" long

appendage with two holes drilled about 1/2” apart. These would come in handy. I mounted the blade in the slot along the bottom of the crib’s side panel. Using the holes, I anchored the blade to a pair of machine screws I’d backed in from the reverse side of the side panel’s base. I then routed a slot in the notch I’d removed. By replacing the notch around the blade and securing it with a simple hook latch, catching the machine screws on the reverse side, I could easily conceal the blade.

6.

Syrup began to suspect. He’d look into my eyes at times not to see me, but to see the morphine. Of course, he didn’t know he was looking for morphine. He just knew there was something affecting me. Truth be told, he may have been reacting more to the paramecium’s influence on me than to the morphine’s. But it is, in fact, easier to admit to a friend that you are hooked on prescription narcotics than to admit you’re planning to dismember yourself at the behest of a microscopic organism. Luckily, Syrup couldn’t or, at least, didn’t press the issue on either count. He knew me well enough to know something was up. And I knew him well enough to know he knew. What neither of us knew was whether his curiosity was stronger than my need to tell. So, for the better part of two months, from mid-September to mid-November, we played a game of psychological chicken. Who would flinch first, jump from the car?

Mimi.

-“Nil, are you fucking high?!”

I’d come back from Dr. Kantor’s house. He had two Jacuzzis in his backyard; one heated to 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit, the other cooled to 68.6. Kantor believed the thirty degree difference had mystically invigorating effects on the circulation. This, in turn, heightened the high. So, we filled our veins with the drug and dunked first in one, then the other. His yard was pitch black, only a string of christmas lights illuminating the path between the two tubs. We would settle finally in the

cool tub and eat cans of chocolate pudding.

I was still dripping wet and quite audaciously high—sleepy and euphoric, so soothed as to be utterly without concern as I returned to the Calypso. I upset an enormous terra cotta urn as I clumsily navigated the front steps. This apparently woke Mimi. She met me at the front door, tennis racket in hand, as if she expected an intruder. If she had actually thought the bustle from the stoop was a criminal, she surely would have sent Syrup down to confront him. The fact that she took it upon herself (never waking him) to meet me in the foyer, meant she knew it was me. Perhaps she had peeked through their bedroom curtains before descending the staircase.

Given all that, I don't know what her intentions were. Did she hope to take a swing at me with that racket? Was this her chance to clobber me with the "intruder" as a cover? Did she wish to confront me privately, behind Syrup's sleeping back with the intention of asking me to leave their home? Was she having trouble sleeping and glad to have someone awake – maybe even someone other than Syrup – to talk to? I didn't know. But stumbling through the front door, while I tried, simultaneously, to extract my key from the lock's tumblers, I didn't even see her. When I recovered my key, I straightened my self – both physically and mentally – in anticipation of my stealthy climb to the baby's room. There stood Mimi in her bathrobe, with tennis racket. I camouflaged my surprise, pulling her to me instead and breaking into a spontaneous, sopping wet waltz. We wouldn't have awakened Syrup if she hadn't raised her voice.

-"Nil, are you fucking high?!"

7.

I was still working out the bugs on the baby crib guillotine when I decided to go ahead and remove my left arm. It came off rather easily. But there's an enormous artery which, once severed, is exceedingly difficult to control. I had made preparations: a pile of towels at the forward end of the table saw, the cellular phone nearby, but I hadn't counted on the unwavering cascade

of blood issuing from my shoulder. The combined disorientation of the double dose of morphine and the light-headedness precipitated by the escape of what looked like gallons of my blood from my body, made attending to the wound quite impossible. If I hadn't had the foresight to dial 911 immediately, my tale would have ended in a puddle of strawberry preserves on the poured concrete floor of Syrup's garage workshop.

8.

I came home late one night. Or, more precisely, as I later learned, I *thought* I came home late one night. I'd had a few drinks (I thought) and I pussy footed through the house to avoid waking Syrup and Mimi. When I reached my room, I quietly closed the door before turning on the light. I gingerly took off my jacket, as if the noise of that alone could wake them. I gently draped the jacket over the back of the armchair in the corner. And glided—that's how I remember it, gliding—toward the bed. As I did, I started to unbutton my shirt and, as I did, I glanced back at the monkey painting. I had to stop. I had the sensation that my feet were sinking into the floor, that my shirt buttons had turned to teeth, that the ceiling above me was liquid. None of these possibilities struck me as any more or less likely than what I saw over my shoulder as I neared the bed.

The frame, still gilded, held vigilantly to either side of the horizon, pulling it taut like a string, the sun still floating faithfully above it. That was as it should be; as it had always been. But front left, from my perspective, vaporous and taunting, stood – not the monkey – but the lack of the monkey. I fell back, sitting onto the edge of the bed, my shirt unbuttoned but still half tucked. I looked away again – at the window, into the black night, thinking that it certainly wasn't as black as it appeared to be from inside this lighted room. Nothing could really be that black. I looked a long time, expecting it to turn less black and begin to reveal nuance: heat and the outlines of shadows, a pair of eyes or a branch stirring in the wind. I expected then to turn to the painting and to find the monkey in his usual position, assuming his usual gesture; the whole thing an optical illusion.

No such luck. When I turned again to the painting, he was even less there than before. Is that possible? Can something be more missing or less missing? Can an absence be great or small? I know it is possible. Loss is eminently and infinitely measurable. That is why, after all, time can heal a broken heart. And from the first instance to the second, the monkey's absence increased.

I looked a long time at where the monkey had been. I considered where he might have gone and why, but arrived at no conclusion. I lay down after a while and closed my eyes, hoping, perhaps, to find the monkey in my dreams. When I woke, I opened my eyes slowly, thinking the monkey might have returned. But saw instead a wall-mounted television and blood pressure unit. Syrup and Mimi were sitting a few feet away and didn't immediately realize I'd woken up. I closed my eyes again and tested my left arm. I thought I could feel it moving. I swatted the mattress, but there was no sound. I slapped my hip, but felt no contact. There was little doubt. My arm was gone.

9.

I do not think. I am. Therefore I am. Therefore I have a bone to pick with René Descartes. In my mind's eye, I've stepped into the ring with him and laid blow after blow into his soft midsection. He's flabby. He tries to reason with me. *Look,* he says, *I have no quarrel with you.* But I deliver body shots left and right. I shower them down. He tries to clinch, but I'm too wily. I side step and stick him in the ribs. He grimaces and reels.

- "It's not thinking," I tell him, "but feeling that makes us human. It's compassion and empathy. These are the heights to which consciousness aspires."
- "No. It is god to which consciousness aspires," he asserts, still trying to catch his breath.

The bell rings and I follow him to his corner.

- “What do you mean?”
- “Consciousness is not a gift. It was not bestowed upon us, intact and ready to wear. It evolved. We were once paramecium, you know. We were fish and fowl and reptiles, perhaps. Some of us are still snakes, in fact.”

He giggles, amused by his own little joke. (The French love their puns). He spits into the bucket.

- “But how do you know that? You died two hundred years before Origin Of The Species.”
- “I try to stay current, he said, “If I understand Darwin correctly, we eventually reached the level of monkeys. It took us millions of, billions of, years to arrive at fingers and a thumb, an enjoyment of sex, preferences in food, an attachment to useless habits. We knew we were onto something. We began to make choices based on predilections, rather than by necessity only. We were conscious. But it didn’t stop there.”

His trainer shoves the mouthpiece into René’s mouth and pushes him toward the center of the ring. I grab the towel draped across the top rope and toss it to the center of the ring. The referee calls the fight.

- “Go on,” I say.
- “We developed new features for our consciousness, just like new model-year cars. Guilt was a big one. Think about it, we weren’t born with guilt, not individually and not as a species. It took generation after generation of hitting men with sticks and watching them bleed. The first man to hit another man with a stick thought nothing of it. He watched the man spitting up blood and probably made no connection between the hitting and the blood. His great grandson (I’m speaking metaphorically, you

understand) hit a man with a stick and realized for the first time that the blood was caused by the stick. Causal relationships are the first component of guilt. His great grandson realized that drawing blood with a stick was painful and even dangerous. Finally, in this great family tree, there arrived a grandson with an imagination. After hitting a man with a stick and causing him to bleed, he thought, 'I sure wouldn't like to be that fellow. Perhaps I shouldn't have done that.' And guilt was born.

Consciousness strove to increase man's awareness of all the phenomena around him. Not just another man's pain, but the ebb and flow of the oceans or the cosmos, the communication of an idea, fashion, love, obsession, ambition, fantasy, fear, redemption. Consciousness yearned for reasons, so it invented god. It is said that man was created in the image of god, but I believe the inverse: god was created in the image of man's consciousness. God was all the things that consciousness aspired to be. But human beings are an impatient lot. I know. I've stood on line at the bakery on Thursday morning when they bake the marble rye.

We, as humans, continue to become more acutely aware of what goes on around us and in us. There are those who claim to be able to see the future or communicate with the dead. I don't know if I believe this is true, but I believe it is possible. What these 'seers,' as they are known, may be seeing is simply the next advance of human consciousness. They are at the prow of the ship, catching a glimpse of land in the distant fog, before the rest of the passengers know it is there. I knew a man in Montparnasse who, when faced with a difficult decision, would ask the advice of his father, dead some twenty years. What we call god is, in fact, what we seek to attain through consciousness: omniscience, enlightenment, compassion, imperturbability. It's that 'all-knowing, all-seeing' business."

- "Yes," I said, "I see what you mean. But god is the blanket we pull up to our chins to

ward off the creeping chill of death. Is he not? We invented god to comfort ourselves, to convince ourselves that there was more to our living than this three score and ten. That is god's true meaning. Consciousness has done nothing to replace god in that respect."

- "Says you," replied Descartes, "what about my friend in Montparnasse who speaks to his dead father? Can you say with certainty that he is not communicating with the dead?"

- "Well, no. But…"

- "He makes decisions based on the advice of his father. I should stop there because that, alone, is such a powerful message. Its implications are monumental. But I can tell you won't be satisfied. You said, 'I am, therefore I am.' That's how we got into this bloody thing in the first place. If acknowledgement of consciousness is what constitutes 'being,' then certainly Montparnasse's father exists, as well. Hegel said the self exists only in its recognition by another. For a man to take another man's advice, both men must exist. Surely you must agree with that? And this existence after death, or *after life* as religion prefers to call it, is the blanket you refer to – the blanket we pull to our chins in the cold. This existence is, for all intents and purposes, god."

- "But one man…"

- "One man? I knew you'd say that. It's more than one man. You are speaking to me now. Are you not? And I've been dead for more than 350 years. Surely if two men, you and my friend in Montparnasse, who, by the way, is considered by all who know him to be a measured man; productive, wholly of his right mind and practical in all

matters, if you two can revive the dead, then thousands, perhaps tens of thousands more, can do the same. Maybe all of China speaks with their deceased. Maybe the populations of New Guinea and Hispaniola dance with their departed on festival evenings. The Jews set a place at the Passover table for one of their dead. And, while that tradition is probably just symbolic for most, it presupposes an existence, instigated by the living, for the dead.

So, if tens of thousands, perhaps millions, of men and women are revived by their living descendents every day; if the dead are interacting with the living, consulting on decisions, sharing grief and joy, giving and, yes, taking – is that not a perfect and fully realized vision of heaven on earth? Can not consciousness aspire to these heights? Is god not, in fact, vestigial – like an organ or a limb whose services we do not require? We may not be there yet. But, eventually, our collective consciousness will become strong enough to render god obsolete. And, like the body with an infected or unnecessary appendage, we will amputate him and move on."

10.

In late November, if the snows hold off that long, the silvery Beeches still cling to their last few leaves. Like mothers cradling their children, they are loathe to let them go. And, though the sun takes a step back at that time of year, retreating from the napes of our necks where, for the last six months, it had taken up what seemed like permanent residence, the emigration of foliage from limb to ground clears the way for a blazing new light. The forest floor basks in this sudden remedy, the tone of honey trapped in jars. The blanketing of fir and pine needles chimes like bells struck with mallets. Where there is a puddle or a lone remaining droplet on a lone remaining leaf, there is a cacophonous refraction of branch and bark, sky and earth, brown and blue—a bubbleized depiction of a moment in space, yet perfected; silent and still. A breeze disrupts the bubble. But each element, represented by its miniature replicant trapped in hydrogen and oxygen, sways and elastically unsways in perfect synchronization, simply part of the world they

inhabit. The trunk of the Beech can't move this way without the scuffing, meandering cloud above. Nor can the brook – water reflected in water – saunter that way without an exact and equal action from the hillside grasses.

That November delivered something else.

11.

Syrup, at wit's end, called Gabrielle. He could think of nothing else; hadn't considered that her reintroduction into what was becoming the very Carravagio-esque tableau of my crisis/life, might be disadvantageous. He simply felt something must be done. He gave me no chance to decline. She was coming, as we spoke of it, from Maine or Vermont or wherever it was she now lived with her nouveau hippie boyfriend – a Dartmouth grad with a degree in philosophy whose analytical excesses (he called them "beliefs") had led him to a meek, often feeble stab at self-reliance. They lived in a small 19th Century two-story house on an equally small parcel of land that he – seemingly oblivious to the mocking it engendered – referred to as a farm. I think they grew a lot of beets because every so often I'd receive a small package from Gabrielle; often around Christmas time or in the vicinity of my birthday.

The packages would invariably include borscht or some other rose-colored concoction which I threw immediately away, plus home-baked cookies and always a short note, often on one of those black and white, bookstore postcards. It was always obvious that she'd chosen the card expressly for me. Once she sent a portrait of Matisse, photographed by Henri Cartier Bresson. Neither she nor I cared particularly for Matisse, but when I'd worked at a bookstore outside Boston in the mid-80s, Gabrielle would drop in and we would hole up in an obscure nook in the back of the store, paging through art books, transferring our as yet unspoken, unacted-upon desires to the glossy reproductions of Rothkos and Richters and Twomblys and Ernsts. For a short while which corresponds almost exactly to the period between our first kiss and our first fuck, we were infatuated with Bresson's photography. I stole the enormous monograph of his

work and put it prominently on the glass-topped rattan coffee table I'd inherited from Syrup's brother who had recently left Boston for Los Angeles and a failed acting career. Gabrielle began spending nights at my apartment drinking inexpensive wine. We supported the flimsy, mutually understood assertion that we weren't simply fumbling toward sex by renting art house movies and lying on our stomachs on my futon dallying through the myriad books I'd "relocated" from the book store's shelves to my own. The Matisse portrait was always a favorite, the bespectacled, elderly painter, draped in a smock, a stocking cap topping him off, surrounded by a dozen milky white doves, their cage doors tellingly open, one perched upon his outstretched hand. The light is sumptuous, a languorous dappling of shadow holding off and caressing an insistence of sun. Gabrielle and I must have run our hands gently across that photograph's surface a hundred times, our shoulders nudging, our feet playfully jousting.

12.

Intent on encouragement, the paramecium enjoined me to revel in what he called "our remarkable achievement."

- "You are nearly a king," he said.
- "How do you figure? If anything, I'm now actually a bit less than a man."
- "No, no, no. You can't measure a man with a ruler. Power and prowess are what determine the value of a life; influence and the size of one's contribution. A blind man can teach the world to see. A dead man could teach the world to live. If we can just follow through with our plan, you'll be a god, a prophet, a messiah."
- "And you?"
- "At your service, my liege."

13.

The day before Gabrielle came, she called:

- “Nil?” she ventured cautiously, hoping that it would indeed be my ears which received the message, “Syrup told me. About your arm. I’m worried about you Nil. I’ve always worried about you. You’re the…you live your life like it’s a story. You do things which make for good reading. I admire that. It takes courage. I mean, it’s how all of us wish we could live. We’d want to do the things that mean something, that challenge something. But we have practical considerations. I don’t know how you’ve managed to avoid that, Nil. I don’t know how you can make certain decisions without any consideration of the practical. That’s why we didn’t last. I am a practical consideration. But you thought of me as part of your story; your Beatrice, your Marie Antoinette. But I can’t exist as part of your story, Nil. I need to write my own story. I want to include other people in my story and I want to be included in theirs. Can you understand what I mean?”

14.

My release from the hospital was conditional. I agreed to pay weekly visits to the Cooper County Mental Healthcare Center in Durango. Syrup expressed a willingness to chaperone the trips – the drive to and from the Center. Anxious to return to the Calypso, I agreed. The drive home was awkward and quiet. I tried to instigate conversation about my excitement for a real meal or how nice it would be to take a walk in the woods behind the house. Syrup and Mimi neglected to take up the threads. At one point, Syrup asked if I planned to be fitted for a prosthetic arm. I didn’t see the point, I told him. I wouldn’t be able to use it. It would be simply for appearance’s sake. Syrup snapped:

- “Well maybe there’s something to be said for appearances, Nil.”

Back in the baby’s room I was relieved to find the monkey safely framed, assuming his same unnatural position as the smoking accomplice of that enormous setting sun. I removed my wallet

from my back pocket and set it on the bed. With my right hand I snapped open the Velcro and with thumb and forefinger pried open the billfold. I fingered through the various receipts and ATM statements until I found the photograph of Villa Forni. I placed it on the bed and returned the wallet to my pocket. In the photograph there are two small, leafless trees in front of the house. One just to the right of the staircase leading to the front door, the second farther to the right and set back closer to the house itself. They are a couple, linked through decades of shedding and reclaiming their foliage, though never truly together, never touching. They walk not through space, but through time; one of them leading, the other just slightly behind. But which of the trees is leading? It depends on how one perceives the direction of their travelling: to the villa's birth or to its demise; returning to the past or advancing into the future.

Gabrielle would be arriving at the Calypso in just a few hours – my past arriving in my future. I sat down on the edge of the mattress, facing the small oval mirror on the wall to the left.

- "I am a Vincenzan," I announced.

I stared back at me as if I hadn't heard what I'd said or, as if I'd heard it but known it was a lie. Slouching back, I fell into the nest of pillows atop the bed, the photograph of Villa Forni beside me. Exhausted and confused by my ordeal, a dose of sedatives probably still awash in my bloodstream, I shut my eyes.

15.

Nil on love: some people love other people. I'm sure it's true. But mostly people love the bonds they create between themselves and others. Their various relationships, each extending in its own spatial and temporal direction, each connected to some fragment of their lives, intersect in a vast lattice work of good, bad, now, then and memory. And it is upon this lattice work – this macramé hammock of self-affirmation – that they hoist themselves and declare their well being. And it's wise of them. Because, if you attach yourself, truly and entirely to one person; if you love

not the bonds you've forged, the mutualities you've created by simply being in so many places at the same time, but love instead the flesh and ephemera that make another truly another and not a vessel of duplicate experience – if you love another regardless of the tethers which buoy ballast to balloon and vice versa, then you are bound to be devastated and destroyed. It's as simple as that.

And so I spent the ensuing hours in expectation of Gabrielle's return to a place she'd never been. I was the same island on which she'd lived for the better part of three years and yet I was not. My architectonic plates had shifted, my continent had drifted. One of my peninsula had broken free of the mainland and drifted off to sea. I had new inhabitants: a paramecium, a monkey. Had she loved me or simply us?

I knew I'd loved her. It was, in fact, us I couldn't bear. The bonds between us were cobwebs, laden with the spider's spit. I struggled, in the final months of our relationship, to extricate my limbs, my hair, my eyes. Constantly tugging and wiping my skin, I felt encumbered by a slowly enveloping cocoon. But Gabrielle was not the problem. When I was with her – walking hand in hand, as was our habit or entangled in a post-coital embrace or fixing a simple meal of pasta and oil in the gently fading light of a bronze October evening – all was well. But, like Sisyphus, when we were apart I discovered tragedy in my plight.

Arriving home, our apartment empty, a subsonic buzz painting the air, I stood in the doorway swallowing deep breaths of emptiness; accepting the welcome of nothing. I was amazed at how easily she could disappear. Our apartment took on a different feel in her absence. The space seemed more static, as if the ions in the air had lost their charge. The light, rather than vibrating and reflecting off doorknobs and the handles of cookware, settled like dust onto surfaces content to receive it; too apathetic perhaps to resist. There was no unspoken code to which I felt a need to conform, no politics or posturing. Sure, at times I loved putting on a show: a little push and shove, a little cat and mouse, a little hue and cry. I played the distanced, thoughtful man. I played

the hurt, befuddled boy. I played the forceful, lusty animal. And she in turn played the confidant, the penitent and the vixen. But, in the hour or so before she returned, the evening redolent of the ensuing night, I became once again aware of my latent singularity. Her presence demanded a share of my self; a divvying of my wholeness. Without her as appendage, I was one: me. It seemed obvious that with her, I should be added to; more than whole. But the opposite was true. By removing her, I increased.

16.

Many of the nights I spent in the hospital were long, torrential journeys, furnished with mild hallucinations. As a morphine junky of some repute, I was, as one might imagine, a bit less susceptible to the charms of the sweet opiate (C17H19NO3H2O) than a first-timer might be. Nonetheless there were nights when my reverie was quite unexpectedly buoyant. One night I got the shakes – not caused by withdrawal, but some deviant sort of anxiety, probably brought on by the extremes of my medical situation. Not surprisingly, the body considers the amputation of a limb a devastation and, as such, reacts like a nation under siege. Along with the predictable efforts to fortify the remainder of the body/state, there is an attendant and understandable breakdown of what might be called the body's social hierarchy. The infrastructure of neural highways, the dispensing of on-board chemicals on an as-needed basis, the routines of intake and output are, in the wake of such an overwhelming systemic trauma, all susceptible to unpredictable breakdown. My body took to convulsions and gyrations, heaving itself off the mattress, crashing down in unexpected contortions. My inner torment matched my outer. I struggled vainly to control my body; to hold it still. Every so often I'd get it together by focusing on my breathing and on a single dimple in the acoustic tile ceiling. But I couldn't hold it for long. My torso was twitching in long, exaggerated arcs, a horizontal caricature of some spasmodic new wave dance. It wasn't long before panic set in, which only made it worse. I yelled for a nurse.

Jean Thousand Deer Smith was on duty that night. She moved swiftly and, unlike some of the other nurses in the ward, decisively. She had the syringe in my arm, the morphine in my

bloodstream before I knew she was there. Then she held my hand and whispered:

- “Sssh, quiet, it’s just gonna be a minute Mr. Nil. Just a minute now. Take a deep breath. Deep breath. It’s gonna be okay, Mr. Nil. Hold on. Hold on.”

And within minutes the quakes subsided. She must have been generous with the morphine, because I slipped into a lugubrious dream state as she calmed me with a story:

- “At the beginning of time, the Great Spirit walked through the heavens with a bucket full of stars. In certain corners of the sky, he splashed great quantities of stars out into the blackness. In other places, he used a brush made of the tails of a million horses to stripe the night with diamonds. But in a few places, the Great Spirit took more care, reaching into the bucket with his hand and removing a dozen stars at a time. In one sky which lived in the third quarter of the year just over the great peaks of the Colorado mountains, the Great Spirit worked with special precision. He picked individual stars between thumb and forefinger and with utmost attention, arranged them as a sign for the people below. With seven of his brightest stars he made the Big Bear. He put the Bear in a part of the sky where he might find trout and salmon so he could feed his son the Little Bear. It is said that at the beginning of time, the Great Spirit also created for the Big Bear, a wife and for the Little Bear, a mother. She stood on her hind legs and searched the night sky for predators. While the Big Bear sought fish for his family among the rivers of the Earth, the Mother Bear kept a watchful eye and suckled her cub.

  They say that one day when the sky was bright and the stars could not be seen, that the Mother Bear heard some rustling among the myriad stars to the North. She moved to investigate, keeping her cub at a safe distance behind. She was unaccustomed to the coldness of the air as she moved North. She shivered against

the bracing wind and considered turning back, but she knew she must protect her cub. As she approached the pole she began to hear the sound of a high-pitched howling. She could not be sure whether or not it was the wind. The thick brown fur on her arched back stood on end like the bristles of the porcupine.

Suddenly a lone wolf was upon her, its teeth sinking into her hind quarter, its body whipping through the air as she spun to free herself. She knew that a single wolf would not pose much threat. But she also knew that where there was one wolf, others could not be far behind. She shook her hips in long and quick gyrations, but the wolf's grip was strong. With her attention diverted, she did not see the other wolves arrive. But before she knew it she was blinded in a fury of gnashing teeth, fur, saliva and blood. The Little Bear froze in horror as his mother was enveloped in a cloud of wolves. The Mother Bear fought bravely against the increasing canines. And the Great Spirit watched from above as eyes and teeth and the Mother Bear's claws flashed across the Northern sky.

It is not for the Great Spirit to intervene in the course of nature, whether it be on Earth or in the Heavens. But sad for the loss of the beautiful Mother Bear, the Spirit vowed to repeat the fiery display of her love and devotion for her darling cub each year in the sky to the North. And still, to this day, the Little Bear stands frozen in the night, in the same position from which he watched his mother give her life, defending him from the wolves. He watches the sky forever. And once a year his mother reappears as blinding streaks of light; as eyes and teeth and claws. We, on Earth, call it the Northern Lights, but the Little Bear knows that this is his mother saying goodbye."

17.

The paramecium was wary of Gabrielle's arrival. He tried to hide it, saying he was looking forward to meeting her and so forth. But I knew him well enough to know that he saw most, if not all,

outside influences as threats to the plan. In his mind, we were maintaining a steady, delicate tack and he feared an unexpected breeze, the crossing wake of a passing boat, a sudden and unannounced shift of weight from starboard to port. He asked subtle questions meant not to arouse suspicion:

- “How long will she be staying?”

And…

- “Will she be staying here? At the Calypso?”

I knew he was dying to take the next step, champing at the bit. He wanted to know if she’d be sleeping with me. So did I.

I made efforts to reassure the paramecium, telling him she was just here to help Syrup and Mimi look after me. I justified it further, explaining that if I became too much of a burden, too soon, they were likely to kick me out or, worse yet, have me institutionalized before I even had a chance to share my work with the world.

- “What good would I be,” I asked him, “locked up in some State Hospital with an arm and two legs?”

He relented.

18.

On several occasions, either in the basement of the Calypso or in the woods behind the house, I attempted to excise my tongue. Doing so was fundamental, since we all have such an

irrepressible need to explain ourselves. But doing so is also exceedingly difficult, especially with just one hand. One must physically extract one's tongue from one's mouth, pulling it taut, and, at the same time, untether the slimy appendage from its mooring. But one's grasp of the tongue, tends to loosen, against one's will, as the knife moves nearer. There is simply a reaction of self-preservation which takes over. And because the tautness of the tongue, yanked from its cavity, is essential to actually removing the whole of the tongue and not just some wagging portion of it. And because the activity of cutting through the pink and meaty flesh of an entire human tongue takes fifteen seconds or more. And because it's nearly impossible to continue to yank the tongue from the mouth as the pain rises to an unbearable pitch and as the back of the throat fills with blood, gagging and coughing in a desperate attempt to expel the offending liquid. And because there is no readily available apparatus that is very well suited to tongue removal – a kitchen knife being too straight to allow the proper angle, pruning shears being too stout to span the tongue while fitting wholly inside the back of the mouth. And because, even if one were able to surmount everything else, one would still need two good hands and so on.

So, though I made several attempts, I never got so far as drawing blood. Each time the realization that I would be incapable of finishing what I'd started, prevented me from starting. I needed assistance. And, more than ever, I became aware of the paramecium's insufficiency. For some things, there is simply no substitute for a human being.

It's handy to have incriminating information about a doctor – that he illegally dispenses morphine, for example. If you ever find yourself in a position to acquire such information, I suggest you do so. You may not know, at first, to what use you might put this information, but when the time comes, you'll be glad you have it. You may also find, as I did with Dr. Kantor, that the doctor, being a man of science, accepts the reality of your bargaining position without much ado. When I first made my proposal, Kantor rifled through a handful of possibilities, such as killing me, turning me in to the police, simply refusing. I could practically follow the trajectory of his thoughts as they traced a wide loop in the air adjacent to his body. But, eventually, they returned to their roost in

whichever lobe it is which accepts the inevitable.

When I returned to the Calypso, gorged on Morphine and sutured practically from ear to ear, I carried a little note pad to communicate with Syrup and Mimi. I tucked my tongue, wrapped in butcher's paper, in the back corner of the freezer behind an unopened box of garden burgers which had been there for as long as I'd been at the Calypso and which promised to be there for the life of the refrigerator. Syrup and Mimi were surprisingly quick to trade in their anger for fear. They were arriving at a new understanding of my malady. They concluded that I was taking my own life, one piece at a time. They swapped stern rebukes for sympathy, encouragements and reassurances. I was confident now. Their consciences (their fears) wouldn't allow them to dismiss me from the Calypso.

19.

Gabrielle arrived just after 8:00 p.m. I watched from the bedroom window as Syrup's car turned into the driveway. Through the bat-shaped clearing in the rain mottled windshield, I could see her smiling. Syrup appeared to be talking. After the car had stopped, after the engine had stopped, after Syrup had gotten out and closed his door, she sat there another second, her seat belt still on. She stared straight ahead in the direction of the garage door. But I doubt she saw the door. Nor the garage itself. Nor the house. She was looking at memories. And I had a pretty good idea which ones:

> An overcast, foggy morning in a colonial graveyard in a little seaside tourist town in New England. The season's over. Most shops shut for winter. She and I in long brown coats, walking, hand in hand amongst the head stones. Remarking on brief lives lived long ago. The expanding sense that the graveyard belonged to us. That the town belonged to us. That the ocean and perhaps the whole of the world belonged to us as well. The two of us: King and Queen, the world's dead bowing at our feet. We kissed and I stretched my

clumsy arms around her brown coat and pulled her toward me. I held her head in the manner of a man bringing a watermelon to a table. And our separate spaces dissolved into a sumptuous, wet entwinement. A kiss so deep, so intimate as to overcome any sense of otherness. She suggested we make love right there, under cover of mist and tomb stones. But I, being demure and overly ever-unwilling to intrude on the passing moments of other lives, declined. And I think, in some very small way, her falling out of love may have begun that very moment. Perhaps there is some number of internal switches which must be thrown in order for one to fall in love. Perhaps if even one of those switches is, once again, turned off, then it's no longer love. And perhaps if one switch is turned off, then the switches, whose only function inside us is to determine our state of being in or out of love, no longer have a reason to be switched to "on." Maybe the turning off of one switch trips an avalanche of turnings off, one after another, until the person we loved is just another person. That morning in that New England graveyard, Gabrielle's first switch was flipped. A connection may have been intermittently and occasionally re-established over the next ten months, but the "system" of Gabrielle's love had become unstable. Failure was imminent. Death had seeped through the soft earth, into her canvas shoes and through the soles of her feet, into her bloodstream. "Death to your sycophant love for the pitiful Nil!" it said. And so it was.

And:

The night she left me. Halloween or thereabouts. My sense of time is tied to temperature and quality of light which is, in turn, tied to the nearest holiday. Roughly Halloween. The news delivered just prior to a party at her sister's. The new boyfriend, the son of a family friend, would be there too. I spent the entire evening on the balcony as the temperature tumbled from mid-60s to upper-40s. She shuttled between one of the two bedrooms where the boyfriend held court and the balcony where I contemplated a two-story plunge to minor injuries. It struck me as cruel at the time that all I really wanted was a deadly

drop, and she had brought me to a measly second floor party. We left together and for the first time in six months she spent the night with me. Her parents, strict Catholics, might have phoned her apartment early one morning, she reasoned, found her missing and arrived at the obvious conclusion that she was in my bed receiving a despicable, heathen fucking. Therefore, our fucking took place in the evening so she could go home to sleep and receive phone calls. But that night she stayed. In my bunker-like, basement apartment she consoled me. She played executioner, confessor, victim and stranger with equal aplomb. And she accepted me carnally one final time. It was a fuck for the ages. Through eruptions of tears, driven in turn by lust and hate and fear and love (all mine), we slowly and deliberately ground our bodies into a single erotic entity – the fuck we should have had that day in the graveyard; the fuck – I couldn't help thinking – that might have saved us had it happened ten months sooner. I clutched her as one would clutch a floating timber from an exploded ship. We rose and descended in perfectly-timed unison, never ceding the suction of our pelvic contact, knowing that any disconnection might be our last. She was there too, but I knew the sickening truth: that her prevailing emotion was not love nor fear nor hate nor lust, just pity.

When I finally came (against my will) I expelled my very ability to think or feel. As she fell asleep, I could sense myself leaving my body. I didn't float above the bed or travel instantly to another place as reports of out-of-body experiences typically have it. I evaporated, leaving my physical shell, like the exoskeleton of some departed locust, staring at the ceiling, on the bed, as Gabrielle dreamed of a tomorrow without me. I lay awake all night and in the morning I saw her to her car and she left me. The morning was bright and the air felt like cold glass. I stood in the driveway a long time, perhaps entertaining the thought that she'd turn around and come back. But the future never turns around and comes back.

20.

I can say now in retrospect a thing or two about loss. The first is that there is nothing in this life that we can not afford to lose. Now, when I hear flood victims on the radio news moaning about their precious household belongings; their “memories,” as they call them, I am filled with a sad and pity-filled scorn. Don’t they realize that what they have lost are the enemies of memory? Their photo albums, their beloved keepsakes are intended as traps for times and feelings escaping into a past which each day grows more desolate and uninhabited. They fear that the dehabitation of their past will not stop; that eventually their most cherished memories will disappear with the lesser events and sensations of days gone by. So they stow keepsakes as insurance against the loss of instances of value, as if a yellow bow flattened and faded between the oversized pages of a family album might someday equal the head of an infant daughter on her first birthday; as if a photograph of a family vacation in the Adirondacks or at the Grand Canyon might supplant the estrangement of lives lived normally and at home.

But these mementos don’t conjure moments, they replace them. What we end up remembering is the object itself. We can tether a why to the what and recall the piece of life that the object was supposed to represent. But these objects are nothing more than automaton replicants of the very human reality of being engaged emotionally and physically and intellectually in a moment; of *experiencing* something. Keepsakes are surrogates, second-rate and second-hand. They are inadequate for the same reasons that hearsay is inadmissible in a court of law.

The second thing is that dying is far from the greatest loss. It nearly goes without saying—or ought to—that if you’re not conscious of your loss then there’s no attendant pain. And, as the dead don’t know they’re dead, there loss is quite inconsequential. To them, at least. What’s far worse is to live through loss. So, the survivors have it worse than the victims. Though the instinctual will to live prevents most from realizing or perhaps just admitting this, quadriplegics would be better off dead. Sure, some make contributions, learn to operate computers with straws and what not. But their internal life, their sense of loss is a burden no body, no matter how strong,

can bear. Every moment is an open window into a past when this or that task was commonplace, when recreation and everyday social behavior were second nature. Every night when the light recedes, the darkness licks at the quadriplegic's face and suffuses him in torment: *you can not lift the baby, you can not throw the ball, you can never make love again; play the piano, walk the dog, take a picture.*

21.

I laid down on the bed in the dark, supine and listened. Steps on the walk. The key in the front door deadbolt. The door opening, then closing. Mimi calling hello from another room. Mimi extending a warmer greeting, now apparently in the same room. A suitcase hitting the floor. It sounded big, a bag packed for an extended stay. Mimi offered a beverage. And, for the first time in years, Gabrielle's voice reached me – not by dint of electronic impulses transmitted through thousands of miles of cable – but as simple sound waves carried through adjacent molecules of air, the first molecule resting gently on the supple skin of her lips, the last comfortably lazing in the canal of my ear. I did not get up. The headlights of passing cars cast new shadows on the wall behind me. I dared not look. The shadows spoke:

- "Nily boy," they taunted, "who's that downstairs, Nily boy? Could it be the beloved Miss Gabrielle?"

And the shadows, evidently forming some complex apparatus whose purpose was to count the days of my life or to measure the volume of my tears or to compute the ratio of my grief to my loneliness, clicked and whirred and sputtered.

I intended to stay there on the bed in a position which suggested helpless convalescence. I intended to wait for Gabrielle to climb the stairs and walk the final eight steps down the hallway. I intended to make her come completely to me. She would even have to bend down to kiss me. I wouldn't even crane my neck. But the infernal racket of those damned shadows, of their repulsive

machine, forced me from the bed. They called after me:

- "Where you going, Nily boy? We were just going to play you a song. You sure you don't want to hear it? It's one of your favorites."

As I rushed from the room the shadows began to sing:

- "I've got a crush on you, Sweety Pie…"

22.

Africa, My Africa by Amos Njimbe. Yellow letters set against a crimson field. It says "Africa" twice. In between: "My." Why does it have to be "My"? Why does Amos Njimbe feel that Africa is his? The continent is huge. It contains multitudes, like Walt Whitman, except, in Africa's case it isn't a metaphor. Millions of people, thousands of peoples: black and white, African, European, Arab. The Dutch settlers in the south, the Muslims in the north, the tribes of centuries-old civilizations from Good Hope to Gibraltar. And yet Amos Njimbe feels as if it is *his* Africa. What about the beasts, for heaven's sake? The great jungles and immense deserts of the continent are home to countless creatures: elephants and geckos (I'm guessing) and cormorants and fire ants and three toed sloths and lions and camels and man-eating tigers. If Amos Njimbe were eaten by a man-eating African tiger, would it still be *his* Africa? It seems to me the tiger might have, at the very least, an equal claim.

The book rests atop a shelf below the monkey painting. There is an inexpensive bookmark, the kind dispensed free of charge at bookshops, dividing the book roughly in half. Mimi has, evidently been reading Amos Njimbe's book for the upcoming meeting of her book club. Prior to his receiving the Mobile Award last year, none of the ladies of the club had ever heard of Amos Njimbe. But that is not unusual. Neither had I. Neither had most of the world's population outside of his native Namibia. One of Amos Njimbe's great attributes – when it comes to international

literary awards and ladies' book circles – is that he writes not in some native, tribal tongue, but in a charmingly primitive English. His stories are surreal fables told with the innocence of a child. Yet they contain small, Zen-like epiphanies regarding the simple value of a life lived morally and with joy. Amos Njimbe is the perfect primitive; the familiar exotic. He speaks our language and totemistically reminds us of the little truths we sometimes forget in the midst of our advanced lives. His book might as well be called, African, My African because to the American Ladies' Book Auxiliary that is precisely what he is.

I know that Amos Njimbe doesn't believe that Africa belongs to him. The book is his perception of Africa; his recollection of an innately African boyhood and manhood. But the question persists: why "My" Africa? What possesses Amos Njimbe to share his own sense of Africa with others? What makes him think they'll care? The amazing reality is that, in fact, they *do* care. But why? Can the experiences of one man stand-in for the experience of many? Can a reader who has no true experience of Africa gain some by reading a book? Can a reader who does have a specific relationship with the continent abet or replace it with the represented relationship of someone else? Perhaps the "My" in Africa, My Africa refers not to Amos Njimbe, but to the reader. Perhaps "My" is a singular surrogate for the collective "our." Is this the power of a book? the power of a painting, a movie, a song? Could it be that I am the monkey and that the monkey is me? Is it possible that, in the Villa Forni Andrea Palladio built a house, not for Girolamo Forni, but for all of us? Perhaps…

- "I've got a crush on you, Sweety Pie…"

23.

A hot wind dips and burrows into my body, turns back, retreats, changes its mind and rakes me again, peppering me with sand. The sun, low in the sky and the color of tamarind, sits on my shoulder like a fiery epaulet. No matter how I turn or how fast I gallop I can not shake it. I am resigned now to wear it thusly until the time it sets. But my patience is grown thin. Yes, I've stood

here now for many days and for many would-be nights without change. The wind still coils and uncoils around my ankles, waist and neck. The sun neither rises nor sets, yet perches sullenly on my dark brown shoulder. And, perennially, this blasted cigarette continues to burn between my fingers, The ash does not grow longer. Neither does it fall off and scatter in the persistent wind. Smoke continually emanates from its tip. We are quite a threesome the sun, the cigarette and I (a foursome if you count the wind, but, of course, if I hadn't told you, you'd never have known it was there).

From my vantage point atop a brief blush of hill I survey an expansive cosmos. I am a surveyor, an overseer, a monitor. I have just a little effect on the events I oversee: like a parent, whose child, about to commit some act of attention-getting mischief, peers back over his shoulder to see if mommy is watching. Elephants and lions and seals circle in the distance the way buzzards do. Were it not for my presence, I don't doubt they'd dive bomb the sleeping invalid below, picking his already tattered carcass clean to the bones. I remain vigilant. Not so much because I care about this man's well-being, but because forestalling the beastly attack is the only power I exert. Should I let down my guard; should the beasts set upon the helpless human and tear him to pieces so small that there would be, in fact, no man to speak of, then I would have surrendered my only source of influence. For not only do I affect the behavior of the elephants, lions and seals, but I also hold some sway over the lumbering gentleman spread out upon the neatly made bed.

That is not to say that I can keep the circling animals from antagonism altogether. They push against boundaries to test my ire. They make faces at the man and howl and cackle and laugh. They cast monstrous shadows upon the wall; shadows depicting biblical scenes gone awry or impossibly contorted caricatures of personages from the man's tormented past or grotesquely complex, overwrought apparatus expanding and contracting in some bio-mechanical struggle to force product from material; utility from stasis; substance from instance.

From where I stand – just the other side of a 12 by 8 inch portal framed in gray-stained ash – the

man is something of a Gulliver, rising from the creaseless plain of the bed. The topography of his slightly raised knees, his shoulders, his protruding chin are plate tectonic upheavals. In the dimming light of evening it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between the man's farthest reaches and the contours of the pillows scattered against the headboard. The seeping grayness of dusk, floods the room like water into a submerged car. Features and distinction drown in the rising haze. I try to keep track of his edges but soon lose them in a marbling of gray and black and blue. My ward, the man, is disappearing right in front of me. I know he must still be there, reclined, indifferent. But if I can not see him, I can not protect him. I can not control him.

24.

I nearly forgot about Gabrielle, obsessed as I was with out running that song. I stumbled down the hallway, grabbing the top of the banister and swinging myself across the threshold of the top of the staircase. I landed on the third step down and found myself startledly face to face with the only woman I've ever loved. I didn't bump her but she nearly toppled backwards anyway. I halted and froze, an expression of stifling anxiety on my face. I glanced back once more over my shoulder. No song, no sign of the shadows. On Gabrielle's face my anxiety was reflected in an equally stifling concern. She extended an ambiguous hand. It was unclear if she intended to pat me, steady me, take my hand in hers, caress me (I wished), shake my hand formally – it was an instinctive move, physically reaching out.

We stood there stifled for what seemed an eternity. I think that I was vaguely aware of Syrup and Mimi at the bottom of the stairs watching us. Behind me I could hear the clink-clunk of the grandfather clock's pendulum, but I couldn't count the number of seconds flashing by. They were moving both forward and backward. We were rushing toward the first words we'd say to each other in more than five years in person, but we were also rushing away from them, toward the last words we'd said five years ago.

At that moment time ceased to be a rail we were riding in one forward direction and became a

dual vortex with us trapped between. The vortices extended in opposite directions, getting narrower as they receded from us. Staring into their maw, through a barrage of swirling dust and hair we could see, in one direction, the future and, in the other, the past. The farther we looked, the narrower the vortices became, eventually dwindling to a single, concentrated point of energy which, at one end was birth and, at the other, death. I looked to my left. In the foreground my dismembered arm was circling through the air, tattered at both ends. Farther back I could see my '86 Honda Civic on the shoulder of a busy city street, the Boston skyline in the distance. I was changing a tire and cursing. It was the day of Gabrielle's graduation from Boston College. I was to meet her parents for the first time at a small reception they were throwing for her at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. Back farther still, I saw myself in front of a primitive Atari video game in my father's apartment. It was a few years after the divorce and I was spending the weekend. I wasn't so interested in the Atari – Space Invaders could hold my attention for only so long – but my father was in the midst of succumbing to a drug-induced stupor on Friday night and would not really come to until Sunday afternoon, so the Atari was my only company. I saw the Paramecium and the New England graveyard and Syrup and Mimi's first encounter. I also saw the Ramones at CBGB's which I found very confusing, because I don't believe I ever actually saw the Ramones at CBGB's.

Looking to my right, it was more difficult to make out what I saw. I had no frame of reference to judge or identify the events of my future. There were places and objects I did not recognize. For instance, at one point, about a third of the way into the vortex, I could see myself holding a spherical object the size of a beach ball. The sphere had a slot cut into the bottom. I lifted it over my head and inserted my head into the slot. I held it there for ten or fifteen seconds and then removed it. I have no idea what the purpose of the device might have been. I saw myself in Paris and Rome and another European city which I couldn't identify. And I saw multiple, repetitive images of myself in bed: hospital beds, twin beds, cots, king-sized beds in various homes and institutions and in varying states of wholeness. At one point I saw myself with a left arm again. But then, a bit farther back (or perhaps I should say farther ahead) the arm was gone again.

What had happened is, for now, anyone's guess.

What heartened me most about the dual vortices hovering about my head like giant, spiral ear muffs, was that the vortex to my left and the vortex to my right were of roughly equal length. Leading me to believe that I was only halfway through my life; that I had another 35 years – give or take – to live.

25.

In my remaining hand I took hers. And I opened my mouth. The little neural messengers in my brain ran from lobe to lobe looking for something to say. They checked every desk top for a scrap of paper; every computer monitor for an appropriate phrase; every blackboard for notes referring to this moment. They found nothing. There were, in fact, precisely eight words in my head at that moment. The neural messengers tried to suppress them, considering discretion the better part of valor. But something in my brain overrode their impulses and fired away. For a moment, face to face with a girl I once loved; a girl I could probably still love if I hadn't been prohibited from loving her, I forgot who I was. I forgot that now I was a man with a mission; a savior, a martyr. I forgot that now I was a man without a left arm; without a tongue. I tried to say the words:

- "I've got a crush on you, Sweety Pie."

But said:

- "I ga-ga kuf ah-nu thwee-ee high."

Gabrielle's face stuttered through the beginnings of a series of reactions. She started to be surprised, then amused, then alarmed, then disappointed. She rifled through pity and disdain and longing and melancholy and finally said, sympathetically:

- “Nice to see you too, Nil.”

I waited for more words to form; for the neural messengers to retrieve sheaves of unutilized copy from a trashcan beside a desk in some dark, rarely used lobe in the far reaches of my brain. I waited patiently, content to look at Gabrielle. Her hair was shorter now, but her skin just as I remembered it: a cool, still pond canopied by trees; stumbled upon in the midst of a long, lonely walk on a stifling August day.

She looked at me too. And as she did, I realized the she also saw the dueling vortices of past and present. Her countenance belied, on one hand, nostalgia and regret, on the other hope and fear. Her eyes glazed momentarily. I assumed she was peering into the thrashing chaos of one vortex or the other. But perhaps she was just choking back a tear.

It should have bothered me that Gabrielle’s reaction to me was ostensibly pity. But it didn’t. For one, I craved her attention and wasn’t picky about what form it took. It had been a while since I’d enjoyed the physical company of a woman; since I’d bestowed or received physical affection. (By that time I had almost completely sublimated my carnal appetites). I’d had fleeting, yet satisfactory, affairs with women like the one on the bus to Denver, but none of those were manifest in moist flesh and warm breath. Gabrielle was my Platonic ideal of a woman. She wore traditional, fashionable clothes; read European novels; had an unnatural affection for Kandinsky and Juan Gris; listened to Frank Sinatra and British punk; was a fan and aficionado of sailing – having come from a family of sailing enthusiasts – though she, herself, did not sail. She was oppressed and repressed by Catholicism, but she used the Church’s dogma as a scale to measure her indiscretions; seemingly taking satisfaction in testing its elasticity and her own. Her passion and emotion lived inside. They emerged only occasionally, piercing her skin like sticks through a lawn bag. And that was one of the most compelling things about being with her. Stirring her, exciting her, moving her – none of these was a given. I had to work at it and, even when I did, the results were far from automatic. Of course, when I did succeed in eliciting an emotional

response, the reward, being rare, was all the sweeter.

26.

But I also knew that pity was a first step toward devotion. The paramecium and I had discussed this very subject more than once. We knew that bringing people to our side, attracting them to our cause, would be a subtle psychological maneuver. The process wouldn't happen overnight and would travel through a series of stages. Pity, we reasoned, was one possible point of entry. The paramecium described one imaginable path this way:

- "As with beatification, there may first be controversy. But purity, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. An angel of mercy to some, may be a euthanasianist to others. There's no atlas to the souls of men. The most precious bloom may start, for instance, as a seed of pity; may pluck from its lamentable husk a sorry root. Before long, spread out beneath the ground like a subterranean nebula, our timid little shoot seems deserving of respect. The very faults which, at first were perceived to be part of him and which made the upstart seem so pitiable, are now seen as obstacles he has admirably overcome. Before long, the faults are forgotten; the seed has given way to a forceful rise of stem, emerging from the earth's bosom like the fulfillment of a promise. The stalk becomes the rallying point for a new understanding, a new energy, a new belief. He has merely done what his nature demanded. But in his example, the world sees a vision of hope and of cure. And the pity-laden scorn he once endured, sloughs off like so many dead leaves, lost to the wind and forgotten."

27.

Shortly after Gabrielle arrived, my morphine connection was severed, Dr. Kantor having been indicted as part of a Federal prescription drug fraud sting set up by the FBI and Colorado State Police. But I'd had the foresight to stash a significant quantity of the drug prior to his arrest. I wasn't using recreationally anymore. Before the removal of my tongue, I'd weaned myself off it in

anticipation of Gabrielle's visit. And currently, for the throbbing pain at the top of my throat, I got by on naproxen sodium and an occasional vicodin. But I knew that to continue with my plan I would need morphine. I kept my stash in a small box gift wrapped and bowed in red ribbon beneath my bed. If prying eyes (Mimi's, no doubt) were to find the box, discretion would forbid her from opening it. I counted on her pride and her pregnancy-induced self-centeredness. Undoubtedly, she would assume the gift was for her or the baby. She would smile sadly to herself, shake her head and release a little chuckle. She would admit silently that there was still some good left in Nil. And she would ramble back downstairs, feeling a little bit guilty for snooping.

Occasionally, I'd check the box to insure my theory held. And always the box lay where I left it, undisturbed. I knew that if ever Mimi (or anyone else, for that matter) let their curiosity get the better of them; if they gently slipped the bow from the corners of the box and pried open the lone strip of Scotch tape which anchored the paper to the box's bottom; if ever they shimmied the gift wrap, still holding the squareness of the package up from around the box, freeing the shell from the yolk, as it were; if they found the two dozen vials of Kantor's morphine, the jig would most certainly be up. Not only would my plan be foiled, but I'd find myself in an extended-stay residential facility for chemical dependants. I'd find myself talking to a seven foot tall American Indian, urging him to just raise up his hand, Chief. And, well, that's not the life for me.

28.

We ate dinner informally at the table in the kitchen. Mimi made pasta. And despite everyone at the table knowing why Gabrielle was there, the mood was convivial and light. We laughed over stories of road trips and parties; of former roommates and friends. Gabrielle mentioned D. Peters Wilborn, a mutual acquaintance of ours some ten years ago – so upper-crust and well looked-after that, for a diversion, he worked part time at a snooty Cambridge bookstore, while spending four days a week studying African hand drumming with a Senegalese master. He used the vestigial first initial while adopting the pluralized family name as his familiar. So we referred to him

as Peters, stressing the s, and suffered him gladly, like a nineteenth century toy. The subject of my arm or my tongue, as vestigial now as Peters' D., but, unlike it, no longer attached to me, never came up.

29.

We are surrounded by a thousand apparatus; surrogate limbs designed to perform tasks and operations that our bodies can't. The machines of the every day, loosely defined, so simple as to be overlooked – not thought of as apparatus, but simply as things. But things are the mother of invention. Simple machines imply their own failings. Better versions are suddenly "needed." The thing, via a series of other things, eventually evolves into the machine. Industrial selection. Survival of the most efficient. So, in turn, from the pencil, we get: the fountain pen, the ball point pen, the felt tip pen, the roller ball pen, the typewriter, the electric typewriter, carbon paper, the mimeograph, the copier, the color copier, the fax machine. Because: pencil is impermanent, nibs smear, ball points scratch, the felt tip's imprecise, the hand is inconsistent, the typewriter's arduous, the electric typewriter does not produce duplicates, carbon paper's messy, the mimeograph is arduous, the copier can't reproduce color, the color copier can't transmit documents to others. The pencil's failings invented the fax machine. Failure leads us to what we are capable of.

Simple machines also beget attendant machines. The pencil, the pencil sharpener. The dish, the dish washer. And so on. But these machines, simple and complex, do nothing to save us from our headlong plunge. Life is nothing more than a decades-long, slow-motion dive. The force of our fall is so great as to drive our lifeless bodies underground after death. But even the simplest machines lead a complex life.

I've spent afternoons in galleries and art museums and I've walked like a zombie led by a path of paintings on the wall and little placards beside them. More than once, I've unknowingly continued

beyond the last painting and discovered, mounted at roughly the same wall height, a thermostat or a fire alarm. And these simple machines – a crude potentiometer and a basic switch – suddenly sidestep their utility. They can, if stumbled upon unwittingly and in the proper frame of mind, avoid being machines altogether. They can be beautiful. When one then realizes that with a sliding of the lever or a flip of the switch, environmental change can be affected – the temperature can rise or fall, the population of the building can be exchanged: patrons and employees for officials of the Fire Department – then their double lives become apparent. Machines can be beautiful so long as they are stripped of their notion of utility. This is the sacred secret of architecture. Buildings are simple machines. Their function as places of commerce or industry or domestic shelter doesn't take away from their existence, in certain cases, as objects of true beauty. But I wonder if, for instance, wealthy clients who commission extravagant homes continue to see their dwellings' beauty five or ten or twenty years after they move in. Or does the beauty dissipate as the design becomes the domicile? In my experience, buildings become decreasingly beautiful at each step along their journey to realization. The drawings are usually the purest, most aesthetic stage of conception. The models – miniature fiberglass or balsa wood structures, replete with cellophane lawns, matchbox cars lining the street and 1/25 scale model people on their way in or out – are often nearly as gorgeous as the drawings, but leaving less to the imagination, they just as often impose reality's will on the viewer's experience. They depict available parking, demonstrate adherence to fire code and zoning laws; they convey utility with heating units and loading docks. The diminishment has begun. The buildings themselves are often a compromised extrapolation of the original design ideal. The client asks for certain modifications. Structural concerns outweigh aesthetic ones. And buildings are almost always too big to be taken in with one glance. As an experience, they unfold more temporally than spatially. Finally, when the building is furnished; when it's attendant living or working occupies its space, it can no longer be understood as an object. Buildings are the enemy of architecture's art. Machines can live two lives, but never simultaneously. A bicycle wheel and a stool, once placed in a gallery, are no longer a bicycle wheel and a stool.

30.

So what of my plan? Why would my own utility be an issue? I've studied the heavens and I've imagined heaven. And I've found neither endeavor more or less useful than the other. Stars, enormous balls of burning gas, live and die in life spans stricken with gigantism. They suffer infancies and mid-life crises and old age and in the end they expend their energy and die. They are like us. Stars come and go, yet the women talk of Michelangelo. And why? Because, unlike stars, we are capable of generosity. A Sixteenth Century Italian (last name Buonarotti, meaning "good breaks") left gifts – sculpture, paintings – for the rest of us to unwrap and cherish for centuries, millennia, perhaps, even, the life time of a star. But what do the stars do for each other? Occasionally, they implode and suck their twins into their blackness. That's hardly generous. Every so often, one "falls" or "shoots," apparently performing for the other inhabitants of the sky. But these so-called stars are not, in fact, stars at all, but meteors hurling themselves into the earth's atmosphere; plunging headlong to their deaths. (I'm aware I've already used that phrase to describe the trajectory of a human life. This plunge is far less tragic).

But lives, like falling stars, can be both illustrious and illusory. The lives which draw sudden and brief attention can seem, in their moment, important. Lives such as these; stars such as these can be taken for guiding lights. But there's a reason the author of the New Testament had the wise men chase the North Star and not some plummeting meteor. The North Star is imperturbable. For more than two millennia, while never the brightest star in the sky, it has hung above the Big Dipper's cup: a beacon for wayward sailors and lost nomads. It has not erupted in tempestuous furies. It has not imploded and turned inward in a dramatic and desperate plea for attention. It has not collapsed and swallowed its surroundings. It has steadfastly maintained its location and its luminosity, content to provide; purposeful and mindful of its calling. Others have come and others have gone. Massive Red Giants have wowed astronomers in remote corners of the sky. White Dwarves and twin nebulae have flickered and flamed to the delight of observant eyes. But their contribution is fleeting; their charm soon replaced by other ephemeral thrills. I am no Red Giant. My heart is steadfast and expansive. It can hold the hopes of millions. It can guide

the misguided masses and blanket the forsaken, the forgotten, the unfortunate. The earth pleads for blood and my heart issues a beat. What the bullets and the bombs and bats can steal, my heart can replenish.

31.

It was 2 o'clock in the morning and I couldn't sleep. The paramecium was chattering in my ear and the shadowy projections of the mobile on the wall had refused to take any meaningful shape. I went to the kitchen and poured a glass of juice. I spread out the Rocky Mountain Times on the table and scanned the stories of Balkan conflict and Wall Street upheaval; of championship game failures and problems at Denver's state-of-the-art airport: global futility far and near. I couldn't read more without becoming frustrated and depressed. So I tightened the velveteen rope of my robe and wandered out to the garage. The space between Syrup's 1999 Honda Accord and the primed, but unpainted garage walls was home to a great many apparatus. On metal shelves lay pruning shears and trowels, hand saws and cordless drills. The walls themselves sprouted hooks of varying sizes and from those hooks hung rakes, hoes, shovels, brooms – the long-handled cousins of similar tools housed on plywood shelves at one end of the garage. Beside the shelves, facing the Honda's grill, was a seven foot tall sheet metal cabinet. I eased my way around the car's front quarter panel, gathering my robe to keep it from gathering dirt or cobwebs or grime from the car, the floor or the wall. I turned the handle of the cabinet and opened its right-hand door. It swung with an awkward creak and circumscribed an arc quickly at first, more slowly as it reached perpendicularity with the cabinet's face. Inside I found leather work gloves and dust masks, an old painter's hat stiff with white latex, a scattering of seed packets, a sprinkler, an additional trowel, an assortment of paint brushes, and two cans of Rustoleum brand spray paint—one brick red, the other black. Without any particular intent, I picked up the black can and shook it. The metal ball inside, used to stir the paint when the can was shaken as I was doing, rattled against the sides of the can. There was significant resistance, though, and the sound of the ball contacting the interior can walls was muted and thuddy – not a clean and unfettered tink. I've always found that sound peculiarly satisfying. The can was full. Whether the nozzle remained

unclogged was another matter altogether.

I left the garage and, still shaking the can, crossed the driveway, peppered with red and brown leaves. I waded a step or two into the shallow brush across the driveway and leaned down. I pointed the spray can at a light gray rock which was picking up enough moonlight to distinguish itself from the ground and twigs and leaves. I depressed the nozzle. The paint sputtered for an instant and then released in a steady, useful stream. I stood up and felt victorious, as if, somehow, I'd come through in the clutch. I walked to the back of the Calypso. The large, windowless expanse of wall which corresponded to the back of the garage beckoned. I still had no intent. I didn't know what I planned to do. I had no reason; no motivation. I stood before the wall, can in hand, and I heard the paramecium's voice. What he'd been whispering over and over again in the dark suddenly took form. Syllabic blathering transmogrified into clean, distinct words. As they formed in my head I sprayed them on the wall, neatly, one at a time. When I'd finished I stepped back to read them as a whole; to parse their collective meaning. Aloud, I read the words:

- "Addition through subtraction."

32.

The morning after Gabrielle's arrival, I awoke to the smell of breakfast. Sunlight entered the room at an angle like a runner sliding into second base. The trees outside the window allowed only individual beams to pass unhindered. The monkey was wide awake, biding his time. The elephants and lions and seals of the mobile hung motionless in the air, smiling, waiting. Gabrielle was in the kitchen busily making pancakes. I re-donned my bathrobe and groggily clomped down the stairs. Gabrielle stood facing the stovetop, griddle handle in one hand, spatula in the other. I passed her on my way to the refrigerator, juice on my mind. As I passed behind her, I absent mindedly extended my face out across her shoulder and kissed her on the cheek. It was the first kiss we'd shared in five years. When I reached the refrigerator, I froze, realizing what I'd done. I glanced back. She was flipping a pancake.

She was flipping a pancake. Maybe she was clinging to her task out of fear. Perhaps she felt her knees go weak and her head swoon like swooping swallows. If she lost focus on her pancakes, perhaps, she would become un-moored, loose her footing, collapse. I reached for a carton of orange juice, turned, took a glass from the cabinet beside the fridge, set it on the table and poured it full with juice. I set the carton down and slumped into a chair, glancing again at her back. At that moment, she too had turned toward me. We made eye contact for the briefest possible moment. In fact, as we turned away, I wondered if we had actually looked into each others' eyes. Her retinas were surely emblazoned on mine, but was it merely an act of will? How can one be sure?

- "So, tell me about Maine," I scribbled in my little pad. " Do you live on the coast?"
- "Well, about a mile and a half in. It's beautiful. The winters are rough."
- "Do you work?" I wrote.
- "Uh-huh. I work at the Benson Public Library."
- "Uh-huh." I grunted. (You don't need your tongue for that).

33.

Syrup and I met in 1979. We'd grown up in the same New York suburb on the banks of the Hudson River. We were freshmen and both had first period off. It was November. Morning frosts were becoming more and more common. I sat alone in a corner of the school cafeteria reading James Clavell's King Rat, while Syrup huddled beneath the football field bleachers with a group of upper classmen – friends of his older brother's – and smoked pot. But after the joint or bowl was done, so was any sense of commonality or connection between Syrup and his brother's friends. So he'd wander back inside, eyes overtaken by capillaries, and sit by himself in his own corner of the cafeteria. I never even noticed him. But he, evidently, had been sizing me up for some time. He'd been checking out all the regular first period inhabitants of the cafeteria hoping to find someone non-threatening to talk to. At the rear, by the propped-open fire door were the

cigarette smokers; sons and daughters of auto body repairmen and sporting goods salesmen. The boys grew inept little mustaches and the girls styled their hair in the manner of Farrah Fawcett Majors or Valerie Bertinelli. At the opposite end, by the hallway doors, sat a group of four or five boys who spent each morning poring over their homework – calculus or physics probably. They were possible targets for Syrup, but he wasn't particularly interested in early morning homework discussions; especially not calculus or physics and especially not while stoned.

Beneath the Yes mural painted on the wall by the kitchen, a group of stoners hung out talking about prog rock and the encroaching new wave. These were kids who had been at some of the same parties Syrup had been to and in some of the same parking lots where, on excruciatingly boring Saturday nights, Syrup and his friends had hung out. They listened to some of the same music Syrup listened to and were, as likely as not, just as high as he was. But these kids rose to their level of disaffection and were, even then, establishing their patterns of adulthood. They would not develop affections for any music born after their graduation from high school; they would continue alleviating the pain of their mechanistic daily routine with an inebriate of one kind or another. If they could keep their hair, their hairstyles would remain the same. They would marry each other and all stay friends, working side by side until retirement. None of them would ever live anywhere else. Could Syrup have known this? Not really. But there was a palpable, instinctual hunch at work. He had been raised by a pair of English teachers, intellectual liberals who'd come of age in the late 1950's; people drawn to the beatniks in their youth, who listened to bebop and read 100 novels a year. Syrup would go to college. It was implicit. He didn't know it yet, but when he got there, he'd throw wine and cheese parties in his dorm room to distance himself from his beer drinking, chip eating school mates.

So, finally, in an uncharacteristically affirmative action, Syrup sidled up to my table. We'd had mutual friends and had been at a few of the same parties too; a few of the same concerts. Evidently, my steadfast focus on the novel gave Syrup the impression that we might have something in common – not that he'd ever read a novel, nor that he has to this day. His taste runs

more to epics of Twentieth Century European geopolitical upheaval. But having grown up in a house which, from the inside, appeared to be built of books, he felt a kinship with readers. In all likelihood, he reasoned, a reader is not one of the uncouth, rude, purveyors of violent high school chaos whom he feared and despised. Before long we were spending every first period together, smoking pot under the bleachers, then sitting in the cafeteria. We'd unwittingly become best friends and would remain so for more than twenty years.

34.

I'd made a decision to replace Villa Forni as my central beauty. Where once I'd found her stunning and irreproachable, now, thanks to her bile-soaked diatribes, I found her distasteful and, on occasion, repulsive. She argued with me, of course, and turned suddenly demure and coquettish, hoping to reawaken my affection. But it had never been her demureness nor coquettishness which had attracted me, so she only managed to increase the distance between us and strengthen my resolve. Love is always like that at the end. I decided to turn over a fresh leaf and avoid architecture altogether. Music seemed like a good place to start; or poetry or the movies. The paramecium supported my plan, having long seen Villa Forni as a selfish distracter.

I returned the photograph of Villa Forni to a shoe box under my bed which contained dozens of other photographs and postcards. From the contents of the box I withdrew postcard photographs of Oscar Wilde, Iggy Pop, Frank O'Hara, Primo Levi, Otis Redding, Italo Calvino Charles Mingus and Richard Hell. I pinned them to the wall above my bed. Each of these men had created beauties worthy of being my central beauty, but photographs of the men themselves wouldn't do. They were the eight apostles of my as-yet-unfound central beauty. I sought their counsel. I asked them to guide me to the messianic beauty. They were not quick to respond. And when they did, they aligned themselves in pairs: Levi and Calvino – the Italians; Hell and Pop – the punks; Wilde and O'Hara – the homosexuals; Redding and Mingus – the African-Americans. I wondered if these alignments somehow defined my aesthetic. Could my sense of beauty be called gay-black-Italian-punk? Before I could answer my question, they realigned. This time it was Wilde and Hell –

the urban dandies, O'Hara and Calvino – the classicist humanists, Pop and Mingus – the noble savages, and Levi and Redding – the heart-on-their-sleeve gentlemen. So perhaps I'm a dandy-humanist-savage-gentleman. Who knows?

35.

The paramecium's tale. (Told to me late one night in the baby's room).

I was born in a South Pacific atoll known as Palmyra. The year was 1954. I spent the first six hours of my life clinging to the underside of a U.S. Army latrine. But, I soon decided that was no place for a young paramecium with ideas of his own. So I packed my bags (metaphorically speaking) and set out to make my way in the world. Mind you, to a paramecium the world is often no bigger than a city block. Our death bed is rarely more than a mile from our place of birth. Sure, there are examples of great paramecium explorers who've infiltrated suitcases or airline meal trays and traveled across oceans, but, given our life expectancy, surviving such trips is almost unheard of. And when it is heard of, it is the stuff of legend. No paramecium, after all, lives long enough to return from such a journey.

There is a well-known story, however, of two brave young souls, one who adhered himself to the shaving brush of a Parisian journalist who was primping at Charles de Gaulle Airport. He flew the Concorde to JFK and, after moving from the journalist's shaving kit to his spectacles, expired some seven hours later in the bar of a hotel on Central Park West. But, before his death, he made the acquaintance of a strapping paramecium youth living on the underside of a high ball in the hotel bar. He regaled this native New Yorker with descriptions of his beloved Paris, deliberately accentuating the French pronunciation: "Paree," whenever he mentioned it. The New Yorker, his nucleus spinning with visions of the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe and the Moulin Rouge, was overjoyed to hear that the journalist, presently conducting an interview with a young painter of iconographic, abstract canvases which hinted at Pop's cultural signification while striving for greater emotional and spiritual depth, would be returning to the City of Lights,

posthaste – catching the Concorde for his return just an hour hence. The New Yorker quickly swapped places with the Parisian, taking up residence on the journalist's horn rims.

The New Yorker, no longer young by the time he reached Charles De Gaulle, made his way to the very men's room from which the Parisian's journey had begun. There, he recounted his meeting with the native son in the New York bar. The Parisian paramecium's descendents – now two generations removed from their adventurous forebear – were filled with excitement and pride to hear of the courage and joie de vivre in their bloodline. The New Yorker, shortly after telling his tale, expired in a puddle by the sink.

But I was naïve when I was young. I gave no thought to how I would travel nor to how long I had to do so. When the toe of a boot appeared beneath the latrine floor, I dislodged and dove for the boot. The boot walked a long way, hours perhaps. I grew tired and weak. Eventually, the boot came to rest in a ravine. The ravine stretched as far as I could see to either side. And in the ravine, shoulder to shoulder, a hundred men or more crouched down and peered over the bank in the same direction. At one point, one of them barked a brief command and all the men in unison, pulled caps over their heads, positioned goggles over their eyes and placed their hands over their ears. My boots stirred, nearly tossing me to the ground. But I maintained my grip and stayed put. There was a long wait. Many things rise invisibly from the flesh of men. A palpable anxiety is just one of them. Excitement is another and there was a fair amount of that as well. There was a brief period of audible electronic pulses, another bark from the same man as before, and all the shoulders of all the men tightened and hunched a few degrees further. The sky, which seconds before was mottled gray and blue and black, turned suddenly white. Moments later a roar of thunder rose with the determination of a tea pot starting its whistle. The rumble reached thunderous proportions and kept growing. It was soon three, four or five thunders, all piling up in a towering cascade of tumultuous noise. A fine silt began to rain down. My cilia strained to maintain their hold against this bombardment. Keep in mind, I was even smaller then, than I am now. A wave, like water passed over us, flooding the ravine. But it was not water. It was air -

hotter and thick and travelling in a single mass. The heat dissipated and the noise and the light subsided. The man in charge barked a new set of orders, a little less emphatically this time. I was surprised by what had happened, but I knew so little of the world. The men, however, were visibly shaken. Some staggered as they rose from the ravine. Some stayed hunched where they were a long time after the command to rise. There was no talking, just a silence that broke only for the sound of an ominous, whistling wind.

My boot was one of the first to move. He dug into the side of the ravine and clamored up the rise to an enormous open field leading to a beach and, then, to the sea. Everything looked, more or less, as it had before. Yet the men bore the recognizable sense that something had changed. A few days later, still on the boot, I found myself on a DC-3 transport en-route, first to Manila, then Hawaii, then Edwards AFB, then Omaha and, finally, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. I had traveled half way around the world – farther than any paramecium I'd ever heard of – and yet I felt fit as a fiddle. Curiously, I saw very few paramecium during the next few weeks. I felt strong urges, as members of my species, the aurelia, often do. We are not the supermodels of the protozoan world. That distinction belongs to our cousins the caudatum, who are long and graceful – easy on the eyes. They never have any difficulty finding genetically compatible organisms with whom to mate. But we, aurelia, are divided into 16 distinct mating groups, known as syngens. And finding the right syngen is no picnic. But we are plagued with the need to conjugate. That is, to join, temporarily, with a compatible syngen and exchange micronuclear elements. You see, I've got two nuclei. One, the macronucleus, controls all my metabolic activity. The other, the micronucleus, contains all my genetic material and is responsible for the genetic reorganization during conjugation. After conjugation I can take care of reproduction by myself. We call it asexual binary fission. I can just divide into two daughter cells.

Now, I had no particular desire at the time to be a father (or two daughters, as the case may be) but without the rejuvenating effects of conjugation, a paramecium ages and dies. We were quarantined at Guantanamo. They locked us in sanitized barracks and burned the men's clothes.

I dropped from the boot as soon as I realized what was happening and tucked in beneath a porcelain sink. There were a handful of microbes; bacteria and an assortment of protozoan, but no paramecium and certainly no aurelia. I began to fear for my life. There was no telling how long this quarantine would last and I knew that without conjugation I'd be dead in a matter of days. I scoured the scoured walls and floors, the fixtures, the window casements and the silverware brought in with meals. I began to feel weak. But my weakness was, apparently, a product of imagination. In the ensuing days my strength returned.

When the quarantine ended – some six weeks later –rode a gimpy lieutenant's shoe horn to the Ft. Worth, TX airport and then hopped the pocket comb of a satellite salesman on his way to Minneapolis, MN. Minnesota proved inhospitably cold so I returned to Texas on a ball point pen. I was a microbe hobo, riding the rails. The pen, it turned out belonged to a gas station attendant from Cavendish. I should have been dead months ago.

Somehow, that blast back on Palmyra has allowed me to exceed my normal life expectancy. The explosion had the effect of a super-conjugation. It imbued me with a continually refreshing life energy. I have no need for sleep. I eat only for pleasure and, at times, go days without food. (This is highly unusual for paramecium, gluttons of the protozoan world).

36.

I remember my father, but not very well. He was a big man. One might refer to him as burlesque, though I know that's not how that word is used. I'm supposing, if I use it to describe a man, you'll picture a walrus-like mustache which borders on the ludicrous and a belly that evades the containment of a generous pair of trousers. In my father's case, these trousers were, as often as not, plaid. (He was an avid golfer). He was voracious, taking in meats and cheeses without regard and filling gaps between meals with cocaine and pills and hobbies and rousing friendships. The friends he chose, I think, dulled his senses more than the drugs did. He displayed a unique and insidious brand of elitism which was – as must often be the case – rooted in his own

psychological shortcomings. I say unique because he robed his elitism in a peculiar populism. He chummed with the black starter at the country club, sharing a bottle of Tuborg before teeing off. For a journey to the Porsche dealership in Connecticut, he dressed down in a ratty football jersey and cut-off denim shorts. When the dealer (replete – I swear – with German accent) questioned his ability to afford such an automobile, my father extracted the price of the car, in cash, from his shorts' pocket. He'd set ol' Gunther up. From then on, incidentally, whenever my father would turn up at the dealership – for a tune-up or just to window shop the new models – he was greeted with great enthusiasm and congenially referred to by all the employees as "Doc." (He was a dentist).

37.

I don't want to die. As a child, I would lie awake at night unable to resist contemplating what death would feel like. Over the course of an hour or more, I would try to empty my mind to allow for sleep. At first I'd stop consciously thinking about death. Other ideas and images would ricochet around my pre-pubescent brain. But eventually, those too would slow down and stop. Sensory information was harder to still: the shadows and light cast by passing cars, the faint tatters of conversation from downstairs, the aroma of after-dinner coffee. I tried to retain these sensory stimuli, to save them for use in my impending dreams, but soon enough the coffee's scent would become familiar, then indiscernible, then disappear. Conversation and light would be overtaken by a hum which was the average of all the available noise and light in the suburban night. I could feel the twitches and tingles of life submitting to the horrible stasis of death. I'd grab desperately at a snatch of thought; an incident from the day or a memory of satisfying activity: playing ball or swimming in the lake at my grandparent's summer house. But a sleep-ready mind is a death-ready mind. I employed AM radio to provide a benign focal point. The shallow, compressed lull of 70s pop was usually enough to fool my mind into a semi-hypnotic state which allowed for sleep. But there were enemies lurking in the amplitude. Live And Let Die by Paul McCartney and Wings was the most irrepressible antagonist. Those ominous, Wagnerian strings and the simple mention of the word "die" would send me spiraling downward through the lull into the torment of nothingness. Carly Simon's minor key Killing Me Softly had a similar effect.

Once instigated, my brain – all of nine or ten years old at this point – would construct a complex similitude. Some might argue that I was, in fact, *de*constructing the complex similitude that is life; stripping away the layers of carefully painted artifice, removing the layers of willful wool from my eyes, to reveal the unacceptable truth of human life: death awaits. It waits patiently. It was here before I arrived and it will be here after I leave. The flesh and organs and sinew and bone that constitute my body does so only for a short time. I am a temporary form, renting matter from the cosmos. For most of its existence that same matter constitutes other things, dead things, things that are not me. If I let down my guard, even for an instant – as I'm crossing the street, as I'm swallowing a fork full of meat, as I'm lying in bed at night – if I let down my guard, death is there to welcome my matter home. I must be vigilant. I knew this at ten. I know this now.

So, despite what some in the press and among the public have said, death has never been my goal. It is precisely a new conception of living to which I aspire.

38.

I had trouble sleeping. With Gabrielle in the house, I felt watched. Syrup and Mimi had ignored me to my satisfaction – they went about their lives, they had the baby to worry about. But Gabrielle was there for me. She had no other obligations, no other responsibilities. I was her only concern. This made me uncomfortable. But the paramecium, as he was prone to do, saw opportunity in my anguish.

- "She is your preview audience."
- "My preview audience?"
- "Yes. Before the world gets a chance to see you, to study you and debate you. She is your market research group, your dry run, your guinea pig. We'll be able to make some tweaks based on her reaction."
- "Some tweaks?"

- “Fine tunings. Now, I don’t pretend she’s the perfect test. She’s far from objective. She has a built-in empathy. But she also has a built-in aversion. She didn’t want to come back into your life. Yet here she is. She is, in fact, quite possibly the least likely person to come to your rescue. But a little ‘cut-off finger here,’ and ‘cut-off hand there’ and, *voila*, here she is. Marvelous.”
- “Okay, so, we’ve gotten her reaction. Can’t we send her home now?”
- “No, no, my dear boy. What is your hurry? You need to think about what you’re doing and why. Are you merely looking for sympathy and pity? Are you inclined to accept the judgement of second-rate psychologists? Are you simply making a play for attention? If you let Gabrielle off the hook this easily – if you then let the world off the hook – then, indeed, that will be the final judgement; that’s what the psychology textbooks will say – ‘a play for attention.’ That is, if you make it to the textbooks at all. Is that what you want? Shall that be your legacy – ‘a play for attention’?”
- “You’re making an art of these pep talks.”
- “Art is what you appear to require. You react to nothing else.”

He paused to look me in the eye. He was not staring me down, nor pausing for effect, he was looking for something in my eyes, some glint of recognition, some acceptance or agreement. He thought he knew something about me and he wanted to see if I knew it too.

- “So what do you suggest I do?”
- “Let the cat out of the bag. Spill the beans. ‘Fess up. Tell her.”
- “Tell her? Are you crazy?”
- “You’ve got to start somewhere. If she doesn’t go for it, you can send her home and she’ll be nothing more than one little, isolated cell of dissention in the wilds of New England. She’ll be an ex-girlfriend. Just the sort of unreliable third party that the major news media won’t touch. She may get a couple of minutes on Hard Copy or a paltry advance from The Enquirer. Oprah might even have her on to talk about ‘Nil: The

Early Years." Or some such nonsense. But the real news, the real message will be unaffected. And think about what it will mean if she comes on board. What a persuasive apostle she would make. The doubter, the disillusioned, drawn back to the fold by the power of the truth. She could be your doubting Thomas."

39.

I hoped that I could woo her. I hoped that the clarity and the truth of my plan would sway her. I imagined navigating the rest of the course with her at my side and I was filled with a joy and a pride that threatened to blow my head off my neck like a champagne cork. But, of course, she could always reject me. My punishment could be swift and unmerciful. I risked alienating, once and for all, the only woman I had ever loved. If I was going to go ahead and tell her, I needed some padding. It had been a week since I'd decided to replace Villa Forni. But, as yet, I'd taken no decisive action. Seven days without a central beauty. Seven days of raw, unprotected vulnerability. I hadn't gone that long in years. But the decision I was now forced to make would be critical. Not only would my next central beauty shield me through my ordeal with Gabrielle, it would also guard me against the inevitable bombardment that would follow my going public. There was no doubt that many would find my message hard to swallow. Some people would feel personally attacked and would react with violence. I had to be prepared.

I remember asking myself: if this were it; if I knew that I had minutes to live, to what or whom would I turn? Whose forgiveness would I ask? Whose comfort would I seek? A series of pellet-shot-memories deflected off my brain:

- Dylan Thomas' *A Refusal To Mourn The Death, By Fire, Of A Child In London*, the first poem I ever loved – in particular, the lines, '…nor sow my salt seed/in the least valley of sack cloth/to mourn the majesty and burning/of the child's death.' At 15, I'd been overwhelmed by the magic of the personal geography of these lines: that our tears are plantings; that our grief might breed new life, born in the sack cloth valley of our garments.

- A Cartier Bresson photograph – not the portrait of Matisse Gabrielle and I used to moon over – but a picture of a man hop-scotching across the puddles of a vacant lot, his reflection in the puddles mirroring his action, an apéritif advertisement behind him, depicting a black figure in silhouette, in precisely the same mid-air position. The capture of a moment of true serendipity. The sense that in all the unfolding of man's time on earth, such collusion has never before existed. Or, if it has, it occurred before the advent of photography and is list to us, useless.
- Lawrence Of Arabia, the film by David Lean. I've seen it many times. But a film is a tricky proposition. As a central beauty it fails. There are too many images, too many scenes, too many faces and lines and frames. I thought of Peter O'Toole donning his Bedouin costume for the first time. I considered the vast Saharan vistas. I imagined the film's conceit as a whole: that all truth is local; an outsider, no matter how strong, can not impose his own reality where a previous reality exists. He can, however, act as a mirror in which others may truly, and for the first time, recognize themselves. These are truly beautiful ideas, but too diffuse; too fleetingly temporal in their presentation.

I thought of paintings by Jasper Johns and Giotto and Gerhard Richter and Caravaggio. I thought of Joseph Cornell's boxes and Max Ernst's assemblages and the beautiful spirit and conviction of John Heartfield's photo-collages. I thought of the New York City skyline and the pantheon in Rome. I thought of stories by Calvino and Borges, Robert Walser and Paul Bowles. For naught.

40.

"A project has one life in its built state but another in its written or drawn state."

I came across this quote in *A Scientific Autobiography,* written in 1981 by the Italian architect, Aldo Rossi. Rossi's drawings had always charmed and moved me. They are works unto themselves, not enslaved to the image of the finished building, but often wild, anarchic and

irregular. He seems mostly to want to describe the building's spirit rather than its shape. He knew that the point is not a window here nor a chimney there, but the meaning of the place and the relation of place to how life is lived within it. Rossi takes the drawing's life to be every bit the equal of the building's life. In many cases, the drawing is more beautiful; in most cases, closer to perfect and, in certain instances, more real.

The thought occurred and I was done. I had found my central beauty. It had been there all along. I'd relied on it. I'd confided in it. I'd obeyed it. But I hadn't seen it for what it was: beautiful, perfect and real. I left the Rossi book open to page 142 and left Syrup's study and climbed the stairs. I crossed the hallway and entered the baby's room.

The cocked-headed monkey, cigarette in hand, introducing a tamarind sun. This was it. He was the maestro. He could protect me. I might have thought of him as less than real, therefore less than perfect, therefore less than beautiful. But no. This monkey was superior in every regard to any real monkey. He wasn't the target of unseen predators in the jungle just out of frame. He didn't suffer from parasitic infestation. He wasn't exclusively an eater/shitter/sleeper/fornicator. He was smoking a cigarette. And that makes all the difference. Like Descartes said, it took us millions of years to develop an attachment to useless habits. And that is what made us human. This monkey has arrived at one of the final stops on the consciousness train. He has caught up to us and now he threatens to pass us by. He will be god in no time.

In this painting, the artist has created an ideal. That is what artists do. They make voices they wish they had. In this sense art and consciousness are alike. They are both processes driving toward a perfection of some aspect of humanness. The ideal world is one where the monkeys smoke and gesture to the brightness of the low-hanging sun; where the monkeys reach out toward the burning ball of gas whose absence defines our nights – reach out as if that burning ball of gas were a heavy piece of fruit bending the bough of its parent tree, pulling its origins to the earth, threatening to break free, to come hurtling down, to fall headlong into the hardening

clay. In this ideal world, the monkey catches the plummeting fruit. He cradles it in his soft, genderless, fur-lined lap. My monkey will cradle the sun as it dives toward the earth. My monkey will cradle the unborn child as it plunges into existences. My monkey will cradle me as I drop.

Salvation.

Part Three:
What I Was Put On Earth To Do

1.

I wrote:

- "I'm dismembering myself on purpose."

Gabrielle:

- "…?"
- "(nod)"
- "On purpose." (Not a question, a sarcastic affirmative meant to be both quizzical and derogatory).
- "We get only this one life to do something with." (A bad sentence. But she knew what I meant). "What options do we have? What difference can we make? Everything sinks. The lowest common denominator is the ocean floor and everything which reaches a large audience ends up there. Successful politicians are men and women who've mastered the art of saying things which will be acceptable – without being terribly well-liked – by the greatest number of people."

(I ripped the sheet from my little note pad and slid it across the table to her. She read it as I continued writing).

- ""Products are developed in this same manner. Even music, in order to be popular,

must be banal. Anything which surprises is relegated to the slag heap by record executives and radio programmers. Maybe people would like some of it, but they never get the chance. Television is the great artistic voice of our time. Do you know anyone who's ever written for TV? They fall into two categories: 1). those in the 65th percentile *or* 2). genuinely smart, creative people who have been beaten and dissolved and defused by the necessities of life. By and large, their decisions have been subconscious. They didn't decide to give up. It just kind of happened. One minute they thought they might replace Shakespeare in the Western canon. The next: 'why doesn't anyone write like Henry James anymore?' Then they thought, 'if only my generation had a World War, so I could write the next Catch-22.' Finally, they copped to an appreciation of John Irving and started writing for television. A few years later, they are overheard at a cocktail party saying, 'whatever you think of his work, you've got to give him props for the sheer volume, I mean, come on.' (Referring to Stephen King). I don't begrudge them their cowardice. The world conspires to make it so. And the world is one fucking powerful construct. Who are they to deny its will?"

- "So, you thought you'd cut off your arms and legs!? That would be better? That would be a higher calling?"
- "I could lay down and die like everybody else. But what would be my legacy? What is the legacy of the human race?"
- "The human race? Who the fuck do you think you are, Jesus fucking Christ?"
- "Christ was a failure."
- "!"

The paramecium whispered in my ear.

- "Easy, boy. You can't take on the champ until you've worked your way up through the ranks."

He was right. I back pedaled, writing:

- "His intentions were good. Turn the other cheek, all that, that's good. But nobody's

listening. Even his so-called followers have forgotten the point. There was probably a time when his message actually meant something. But myth eventually sinks like everything else. His great failing was all that son of god stuff. The walking on water. The feeding of the multitudes with a handful of loaves and a couple of fish. It opens the door for skepticism. And once that door is opened, once skepticism is out of the barn, there's no way to get it back in. Skepticism is the most insidious disease. It spreads faster than AIDS. It's more deadly than cancer. If Christ had simply tried to lead by example – skipped all the rabble rousing and the miracles and the claims of divinity – then maybe people could have taken away something lasting."

The paramecium:

- "I'm telling you, buddy, back away from Jesus. He's too big."

I changed the subject:

- "Look, the point is that people have lost their way. Cell phones and the stock market, constantly connected to one's information, helpless and desperate if that connection is lost. And for what? A sense of purpose? A display of self-importance? Insecurity is getting the best of us and we're reacting with brute force, selfishness and ignorance."
- "But what the hell is cutting off your arms and legs going to achieve?"
- "It is crucial that we return to the essence…"
- "Of all people, Nil, I never thought I'd see you go new age."
- "…return to the essential. There are three rules: don't kick anyone harder than you'd want to get kicked, kiss the people you love and make a baby. Those are the essence. Everything else is superfluous. The first two are immutable and beyond the reproach of reason – that is, we are born with these rules in place. A baby may not know that biting her mother's finger hurts, but as soon as she figures it out, she knows it is wrong. Why? Because the baby doesn't want her finger bitten. The affection, too, is there right from the start, but culture subdues it in most people. It manifests itself on occasion in all but the most hardened cases. There are well documented instances of men who, in their daily lives are unfeeling, undemonstrative

ogres, yet who, in the face of certain films from their youth or the illness of their mother or a championship for their favorite team, quiver and cry like a little girl. That natural, insubordinate affection lives in all of us."

- "Uh-huh. What about this 'make a baby' business?"
- "The impulse to make a baby falls before cognition in the signal path which carries impulse to action. In other words, the impulse to have a baby has to pass through the cognitive filter before it's acted upon. Kissing and not kicking don't. So, some of us are able to talk ourselves out of having babies."
- "Some of us talk ourselves into kicking – or killing – people, too."
- "Yes. But, unless we're insane – if you believe in such a thing – we still know it's wrong. Adults who've chosen not to have kids don't think what they've done is morally wrong. Of course from a species perspective, it is. But that's not what drives morals."
- "And let me guess: morals are what this is all about."
- "Yes ma'am."
- "Kissing and not kicking."
- "Uh-huh. Manners. We live in a society of manners, developed over many centuries of trial and error, to protect us from ourselves and to emphasize what little value there is in our scant allotted years."

2.

It's just that our evolution has stalled. It is true enough that we probably have a greater unanimity of civility than at any other point in history. Europe and Asia are not being overrun periodically by some horde or tribe. Violence as the apparatus of power has suffered a deep decline. But might still makes right. It's simply that people have become more sophisticated in applying it. And I don't just mean geopolitically. Corporations and individuals lord their accumulated power, in the form of wealth and material goods and the manipulation or circumvention of the rules of the game, over those with different fortunes or different propensities. Gay rights, civil rights, women's rights:

they're all just power grabs; men and women saying, 'we want a piece of the pie. we want the right to decide and to misbehave.' It's referred to as freedom, but it's really just the right to indulge our human tendencies. And if we should have learned anything at all from the trajectory of human history, it's that our tendencies are abominable. Freedom is a permission slip. The disenfranchised don't deserve more power. The enfranchised deserve less.

Each of us and all of us would benefit from a severe reduction in our power and our freedom. Is there truly a need for thirty different kinds of toothpaste? We need fewer things. We need to restrict, remove, excise and eliminate. The less, the fewer: the better. Some people already have a sense of it. How else do you explain the dramatic rise in vegetarianism? Have people suddenly embraced animal rights? Is cholesterol concern really so accepted and widespread? No. People have instinctually arrived at the thought that less is more. That, to disavow, even arbitrarily, certain practices or routines. allows greater focus on what remains. And it's not just vegetarians, but vegans and macrobiotics! People are desperate for constraint. The world is yearning for a Spartan asceticism; an opportunity to pare down and simplify, to return to the centrality of our being. They may not know it, but they yearn to return to the three rules.

But who would take the first step; the first consciously-executed, publicly-acknowledged step? Who would lead? With the paramecium's help, I decided that the answer to 'who?' would be 'me.' I had no other calling. I had no specific talent or gift. My studies in philosophy had produced an analytical mind with no particular application. It's a bit preposterous, nowadays, to call oneself a philosopher. But no more than, say, calling oneself a prophet. When my old professor, Dr. Blunt died, and a lifetime of good intentions got buried in the dirt with the flesh and bone which dispensed them, I knew. Flesh and bone are not the point. Ideas and ideals are eternal. We know so much more about what Plato thought than what he looked like. Aristotle, Sophocles, Pliny the Elder, Thomas Aquinas, Shakespeare, Machiavelli, Borges, Locke, Wittgenstein, Robert Walser, Oscar Wilde, Bertrand Russell, Primo Levi, Calvino: what color were this one's eyes? what was the shape of that one's head? did he eat a lot? perspire much? talk in his sleep? Who cares?

We've retained the best of each of them. We have no need for them as men; as flesh and bones. We have their spirits – their thoughts, their concerns, their fears and their appetites. They have achieved some kind of grace. They are immortal, because after each of their deaths, their work has been picked up and used by each successive generation. They haven't disappeared like everyone else; like the billions upon billions of other men and women who have lived on earth. They have been useful for twice or ten times or twenty or even a thousand times the length of their flesh and bone lives.

I would lead by example. And I would speak simply and confidently to the issue of 'why?' If I can do without my arms and my legs; without my tongue and my penis, then, surely, others can do without the possessions which define their value and personality. I would reduce myself until I arrived as near to pure essence as possible. I had no intentions of taunting death. Staying alive is an essential part of the plan. I need to be able to react; to tailor my message for each audience and each shift in the prevailing reception of my plan.

3.

In the dimming afternoon light, the monkey's eyes gleamed. He was looking at me as I lay on the bed. A recently-exhaled puff of smoke was floating in the blue sky. Or was it a cloud? His gaze was searching, but not inquisitive. He was looking for an answer, not a response. At times, I've had the sensation that he has x-ray vision; that he can see through me. I've wanted to ask him what he sees. Does my heart look like other men's hearts? I've wondered if he can see anything which might be called a 'spirit'. There are those who claim to be able to see a person's aura. They feel qualified to comment on its relative energy – its brightness or dimness. They describe its color. (Evidently, certain colors are associated with certain emotions). I resent this thought and these people. I think they are lying. Knowingly preying upon the deepest of human yearnings is among the darkest of human sins. This idea of the aura or soul or spirit or whatever you want to call it as nothing more than a giant mood ring, is insulting. It reduces our primary humanness to the essentiality of a dime store novelty.

I've wondered if, when the monkey looks at me, he can see my missing arm, still in place. Perhaps he can see just its outline – a dotted line distinguishing the space which would have been occupied with matter known as 'Nil's arm' from the space which would have always been space. Which reminds me: fifteen days after Gabrielle arrived at the Calypso, she left. She'd been frightened off. In bed, looking at the monkey; the monkey looking at me, I realized there had never really been a chance that Gabrielle, of all people, would understand. Ever since that day at the graveyard, I was Nil, the gun shy; Nil, the incapable. How could I be the man to lead the tribe out of the desert when I couldn't even consummate our love on a grassy plateau in a lightly misting rain in a cemetery on the New England coast? To Gabrielle, I was a noble failure. I was the poster child for wasted potential and grand possibilities conveniently misplaced. And now I was hatching a scheme to sell salvation. She was right to doubt. She was right to leave. Given what she knew, my divulgence was tantamount to a confession of insanity. And that's what she told Syrup and Mimi before she left.

- "We have a baby on the way," pleaded Syrup, "how are we supposed to get him what he needs?"
- "I don't know. But I'm going back to Maine. I had a life there. I was living in peace until he called. I can't get dragged into this. I left Nil for a reason. That reason hasn't changed. I can't bear his destabilizing influence. I came out here. I tried to help. But I can't. I'm sorry, I'm going home."

4.

I don't think Syrup thought I was crazy until I cut off my penis. Despite agreeing to pay weekly visits to the Cooper County Mental Healthcare Center in Durango, this was my first visit. I was humoring Syrup, who was humoring Mimi, who was humoring Gabrielle. In the middle of what was termed an 'exploratory' session (they were trying not to scare me) I excused myself to use the men's room. I did it with a linoleum knife I'd hidden in my sock. I couldn't muffle a shuddering

bellow of male horror as it came off more easily than I'd expected – compared to my arm, which was exceedingly difficult to remove. During the thirty seconds it took for the doctor to find a couple of burly orderlies and to convince them to break down the door, I stashed my dismembered member in a small jar of formaldehyde which I stashed above the acoustic ceiling tiles. There would be no miracle reattachment. As I lost consciousness, I was rushed to the on-site trauma center where my wound was cleaned and bandaged. A flower-like cluster of surgical lights dimmed and danced as I went under. A hazy, aqueous sensation of sinking and softening accompanied my descent. When I woke up, three hours later, I was a eunuch.

5.

I dreamt of the monkey. He too is a eunuch. He is an embodiment of the ideal presented in dolls and children's books and cartoons – the genderless. Though his rendition is more authentic than mine; he hasn't lost his genitals, he never had them. So why do I call him 'he'? Convention, or affinity, I suppose. His is a plum assignment, unsullied by the tugs of estrogen or testosterone. I dreamt of him riding his cloud of white smoke, like a toboggan, down an enormous hill of garbage. His hands gripped the forward edge of the sled which curled up and over his folded legs. He picked up speed as he descended, his cigarette perched, all the while, casually on his lower lip. At one point he released his hands and threw them joyously in the air, roller coaster-style. My vantage point withdrew; the camera pulled back. The garbage hill was enormous, endless. No matter how I cocked my head, I couldn't take in both the top and the bottom in one glance. The monkey was flying. The sled was shimmying side to side and teetering as it negotiated each mogul and dip. But he was not making progress. The bottom of the hill was not approaching, nor the top receding. In the dream, I watched the monkey as I thought, in common, idiomatic parlance: he's getting nowhere fast.

6.

I overheard Syrup and Mimi arguing. She was saying that I had to go; that with the baby due in

the next few weeks, it simply wouldn't do to have me here. She said the stress I was causing was unhealthy, could harm the unborn child. She said that once the baby arrived, my influence would be most unwelcome, even dangereux. She, it goes without saying, didn't say it in French nor put things so delicately. There was quite a bit of cursing and hollering and demanding and pleading. I believe she may have cried. Syrup, for his part stood, on what is commonly known as Christian charity, though he didn't call it that and doesn't, to my knowledge, consider himself a Christian. But the argument's the same. He said that I had no where else to go, no one else to turn to. That he and Mimi were my last chance. If they turned me out, he said, I'd be institutionalized and that, he said, was a slippery, downhill slope; a slow motion dive toward madness, death, oblivion. He didn't use those exact words. But oblivion is certainly what he was implying. He said he had a responsibility to me. We had been through a lot together. If there was anything he could do to help me, he must try. That's what he said. And it occurred to me that maybe I could tell him about my plan. But The recent sting of Gabrielle's rejection quelled that impulse. For a while longer, at least, I'd be bearing my burden alone.

7.

I received a letter from Gabrielle. It was perfunctory and bore a postmark from Megonsett, ME:

> Dear Nil,
>
> I left because I had to. I hope you understand.
>
> In life, there are certain decisions we have to make which don't exemplify the spirit of our hearts or the truth of our feelings. I care about you, Nil. I truly do. And I want to help you. But I'm not the right person. I've moved on. I know that's not the most compassionate thing to tell you, but it had to happen. You have to move on too. It's how we recover. I've got a house now and dogs. I've got a new job. I have a new life. In a sense, I'm a new person. I'm not the Gabrielle you used to know. That's what happens. People change their environment to change themselves. We're not always in charge. We react to our

surroundings and our reactions define who we are. I'm a different Gabrielle. You're a different Nil.

Besides, what you wanted and what I think you need are completely different. If I'd stayed, I couldn't, in good conscience, have helped you do what you're doing. You need help, Nil. You're heart's in the right place. But you need to re-channel your energies. I couldn't stand by and watch you harm yourself. Please, please, go talk to someone; a therapist, psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker, someone. I understand you believe in what you're doing. But you're hurting yourself. Please, talk to someone before you go any further.

8.

Really, I couldn't complain. Things were moving. The plan was unfolding. But the paramecium, as he's prone to do, was bothered. He was satisfied with my progress, but could not, for the life of him, understand why the world hadn't yet beaten a path to the Calypso's door. It had never occurred to him that we (I) would have to make some effort; to actually *publicize* what I was doing. He just figured that the lid could not be kept on such a monumental occurrence. But there we were, down an arm and a penis, and no one even knew we existed. It was a rare occasion when the paramecium identified a problem, yet offered no solution. In this case, he simply hadn't foreseen this plight and, as a result, hadn't set his microscopic mind to it.

I'd gotten used to having each new phase of the plan revealed to me as we reached its inception. It wasn't necessary for me to know beforehand. I trusted the paramecium and, until then, he hadn't disappointed. So I was amazed by his naivete:

- "You think people are just going to miraculously realize that I'm out here in the Colorado wilderness hacking myself to pieces for the good of the planet?"
- "Not telepathically, if that's what you're suggesting."

- “What then?”
- “It seemed to me that such an event, something so extraordinary would merit some attention. The press would catch on. The media. They have to take notice. They have to wake up. This puts reality TV to shame.”

I just shook my head.

The next morning, shortly after Mimi had gone for groceries, the phone rang. It seemed Syrup, apparently at his wit’s end, had mentioned me to some of his friends at the magazine. One of them was evidently taken with the story of this hapless lunatic who, despite all appearance of sanity, was formulaically taking himself apart. He alerted a friend at the Denver Post. My story, this fellow from the Post tentatively suggested, just might be news.

9.

Syrup and Mimi hadn’t let me near a drop of alcohol since I’d arrived at the Calypso and I was dying for a beer. One Thursday when Mimi was headed to Durango for some framing, I convinced her to let me tag along. The frame shop was a block and a half from the Rainbo Grille. I don’t know that they actually grill anything there nor do I get the point of that e at the end of Grille – maybe it’s to compensate for the missing w at the end of Rainbo – but they have beer. So I told her I wanted to pick up a thank you card for Gabrielle. I might have insinuated that I needed to start appreciating the support of those around me and that acknowledging the efforts of others was the first step toward taking responsibility for myself; the first step toward recovery, or some such tripe. Mimi’s a sucker for that kind of self-help psychobabble and wanted desperately to believe I was sick. If I was sick, I could get better. If I was sick there was an explanation for what was happening; it and I could be dismissed with the convenient tag of mental illness. There was something glamorous too about knowing and housing a certified looney. In her circle of skirts-at-the-supermarket housewives, Mimi had become something of a celebrity. Her gossip was grade A prime; no filler. She related her stories with a resigned and rarified, magnetic sympathy – a

sympathy which attracted the sympathy of others – because, magically, in the telling of her sad stories about me, she subtly transformed herself from spectator to victim and me from victim to perpetrator. Her friends marveled at the absurdity of my actions and at the undue strain it was putting on poor, pregnant Mimi. So she drove me to Durango.

I had a crisp pale ale served in a tall, tapered glass. Denial makes most anything better when finally it arrives. This is especially true of beer. At the front of the bar which set up rather like an English pub, on either side of the front door, there were a pair of display windows. The space had probably once been a shop of some kind. The Rainbo Grille had boarded up the windows on the outside and used the spaces to display art, facing in, for the patrons of the bar. There were roughly eight paintings in each window – sixteen in all. I ignored them at first. But I suppose it was inevitable that sooner or later, maybe not even that day, but eventually, I would confront those paintings. They were, after all, the missing stars in my guiding constellation. They were not the pole star – the star which determined my direction – but they were the stars which gave the pole star context.

10.

Sleep brings dreams, which are, for me, a form of torture. But lack of sleep brings a torture far more severe. The night makes no concessions, offers no refuge, no compromise. Night is real and reality is the one thing against which I am defenseless. The stars are just stars, not metaphors for something else, not something ambiguous, not a matter of opinion. And I, too, am just me; the one person not fooled by my pretensions. I, the audience, find me, the performer, a bore. The crickets bowing their two-note bolero are not interested in my intentions. Shadows pass through my room without so much as a sidelong glance. Even those I hold in thrall – Syrup and Mimi, Gabrielle (thousands of miles away) the paramecium, the monkey – are all asleep and frustratingly beyond my reach.

Sleep has been compared to death, but my pitch-black, silent wakefulness seems more like death

to me. I can't relate to the concept of my consciousness rendered inert. I can't process the non-dream periods of my sleep. They are non-existent. When considering death, I must apply an existent form of experience if the consideration is to amount to anything. Any other application is pure mental exercise, lacking any palpability. As others sleep and I lie awake, as my influence and interaction is rendered null, I imagine a different way – a relationship which overflows the borders of wakefulness and sleep, of life and death. Isn't that what we call love?

11.

I was sitting on the back porch of the Calypso – the lido deck – with headphones on, listening to Brian Eno's Music For Airports, when I had the vague sense of someone else's presence. It's an impulse I try to trust. Evolution armed us with this capacity as an alarm system of sorts. To ignore it is the equivalent of removing the battery from the smoke detector. As I began to turn and slide the headphones off my head, I heard a voice.

- "Hello?"

It was a man in his mid- to late-twenties, wearing a collared, long sleeve, white, cotton shirt tucked into a pair of khakis. In his breast pocket, two pens and in his hand a small spiral bound notebook.

- "The Post?" I said, pointing at him.

He was taken momentarily aback.

- "Yes," he said, "that's right. Mr. Nil?"
- "Just Nil. I'm not really the mister type."
- "I'm Terry Trewlis from the Post. I'm sorry to drop by unannounced, but I wanted a chance to speak with you face to face. You sounded a little hesitant over the phone

and I just thought if we could talk face to…"

- "I'm not hesitant."
- "You're not? Alright. What I had in mind – and I should be up front about this, my editor's not really on board with this idea yet. I think he will be. He's a good guy, a good editor and when he sees something, sees where it's going, I think… Anyway, what I had in mind was to spend a little time together talking about what's happened to you, you know, why you're doing what you're…"
- "It hasn't happened *to* me. You understand?"
- "Yes. That's the kind of stuff I'm looking for."

12.

The paintings at the Rainbo Grille were the brothers and sisters of the monkey in my bedroom. They were painted by the same artist. I hadn't thought he'd rendered so many. Many of them, though not all, also depicted monkeys. Different monkeys? Maybe the same monkey at different moments. There were depictions of the monkey hitchhiking with a hobo sack thrown over his shoulder on a stick, the monkey in astronaut gear in space, the monkey wearing reading glasses in his breakfast nook with the paper and a cup of coffee, the monkey opening an umbrella as it starts to rain (people in the background running for cover with newspapers and overcoats pulled up over their heads). A torrent of significances. All that I'd seen in the original paining was multiplied with the contents of each new frame: the monkey as unnatural inhabitant; the monkey as mirror to the man. The distillation of the aspects of monkeyness demanded of him by these painted environments exploded into hundreds of facets. The demands of the paintings now included those of the road and the loner, the explorer and the outcast. He was now the calm in the eye of the storm, the prepared in a diorama of unpreparedness. He was domestic and learned and beginning to age and falter. But he still maintained his connection to his disconnectedness. He was still the monkey doing what monkeys do not. In the original painting: smoking, now also drinking coffee, reading the paper, hitchhiking and seeking the shelter of an umbrella.

Somewhere there was a painter who set all this behavior in motion; the puppet master, the monkey-god. I found myself needing to know what he knew. What drove him to instigate these simian goings-on? Why monkeys? And why here? I was determined to find out how these monkeys had ended up, en masse, in the Rainbo Grille. I had a sense this painter knew what I was up to.

13.

The Denver Art Museum presented a show called the Studio Of The South, concerning the brief time Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gaugin shared a small house and studio in Arles in the south of France. In each gallery, quotes from the two painters were appliqued to the wall. They were from letters back and forth between the painters prior to their convergence and from letters to their friends, students and loved ones during their cohabitation and from letters between the painters after Gaugin abruptly moved out. I have strong childhood memories of a small book of Van Gogh prints my mother kept on a glass table in our living room. The dust jacket was metallic gold. I paged through the book in boredom sometimes, stopping at the paintings of Van Gogh's bedroom or of the Starry Night. I had no need for a central beauty then. A child's whole life is beauty. There is a preponderance of beauty and a dearth of ugliness. But as one gets older, the scales tip. If I'd had earlier need of a central beauty these paintings of Van Gogh's would have been strong candidates.

As I moved through the galleries, something became clear to me: Van Gogh was blessed with a feel for the world and a feel for life and a feel for his work which Gaugin was not. Van Gogh's paintings breathe. The pigments inhale and exhale as you watch. The elements which form the symbolism of the paintings step forward from the canvas, still relating to the rest of the composition, but announcing their ascendancy. The paintings, themselves, are the keys to the paintings. Gaugin, on the other hand, requires learned exegesis, interpretation, explanation. Perhaps that's why curators like him: he gives them something to do. On the audio tour of the exhibit, the curator explains that a Gaugin still life of a pitcher on a table beside a kettle

represents the deterioration of Gaugin's marriage. The painting doesn't communicate this point, the curator does. He might as easily have said it represented unrest in the French colonies or an unusually hot summer or the recent discovery of Pluto. Gaugin did not imbue his painting with enough content nor enough context to point to the rightness of any single interpretation. When all meanings are possible, meaning is impossible.

In one gallery, in applique letters on the wall, a quote from one of Gaugin's letter to a friend: "Van Gogh is interested in the accidents of pigment, I can't bear to muck about in that mess." My friend, John Przyborowski, once said "Accidents are god's way of saying 'howdy.'"

I don't believe in god. But I do believe in accidents.

14.

The baby arrived on a Tuesday. It was raining. And I woke to a scurry. Syrup was up and down the stairs three or four times, having descended first without pants, then without keys and once without wallet. Mimi stood by the door with an umbrella and an overnight bag, waiting. I traipsed out of my room and casually down the stairs in my bathrobe. "Time?" was all I said to Mimi (it came out more like *tynge)* who nodded, and I raised my eyebrows and smiled in response. But I didn't break stride on my way to a glass of orange juice. I sat at the kitchen table, lazily thumbing the Post, as they pulled out of the driveway. I'd been too preoccupied to consider this moment. Everything was about to change. My room (the baby's room) would no longer be my room. The plan was to relocate me to the convertible sofa in the den. I would certainly lose my status as the center of attention. But I had no intention of behaving like the family dog who suffers from jealousy at the newborn's arrival. Less attention might be advantageous, might allow me more autonomy and more opportunity to continue with my plan.

15.

Only an hour or so after Syrup and Mimi left for the hospital, there was a knock at the front door. I

was still in my bathrobe, still at the table, still perusing the Post.

- “Mr. Nil. I’m sorry for just dropping by again. I was kind of passing by.”
- “Yeah, that’s a bad habit.”
- “Well, actually, it doesn’t usually work this way. It’s just that my editor hasn’t really taken the bait yet. He’s got me on other stories, so I can’t really know in advance when I’ll have some time for this story. If I find myself nearby, I drop in. I hope it’s no inconvenience.”
- “No,” I said, “it’s ok. Can I get you some juice?”
- “No, thanks.” Do you have any coffee?”

I don’t drink coffee, so the answer was no. The truth is, there was probably some coffee in the house.

We moved to the living room, each to one end of the brown couch, and we began, in earnest, our conversation about what I was put on earth to do.

- “Do you really think it’s what you were put on earth to do?”
- “I do. But I might come at that concept a little differently than some. It’s not that I imagine there’s someone or something out there who has this plan and that he’s moving us around like little pieces on a game board. I’m not saying that there’s a design or even a purpose in the universe or for us here on earth. But I’m saying that life is a series of processes. And the most important process at any given moment is the process of discovering or inventing what it is you should be doing with yourself. It’s a moment to moment thing as well as a whole arc of your existence thing. Should I turn on the TV? It’s not that simple. If you turn on the TV, you’re turning off a million other things. You could be painting your masterpiece or conceiving a child or practicing yoga or making a meal. Who knows? I’m incapable of imagining all the

things a person can do with time. But I cry when I think of how many people don't even try. Click! the TV's on and that's that. And it's probably true that for some percentage of those people – maybe even a significant percentage – clicking on the TV is what they were meant to do. But I knew I wasn't one of them. So, like all young people searching for meaning, I tried and I traveled and, on more than one occasion, I tripped and fell."

- "Okay, let's talk about that – your travelling, your trying. Where did you grow up?"
- "I'm from the American suburbs, you know. It doesn't really matter which suburb. The American suburbs are a kind of locale. Whether your from Winnetka, Illinois or Mamaroneck, New York or Simi Valley, California, you share certain experiences with other suburbanites. The pertinent facts are these: I had my own bedroom, I had a dog and a cat who were both allowed out of the house without accompaniment, there were yellow bases spray painted in the shape of a diamond on the asphalt of the cul-de-sac at the end of my dead end street, I took a bus to public school, the nearest mall was two towns away, but there were at least 4 strip malls that I can remember in my home town, plus a movie theater and a bowling alley, I could ride my bike to three different parks or to Echo Lake which featured a tree-canopied, still-water lake at the base of an updraft of rocky hills."
- "That's an inauspicious start. Where did you go from there?"
- "The first awkward flapping of my wings," (I was trying to put a poetic spin on things, hoping Trewlis might adopt my tone), "propelled me to college in Boston. But I didn't last long there. Boston became a sort of base of operations as I darted out into the world for longer and shorter sojourns."
- "Where'd you go?"
- "I lived in a cabin in Vermont for six months – no electricity, no running water. I slept on a piece of foam rubber and read by the light of a camping lantern. I house-sat for a friend in Denver for a while. She was off to India to sit with her yogi. She was traveling and trying too. But she was looking for others to answer her questions and

to point her in a direction. I was looking to myself, not for answers, but for the right questions. Everybody's looking for answers, when they don't even know which questions matter to them. I lived in her house – a three story colonial with a solarium and an indoor lap-pool – for eight and a half months. But that was never the place for me."

- "When did you realize you needed to do something dramatic?"
- "I don't like the word dramatic. There's no drama in what I'm doing. It's a job like any other. Too often, we accept our mandates from others who don't understand their goals any better than we do. Rather than taking my orders from a boss or a priest or a politician, I sought to assess my role in the world. How do I fit in to this complex of influence which creates everything from money to Monet, from water cooler conversations to the theory of relativity? Who am I? What was I put on earth to do? What is my job?"
- "Okay, when did you figure out what your job was?"
- "These things aren't whens as much as they are hows. It's a process, not a procedure."
- "But surely there was a moment when you thought I'm going to hack off my limbs?"
- "I guess so. But by the time I'd reached that point, it wasn't such a surprising notion."
- "What's the point?"
- "Finally, we reach the marrow in the bone. Isn't that the question you've been wanting to ask the whole time? Isn't that, in fact, the only question you really want to ask? You see, we're all susceptible to thinking we need answers, when questions are the tonic. The asking is enough, isn't it? The point is quite simple. I stumbled on this thought: there is nothing in this life that we can not afford to lose. I believe it is truer than nearly anything else one can say, because there are no exceptions. No loss is so great as to stop us finally. Even losses which drive men to suicide are propulsive. There is a moving past the loss to a life decision – in this case, suicide. But suicide is more than a definition of one's mode of death, it is, most essentially, a life-defining

act. The loss which may inspire it does not come to define the life. The life lived between loss and death is the most heightened period of examination and determination in the suicide's existence. That period becomes, in essence, a distillation of the whole of the suicide's life. The loss doesn't negate the life, it creates it."

- "So you're committing suicide?"
- "It's important that you get this part right. I am and I am not committing suicide. How can both things be true? Let's start with the *am* of it: I am committing suicide the same way you are committing suicide. We all choose to include and exclude certain possibilities in our lives. An obvious example would be cigarettes. A less obvious example might be poetry. The inclusion and exclusion of these possibilities – let's call them factors – these factors determine how we live. How we live determines how we die: lung cancer, dune buggy accident, auto-erotic asphyxiation, what have you. On the other hand, I am not committing suicide. The point of my dismemberment is not to expedite my death – although I am aware that it will probably induce that side effect – the point is to live a lesson which can not be learned any other way."
- "Learned by whom?"
- "Welcome to class, my boy."

16.

Digging up the painter's name had been a chore for the bartender at the Rainbo Grille. A phone number or an address were, evidently, beyond his means. So I took it upon myself to do a little detective work. There were plenty of leads. It shouldn't be too difficult. A few days after the baby was born I asked Syrup where he'd gotten the monkey painting. He was a little hazy but thought that he'd bought it from a guy who'd done some work at the magazine's office.

- "He was a contractor. Dry wall or flooring or something. I can't remember. He'd told one of the secretaries that he was a painter – I guess he was trying to impress her –

and she'd suggested he bring some of his work to the office, she wanted to check it out. So, he brought a few small paintings down. It was sort of the buzz of the day. You know how it is at an office, any little thing which breaks the routine… Anyway, his private showing turned into a public auction. I offered him, I don't know, thirty five or forty dollars for the monkey on the beach."

Syrup didn't know where I could find him. And, frankly, didn't understand why I'd want to. But one of the positive side-effects of the baby's arrival was Syrup and Mimi's unwillingness to pursue lines of inquisition which, previously, would have obsessed them.

The phone book had only one listing for the last name I'd been given. It was the painter's ex-wife who couldn't tell me the whereabouts of "the lout," as she called him, though she had no trouble recalling the exact total of his back alimony and child support and had no compunction about painting her own verbal pictures of the man I sought.

- "That son of a bitch is the most selfish man alive. He's so self-absorbed, he doesn't even realize how he's behaving. I'm not saying he's evil or malicious or even ill-willed. He just doesn't get it. He doesn't know how he's coming across. He doesn't know how he's affecting people. He needs to take a good long look in the mirror. First of all, nobody could give a shit about those paintings of his. Monkeys, for Christ's sake. Who, in their right mind, would spend all that time painting a freaking monkey over and over again? And it's not even a good monkey. He's no John James Audubon."

She pronounced the last word like a German highway.

- "I guess I might have some respect for him, at least, if he cared about the paintings. But he hates them more than anybody. He just started making them one day and

people liked them and they were cheap so they bought them and he figures ‘what the hell’ and keeps making them. It’s thirty dollars here, forty dollars there – beer money. He could probably get more for them. Some of the people from up in Aspen have bought some. I mean they can afford more. But he doesn’t care. Forty dollars he’s ripping them off, he figures. Meanwhile, he can’t pay his child support.”

She was able to give me the name of a contractor he worked for, on and off.

17.

The paramecium didn’t like the idea of hunting down the artist.

-“Too many cooks in the kitchen,” he said.

But I needed to know. Again, there were questions: who was this man? why a monkey? What kind of interest did he take in what I was doing?

18.

I’m not a fan of the telephone. Think of how preposterous the concept would seem to someone from pre-phone days, an American colonist or a Sixteenth Century Dutch painter. You’re sitting at home, minding your own business, peeling carrots or mixing your cerulean blue, when a bell rings. You are then obliged – it is considered rude not to! – to stop what you are doing, swallow if you are eating, and pick up the handle of a plastic device connected with a wire to the wall of your home. You are expected to say ‘hello?’ in a slightly submissive manner. You will hear a voice through this device. It may be a friend’s voice or a relative’s, but it could, just as easily, be the voice of a complete stranger. This stranger may ask you to buy something or to answer some questions. The voice through the device may not only be a stranger’s voice, but it may, in fact, be an electronically recorded voice, dis-allowing any interaction on your part. And if you, disinterested, decide to put the device back down, resting the plastic handle in its plastic cradle,

thereby disrupting and ending the connection between your device and the stranger's device, if you sever this unsolicited tie without a lengthy and heartfelt apology, you are considered rude. You are left with feelings of having been intruded upon and of guilt and ashamedness. Preposterous. Do we own things or do things own us?

It was my sister.

-"Nil."

Even my own family called me Nil, as if I was some kind of token, talisman, figurehead.

-"Hi Beth."

This was the first time we'd spoken since I'd lost my tongue.

- "God, you sound awful. I don't get you, Nil. That's the best you can talk, huh?"
- "Well, if I really focus, I can make myself a little clearer."
- "Wow. Are you ok otherwise?"
- "Yeah. Fine. Syrup and Mimi are taking good care of me."
- "That's good. Hey, do you remember, Marina, my friend from college?"
- "Umm…"
- "She's driving cross-country and she's gonna be passing through Colorado later this week. She wanted me to ask you if she could crash at your place."
- "Well, it's not really my place."
- "But just for one night it'd be ok, right? I gave her your number. She should be there on Thursday. She won't be any trouble. I've gotta run now. I've got yoga in twenty minutes. Thanks, Nil. Take care of yourself."

Click.

19.

Terry Trewlis sent a postcard, depicting the old Denver train station. For decades, this was the primary transition point for travelers heading west. At this station, people made decisions that influenced the rest of their lives, often sealed their fates. From this junction one might go north via Laramie or south via Albuquerque. More often than not, people would head due west, to San Francisco. Jack Kerouac spent some time here. Rumor has it, he slept in the train station for months. Everyone's on a journey.

The postcard read, simply:

> "Mr. Nil-
> Couldn't get my editor to bite, but got his permission to sell the story to another outlet. It runs this week in People.
> Hope all is well.
> -Terry Trewlis"

20.

It was now of paramount importance that I find the painter. I was about to go national, maybe even global. And I needed to convene with the source of my central beauty. I felt as if, somehow, the painter and I were in this together. I wanted to include him in the ascent. It occurred to me that perhaps my conception of a central beauty was flawed. Perhaps the softening of blows derived not from the object, but from its creator. The object was merely a conduit for the relationship between artist and audience. Such a relationship could be as complex as any real-life, day-to-day relationship.

For instance, at first, one might be attracted to the outward characteristics of the artist, conveyed

in the work. Perhaps the brush strokes are sumptuous or the lighting is evocative. In a movie or a novel, at first blush, the characters might crackle with charisma or pathos. Then as time goes by, as one becomes more immersed in the work, the artist's tendencies begin to become apparent. You start to notice the tricks and predilections which are peculiar to this artist. You begin to recognize a personality. Your appreciation deepens. You feel as if you understand. You see more of the artist; start spending more time with the work. You begin to see certain tendencies as quirks. Some become bad habits and start to get under your skin. You wonder why the artist must always do x or y. It gnaws at you sometimes, even, when you're not in each other's presence. But, as more time passes, you begin to accept these ticks. The artist, after all, wouldn't be the artist without them. Your understanding of the artist, after fluttering in the air, stirred at times by heavier and lighter breezes, after rocking back and forth like a feather as it nears the ground, has settled gently. And, though you may not love every word, every brushstroke, every note, every shot or scene or character – there may even be entire pieces you could do without – as with anyone you know well, you have reached an understanding. It's called love.

21.

I asked the monkey about his father, about the man who brought him into being. But he wasn't in the mood for talk. The blurred line between his monkey-ness and what we proudly call our human-ness wasn't blurry enough at that moment to allow him to speak. Perhaps he could, but he chose not to. A fine example. So I lay on my bed, watching him. He hardly moved, standing there, statue-like on the canvas. There was more activity emanating from the window. Below, I could hear the muffled essence of an argument between two boys, most of the words coming through the glass as unintelligible blobs of gelatinous verbs and nouns. But every so often, a verb like *kill* or a noun like *homo* would pierce the glass and enter the room unscathed; the sound of a wooden baseball bat ricocheting down a concrete sidewalk and coming to rest in the gutter. It was dusk and, as is the case, throughout rural America, in the summer time, in the early evening, a curtain of noise, barely distinguishable from the silence and often mistaken for it, drew around us and set all our sounds and all our quietness to an anxious cricket-composed accompaniment.

The sun faded and a hazy, filtered light – the visual equivalent of the crickets' muted din – suffused the room, taking the monkey and me with it. Just as certain words had managed to make their presence known amidst their less assertive kin, certain colors rose from the monkey's canvas and asserted their existence as the diminishing light dragged the canvas from which they were drawn into the non-existence of pitch blackness. These colors, evidently the fittest of the lot, made more of less light, extending their lives, on this day at least, four or five minutes beyond their expectancy. In the process they brought into being new combinations of shapes and configurations, new combinations of green and yellow and red. The death throes of light had raised new objections to the negation of night.

A small yellow triangle in the lower right suggested a boat with a red, rectangular patch of sail. The breezes buffeted the small vessel which strained against the waves like a too-small puppy straining against a heavy-handed caress. This was an ideal boat upon which the paramecium might sail. And I imagined with a longing which surprised me, that the boat was sailing out of sight as the paramecium, handkerchief in hand, waved a tearful goodbye from the deck. I hadn't known I'd harbored such longing. The paramecium had been my confidant, my coach. I couldn't think of continuing my journey without him. Fruition without him present would be hollow. Wouldn't it?

22.

In the morning, I asked the paramecium to remind me why we were doing this. He pointed to the issue of People lying on the bed stand.

- "I know what that says. But I want to hear it from you."
- "It's not what it says, it's what it is."
- "That's the world's reason. What's my reason."
- "You are the world."

He appeared to be busy, reading or trimming his fingernails, it's difficult to tell with single-celled organisms.

- "Yes, thank you. But humor me. You have to consider what this is like for me. I'm dwindling. I need confirmation that it's not just all in my head."
- "Dwindling? Please. You've still got millions of cells. Don't even bother me until you're under a hundred."
- "I didn't mean to imply anything. It's all relative. You have to consider what I was…and what I am now."
- "You want me to tell you that it's not all in your head. But I can't do that. If it's not in your head where is it?"
- "Screw the philosophy. It's psychology I'm concerned with."

The paramecium took a deep breath.

- "Philosophy, psychology, sociology, religion, anthropology, blah, blah, blah. You humans really think you're something special. A different science for every day of the week. It's all part and parcel. Your head is the only apparatus you control. Asking if it's all in your head is pointless. The only question worth asking is how to act."
- "But how can you decide how to react without knowing why you're reacting?"
- "Who said anything about *re*-acting? It's all about acting. When you start reacting your finished. You're a button, a knob, a dial, just another apparatus in someone else's machine."
- "But what if I'm *acting* for the wrong reasons?"
- "Who are you to decide which reasons are right and which are wrong? Each person who reads People will devise their own reason and decide if it's the right reason or the wrong one. You can't decide for them."
- "I'm trying to decide for me, not them."

- “There is no you. Don’t you get it? There’s a monkey. There’s a boat called the Calypso which is really a house. There’s a Villa in Italy. There’s a paramecium. Is there? Does it matter? Who are you talking to? Who cares? Don’t you get it?”

23.

The People article was a complete distortion. At various points I was compared to Sidney Omarr, Yogi Berra, Nostradamus and Jesus Christ. But it was, ultimately, sympathetic. There was a photograph of me in a chaise lounge the backyard of the Calypso with a glass of lemonade by my side and the Tibetan Book of the Dead on my lap. The book wasn’t mine, by the way, I’ve never read it. Terry Trewlis brought it along – thought it was a “nice touch.” If there’s one paramecium edict I’ve fully digested, it’s “let the professionals do their job.”

A few days after the People article came out, Terry Trewlis called to say he was making the tabloid T.V. circuit. That week he would be on both Hard Copy and Extra. I asked if the shows planned to talk to me, but Trewlis didn’t know.

24.

All the contractor could tell me was that he hadn’t seen the artist in a while – business had been slow, what with the downturn of the economy and “those god-damned terrorist,” as he put it. But he knew the artist hung out at the Plugged Nickel.

The Plugged Nickel looks like the diner in Hopper’s “Nighthawks at the Diner.” Except it’s in the middle of nowhere and it’s not so well-lit as to allow you to see the insides from the outside. There’s a small, coin-operated pool table in the back and a single bartender with so little to do, he seems bothered to get up to pour you a drink. Stasis begets stasis. But once I’d successfully roused him from his lethargy, he seemed glad to have some company. He knew the artist by first name only and said he came in a few times a week, sat at the bar and kept mainly to himself. The bartender was unaware that the artist was, in point of fact, an artist. To him, the artist seemed “at

odds with the world," which struck me as an odd turn of phrase coming from the bartender at the Plugged Nickel. He asked me what kind of paintings the artist made. I described the monkey (or monkeys) and the various activities and scenes. The bartender asked if the paintings were "photo-realist or more abstract." To which I answered, "somewhere in between, I guess."

I ordered a second whiskey which came with a bit more cordiality, a bit more whiskey and, or so it seemed to me, additional respect. I suppose bartenders must come to appreciate a man who sits down in no apparent hurry to drink, who then proceeds to drink steadily and with determination. There must come a point too when the curve bends downward, the determination turns to abandon, the respect to pity. But I never reached that point. I left my name and number with the bartender to give to the artist. I was, I said, interested in the paintings.

25.

Marina. Marina. Marina Del Rey. I don't know. I couldn't put a face to the name nor a last name to the first. All, it seemed, I could say for sure was that her last name was not Del Rey. So, when her voice on the phone said, "I'm a few blocks away at the Mobil station," I still had no idea who was a few blocks away. I gave her directions anyway and waited for a knock on the door.

She was five foot two with short brown hair – tousled by design, evidently – a navy blue tee shirt and jeans, and an overstuffed back pack slung over one shoulder.

- "Nil! It has been so long. God, I had such a crush on you in high school."

I still didn't remember her. I invited her in, took her bag and offered her a drink. She was driving cross country, visiting national parks before returning to Connecticut to take a job at her father's button factory. Her father, so she told me, had made his fortune in buttons.

- "What's the deal with this?" she asked abruptly, fishing a copy of People out of her

bag.

- “Oh, you saw that.”
- “Saw it? Everybody saw it. You’ve been on Hard Copy. You’re a celebrity, Nil, it’s so cool.”
- “Yeah, I guess, but…”
- “But what’s the deal? Why are you doing this to yourself? Is it just for the attention? That’s what Bill Maher said.”
- “No, that’s not it. Well, kind of it is. Are you hungry?”
- “No, I had Hardee’s. I want to know why you cut off your fingers and toes.”

According to the People article I had cut off all my toes.

- “It’th probably a little difficult for you to underthtand me,” I exaggerated my impediment, “maybe I thould write it down for you.”
- “No, I can understand you fine. I’d rather get it straight from the horse’s mouth.”

26.

I sat in a café, writing. Some improbably popular music from fifteen years ago was playing. The tables in the small, dimly-lit room were close together, imposing an intimacy no one had requested. I looked up from my table as I took a sip of root beer. At that moment the music stopped and those of us in the room were abandoned to a silence punctuated by discreet clinks and clanks of silverware on porcelain. Suddenly, each person in the cafe was poignantly aware of their proximity to the strangers at adjacent tables. We were all cramped into this little room, drinking coffee and reading or writing or staring anonymously out the window or at one another. There was nothing we could do here that we couldn’t do at home, in the uninterrupted serenity of our own homes. Yet we had gathered here, of our own volition, to do solitary things collectively. I wrote in my little notebook:

We are monkeys. We huddle in artificial caves – not to stave off physical cold, but to

stave off emotional cold. The cold is part of us too. We need a little of it to define the space (the difference) between ourselves and the next monkey. Like the monkey in the painting we need to stand out from the canvas. That coldness is our negative space; it distinguishes us from our environment, from our frames, from each other.

27.

Terry Trewlis called.

- "Hi, Mr. Nil," he said, "how are you?"
- "I'm fine, Terry. What's up?"
- "Well, it took a little time and a little movement elsewhere, but my editor has jumped on the bandwagon. He wants a story about you."
- "Isn't it a little late?"
- "No, no. He wants a feature for the Sunday magazine. This is great. The piece I'd written before was news. This is a feature. There will be pictures, everything."

I didn't ask what "everything" was.

- "Okay."

I didn't want to seem over-anxious.

- "I'll arrange for a photographer. We can be out to your place next Tuesday around 5:00. Would that be okay? I want to get some shots during the magic hour."

I didn't have to ask what "the magic hour" was. In college, I'd worked on a friend's film class project. And all he could talk about was "the magic hour." It seems that in film class, they

convince you that you can shoot anything, in any possible way during “the magic hour” and it’ll look like Cannes. My friend had very little in the way of a script or a visual style nor much in the way of a cast. He was counting on one thing and, apparently, one thing only: “the magic hour.”

28.

It had gotten to the point where I could read the paramecium’s mind. I could actually hear his voice in my head when Terry Trewlis hung up:

- “A photo op. We need a new look.”

And then in mock-fashion-show-MC-voice:

- “Nil is wearing the trendiest new look of the season. Straight from the runways of Paris and Milan, Nil has gone leg-less – well, not entirely…he’s still got one, ladies and gents. But doing away with bulky appendages streamlines the look, allowing for a more concise design aesthetic. A single, bold stroke can transform the most pedestrian pigeon into a resplendent swan. We call it ‘Ampusthetics.’ You’ll simply call it divine.”

29.

I’d been staring at the ceiling of the den for two hours. The sofa – to which I’d been relegated since the baby’s arrival – was lumpy underneath me and sleep could find no purchase. I climbed the stairs, trying to avoid eliciting squeaks from the forty year old architecture. Mimi’s sleep had lightened considerably since the birth. I had no intention of facing her down in the middle of the night.

I entered the baby’s room, quietly – a task made easier for the fact that they left the door open in order to hear the baby cry. The room was just how I’d left it, except, of course, for the baby.

I gently opened the curtains and settled into the armchair in the corner. Lions and elephants and seals floated above the sleeping child. With a casual fluidity and an almost impossible lightness, they danced in the air. They moved so slowly, with such utter lack of purpose that, to the casual observer, they might not appear to be moving at all. Their shadows, projected on the wall beside the crib, offered more substantial evidence. Occasionally exaggerated by the headlights of a passing car, the two dimensional animals' anti-light doppelgangers caromed and careened in patterns not discernible in the animals themselves. They swooped and darted with the sprite and precision of swallows, whose aerial prowess is legendary among birds.

As I sat in the chair, with my back to the corner, my oblivious side to the baby and my front to the window and the wall, I was treated to a magnificent pantomime. The animals played out scenes from myth and history – portraying Hannibal and his elephant army on their momentous trek across the Alps and Prometheus' ill-fated flirtation with the sun. As cars passed, forms distended and deformed. Some plummeted with resigned abandon to the floor. They crashed through the pine boarding and the joists, smashing through to the first floor. They continued diving, piercing the ground floor and rushing through the compacted air of the basement until they reached the Calypso's very foundation. They didn't stop there. The six feet of solid concrete offered scant resistance to the shadows' manic descent. Into the earth they burrowed, creating, in their wake, a sucking vacuum – like a giant bathtub-whirlpool of air. Before I had a chance to moor myself against it's pull, the whirlpool was slurping me into its maw. I traveled the same path as the shadows from second floor to first, then to the basement, through the rubble of the concrete foundation and into the moist, sweet earth.

The night went pitch black and, just as Einstein predicted, I lost all ability to sense my direction of travel. I couldn't tell if I was still going down. You can't blame perception for thinking itself captain of the ship. We go through most of our lives with perception at the helm. We believe it when we see it, and, to a lesser extent, when we hear it, touch it, smell it or taste it. The information we

gather on such sensory intelligence collection missions is taken to be empirical. So, when perception is denied primacy, it goes a little haywire – the captain begins pacing the deck, barking incomprehensible orders, changing his mind, contradicting himself. More than once, trapped in the fertile clench of the loam, I perceived myself to be changing direction (was I now moving up?) or stopping altogether. But then a root would brush by me, rushing toward the sky. Because roots don't often drive through soil to the surface, I deduced I must still be sinking. Once or twice, I thought I heard a distant cackle, like the communal call of circling carrion. But it might have been a whoosh of air traversing the cups of my ears. I thought I saw the distant shine of the monkey's eyes, slithering through the blackness. He was still with me, my protector, my compatriot, my guide.

Syrup and Mimi must have taken my presence in the baby's room as a sign of disturbance. All they could think about was the baby. Even fully awake, I would have had trouble explaining my presence there, but in the midst of Mimi's inappropriate, forceful shaking, I was unable to even process their concern.

- "What'th the big idea?" was all I could muster.

30.

When the phone rang, I was in the process of opening a carton of milk – no easy task, down an arm. There's a little, one-handed maneuver that most of us use to open a carton of milk. It's not something we're really even conscious of. It involves folding back the wings of the spout with the thumb and middle finger, and, while keeping the wings prone and extended, reaching in between with the index finger and prying the spout's imminent nose from its glued backing; yanking the two-dimensional plane of the folded, waxed cardboard into diamond-shaped three-dimensionality. The trouble, though, is two-fold: prior to this maneuver one must flay the triangular roof of the carton in order to form the two aforementioned wings (this is an act which normally requires two hands); and when performing the described maneuver, it is incumbent upon the maneuverer to

steady the carton, to prevent it from flipping, shimmying or swan-diving from the kitchen counter. I've perfected the technique of anchoring the carton with my one remaining index finger on the carton's peak and, with middle and ring finger on the slanted roof's outer surface and thumb on the inner surface, prying each of the wings into existence. Then, to bring the spout to life, I push the carton's back to the splash back which rises four inches from the counter. This is enough to create an L-shaped cradle for the eight inch carton and allow me to perform the little, one-handed maneuver that most of us use to open a carton of milk without fear of sudden overturn and spill.

I never finished these choreographed procedures. I left the milk carton on the counter. When I rediscovered it there, the next morning, it had to be thrown out. Within moments, I was in the car, following the directions I'd been given over the phone.

31.

I was in the backyard, a few days after Marina arrived. I was pulling dandelions from the lawn and gathering them in a little bunch. One man's weed is another man's bouquet. Marina came around the side of the house in full hiking regalia: her frame pack mounted on her back and thick, woolen socks emanating from the tops of some very technical-looking hiking boots.

- "Another day in the mountains?" I asked.
- "Oh yeah, god, it is beautiful. What they call mountains back east don't hold a candle to this. It's amazing. What are you doing?"
- "Rescue mission," I said, holding up the yellow flowers.

She clicked open a series of nylon belts which secured the pack to her torso. She leaned forwarded and dipped her right shoulder forward. She recoiled her left side, extricating her left arm from the pack's left shoulder strap. The pack shifted to the right and as it did, Marina maneuvered it around her and down, setting it gently on the ground.

- “Can I have some?” she asked, referring to a pitcher of lemonade on a small, lawn table.

I nodded. She poured herself a glass and, with a moan – the kind one makes when stretching – she settled into one of the red-stained, oak lawn chairs.

- “Nil, mind if I ask you something?”

Why would I mind?

- “What are you up to? I mean I have my own ideas. And what you’re doing means something to me, no matter what your reasons are. Whatever you say, it won’t change my mind. Do you know what I mean? It’s like a song – the singer may think it’s about one thing, but someone listening might think it’s about something else. You can’t really say that person is wrong. They might experience some new feeling or thought and they could change their whole life as a result of what they think that song is about. I knew a girl in college who bought a record by this group called Throwing Muses. Have you heard of them? Anyway they’re this group with a girl singer and she has this kind of high, manic voice. And the band is kind of fast and herky jerky, y’know? Well, she bought this record – an actual vinyl record. It was a 12-inch ep thing that was meant to be played at 45 r.p.m. but she didn’t know that. I guess she didn’t read the liner notes. Some people don’t really care about that stuff. And she played it at 33 r.p.m. So, to her, Throwing Muses sounded like this dirgey, dark, slow group with a guy singer with a low voice, like a Nick Cave kind of singer. Do you know Nick Cave? And she listened to this record a lot and she really liked it. So when Throwing Muses were coming to play in Burlington, where we went to college, she bought tickets. And she turned up at the show and she bought a t-shirt and everything and then Throwing Muses comes on and the only boy in the band is the

drummer. And they start playing this fast herky jerky stuff and then the singer starts in with her high-pitched voice and my friend is totally confused. She waits through the entire concert, thinking maybe they will change – maybe the boy drummer sings sometimes or something. She had met up with some friends at the concert and they knew what Throwing Muses were supposed to sound like. Isn't that a great name, Throwing Muses? And she asked them what was going on? what had happened to the guy singer with the low voice? And they told her that they never had a guy singer. It was always this same girl. So she went home that night and looked at her record to try to figure it out. She thought maybe they had put the wrong record in the wrong cover. It's like this book, If On A Winter's Night A Traveler that we read in Lit 31. This guy buys a book, but the publisher has attached one book's cover to a different book's insides. Anyway, my friend finally figured out that she was listening to the record at the wrong speed. So what was she supposed to do now? Keep listening to it at the wrong speed because she likes it that way? Or listen to it at the right speed because that's how it's supposed to be? Do you know what she did?"

- "She stopped listening to It altogether."
- "Yeah. That's right. How did you know that?"
- "That's how it works. If you buy a product, its utility is proscribed. You follow the instructions. Any cognitive dissonance between your experience of the product and the manufacturer's intent will lead to a breach in your relationship with both the product and the producer. The definition of your role begins to break down. You were defined relative to the product and vis-a-vis your relationship to the manufacturer. But now you begin to flounder. Your sense of self starts to erode. As Yeats said, 'The center will not hold.' You have only one option: discard the cause of the confusion. Everything returns to normal."
- "I would have kept listening to it the way I liked it. It wouldn't matter to me if it was the right way or not. If I liked it, I liked it."

I sensed an opportunity.

- “So, what do you think I’m up to?” I asked.
- “I think you’re out to save the world. I think when people see what you’re doing, they will stop dead in their tracks and drop their guns or their shovels or their cell phones and they will realize what they’re doing wrong. Your like a compass. But instead of pointing the way to the magnetic north pole, you’re pointing to the moral north pole. You’re showing people the way.”

This was too easy. I had to test her a little.

- “You think everybody should chop off their arms and legs?”
- No, no. I’m not saying everybody should do what you’re doing. You’re setting an example and the example has to be more severe than the result. You couldn’t just go about living a quiet, unselfish existence – relinquishing your possessions or whatever. That wouldn’t get through to people. For one thing, they wouldn’t put you on TV or anything. You had to take it to the extreme so people would wake up and take notice and do something.”

Close enough.

32.

The address was a flat-roofed, three story brick building in downtown Denver about a block west of the train station (where they say Jack Kerouac lived for a while) and across the street. The ground floor housed a Mexican bakery and the whole block smelled like corn tortillas. The smell was so dense, so pervasive one couldn’t imagine that there was any room remaining in a cubic foot of air for the smell of perfume or hair conditioner or the waft of a wet dog shaking.

I hit the buzzer for 2R. After a few seconds, I could hear the distant creak of a distant door, then footsteps on the wooden stairs and then the metallic unlatching of two deadbolt locks. The door swung away from me.

- “Howdy. Nil?”

The artist was about my height, but considerably heavier. His hair was brown and tightly curled – the kind of hair which doesn’t offer the barber many options . He wore a white t-shirt, tucked hastily into a pair of navy, Dickie-style work pants. He was not freshly laundered and I found myself suddenly thankful for the corn tortilla camouflage.

He invited me in, leaving me to close and double lock the door behind me. I followed him up two long, straight flights of creaky wooden stairs. His apartment was nicer than the building had led me to suspect. The landlord had rehabbed the place fairly recently and had not used – as is the custom – the absolute cheapest materials, nor employed the laziest solutions. The place was spacious, though that impression may have been due in part to the artist’s furnishing scheme. There was one table and one chair in the dining room, nothing in the kitchen and, in the living room, a futon, flopped crookedly against the wall, facing an industrial-sized portable radio/cassette/CD player. On the walls hung precisely three still-wet oil paintings, arrayed in a vertical column. They were unframed, merely stretched canvas. On the table there were a collection of sloppy soup cans and mayonnaise jars filled with paint, a collection of dirty brushes, two additional canvases-in-progress and a glass of whiskey. He sat at the lone chair and angled himself toward the column of paintings on the wall. He glanced at my missing arm. People do this when they meet me. They look at the space my arm used to occupy. Then, invariably, their eyes assume this unmistakable expression of pity. They do one of two things: either they look up from my missing arm to my eyes and search silently for an explanation, or they look quickly away. If we’re talking, their next sentence begins with “Anyway…” The artist looked at the absence of my arm. He surmised the fact of it as a fact and then, shifted his attention to the paintings. He wasn’t

avoiding the subject.

- “These are the newest ones,” he said.

I looked at each one for a few seconds. Three monkeys, three scenes. Monkey, monkey, monkey.

- “The top one is one-twenty-five. I could do the others for a hundred each or, if you wanted more than one, the price could come down a little.”

He took a sip of whiskey and leaned back, rocking his weight onto the back legs of the chair.

I took another few seconds with each painting. The most expensive one, the one on top, depicted a monkey in cap and gown, on a dais, accepting a diploma and shaking the hand of someone out of frame.

- “Why is that one more?” I asked.
- “He’s a college graduate.” He laughed just a little.

The middle one pictured a monkey, surfing in floral print trunks, cutting back against a breaking wave, his arms outstretched for balance. The bottom painting showed a monkey, apparently in a park, in the shade of a tree, with a book in his lap and a half-eaten apple in his hand.

- “Which one do you like?” he asked. “I’m sorry if I’m talking too much. I quit smoking the day before yesterday.”

I’d been there ten minutes. He’d said precisely 59 words.

- “I’m not here to buy a painting,” I said.
- “Rodney said you wanted a painting,” he said, referring, I suppose, to the bartender at the Plugged Nickel.
- “I told him I wanted to see you about the paintings. I didn’t say anything about buying one.”

He stared at me, his head cocked slightly to the side. His eyes didn’t ask a question as one might expect. This was a man accustomed to ambiguity. He just looked at me, completely neutral. I would get around to an explanation eventually. Or maybe I wouldn’t. But, in any case, it wasn’t his nature to be solicitous.

So I told him the story…of the monkey in the baby’s room and the animal mobile and the shadows on the wall and the paramecium and my plan. He drank a little more whiskey as I spoke.

- “I had the sense,” I told him, ”that the monkey was going through a similar transformation, that you were depicting the deconstruction of his very monkeyhood. The question is how much can you take away, before he’s more nothing than monkey, right? At what point does his essential monkeyness evaporate? And what about being a monkey or, in my case, a man, is so noble after all? You know what I’m talking about: we need to relinquish our attachment to being, in order to truly be.”
- “Be what?”
- “Alive. Human. You know, just be.”

He drank more whiskey. He looked at his paintings and shifted his weight in the chair. He looked at me again and then, for a moment, at his feet on the floor.

- “I don’t know what to say,” he said.

There's an old story about a pilgrim seeking enlightenment. He travels thousands of miles by foot to seek the advice of the Dalai Lama. After more than a year of travel, the pilgrim reaches his destination and is granted an audience. He asks the Dalai Lama, "Master, please tell me, what is the meaning of life?" The Dalai Lama says that before he can share the secret of life, the pilgrim must spend ten years in solitude. So, the pilgrim retires to a nearby mountain top, subsisting on twigs and berries in complete isolation. After ten years, he returns to the Dalai Lama and says "I have done as you instructed and now I would like to know the meaning of life." The Dalai Lama, feeling the pilgrim is not quite ready, sends him back for ten more years of solitude. The pilgrim dutifully obeys. After ten years he returns once more to the Lama and asks about the meaning of life. He is instructed to spend yet another ten years alone on the mountaintop. Once he has completed this, his third decade of solitude atop the mountain, he returns to the Dalai Lama. The Pilgrim is, by now, much older than when he first sat before the Lama. His face and body have been withered and diminished by the elements and by his meager diet. He says to the Dalai Lama, "Master, I have done what you have asked, now having spent thirty years alone atop the mountain. Please, will you finally share with me the meaning of life?" And the Dalai Lama, gathering his saffron robe around him and leaning forward, gestures for the pilgrim to come nearer. "Well," he says, "life is like a beanstalk, isn't it?"

The artist got up from the table and circled to the sink. He turned on the tap and tested the temperature with his finger. He added an ounce or two of water to his glass and returned to the table to dilute the water with whiskey.

- "Listen, I don't know what you were getting out of my painting. I mean, I'm no artist, really. I bang nails, hang dry wall. I just painted a monkey for one of my nephews once. I gave him the picture and he didn't really care about it one way or the other. But all the parents at this party went ga-ga for it. I started getting calls for more. I'm sorry I'm talking so much. I really need a cigarette. It's been 46 hours. I couldn't even remember how to paint the monkey, so I had to borrow back the original from my

nephew. By now I've got it down. I could paint that stupid little monkey in my sleep. It's like a kid's drawing. Any idiot could make one. But people would rather buy something than make it. Look at him. He's not the right shape. His head's too big for his body. And look at the sun. I'm serious, there are kids who could paint a much better sun. I don't know anything about painting."

- "But you chose a monkey," I said, "and you gave him a cigarette or set him hitch hiking or reading or…that one's surfing. You were getting at something. Monkey's behaving in non-monkey ways. Or non-humans doing human things. It's all about how preposterous we are, isn't it? How fragile our senses of our selves are."

I realized my tone was staring to sound desperate. I calmed myself and started over.

- "Look, there were a million things you could have painted. And, even after you chose a monkey, a million ways you could have painted it. But you've stuck to this one idea – these monkeys doing human things. There is a meaning to all this. It's not just random. It's not haphazard."

The artist drank more whiskey. He looked at me for a while. Then he looked at the column of monkeys on the wall. Then he just looked at the wall for a while.

- "I just thought it was funny, for kids, you know. It's like those movies where they dress monkeys up like people and they're scientists or cowboys or whatever. Like those Clint Eastwood movies with the orangutan who drives the eighteen-wheeler. I just thought it was funny. But what you're doing, it isn't funny, man. And I don't really see how it has anything to do with me or with my paintings. Do you smoke?"

He looked at the absence of my arm again. But this time, he looked at it the way other people do.

- “You’re not planning on cutting off anything else, are you?”

33.

The following day, with Marina’s help, I cut off my right leg. She thought what I was doing was both noble and cool. I was in People and on TV. She needed no further validation. She asked very few questions. And, most importantly, she wasn’t squeamish.

I took the rest of my morphine. We called an ambulance. We waited in the garage until we could hear the siren. She started the chainsaw and took off my leg just below the hip. By the time the ambulance pulled up to the house, both she and my leg were gone. The paramedics were frantic. This hadn’t been covered in their training – an armless, tongueless, penisless man, with a gaping wound where his leg should be and no leg in sight. They yelled at me, “Mister, where is your leg?! What happened to your leg?!” I was fluctuating in and out of consciousness. Realizing they’d lose me if they delayed much longer, the paramedics strapped me to a gurney and stuffed me in the back of the ambulance.

When I woke up in the hospital, sutured stem to stern, the conversation hadn’t changed much. “Mr. Nil,” they wanted to know, “do you know where your leg is? Do you know what happened to your leg?” The gig was up. There was no point in coy subterfuge.

- “I disposed of it.”
- “What do you mean, Mr. Nil? Disposed of it how?”
- “I hid it.”
- “You hid it? Why?”
- “For safekeeping.”
- “But Mr. Nil, don’t you understand, if we’d had the leg, we may have been able to reattach it.”
- “I don’t want it reattached.”

The next person I spoke to was the head of psychiatry.

34.

8:00 a.m. – Wake up call.

8:45 a.m. – Breakfast. (You were expected to be showered and shaved by then).

9:30 a.m. – Physical therapy. (For some this simply meant recreation, but for me, it was a mind-numbing session intended to teach me the fine points of surviving minus an arm and a leg: walking with crutches, or handling objects like a telephone and a frying pan. Plus what they called “vocational rehab.” It turns out that computers weren’t designed for folks with one arm).

10:30 a.m. – Another shower.

11:00 a.m. – One-on-one counseling. (My therapist, a Dr. Carter-Clarke, seemed less interested in fixing me than in satisfying her own morbid curiosities. She used an up-swooping inflection that gave every question a hidden “Really? That is fascinating?” as she furled and unfurled her eyebrows).

12:00 p.m. – Lunch. (This was the most egregious scheduling rigor. I was never hungry enough to eat much by noon. But come two o’clock, invariably, I was famished).

1:00 p.m. – One half hour of “quiet time” in our rooms.

1:30 p.m. – Group. (What is the purpose of this? Ten men are seated in a circle. They have nothing more in common than a generic diagnosis of mental illness. A bored therapist closes the circle like a lock on a chain and solicits comments. For 80 of 90 minutes you are expected to sit and listen and commiserate with the psychological woes of your fellow man. For 80 of 90 minutes I was reminded of the banality in the officially proscribed justifications for and methods of living. Most of these men weren’t born crazy. They were driven crazy by the contourless routine of a purposeless, regimented life. For 80 of 90 minutes I desperately tried to will myself into an empath. to absorb each man’s internal torment, gathering the various threads of these unraveled lives and winding them

together into an enormous ball of human misery; a ball of hopelessness, fashioned from the incessant clamor of false promises and meaningless rewards; so tightly-wound, so pent-up with potential energy – a veritable atomic bomb of human emotion. Every day, for 80 of 90 minutes I dreamt of escaping Shady Grove's walls to unleash this weapon of amassed destruction on the creators and sustainers of the diabolical construction known variously as "real" or "productive" life).

3:00 p.m. – TV time. (Yes, TV time. It seems the powers-that-be deem the officially supported and sanctioned comic entertainments and consumer extolments to be restorative).

4:00 p.m. – Hobbies. (Ceramics, watercolors, needlework, etc).

5:00 p.m. – Dinner.

6:30 p.m. – Another half hour of "quiet time" in our rooms.

7:00 p.m. – Evening activity. (Each night presented another patronizing social "event", mingling members of the male and female populations One night, a "barn dance" held in the linoleum-tiled rec. room. Another night, a "senior prom." Two or three times a week – the default evening activity – movie night. They were fond of Kevin Costner flicks).

9:30 p.m. – Lights out.

35.

During my stay at Shady Grove, I became a full-fledged media phenomenon. Marina told me so. She said, "you're a full-blown media phenomenon." (I prefer full-fledged). And I know because Gabrielle called from Vermont or New Hampshire or wherever it is she lives. She left a message with my catatonic roommate's wife when I was at physical therapy. The note read:

Gabriel called – she said your a selebrity. She saw you on the tv.

I was becoming a national talisman against the overriding negative news of the day: the precipitous downturn of the economy, the ineffective "war" on terrorism, the crime rate…the list

went on. I was something different. And I was different somethings to different people. For some I was a kooky diversion. To others I was a martyr.

I agreed to appear on Oprah. To her, I was an avenging angel. I was the personification of a stripped-down, aesthetic lifestyle. I was diets and minimal home décor and Zen meditation taken to the extreme and rolled into one. I told her producer, “Oh, thank god, somebody finally got it right.” Of course, I intended to tell Oprah’s viewing audience something else.

Part Four:
The Firmament

1.

The darkness of night swirled before me. Perhaps I’ve seen too many digitized photographs of pinwheel galaxies, spinning in the darkness of space. It may be nothing more than self-aggrandizement – equating the space just in front of my nose with the great, stellar breeding grounds of the cosmos. I know I’m prone to over-dramatization. I know I’m susceptible to delusion. But, in the undulating surface of space-time, where scientists look for perfect mathematical reasons and where theologians seek evidence of divine designs, I find reassurance in the absence of reasons and designs; in the thought that if nothing is true, everything is permitted.

All that swirling nothing is something. It is a landing area for our own fertility. The great painting requires the blank canvas. I open my mouth and swallow whole mouths full of that delicious darkness. I suckle at its teat. I milk the night, the sky, the firmament and grow stronger and more delirious on its nourishing nothingness. Where something is, nothing else can be. But where nothing is, anything can be.

2.

Syrup and Mimi came to see me. They brought the baby – now two months old. Syrup sat by my

bedside, Mimi, with the baby, in a chair by the window. Syrup took deep breaths and sighed in place of exhaling. He looked at the ceiling and the floor and occasionally at me. He asked questions whose answers weren't what he wanted to know. I told him that I knew what I was doing, that it was all part of the plan. I told him that I had no remorse. He started to cry a little. He stood up, ran his hand along the metal bars of the foot of my bed, inhaled and sat down again. He asked the question he'd been meaning to ask. But I told him I couldn't tell him the answer. There were millions of answers, but none of them were necessarily and completely right. I told Syrup what Hegel said: that there was nothing that could be thought that couldn't be said. And maybe he's right. I'll mix it up with Descartes anytime, but who am I to argue with Hegel? However, thinking and saying are not the only tools of expression nor of understanding. I stumbled around a bit before my explanation really crystallized. Our experiences have meaning. Physical sensations and emotions are conduits both in and out of our bodies and minds. We can process an absence as well as a presence. And we can know things about what we experience that we neither think nor say. There were people out there who were hearing about what I was doing and they were making their own sense of it – maybe not cognitively. But you can't tell me, I said to Syrup, that a dream , for instance, doesn't leave you with feelings and information and new senses of things and people and events in your life, you can't tell me that. (I was emphatic). A few seconds later I added music and, then, the view of the ocean from a mountain top. Syrup was looking at the floor. His elbows on his knees, his hands clasped together, his lips pursed tightly. The words had reached him, but they hadn't taken root. They were rattling in his brain like dry seeds in an unopened packet. Neither of us said anything for a few moments.

- "…or watching your baby sleep."

Syrup looked at the ground a few seconds more. Then he looked at me. His eyes widened and stilled. Almost indiscernibly, his face relaxed a little. He reached out and put his hand on my shoulder, touching me at exactly the point where I ended, where my physical self ceased to continue. He looked me in the eye.

- “Honey,” he said to Mimi, “we can go now.”

3.

On Tuesday, I walked off the grounds of the Shady Grove Rehabilitation and Wellness Restorium (I didn’t name it). Marina picked me up and we drove to the Denver International Airport. (Personally, I always preferred Stapleton, but they didn’t let me name the airport either). Oprah’s people booked us – me and my “nurse,” Marina – first class to Chicago and put us up in the Drake Hotel, overlooking Lake Michigan. On Wednesday I was the one and only guest on Oprah’s show.

When I got back to the hotel there was a message from my old morphine doctor, awaiting trial on Federal narcotics charges, at the time. Apparently he’d seen the show. I called him back.

- “Dr. Kantor, how nice to hear from you.”
- “Nil. Oh, man. If I’d only known. How come you never told me? This is deep stuff. And to think I’ve been a part of it. I just wish I’d known at the time. You know what I mean? I wish I’d known so I could have experienced it for what it was. You looked great on TV. There’s this peaceful thing about you. It’s very convincing. I just wish I’d known what I was doing when I did it.”
- “I can give you another crack at it,” I offered.
- “Really? Are you serious?”
- “Well, I’ve still got an arm and a leg.”
- “Which one did you have in mind?”
- “Both.”
- “Done.”

4.

I called Syrup to let him know I was ok. He said that Terry Trewlis had been desperately trying to get a hold of me. He'd left a number. Trewlis was excited, bordering on agitated. Time Magazine wanted him to do a piece on me. There was a good chance I'd be on the cover. The editors of Time thought I could sell magazines. He needed to know where I was, what I was up to. I told him about Marina. I wanted people to know that someone was taking the plan seriously, supporting the plan, devoted to the plan. The Plan, capital P. Trewlis ate it up. I could hear him scribbling as I spoke. "The Plan, capital P. Beautiful." He wanted to talk to Marina.

- "Hello?"
- "Yes. Marina. M-A-R-I-N-A. Della Conte. Two words. First word Della, D-E-L-L-A; second word Conte, C-O-N-T-E."
- "I'm 28."
- "I've known him since we were kids. I was a friend of his sister's."
- "Yeah, she told me about it…yeah, the Plan."
- "I was driving cross-country, camping and hiking and stuff. **and**

5.

After my appearance on Oprah, Marina and I decided to stay in Chicago. If we went back to Denver, we reasoned, I'd be returned to Shady Grove. And, for now, at least, I thought it was important to be out among people. I wanted to see how things were changing. I wanted to be accessible, not cordoned off in some hospital in the middle of nowhere.

Neither Marina nor I had much in the way of savings – maybe a thousand dollars between us. And the following morning Oprah's generosity would end. I called Kantor again and asked him for a favor:

- "Before you come, I need you to collect the rest of my limbs. Do you have a pen? Write

this down. My penis is in formaldehyde in the ceiling tiles of the men's bathroom on the third floor of the Cooper County Mental Healthcare Center in Durango. The ring finger of my left hand is in a cassette tape case in the top drawer of the dresser in the baby's room at Syrup and Mimi's. The rest of my left hand is in a mayonnaise jar filled with formaldehyde. It's buried in the back yard between the tomatoes and the zucchini. My left arm is in a violin case under my bed. I mummified it according to a Mayan practice I read about in National Geographic. My tongue is in the freezer, wrapped in butcher's paper, behind a box of garden burgers. I'm not sure where my leg is. I'll have to ask Marina when she wakes up. I need you to bring all my parts out here with you. You'll never be able to get that stuff through airport security, so you'll have to drive. Bring whatever you need to remove my arm and leg. I've got plenty of morphine. And bring a laptop."

6.

We had a few days to kill before Kantor's arrival. I asked the concierge at the Drake if Chicago was home to a botanic garden, but was disappointed to find that it resided in the suburbs, north of the city. I was informed, however, of an attraction known as the Garfield Park Conservatory, an indoor arboretum, located on Chicago's west side. The Conservatory sits amidst burned-out buildings, disrepaired housing projects, and abandoned cars, just north of the Lake Street elevated train line. The Garfield Park Conservatory is a nearly-impossible marvel. It was built in 1906 and, at the time, must have been quite an engineering feat. The heart of the Conservatory is a series of glass greenhouses, one hundred yards long by thirty yards wide and four stories high. The slanted roofs of the greenhouses are composed of a series of glass panels, each controlled by an elaborate system of winches, chains and pulleys, so as to allow sections of the roof or the roof in its entirety to be opened to the elements. The impression it leaves in the early Twenty-First Century is that of a world still betrothed to its physicality. The same structure, built now, would have no need to open its roof. The interior would be climate-controlled, providing anything the eco-system could provide and more. If the builders, due to some sense of nostalgia or an ironic hearkening to more naive conceptions of the building arts, decided to provide for a receding roof,

they would, no doubt, mechanize it and electrify it so as to facilitate the maneuver with the flip of a switch. But in 1906, humans were still connected inexorably to cause and effect; still part of the causal chain. Humans didn't just set processes in motion, they manipulated them with their bodies (and with the assistance their minds could provide). To this day, at the Garfield Park Conservatory, in order to open a roof panel, a care taker must take hold of the wooden handle of a metal wheel. He or she must rotate the handle, which, in turn, rotates a sequence of gears which ratchets a chain through a pulley hung from a complex of moorings attached to the metal framework of the ceiling. The chain terminates at one end of the glass panel and, when summoned, slowly unfurls the first pane of a series of four which form the vertical panel leading to the roof's apex. The first pane slides atop the second,, which, in turn, slides atop the third and then the fourth, until the panel has contracted itself to one-fourth its original breadth and, in so doing, exposes the flora beneath to a sizeable portion of the Midwestern sky.

The flora, exposed or not, is easily the equal of the structure which houses it. The greenhouses which make up the Conservatory are organized by plant type: aroid, desert, palm, fern. Needless to say, many of the plants housed by the Conservatory are not indigenous to Chicago. Many of the plants are original to the Conservatory and a hundred years old or more. There are elephant palms with fronds as big as a blanket.

As we traversed the gently contoured walking paths of the Conservatory, the paramecium, rejuvenated by the moist, lichen-filled air, talked a blue streak about our progress and our plans. He was greatly encouraged somehow by this primordial garden restricted within its human-imposed glass and steel borders. He was particularly taken by the symbolism of the century plant, which, as the name suggests, blooms only once in a hundred years (and then dies). This, he reasoned, should be the State flower for our state of mind. I reminded him that, as far as I knew, we still possessed two minds and, therefore, could still, theoretically be 'of two minds.' He feigned insult and withdrew to seek the company of local aurelia.

- “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” I advised.

7.

Marina and I were utterly without resource. We’d left Colorado with roughly three hundred and fifty dollars between us and four days later, despite first class accommodations and paid meals, were down to less than fifty. We expected Kantor to arrive with money and a willingness to spend it, but he was at least two days away. Marina was less bothered than I was by the idea of a couple of nights on the street. And I was less bothered than the paramecium.

- “The street!?” he exclaimed. “The street is no place for a man of your stature.”
- “My stature? What exactly is my stature? I’m essentially unknown. I have no grand accomplishments to my name. I’ve amassed no personal fortune. I’ve won no awards, made no discoveries, conquered no foe. What exactly is my stature?”

The paramecium took a deep breath and, such as it is, shook his microscopic head.

- “Nil,” he began quietly, ”we’re never going to get anywhere if you can’t see the forest for the trees. It is absolutely essential that you recognize the importance of what you’re doing. If you don’t, how can we expect anyone else to? You are a man of rapidly accumulating stature. You have given so that the world may grow. You are making the most basic of sacrifices for the good of this place at this time. You are literally giving of yourself. Amassing wealth isn’t the point. And that realization *is* the point. Awards, discoveries, vanquishing foes – these are the things which the world has installed as measures of a man’s value. They are the simple, quantifiable things. But true value lies elsewhere. It lies in our ability to give. Do you still believe that, Nil? Do you still believe in the plan? in yourself?”

This was a side of the paramecium I hadn’t seen before. The cutting sarcasm was gone. He was

solemn. He was right. The world conspires to distract us from what matters. It's easier for all concerned if the rules are well-defined and well-understood. It's easier if each person does his or her part to drive the big machine which is society. It's easier if that machine is steered by a small group of people with the proper access to influence and resources. It's easier if human life is viewed as an economy; if decisions in the present can be justified by the future; if some vague notion of *profit* is the goal.

It's easier. But it doesn't answer to the here and the now. It doesn't allow the people of any particular age, in any particular location, to experience the full engagement which should be called living. Why, as individuals and as a society, must we be productive? It's a seldom asked question. We take the goodness of productivity as a given. Productivity serves an illusory conception of the future. We imagine a life of fulfilment. As children we imagined it and were told school would get us there. As young adults we imagined it and were told hard work and a willing, temporary submissiveness would get us there. In middle age, we imagine it not for ourselves but for our children, and we're told due diligence, responsibility and planning will get us there. Somewhere along the way, we lose the ability to feel it anymore. Life used to poke through the protective bubble on occasion. It used to stick us in the ribs and give us a brief inkling of what it's all about. But all the imagining and submitting and planning hardens and thickens the bubble and before we know it, we're immune. We forget what it was we were after. So the game is clearly defined and we know how to follow the rules.

8.

Our first night on the street it rained. Neither Marina nor I knew our way around Chicago. We moved north from the Drake Hotel and inland. We crossed through a small industrial zone. A certain acidity tainted the air, seeming to lightly singe the insides of the nostrils. The paramecium found the odor particularly offensive. We passed by Cabrini Green, the infamous public housing project. A group of high rise apartment buildings stood on barren ground. There was no landscaping, no lawn, nothing green. The earth was stripped bare: dirt, broken glass, garbage,

light rubble from the slowly crumbling buildings. The windows on the top floors were boarded up. Later we were told that, as people moved out or were evicted or died, the Chicago Housing Association would move remaining tenants to the lower floors, leaving the upper floors vacant. Eventually, they planned to empty the buildings and demolish them.

The neighborhood bordering Cabrini Green directly to the north is a stark contrast. European luxury sedans and SUVs line the streets. A great many more are stored in garages occupying the first floor of new constructions. Older buildings have been attractively rehabbed. There is a small, concentrated shopping area with high end, stylish furniture and grocery stores. The corners of major intersections host upscale, chain coffee shops populated by young men and women who have accepted the rules and are playing the game consummately.

Around eight o'clock, the rain picked up and we moved west, seeking shelter. We passed a steel foundry, still operating within the city limits. Through enormous, open loading dock doors , we could see a huge cauldron of molten steel being tipped by a mechanical arm, releasing its liquid metal into the die beneath a gigantic press. The press plate lowered on the fluid steel with a tremendous hiss. Torrents of glowing orange metal overflowed the sides of the die and were caught in a trough.

We crossed the river, still travelling west on Cortland, and finally reached a dry refuge under an overpass carrying Interstates 90 and 94 north and west out of Chicago. To either side of the street, expanses of sidewalk concrete sloped upwards at 35 or 40 degrees until they met the undercarriage of the expressway. A third of the way up a spiked, wrought iron fence stood sentry. Civil engineers had created an underpass which could comfortably roost thousands of pigeons, while repelling homeless human beings. But human will and ingenuity are worthy adversaries. After a few minutes of exploring, Marina and I discovered, at the far western end of the southern side of the underpass, the fence had been breached. It was impossible now to tell how the breach had been manufactured – whether by sheer force or by finesse or fire. A small contingent of men

had encamped in the shadows near the top of the slope. They had painstakingly wedged various objects – a Detour sign, the wire mesh fold-out section of a shopping cart, sections of plywood – into a seam between two of the concrete slabs. They slept on the incline, their feet pointing down, braced against this makeshift retaining wall.

Marina and I traversed the concrete, leaning upwards in an approximation of the slope. As we neared the group of homeless men, one of them shouted.

- “What do you want? Get away from here.”

Marina responded.

- “We’re just looking for a place to sleep.”
- Find your own god-damned place. This one’s ours.”
- “We don’t know where else to go. We’re not from here. And it’s pouring out there. Can’t you…

One of the other men interrupted.

- “Is that a girl?”
- “Yeah. Please guys, can you just let us crash here tonight?”

There was a short, muted muttering. One of them said.

- “Whatever.”

9.

I had trouble sleeping that first night on the street. The expressway traffic only fifteen or twenty

feet above our heads was excruciatingly loud and quite unnerving. Marina had no such trouble and was out within minutes. I lay awake staring at the gray underside of this enormous viaduct. I thought about the artist. There seemed to be so much more in his paintings than he would admit to. It crossed my mind that his naiveté could be a show, part of his artistic-persona creation. Perhaps he played naïve in order to provide a more interesting back story for his work. There are those who believe, after all, that a proper critical consideration of a piece of art should take the artist's life into account. These critics would argue that an artist's milieu, his or her psychological make up, political inclinations and lifestyle all contribute to the choices which go into the creation of the work. These critics would say that for the audience to ignore such factors is to deprive themselves of huge stores of useful interpretive information. Without such information, a full understanding is impossible. Many artists, aware of this view and aware of the more basic human tendency to be fascinated by freaks and savants, play a role as part of their creative process. They accentuate the disjunctive aspects of their personality and downplay the more mainstream parts.

I didn't buy it. The artist's innocence was no act. He was truly mystified by people's appreciation of his paintings and downright confounded by my exegesis and devotion. He was unerringly a simple man and his paintings, though simple too, in their conception and execution, were more than the sum of their inputs. He was like an ancient Greek poet, possessed on occasion by an otherworldly muse. He unwittingly tapped into meanings and symbols and allegories which, to some (if not to him), expressed ideas that are unavailable to language. This is art's great gift to us: the expression of the inexpressible. It's the analogue of what Syrup and I both understood when I said "watching your baby sleep." The miracle of art is that such experiences can be manufactured. Ultimately, it doesn't matter if what I get out of a Robert Walser story is exactly the same as what Robert Walser meant. If, after a passage he wouldn't have considered sad, I dry my eyes, my shirtsleeve still gets wet.

10.

Dr. Kantor arrived two days later. We met him in front of the Drake, because, at the time we made the arrangements, it was the only landmark we knew in Chicago. Since then we'd seen a great deal more of the city and we directed Kantor to a Days Inn on the north side at Diversey and Clark. The plan was to set up a base of operations. As we walked through the lobby of the hotel, people parted and gawked. I had grown accustomed to that – amputees (not to mention double amputees) being a source of great interest. But there was a dead-in-their-tracks, murmuring, unanimous quality to the way the people in the lobby reacted. This reaction was something different. I checked to see that my fly was zipped.

We were standing at the registration desk, Kantor checking us in, when a teenage girl approached.

- "Excuse me, Mr. Nil?"

She knew my name.

- "I was wondering if you would sign my book."

She quickly dug through her bag and extracted a thin paperback and a pen. She offered them to me in what struck me as a curiously submissive fashion. I hesitantly took them from her. I turned the book right side up and examined the cover. There was a photograph of me in the backyard of the Calypso with lemonade and the Tibetan Book of the Dead. It was a sibling of the photograph used in the People article, apparently taken that same afternoon.

The Annihilation of Julius Nil

by

Terry Trewlis

Staff Reporter, Denver Post

I looked up at the girl.

- “Have you read it?”
- “I’m in the middle. Well, not the middle. More like the end. I’ve got like 75 pages to go.”
- “When did this come out?” I asked.

The girl looked a little incredulous.

- “The day before yesterday.”
- “I try not to read my own press,” I said, by way of explanation. “What’s your name?”
- “Regina.”

I opened the book to the title page and scribbled “To Regina. Don’t believe everything you read. With love, Nil.” She took the book and thanked me, scurrying back to her parents. I turned back to the registration desk. The clerk handed Kantor the keys.

- “It’s an honor to have you with us, Mr. Nil.”

We crossed the lobby to the elevator, still the center of attention. On the way up to our room, the paramecium questioned my hastily scrawled epigram.

- “Don’t believe everything you read?”
- “I wasn’t really prepared. I didn’t even know that book was out. I didn’t even know it was coming out. I need to call that son-of-a-bitch, Trewlis.”
- “Whoa, Nelly. Why the agitation? He’s done us an enormous favor. Did you see that reception down there? Every stinking person in the lobby knew exactly who you

were. The clerk said it was an honor to have you. You're signing autographs, for Christ's sake. If you're going to call Trewlis, it should be to thank him."

He was right, of course. It turned out that the release of the book was timed to coincide with the Trewlis-penned cover story in Time magazine. My face, photographed during the magic hour, graced the racks of news stands and book stores from coast to coast. The Trewlis book appeared at number 19 on the New York Times bestseller list.

11.

Marina and I were anxious to shower after two days on the street. We had a pleasant dinner at a fondue restaurant near the hotel and, afterwards, returned to the hotel for the night. I woke the next morning from a deep sleep to find Kantor setting out his surgical tools. Marina was acting as his assistant. He didn't give me much time to back out (not that I had any inclination to do so). I appreciated his dedication and forethought. He had me lie on his hotel room desk, which he had padded with blankets. He placed a mask over my mouth and nose and stretched the elastic straps over and behind my head.

- "I'm going to sing you a lullaby. Feel free to sing along now. Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream. Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream."

What is meant by the last line of this children's song, I thought.

When I came to it was dark out and I was limbless. Marina sat by my bedside and asked me how I felt. I was, of course, woozy. She knocked on the door to the adjoining room and called for Kantor.

- "Well, we're back, eh? How's the head?"

I thought it preposterous to inquire after my head when it had been my arm and leg he'd removed. But then I realized that, from now on, my head was the only thing which interested parties *could* inquire after. I was a tablet with a head. I knew from experience that as the morphine wore off, the pain would set in. Kantor had done a marvelous job with the sutures. I'd become something of an expert in these matters and recognized the care he'd taken and the meticulous nature of his craftsmanship.

- "Nice job," I said, glancing at my missing right arm.
- "Thanks. It may have been my final surgical act. I wanted to make it a good one."
- "Final act? How come?"
- "I've decided to stick with you. You're the only person in the whole goddamned world who's making something of his life. I'm gonna hang around and try to learn a thing or two."

12.

I was the talk of the night time talk shows. Not only did the hosts center their monologues on me, but I came up in conversations with guests. Tom Cruise said making movies is kid's stuff. He made reference to me and said "Now, that's hard-core." I had offers from other programs, but chose my spots carefully. I avoided over-exposure and mixed my appearances between the high and low brow. I was building a constituency. On PBS I talked about transcendence and Hegelian dialectics. On daytime TV I referred to McDonald's and morality in the 21st Century.

- "I don't know if TV is my medium," I confessed to the paramecium.
- "Nonsense. You're a natural. People need to see you to get the point. The impact of you propped up in one of those overstuffed guest chairs is priceless."
- "That's not what I mean. I'm not sure I'm getting my message across. Because I know that they can edit whatever I say, I pre-empt them. I edit myself. Before the words even reach my lips I've simplified them, removed potentially objectionable

content, deleted truth in favor of charm. You get little blasts of time in between commercials. You have to hit the conceptual mark and leave it. You can't go deeper, you can't debate, you can't even play devil's advocate. Complexity just comes off as confusion. And isn't TV part of the problem? Think about how ludicrous it is: images and sounds are beamed into our homes by officially-sanctioned, State-monitored, corporate-run entities. Their motives aren't benevolent. They're trying to train us."

- "Train us?" the paramecium asked.
- "Well not you, maybe. There's no paramecium demographic…as far as I know. But they're teaching us how to think, what to want, what to buy. Did people always find body odor repugnant? Did they always want deodorant? Or did the deodorant precede the want? Everything is backwards. In our TV-driven advertopolis, invention is the mother of necessity."

I felt this deeply: people aren't bad, they're gullible. Adam Smith figured that the free market could depend on people acting selfishly, but that merchants could generally serve their own needs only by serving the needs of others. If a tailor in Anchorage decides to make coats, he'd be well-advised to make some good, warm winter coats or Alaskans will find themselves another coat maker. It doesn't matter if the coat maker prefers the drape of poplin. Other people's needs mandate his actions. In Smith's model, individual cells of selfishness combine to form a body of communal desires and fulfillments. Smith never imagined that firms would one day concentrate their efforts, not on fulfilling the prevailing desires of the individual cells, but on influencing – indeed, inventing – those desires. Smith recognized the harmful effects price cartels could have on consumers, but he didn't foresee the effect desire cartels would have on the deepest, most sacred motivations of individuals.

The early 21st Century is sometimes called the "Information Age." The title is a decoy. Hiding in its implications is the insidious truth of our times: information is a weapon. Sophisticated governments and corporations deliver information to their constituents and customers the way a

boxer delivers relentless body blows, rendering his opponent malleable. The grown-up, blown-out version of Adam Smith has Alaskans, perversely, in poplin.

I resolved to appear on TV only if I would be allowed a minimum of 30 minutes without commercial interruption. Few programs obliged, but my demand created more news and the resulting publicity helped to clarify my message.

13.

Grand notions of morality notwithstanding, a man still needs something to sell. In these capitalist times, in this capitalist place, if you don't have something to sell, you're out on the street. And my two days' experience were enough. If I never sleep beneath an expressway viaduct again, it will be too soon. And I had mouths to feed. Kantor had come to Chicago with some money, but not much. Preparations for his impending trial had depleted his resources. Marina was effectively penniless. Our needs were modest: a place to stay, a meal or two a day and, now that I was completely limbless, a wheelchair.

- "But the whole point here is to reject commodification, isn't it?"

The paramecium objected to my plan.

- "Not exactly, the point is to distinguish the essential from the non-."
- "Yes. But you are the essence. Your body is the battleground. To sell yourself, is to throw the baby Jesus out with the bath water."
- "But it's not my self I'd be selling. That's the crucial distinction. What I'd be selling is the non-essential, the non-me, the parts I can do without."

Around that time, in Chicago, bereft of all my limbs, I took firm control of the wheel. Prior to then, the paramecium and I had co-captained the ship. But, by severing my final tether to functionality, I

established my command. My authority could not be questioned. I, alone, understood how it felt and what it meant. Any external understanding was incomplete. Others might get something out of it, be effected; transformed. But, no matter what they felt, theirs was a spectator's experience. They were inexorably the object to my subject.

Kantor set up his lap top on the same desk he'd used as an operating table. Marina gathered my limbs and laid them out on the bed of the Days Inn. We had seven pieces:

1. my recently-removed right arm (stashed in a cooler of dry ice)
2. my recently-removed left leg (ditto)
3. my tongue (wrapped in butcher's paper, retrieved by Kantor from Syrup and Mimi's freezer and kept on dry ice for the drive to Chicago)
4. my left arm – minus hand (preserved by means of a South American clay mummification method I'd read about in National Geographic)
5. my left hand – minus ring finger (in mayonnaise jar of formaldehyde)
6. my left ring finger (in cassette tape case)
7. my penis (in pickle jar of formaldehyde)

With the exception of the left ring finger, all the pieces were in good shape. We re-paked the finger in dry ice and tucked it inside a metal Band-Aid box. At my behest, Kantor logged on to Ebay. We offered my pieces for sale. We provided little in the way of description, opting for the discretion of a dealer in fine art or rare coins. For example:

> Julius Nil's right arm. As seen on TV. Suitable for reliquary. Serious offers only. DNA authentication provided.

We set the minimum bid for each piece at $5,000. If all seven pieces sold for the minimum, $35,000 could get us through the next twelve months.

The minimum would not be an issue. Within hours of posting my parts, the bidding had risen to a frenetic pitch. Word had apparently spread quickly, as it's prone to do on the internet. A week later, I was surprised to discover that my penis was the most prized of my parts, garnering a top bid of $125,000. My hand proved the least desirable, but still merited an offer of $40,000. All told, we were looking at over half a million dollars in revenue.

- "Think what we could get for your head," the paramecium joked.

14.

One night at the Days Inn on Diversey Boulevard in Chicago, shortly after the Ebay auctions had closed, I resolved to cut the final tether. My project, I decided, must be performed without a net. The trick is to make the headlong plunge without a pillow, to embrace the impending impact; to absorb it or be absorbed by it. The plunge is, after all, the one thing we can count on, a priori. It may come quickly or slowly, expectedly or un-. But, no matter what else happens, regardless of the ebbs and flows of a person's life, it comes. King or Queen, president or pauper, newspaper man, washer woman, starting quarterback, cabbie, convict, CEO or corporal – it comes. So, it seemed to me, the key to all the moments lived pre-plunge, is to accept the plunge and to welcome its inescapable judgement. I abandoned my central beauty. The monkey – the *painting* of the monkey, painted by a half-wit construction worker – wouldn't soften the blow. All that painting could do, I reasoned, was distract me for a minute or two at a time.

That night I dreamt a jungle scene and an old-time pit of Hollywood movie quicksand. I was sinking, of course. But I wasn't panicking. I wasn't struggling. Everyone knows that struggling in quicksand only makes things worse. A chain of toy plastic monkeys from the childhood Barrel O' Monkeys game descended from a tree branch. Linked arm in curving, s-like arm, they extended to within inches of my face.

- “Take us,” they said in eerie, monotone unison.
- “I don’t need you,” I replied, content to sink if that’s what was in store.

The quicksand rose to my chin and I became uneasy. I couldn’t get my arms to the surface – the grainy muck was too thick. The panic I’d so successfully staved off until then, arrived with a vengeance. The quicksand began lapping at my lower lip. A bit of it entered my mouth. I spit it out.

- “Okay, okay,” I conceded, “I need you. Help me. Get me out of here.”

I tried to flutter and kick in a vain attempt to propel myself upward. The quicksand was so thick as to completely quell my arms and legs, so thick that, even as I tried frantically to move them back and forth, I could generate no motion. I couldn’t impel them at all, as if they weren’t there. The chain of monkeys could not save me. Their arms were fixed and bereft of will. If they were to be of use to me, I had to latch on to them and not the other way around. The effort had to be mine, but I’d waited too long.

As my head dipped below the surface, like a fishing bob with some weighty harbinger of oblivion on the line, the thick, gritty quicksand, not quite viscous enough to qualify as a solid, flooded my mouth and nose, sealing my orifices the way spackle seals a nail hole.

When I woke, the monkey was, once again, my central beauty.

A minute or two of distraction; yes, a minute or two with my head above the quicksand, with my eyes wide open, able to swallow mouths full of undiluted air. The plunge is real. Oblivion awaits. All this knowledge can do is paralyze us prematurely. If it weren’t for the minute or two of distraction, we’d be helpless in the face of our knowledge. I needed the monkey. I confessed it out loud.

- “I need you.”

15.

I was no longer receiving dozens of daily requests for interviews. Occasionally a day would pass without any requests at all. At first, I welcomed the respite. But soon, I realized that the slowing of requests indicated the wane of my celebrity. The sensation was familiar. As in a brief and torrid affair, my lover was tiring of me. Soon she would move on and forget me entirely. I wasn’t sure I’d said what I wanted to say. I replayed interviews in my head, trying to account for my message. Had I been clear? Had the interviewer been sympathetic or mocking? If were watching the interview, would I have understood? Would I have been effected? I couldn’t be sure.

I needed one last chance to clarify my message. I needed to pin the tail on the donkey. On Tuesday there was a request from the Eureka, California Times-Standard. I could do better than that. I waited. But Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday passed without another request. I thought the Times-Standard might be my last chance. Perhaps there was something to Eureka – the exclamation of discovery. I called them back.

- “Yes, this is Julius Nil. I’m calling for Katie Katewicz.”
- “This is she.”
- “Yes, I’m returning your call. You requested an interview.”
- “Oh, yes…what was your name again?”
- “Nil. I’m the guy who’s hacked off all his limbs.”
- “Oh, yes. I’m sorry, Mr. Nil. It’s been a hectic week here. I’m the only staff reporter and I’m covering a couple of big stories at the moment. It was a while ago I called you, wasn’t it? I had sort of given up on that. But, if you have a few minutes, I guess we can do this now…”
- “Sure. Now would be fine,” I said.

- “Okay, let’s see. So, why are you doing this to yourself? I mean cutting off all your limbs?
- “Are you familiar with Adam Smith, Ms. Katewicz?”
- “Well, a little bit, I guess.”
- “Adam Smith coined the idea of the invisible hand of the market. The idea is that people are inclined to act selfishly, but they can only truly help themselves if they help others.”
- “Right. In order to make money, you have to provide things that people need.”
- “But the failing of Smith’s thinking is that it doesn’t go far enough. The invisible hand isn’t a market phenomenon, it’s a social phenomenon. The market is just one small part of it. The invisible hand applies to market interactions because it applies to all human interactions.”
- “So, what does that have to do with you cutting off your arms and legs?
- “Right. This is the biscuit. What is the meaning of life? To ask the question is to tell a joke. It’s so big and so impenetrable it makes people nervous, so they shrug it off and laugh. But it only seems so big because we’ve been confused by dozens of red herrings: money and religion and love and accomplishment and expansion and propagation and on and on. There’s a simple answer. We live to give. It’s the invisible hand. We enrich ourselves by enriching others. Life is only meaningful if and when we effect another. When we teach or touch. There’s a reason those two words are so close. They must be etymologically related. Phonemes are linguistic DNA and those two apples didn’t fall far from the tree. They are the essence. Teach or touch. Live to give. That’s the social invisible hand in a nutshell.”
- “So, what is it your giving?”
- “Are you familiar with the old expression ‘the kind of guy who’d give you his left arm,’ Ms. Katewicz?”
- “Yes. But the implication there is that the receiver could use the arm.”
- “My gift is symbolic. It is the über-gift. A gift doesn’t have to be something you bought

at a store and wrapped in shiny paper. A sacrifice is a gift too."

- "Well, is what you're doing teaching or touching?"
- "Both."
- "Can it be both?"
- "It can't help but be both. Every teach is a touch. Every touch is a teach. We can learn with our bodies and caress with our minds."
- "What do you get out of all this?"
- "I get by giving. My gift is the greatest gift: a life really lived."

16.

There is a picture I haven't seen it in many years, of me as a child. My mother may still have it. I am wearing roller skates but have wandered out into a great field of phlox. It must be Nebraska, where I was born and lived a few years before moving east. I have on a blue and white checked pair of overalls which come to my knees and a white, short-sleeved turtleneck. The sun, evidently unobstructed by clouds or trees, is flooding the plains with a torrential light. The white flowers sparkle in the camera lens. I am squinting and holding my arms up, bent at the elbows, my hands folded behind my head. My mouth pressed into a wide smile, is open and reveals the two upper front teeth missing. The frame – all field and light – is suffused with a joy only possible in youth. The world, for all I knew, ended at the borders of that photograph. I was happily captured in a 3 by 5 inch box, framing a patch of Midwestern space. The frame allows no darkness, no doubt. Nothing needs fixing.

17.

After the piece ran in the Eureka Times-Standard, I expected a second surge in media interest. I'd finally framed my actions accurately. The message, now clear, was incontrovertible. Build a better mousetrap, or so the saying goes, and the world will beat a path to your door. Propose a better way of living, however, and the world, apparently, turns to the sports page. A week passed and there were no more calls, no more requests. I'm reminded of a poem by John Berryman:

All the world like a woolen lover

once did seem on Henry's side.

Then came a departure.

Thereafter nothing fell out as it might or ought.

Thereafter nothing fell out as it might or ought. I called Terry Trewlis.

- "Terry, it's Nil."
- "Hi, Mr. Nil. Where are you?"
- "I'm in Chicago, Terry. I need to ask you something."
- "Are you ok? What's been going on? How'd you end up in Chicago?"
- "Preparing the revised edition?"
- "Oh, no. Listen I hope that didn't…
- "I don't care about that. I need to ask you about the press."
- "What about it?"
- "Why so fickle?"
- "What do you mean, fickle?"
- "I mean two weeks ago, they were beating down my door to tell my story. Now I can't catch a cold, or whatever that expression is."
- "Well, the story's been told. There's nothing more to say."
- "But this isn't just about 'Man dismembers self. Back to you, Dan.'"
- "What's it about?"
- "You wrote the god-damned book, Terry. What's it about?"
- "I know. But the newspaper business or TV or radio, what have you, they're not in the business of philosophy. Our job is to tell you a bed time story. You know, we might not tell it to you right before bed time, but the point is the same. We tell you a story, made up of all these different stories from around the world. And the story goes like

this: everything's ok. People all around the world are doing things, big and small, good and bad, smart and stupid, just like they've always done. Nothing much changes really. We all go about our business, don't we. You know what I mean? The story only needs to last until the next day when we tell the same story again, but with different characters and locations. We can't hang around the same people or places for too long, because then the meaning of the story changes. Instead of a story viewed macroscopically, where no single event draws too much attention, where all the minutiae blend into a single static inevitability called history, you'd have a story under microscope. Personal details would rise to the surface and reflect the fact that all is not well with the world, that there is suffering and brutality and despair around every corner. Stories like yours come in books. And, even then, they usually blend in with all the other books and contribute to the palatable stasis."

- "You wrote a book."
- "That's a piece of crap. It was thirty percent pictures. If you want the truth told, you have to write your own book."

18.

Marina objected to my decision to return to Shady Grove. Despite the fact that her life had been reduced almost entirely to caring for me, she felt that maintaining an independence from institutions was critical to the plan. She was willing to continue to bathe me and feed me and dress and undress me. Granted, some of what would have made these tasks unpleasant – or, at least, uncomfortable – was negated by my lack of genitalia, but still, these responsibilities were far from enjoyable. I probably should have been more impressed by her willingness. Perhaps I should have taken her opinion more seriously. But, at the time, as is often the case with the actor and the audience, her attention was all I wanted.

For his part, Kantor had grown antsy. He reaffirmed, with regularity, his belief in the plan. But what had once been contingencies, began to look more and more like certainties. Thoughts of

‘what if’ climbed the ladder of his brain with increasing alacrity, imploring him to think of things like his future, his career and himself. A return to Shady Grove meant Kantor’s marginalization. Doctor’s are in long supply there (all, presumably, still licensed and not facing a Federal indictment).

19.

A few days after Kantor left, Marina drove me back to Denver. Syrup and Mimi met us at Shady Grove with an agreement they’d had prepared, granting them power of attorney. My signature (delivered pen in mouth) proved a mere formality which lasted only as long as it took Syrup to reassign the duties to Shady Grove.

Syrup accompanied me to my room. Mimi waited in the lobby with the baby. Once the orderlies had deposited me in my bed, Syrup came and sat beside me. He held the bed’s metal railing in lieu of the hand he almost certainly would have held, had I one to offer him. I was reminded of a girl’s hand grasping the metal bar of a bus seat once, a very long time ago. I had the sense of two parallel glass plates, one resting on top of the other. One holds perfectly still, while the other one shakes and shudders, shifting violently in one direction and then the other. One plate is the world, which, since I’d come to Colorado, had changed very little. The other plate is the one on which I live my life. On this plate everything has changed. The world has no use for my agitations. Its slick surface offers no foothold for my ascent. Sometimes, depending on the angle and the light, the plates are transparent, concealing nothing, barely detectable in fact, floating in the space of a clear sky. At other times, the plates become opaque, reflecting the available light as a slab of blinding white obfuscation, revealing nothing of their purpose or their contents. How could these two plates, cheek to cheek, circumscribed as partners, operating in tandem, mean so little to each other?

20.

I’m not the first member of my family to live in a ‘home,’ as they’re euphemistically known. Around

the time I was fourteen, when my parents were still together, my father did his first stint in a 'home.' The place pretty well met my expectations of a psychiatric hospital – a sketchy combination of institutions I'd seen in Ken Kesey's One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest and Mel Brook's High Anxiety. It must have been just as hard for my father to welcome me and my mother and my brother and sister to his new home as it was for us to visit him. At one point – apparently needing to prove to us that he was still the man of the house, even if this was a dramatically different house – he flopped down on the floor to arm wrestle an enormous African-American patient. My father was no pipsqueak, but this man had at least six inches and forty pounds on him. (more here – something's missing) I know that I have some narrative responsibility to report the outcome of this impromptu test of strength between Goliath and Goliather, but, the truth is, I don't remember who won. I'm not sure I actually watched. In retrospect, it seems prudent to have turned away. But I can't say with any certainty whether I turned away at that moment or have done so over the ensuing years.

21.

"Escapee from the looney bin." The title carries a certain cache even on the outside. But it is a badge of honor on the inside. If you've managed to escape without two of your limbs, you're a venerable hero. If you come back, having removed the remaining two, you're an outright legend. If you come back, having been on Oprah Winfrey, you're a god. My status was so elevated that the attendants (male nurses, really) spared me the welcome-home punch-up usually afforded 'worms,' as returned escapees are known. A few of the attendants would occasionally throw me a knowing glance or an approving gesture. One went so far as to say he admired my guts.

The patients waited on me hand and foot. At dinner I was offered second helpings and extra desserts. Patients with families on the outside who gave enough of a damn to send care packages offered me cigarettes and candies or read me measurements and letters from pornographic magazines, holding up the pictures as proof of the rather incredible numbers. These readings had little effect on me. Pornography was never particularly to my taste, in the first place,

but the lack of genitalia rendered the whole thing pretty pointless. I did accept a snort or two of whiskey once when, disguised as apple juice, a bottle got through the Shady Grove screening. But, best of all the special treatment I received upon my return, was to be left alone when I asked to be. Normally, at Shady Grove, such requests fall on deaf ears – patients' ears deafened by delirium and attendants' by design. Being 'non-ambulatory' (as it said on the door of my room), I would have been completely at the mercy of anyone looking for an attentive ear to chew on – figuratively or literally.

22.

In some instances, evidently, light behaves like a wave, and in other instances, like a particle. For a long time, scientists seemed to believe that because they had these two categories (wave and particle) that light must be one or the other. It didn't occur to scientists that light felt no obligation to subscribe to one or the other of their notions. Light must have split its sides as one academician shouted "wave!" and another shouted "particle!" Light was light and prior to scientists, nobody checked light's ID.

Humans like to make boxes. It may be more serious than that. Humans may, in fact, need to make boxes. It's known as the Assimilation Model. We acquire knowledge by building an intricate system of grids in our heads, like a University Physics Department's mail boxes. Each box has a little tag. One might say "ex-lovers," another might say "chicken cacciatore recipe." Other bigger boxes might be called "ties that go with my green suit" or, if you're a physicist, "things which are waves" or "things which are particles." As new information comes in, we file it in the appropriate box, like the department secretary distributing the morning's mail. The trouble is, the world we intend to fit inside these boxes was built before the boxes. Boxes may have been built with one thing in mind, only to discover that two things belong there and that another box, intended for the second thing, is unnecessary. A thing may even exist for which there is no box. Humans don't know what to do with these things. When we find one, we reject it (if we can). We ignore it and hope it will go away.

There's an old story about a spider and a box. It's kind of a 'round peg/square hole' story. Essentially, the idea is that to get the spider into the box you have to cut of all its legs. By doing so, you delete the spider's essential spiderness. By boxing it, you erase it. Friedrich Nietzsche, believed that, as with the spider, all this boxing was erasing everything. He said: "The faith in the categories of reason is the cause of nihilism." He saw the modern intellectual methods of processing the world as the cause of the breakdown of the order of meaning. All that had been posited as a transcendent source of value in metaphysics became null and void after Immanuel Kant. We are desperate to paint a picture of the meaning of life, but there are no cognitive hooks upon which to hang it.

23.

At Shady Grove days unfold like origami swans. By dusk they've traded any relationship to their form at dawn for a pale, submissive expanse of creases and contortions. The hours between are a hard reckoning; a process of laying bare the dismally simple truth of my present and future. There are meals just twice a day. An attendant sets a tray on a stand which extends out across my bed. He props me up to a sitting position in bed. He positions the tray underneath my chin so that anything that falls from my mouth returns to the tray. He turns on the television and spoons mushy food into my mouth as he mindlessly watches ESPN.

Mondays through Thursdays I have physical therapy sessions which consist of a visit from a 43 year old divorcee named Marcie who seems to get more 'therapy' out of her work than her patients do. With no lack of shame, she divulges the intimate facts of her disintegrated marriage, her husband's new girlfriend and her children's resentment. Meanwhile, she asks me to torque my neck, crunch my abs. Granted, I don't offer Marcie much with which she can work, but her focus is nevertheless fuzzy.

On Sunday nights, I'm wheeled to the recreation room where, along with 44 other patients

considered capable of social interaction, I am treated to a movie. It's usually some pleasant, golden era-Hollywood fare: screwball comedies, westerns, musicals. We don't get many action, suspense or war movies. These are deemed 'too distracting,' by which they mean, 'too likely to wind us up and put ideas of retribution, violence and justice in our heads.' I, for one, can not be considered a threat.

24.

- "So this is what it all comes down to."

The other 44 patients were watching Gone With The Wind.

- "Of all the lousy gin joints…"
- "That's Casablanca."
- "I know," said the paramecium, "but I didn't want to tell you I don't give a damn."
- "Meaning that you do give a damn or that you don't, but you don't want to tell me that you don't?"
- "Nil. I've always given a damn, haven't I? The others have flitted into your glow like disoriented moths. They light on you for a while and then flutter off somewhere else. I've been here throughout."
- "To the end."
- "Not so fast. We're not there yet."
- "Well, if you'll take a close look, you'll see I'm kind of lacking the necessary apparatus to push our story forward."

Someone in the back of the room started yelling for Blanche Dubois and was removed.

- "Nonsense," said the paramecium, "you've got the only apparatus we need: that head of yours and your notoriety."

- “I’m just about out of notoriety.”
- “For the moment. But the fickleness of the public’s imagination can work in our favor. We can re-light the flame.”
- “And I suppose you have a plan?”
- “I read in Science about the new generation of automated prosthesis. They have robotic arms and legs which can take the place of your missing parts. Why, I think we can even have you fitted with a brand new electronic tongue. You will be the true post-modern man. You will, after all, be the deliverer of the future to the present. You will become the perfect fusing of man and technology, of nerves and circuits. I’ve been taking some notes. Here, listen to what Marshall McLuhan said: ‘The extensions of man with their ensuing environments, it's now fairly clear, are the principal area of manifestation of the evolutionary process.’ He thought of technology as an extension of the human central nervous system. He thought that human evolution had ceased being biological and was now technological. You will be the forefront of that evolution.”

But I don’t want to be the plough on the front of the killdozer. My reasons had nothing to do with technological extensions of our nervous systems. My reasons had to do with extensions of our sympathy and our consciences and our capacities to perceive beauty; our ability to give and receive more fully. Technology hasn’t addressed these issues.

So, I lie in a mental hospital, dependent on a sports-obsessed attendant to feed me. He is apparently unaware of the irony (or the cruelty) of his watching these masters of physical enterprise; the fastest, strongest, most agile and accurate athletes in the world, while he spoons mush into the mouth of a limbless torso. I can’t help but wonder why I’ve done this. I try to reassemble my reasons and reevaluate my theses. I meant to mean something, first and foremost. But I haven’t meant anything to my attendant. I’m just another mouth he needs to hit with a spoon – a little easier than some, since he doesn’t have to strap me down first. Granted,

he's a small sample group, but if I haven't reached him, than, obviously, I haven't reached everyone. If I'm being honest with myself, I have to relinquish any claim to 'most' or 'many' or even 'some'. A small, cultish following is the best I can hope for, but even this is wishful.

25.

Has it not occurred to anyone that the last place on earth which should be decorated in an "institutional" style is an institution? I had regular visits from Marina. At first, I found these a pleasant diversion from the serial monotony of my waking hours at Shady Grove, of these same four, institutional walls. It's a surprising facet of general relativity that even things as basically-described as pleasure and boredom should be subject to alterations in space and time. Marina occupied patches of space and of time that, without her, would have been empty. That emptiness was, to aliveness, what a black hole is to light. Marina's ninety minute visits on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays were the equivalent of a manhole cover, sealing off the voracious vortex.

But soon, she began to spring leaks. Other than the plan, we'd never had much to talk about. She still liked to reminisce about this article or that interview. And she had a very specific memory for the details of the limb removals she witnessed. She liked to remind me that my right leg was still in her possession. She seemed to feel that by some percentage, this meant that I belonged as much to her as to me. But she was singularly incapable of discussing the philosophy of my endeavor. References to Fichte or Sartre or even Dostoevsky fell on deaf ears. During one visit I asked her if she'd found a copy of Notes From Underground, which, in the course of her previous visit, I'd recommended she read. She said she'd inquired in a book store, but they couldn't find any books by Dustin Efsky, Evsky, Efskee or Evskee. "Are you sure you got the name right?" she asked me.

26.

Night takes on eerie nuances in the sanitorium. No eerier than other places, I suppose, but different in character if not in magnitude. There's a certain black and white, 1930s, laboratory feel

to the shadows and the light and, especially the sounds, renovated by hundreds of feet of tiled hallways. Echoes are the auditory equivalent of shadows, turning clear, pedestrian signals into hazy and ominous runes.

The eerieness of Shady Grove carries with it a very palpable despondency. But it's hard to know if the despondency is part of Shady Grove or part of me. Is it part of the "institutional" décor, planted here decades prior to my arrival, as a desired component of the sedative effect of this place; a compliment to the treatment administered here? Or did I bring it with me, packed, along with my meager allotment of personal affects, for slow, deliberate unpacking, exhuming it from my satchel like some theatrical magician's assistant retrieving a train of knotted, multi-colored silk handkerchiefs from a black, silk top hat? Have I, since my arrival, been insistently draping my despondency across the furniture and apparatus of my room?

As I lie in my bed in the darkness of night, I am not treated as I was at the Calypso, to dancing mirages of plate-tectonic ballets nor to mystical scenes of ancient history nor myth. The shadows in my room at Shady Grove are recognizable as the negative correlatives of three dimensional objects. Though distended and at times grotesque, the shadow of the chair corresponds, quite obviously, with the chair itself. The shadow of the geranium on the windowsill, with it's snake-like tendrils and its clusters of flowers offset by flatter, more independent leaves – though as open to interpretation as any Rorschach inkblot – can not or will not release itself from the shackles of literalness. It is, irrefutably, the shadow of the geranium and nothing more. There is no rebellion here. The mass-less shadows are not inclined to overthrow the hegemony of the objects with mass. There is no opposition to the domination of the possible by the forces of the actual. At Shady Grove acceptance is the norm and the goal. And I can feel its warm, reassuring embrace closing around me.

27.

One Monday, just a few months ago, I received an unexpected visit from Terry Trewlis. Since then, he has visited me with some regularity – at least twice a month. His visits provide the variety of interaction which Marina's fail to. And I am grateful of his company. The second time he came, he brought with him some pages he'd printed from the internet. They constituted the text of a document I'd read once in college and not since: the so-called "System Programme," attributed to Hegel, Schelling and the poet, Holderlin. Trewlis thought that this text, written in 1796, some two hundred and five years earlier, had something to say about my system program.

Trewlis pointed out a passage, written out in a script which philologists have attributed to the young Hegel:

> I am now convinced the highest act of reason, which embraces all ideas, is an aesthetic act and that *truth and goodness* are brothers *only in beauty.*

To Trewlis, what I had done was the most courageous embodiment of this idealistic conviction. I had turned myself into the artwork. I had ratified and manipulated my own body as the raw materials – the clay, the pigment – of my masterpiece. I had separated my self from my body, acting on some Cartesian intuition. What greater truth could there be than my willingness to surrender my physical self in service of this beautiful act of reason? What greater evidence of goodness?

There was a time when Trewlis' reading of my actions would have heartened me no end. There was a time when his research into grand historical and philosophical justifications for my self-administered annihilation would have been welcomed gladly. But by the time I'd returned to Shady Grove, his enthusiasm was met quite differently. As I read the System Programme, it struck me as having little to tell us about the world we live in now. Hegel, though good intentioned, was too naïve of his own time, let alone ours. How might he have reacted to television and film and advertising, where all ideas are, in fact, wrapped in aesthetics? Hegel

couldn't envision a future when aesthetics become the manservant of ideas and ideas the lackey of a self-perpetuating cycle of selling for selling's sake. Whereas in his time, companies and shops and merchants concerned themselves with the manufacture and distribution of goods and service, now these same entities are beholden to greater raisons d'etre. On one hand, companies must concern themselves, firstly, with selling pieces of themselves. In order to do this, they must sell (or create the illusion of selling) something else. But the functionary discourse between supplier and customer has been relegated to a position of secondary importance. And, furthermore, in order to sell the idea of themselves as profitable sellers and as worthy investments, these same mercantile entities (transformed by the modern necessities into pure bureaucratic machines) have learned to manufacture desire for their goods and services; a desire which, in the economist's parlance, is known as *demand*. The modern commercial enterprise subscribes to Hegel's dictum, driving all its processes with an engine made of aesthetics: aesthetics as signifier of desire, of quality, of power, of meaning. But, just as Sartre called man "a useless passion," so is this so-called "meaning," because it means nothing but itself and pursues and accomplishes just one objective: to create more of itself. In this sense, I am the exact opposite of the logical outcome of the System Programme, because I have endeavored to create less of myself. Through anti-profit, I have sought to prove that we don't need what we think we need; that our desires are artificial and extrinsic. It occurred to me that what I have done is to try to separate myself from the aesthetic as it has come to be understood. Not in an effort to redefine that understanding, but simply to discover what enlightenment awaits us in the state of not understanding (or not being understood).

28.

It's not unusual for people to feel that, in their greatest hour of need, that which they need most has abandoned them. Suicide is this thought, felt on a grand scale and acted upon in kind. Biblical authors attempted to combat this very human inclination in The Book of Job. I wonder if the pummeled boxer's urge to embrace his pummeler is related. In any case, since I'd left the Calypso, the image of the monkey, once emblazoned in my mind – a photo-realist rendering of

the immature acrylic original – had begun to recede. Simultaneously, an idea of the monkey had begun to assert itself. As happens with all memories, the realness of the original was being replaced by a conceptual rendition. Instead of the leathery contours of the left side of his face and the sun-washed, diluted, starchy features of the right, I now recalled the monkey as the verbal description of these attributes. In addition, I remembered certain episodes like the day the paramecium suggested we adopt the monkey as our mascot, or the night when the headlights of a passing car launched the monkey into a bawdy version of the Star Spangled Banner. The monkey was transformed in my memory from something palpable into a shadow or an echo.

Unlike the ruination of possibility presaged by the firm mooring of my room's shadows to their three-dimensional sources, the monkey's transformation was an encouraging sign. Perhaps all these years of carrying pictures and lyrics in my wallet had been unnecessary. Perhaps the only aspects of a central beauty that one needs to carry are those which resonate with import and intimation in the fiery synapses of the brain. It is not the monkey that I need, but the monkey's essence. So, during the dark days and darker nights at Shady Grove, I found myself turning with increasing frequency to the monkey's that idea of the monkey tucked deep inside my head.

29.

The paramecium sensed my increasing dependence on the idea of the monkey. He was displeased that I should be sinking farther into the solace of my mind.

- "Wake up, Nilly. We need you out here in the real world."
- "I'm awake."
- "I'm speaking metaphorically, buddy. We need you to do something."
- "What can I do? What am I capable of doing?"
- "You need to instigate some action. I don't know, isn't there anything else we can lop off of you? What about the robotics idea? Have you given that any thought?"
- "I'm not turning myself into a cyborg."

- “You’re too good for that? You’d rather be a vegetable than a robot. Instead of a cyborg, you’re an iceberg lettuce.”

The paramecium’s wit tended to abandon him in times of stress.

- “Look, maybe you won’t understand this, having been a paramecium all your life. I mean, I don’t know if paramecium have ambitions, if you have an internal drive to make something of yourself.”
- “Not exactly. And better of for the lack of it. Look at what this internal drive has done for humans. Rack and ruin, more or less. Rather than an impulse to better themselves individually, paramecium experience an impulse to better the whole. In the case of most of my species, that means investing future generations of aurelia with stronger micronuclear material. The meaning, if you will, of paramecium life is propagation, endurance, simple continuation. I thought humans were different. But after spending some time among them, on them and in them, I realized they’re not. Humans act on all the same impulses as protozoa, just on a bigger scale and with more impact on other species. Do you have any idea what anti-bacterial soap has done to our numbers? But when I found you, Nil, my hope of finding a more noble purpose was revived. You had something eating at you – not one of my relatives, by the way – something which refused to accept simply continuing. You believed in nobility, Nil. You believed in something beyond yourself.”
- “Yes and look at where it’s gotten me. If I pack it in now and allow myself to be turned into some sort of synthetic-hybrid freak, it’s tantamount to an admission of defeat. I have to ride this out, whether I still believe in it or not.”
- “Whether you believe in it? What’s that supposed to mean? Just because the world hasn’t taken to you lock, stock and sinker…”

The paramecium’s grasp of the colloquial also tended to abandon him in times of stress.

- "…doesn't mean you were wrong. Remember those postcards you used to have tacked to the wall at the Calypso? look at those guys. How well were they received at first? Frank O'Hara – nobody knew how much he'd written until after he was run over by a dune buggy. And Calvino? No Nobel Prize? They gave one to Toni Morrison, for Christ's sake. What about Oscar Wilde of all people, the treatment he received? Can't you see that all the achievements you admire were largely overlooked at the time,? Many of them are still ignored. But that doesn't diminish your faith in them."
- "No, it doesn't. Nevertheless, at this point it's just a matter of waiting. Maybe the world will take notice, maybe it won't. But there's nothing more I can do to influence the outcome now. Least of all, reconstruct myself as some 21st Century Circuitry Boy. This whole thing was about accepting less, not accepting new, high-tech versions of the old."

30.

The autumn in Colorado is imbued with all the characteristics that make autumn the ideal season for tourism brochure photographs. The air is as crisp as the new harvest of apples. The leaves of those apple trees and the maples and sycamores and elms and birches crackle like an open hearth of lapping red and orange leaves. The air takes on a new aroma, more earthy than summer, and redolent of the slow descent of the vibrant life of July and August into the ruddy hiatus of November, December and beyond.

Syrup came to visit one such day in a light brown canvas coat. I asked whether Mimi had come and if he'd brought the baby. I thought I could use the cheering up for which infants are renowned. But Syrup informed me that Mimi had chosen not to come and has asked him not to bring the child. She had set aground on the opinion that I was not a healthy influence on any of them, least of all the newborn. When Syrup had come to my defense, though he admitted it was half-hearted, she quickly made her position clear. She said that I was the kind of person who

could bring a whole house down. She couldn't stand idly by while Syrup was dragged into the abyss. She delivered an ultimatum and Syrup, left with no choice, was here to say that he could not visit again. I asked him if he understood what I'd tried to do. He stood up from his chair and ran his fingers through his hair. He walked to the window and back again.

- "I think I understand what you think you tried to do."

But it had no resonance with him. Syrup had comfortably settled into a groove carved by the slow movement of generations, like the grooves in the cobblestones of ancient Roman roads, created by centuries of chariot wheels ferrying young men into the city and old men out. When we were younger we had seen the world as something that "they" had created and we would reject. But that desperation had been paved over and new roads had been created to lead Syrup, the young man, to family and career, to stability and wealth. He was living in that city now, holding the wilderness of youth at bay. He had accepted the world. It was easier this way. Who could blame him? I know that question will sound facetious. But it's not. Really, who can blame one man? Consider what he's faced with.

31.

My eyes were open. But I was dreaming. Or so it seemed to me. I had received a gift. I unwrapped the box with an army of arms, all circling around the box and darting in and out of each other with swallow-like precision. These arms were blurs in the air, never visible when still, but expert in their workings. The box was unwrapped instantly and the arms, no longer needed, disappeared. The lid of the box began to rise without aid, the contents of the box forcing their way out. I backed away, thinking, reasonably, the contents were alive. As the lid toppled off the box and then off the bed to the floor, a plastic material began emerging from the box. The little I could see at first, was thin and clear, like the plastic used to make floating pool toys or kitschy 70s bachelor pad furniture. Soon there was more. Whatever this was it was excavating itself form its container at an accelerated rate. A card, evidently packed in the box, fell out, landing at my feet. I

had feet. My arms returned to open the card. My feet disappeared again and then so did my arms. The card hung in mid-air. Bold, blocky letters, clean and definitive as day, spelled out this message:

Nil-

I sawed this man in half and I thought of yo-yo. Back and Fourth of July. Today and tomorrow. Who is this Tom Morrow, anyway? Inside out, boy you turn me.

I still don't love you. But still…

-Gabriela

A clear, plastic inflated cube, some three feet in all directions sat at the foot of the bed. There was an opening on one side and a complicated apparatus of bellows and clamps and what appeared to be a lens of some sort inside the cavity. My arms scrambled like a hyperactive swarm of snakes. The cube was slipped over my head, fitting around me like a futuristic dada head dress. My arms were gone again. A large ring clamp tightened gently around my head. The bellows began to expand and contract, wheezing asthmatically. The lens swooped toward my forehead, hung there a second, apparently surveying the scene. Suddenly, it darted to my left temple, then to my right. It zoomed around the back of my head and circled back to the front. There was a flash of light, the sound of gears turning (though I could no gears). The bellows began to wheeze more severely. One, in particular, appeared to be choking on something. The bellow in question took one mighty, heaving inhale and coughed up a piece of paper which flew out into the night air, rocking back and forth, gently settling on the dresser across the room. My arms removed the cube (disappearing again when they'd set it on the bed). I sprung legs and scampered to the dresser. The piece of paper that had been regurgitated from the cube was, in fact, a photograph.

The colors were more spectacular than any I'd ever actually seen – the result of years of colors laid one on top of the other, not combining like paint to form black or light to form white, but, each

layer, describing a more startling version of the previous red, the previous blue. It must have been colors like this which gave birth to names like ‘scarlet’ and ‘azure.’ These must have been the colors Giotto sought and, perhaps, achieved. We’ll never know. The photograph was a photograph of my childhood – not one event, not one day, one memory, or even one year of my childhood. It was the entirety of my childhood, exactly as I remember it, spit out as a single image by a clear, inflatable plastic cube.

I climbed in again and made pictures of my dreams, of all the things I want to do before I die, of my trip to Rome in 1992, of all the girls I’d seen on buses and in movie theaters and crowded city squares, on elevators and in restaurants, but never spoken to, of pie. I made a picture of me, my limbs restored, laughing with Syrup and holding his baby at the ages of 2, 5, 6, 11, and 14, against an azure sky dotted with peripatetic white clouds.

32.

It wasn’t just that visits from Terry Trewlis were less frequent and, therefore, more special. They were also more genuinely rewarding. Marina hid her agitation well and, on the occasions when she was present upon his arrival or arrived when he was present, she conducted herself with perfect equanimity. Trewlis usually brought with him books he’d been reading, often pointing out passages which related to my project or to ideas we’d discussed. Sometimes, he brought music he’d found particularly moving or photographs ripped out of newspapers or magazines. His aesthetic and intellectual sympathies were very like mine. He confessed to a love of Borges and Jasper Johns and Robert Wyatt.

On one visit he brought along a CD he’d burned at home of a hard to find Neil Young album from the mid-eighties. The album, Hawks And Doves, had come out on Geffen Records during a stretch which most critics think of as Neil Young’s wayward period. He made a series of albums which dabbled in styles from rockabilly to rhythm ‘n blues to country. The low point in most people’s minds was Trans, an album featuring synthesizers and drum machines. At the time, Neil

Young was seen as jumping the 80s production bandwagon. But in fact, no one of his stature or inclination had been curious enough or brave enough to gamble on such a change of stripes. In retrospect, he was a decade ahead of even his most adventurous peers. Many of the albums from this period, Hawks And Doves among them, have been deleted from the catalog, have never been issued on CD and are exceedingly rare.

But Trewlis had an old vinyl copy of Hawks And Doves. And when the technology enabled it, he burned a CD copy. He intended to introduce me to this lost gem of Neil Young's oeuvre, but he was too late. I was in high school when Hawks And Doves came out and a devoted enough fan to buy it within a week of its release. The album is divided, in a manner facilitated by the now-antiquated vinyl technology, into two very distinct parts. Side one contains four, mainly acoustic, ballads and miniatures, while side two is made up of five foot-stomping country rave ups. I had long shared the opinion which Trewlis offered that day: that side one ranked among the finest single sides of vinyl Neil Young had ever made. But I kept my opinion to myself and allowed Trewlis' enthusiasm to gallop unchecked into my room. His greatest ardor was reserved for side one, track one. This slot – side one, track one – often held an exalted position among music fans and record geeks. It is the answer to the call of "who's there?" It is the breach in the scratchy, popping, crackling, silence of the grooves that precede it. Collectors and aficionados love to debate the issue of the best side one, track one of all time. Trewlis' choice does not appear on many of these zealots' lists.

Little Wing shares a title with a song by Jimi Hendrix, a musician much admired by Neil Young. But the two songs are very different. Neil Young's Little Wing is a spare, acoustic construction, made of one guitar, a harmonica and an incomprably shaky, vulnerable voice. It starts with an abrupt outcropping of harmonica, phased by the shaping of the mouth. The guitar alternates between two chords, sometimes pausing long enough between them that it sounds as though he's given up. His voice is so fragile, so soft, he sounds as if he'd rather not go on. The song is just over two minutes long and after those first two chords, offers no new musical development,

with the exception of an exquisite scrap of melody tucked into the chords in between the song's two verses. There is no chorus. The first verse is four lines:

All her friends call her Little Wing
But she flies rings around them all
She comes to town when the children sing
And leaves them feathers if they fall

If the children fall, Little Wing softens their landing with her feathers. She lays a piece of herself down to absorb the impact.

Trewlis played me the song, thinking I'd never heard it before. He listened as if he never had either, absorbed in the palpable sense of space, the slow seep of melancholy. As the second verse began, it seemed he might be on the verge of crying.

Little Wing don't fly away
When the Summer turns to Fall
Don't you know some people say
Winter is the best time of them all

I was close to tears as the song ended.

- "It's really beautiful," I said.

Trewlis confessed that, when hie life most resembled a plane crash, he'd clung to that song as if it were a buoyant piece of fuselage.

I told him about my idea of a central beauty. I told him that life was a headlong plunge and that

only beauty could mediate the blow that awaited us at the end. I told him about some of the books and poems and songs which had provided me that service. I told him about the Villa Forni and about my recent adoption of the monkey painting. And, when I'd finished with all this telling, I realized that this was the first time I'd ever mentioned the concept of a central beauty, not to mention any of the particulars, to another human being. All those interviews I'd given, all that telling, all those questions: "Why are you dong it?" "What do you hope to accomplish?" And I'd never told any of them about the plunge. I never told them about my central beauty.

33.

Like Little Wing, I have surrendered pieces of myself for the good of others. And now, as in the song, my Summer is turning to Fall. I have begun to feel the rushing of air past my body, a quiet whistling in my ear. How will I be absorbed? The onset of Fall signals a hardening of the earth. The soft Summer ground, plied by the Spring rains, turns rocky and unrepentant. Those who try Winter's shell-like mantle are castigated. There is little opportunity for second chances. Once Winter has impressed itself upon the land, there follows an immunity to the charms of Spring. No softness can be felt; no kindness received.

The world feels no connection to what I've done. Most people dismiss me with pejoratives meant to delineate me from themselves. And, though I didn't feel the loss at the time – caught up in the ecstasy of giving – I have, of late, begun to mourn what I've given. A single arm is not of much use. Nor is a single leg. Nevertheless, each of mine has sold and now rests in the possession of someone who is not just a stranger to me, but also to each of the other limb-possessors. My pieces are the trees of an orchard, chopped down and sold off in random directions, dispersed, disacquainted and denuded of utility.

I yearn to reassemble. I hold out some hope that my pieces might bring me some peace. I have no illusions of re-attachability. That window of opportunity has long-since closed. But if I can get them back; have them here with me, perhaps I won't feel so alone. The last thing I want, the most

futile of all possible outcomes, would be for me to end up here, stymied in this hospital bed, resenting the fact that the world has turned its back on my charity. I'd rather rescind the offer and spare myself the exposure to judgment. As long as my parts are out in the world, I am still subject to critique. I am still, in a perversely literal way, a public figure. I long to take back my privacy. I long to take back my sense of self.

34.

- "What the hell is going on?"
- "What what?"
- "I got a call from Terry Trewlis this morning. Did you put him up to this? He says it's your idea."
- "What, about my leg?"
- "Yes, your fucking leg. What do you think I'm talking about? Is it your idea?"
- "Yeah. It's my idea."
- "Do you have something else planned for it?" Marina asked, hopefully. "Dropping it to the bottom of the ocean or burning it in a bonfire? Something more final?"
- "No. I just want my parts back."
- "You have done the most heroic thing in the history of mankind and now you want to take it all back and say 'never mind'? It's criminal. You have to make Trewlis stop."
- "Marina, you don't know what this is like. Lying here all day, staring at the ceiling. I've made this profound sacrifice and it hasn't made one bit of difference. Nothing has changed but me."
- "But if you stop now, if you change your mind, then you let them win."
- "Them? Who is 'them'?"
- "The ones who've made everything the way it is. The ones who continue to make it, following the blueprint of the day before. Every day they make it a little harder to see it for what it is, to even see it's there. Most people don't even know there is an 'it'. But you've stripped off it's camouflage. You're bringing the it back into the light of day

where everyone can see it and decide if it's for them."

- "The it is inside us, Marina. We don't make it, we are made of it. We are 'them'."
- "It's not inside you, Nil. You're not them."
- "I am them."
- "Then keep fighting it. Don't surrender. Don't you see? This is a capitulation, a betrayal."
- "Who have I betrayed?"
- "Me," she paused a second, then added, "for one."
- "Marina, I never promised anything to you or anybody else."
- "But you meant something." She was almost crying.
- "Whatever meaning I have for you is meaning you created. Nil, as you understand him is something you invented."
- "No, that's not true. You mean something. You are something."

35.

Terry Trewlis comes the following day. I've given him all the money I have access to – about $30,000 – to reacquire my parts. (The rest of my money is in trust to Shady Grove.) He has contacted all six of the current owners of my parts and made offers. For better or for worse, interest in me and my story has completely evaporated. All but one of the current owners have agreed to sell. Marina refuses and has stopped coming to see me.

I now have something to look forward to and my mood is improved measurably. My right arm arrives first, via UPS. Later the same day, my left hand is delivered in person by the owner. He tells me that owning my hand has ruined his life. He'd paid $40,000 for it. His wife, furious that he's spent their savings on a human hand, has kicked him out of the house. He thought the price of the hand would skyrocket along with my fame and that he would retire on the return on his investment. He explains that he accepted Trewlis' offer of $4,000 only because he owed two weeks on his room at the EconoLodge and they are threatening to evict him. It seems he's come

here to accost me. But, now, standing over my torso, confronted with the aftermath of my dismemberment, he's unable to resuscitate his anger. He surveys what's left of me, eyes aghast. Then he places the hand, still in the mayonnaise jar in which I'd stashed it, on the dresser. He takes the check from Trewlis and walks out, glancing back at me and shaking his head as he disappears down the hall.

During he next five or six days the rest of my parts arrive, except, of course, my right leg. Trewlis suggests we offer Marina more money. There are a few thousand dollars left in the kitty. I doubt it will make much difference, but I consent. He makes the call. She refuses. I resign myself to being permanently without my right leg. Missing one leg, has a name, at least: *amputee*. What I am doesn't even have a name. I ask Trewlis to unwrap all my parts and to arrange them around me in their appropriate places.

He starts with my left arm, sidling the stump up against the gnarl of scar tissue at the end of my left shoulder blade. He then places my left hand at the end of my arm, matching the two pieces of wrist as best he can. He replaces my left ring finger in its abandoned slot on my hand. Next, he cozies my left leg into the hip socket. It slips in quite neatly, almost seeming to click into place. My right arm, assumes a similarly natural fit. It was almost as if Kantor had foreseen this moment when he removed these limbs and facilitated these smooth, naturalistic replacements. It is a shame he's thrown away his career. He has a sculptor's touch with a scalpel. Trewlis is more squeamish about handling and placing my penis, so I just ask him to lay it below my groin, to the right of my left leg and to tuck it slightly under my buttocks, so that from above it will appear to be hanging limply. I ask him to pull the dresser to the foot of the bed, to stand on the dresser and to take an aerial photograph, so to speak; a surveillance shot of my reassembled topography. He is standing above me, as I've requested, camera in hand, ready to squeeze the trigger, when suddenly he remembers my tongue. I have become so accustomed to speaking with this infernal lisp and to swallowing food without tasting it, I forgot about my tongue. There it is: on the small table in the corner, still wrapped in butcher's paper.

I ask Trewlis to fetch it. He peels back the piece of masking tape which holds the packet together and unfolds the moist corners of the clean white paper. There is a second wrapping inside. This one is wetter and darker, blotted with watery blood. He decorticates the inner paper, revealing the deteriorated remnants of my tongue, blackened with pustules and sores, swarming with a nest of small, translucent white maggots. Trewlis recoils in disgust and grimaces at the escape of a cloud of acrid stench. Unlike the rest of my parts, which have been preserved like religious relics, my tongue has been left to rot. So, I will be forced to live without my right leg and without my tongue. For the sake of the photograph, it makes no difference. I will simply close my mouth. The camera's none the wiser.

Trewlis can't get high enough to fit me, head to toe, in the frame. He takes the floor-length mirror from the wall and, with two strips ripped from my top bed sheet, he ties the mirror to the metal frame which holds the acoustic ceiling tiles in place. After a few minor adjustments, he has it positioned directly above me, projecting the two-dimensional, horizontal image of my reconstituted body back to me. Then he leaves me, surrounded by my erstwhile parts, the mirror suspended above my bed. My parts cradle me in a posture of normality and wholeness which, for me, is called 'the past.' I search the mirror for the corporeal me which no longer exists.

36.

Terry Trewlis must have paid off the attendants because I've been lying here alone, surrounded by my pieces, for hours now. I try to sleep, but I can not. I try to keep my eyes shut tight. But, against my will and better judgement, they periodically pop open and race to the mirror. Each time they find the same hideous sight. I am a botched Frankenstein monster, abandoned halfway through. I am all stitches and scars. I am the physical manifestation of the old threat 'I'll tear you limb from limb.' But I've done my own tearing. My being has come to be dominated by the negative space created between my positive substance. I am the gaps in myself. I exist in the interstices. I am, above all else, the material realisation of immateriality, the space between being

and nothingness. I am neither positive nor negative.

The thought sickens me. I thrash vainly in my bed, desperate to drive the disembodied pieces of me to the floor. My eyes again cast toward the mirror, met by the grotesque sight of these gnarled stumps of flesh. I turn my head to the right and vomit onto my own shoulder. The lumpy, yellow liquid dribbles down the slope of my hospital gown and into the crevice between my arm and torso. I can not bear to see myself like this. I can not bear to be myself like this.

Trewlis comes in. I yell at him. How could he leave me like this? What if I'd drowned in my own vomit? He rushes to the bedside and wipes my mouth with a cloth. I shout at him. I want him to get these things off of me. Get rid of them. I don't ever want to see them again. He scrambles to remove them from me. He stacks them, as far as I can tell, beneath me. Then he stands on top of the bed, straddling me, and unties the mirror, lowering it to the ground and facing it against the wall.

I break down crying. I am sobbing uncontrollably, spitting up mucus and left over bits of vomit. My nose is running. Trewlis asks me what's wrong. I can not form a sentence. I can not form a constructive thought. I want only to be comforted. I crave warmth. I need to be soothed. Trewlis sits by my bedside, rocking back and forth. Occasionally he asks if he can do anything. My blubbering subsides. I heave, then inhale and hold still for a few minutes, rallying all my energy to hold my self together. Another heave and an inhale. Eventually, I am able to quiet my trembling and stifle my sobs. My eyes, again deprived of me, fixate on a single crack in the acoustic tile above my bed. Trewlis and I remain silent for what seems like an hour or more.

Finally, apparently sensing that the storm has passed, he asks me:

- "Is there anything you want, Nil?"

I know it sounds wrong: despite the fact that I speak, my mind is still incapable of thought. The utterance which comes to my lips is not cognitive. It is primal and unfiltered. I can not think the thought before I say it. It is unprocessed human need, utterly disconnected from the words used to express it

- "I want the monkey."

37.

The monkey arrives the following Monday. Trewlis passed my request to Syrup and Syrup, as one final concession to our bond, shipped the painting to me at Shady Grove. A member of the hospital maintenance crew comes into my room. He's apparently been told what to expect, because he doesn't pay me any mind. He hammers a nail into the wall at eye level, opposite my bed. He lifts the painting from the floor and hangs it on the nail. He sets a small level on the top of the frame, makes one minor adjustment, says 'there you go' and leaves.

It's just me and the monkey. I haven't heard from the paramecium in days. I've been disowned by everyone from Gabrielle to Kantor, to Marina and Syrup. I don't expect I'll hear again from Trewlis again. It's just me and the monkey.

He's still standing on that beach. He hasn't moved a muscle. His cigarette is still lit, the little plume of smoke, as always, frozen in mid-air. Over his right shoulder, the tamarind sun floats just above the horizon, illuminating the ocean's surface with a shimmering strip of light, culminating at his feet. The sky is softly blue. The sea is steelier. The sun, for lack of a better word, is tamarind. Before it all, the monkey, smooth and brown, stands forever motionless, his arms and legs no use to him. But, at this moment, this monkey is essential. Without him the scene has no meaning. Without him, it's just an empty beach, a cold, blue ocean and a bulbous tamarind sun, rising or, perhaps, setting. It's difficult to say.