

There is much to be said of the Celtic belief that the souls of those whom we have lost are held captive in some inferior being, in an animal, in a plant, in some inanimate object, and so effectively lost to us until the day (which to many never comes) when we happen to pass by the tree or to obtain possession of the object which forms their prison. Then they start and tremble, they call us by our name, and as soon as we recognize their voice the spell is broken. We have delivered them: they have overcome death and return to share our life.

MP

By Way of a Preface

I am in the habit of penning a few words at the appearance of works by or about members of the Cloud Club and trust these will not find themselves out of place here. The reading of hieroglyphics is not among my skills, and yet, though one knows not how he fills them, one may judge well enough whether the hatch marks with which a prisoner numbers his days are well or poorly made, with feeling or neglect. The bramble spreads, the bird molts, a crag departs its lofty abode. On clear days the low clouds curl and meld as they pass overhead. And as the hoarfrost populates my own cheeks, I feel less inclined to criticize them for the forms they take as they do. A crock reconstructed sometimes possesses a charm it never claimed in its heyday. Why plasticity should be deplored, I cannot say. But I allow that I lunched with the dean frequently and never noticed any vegetarians.

1. S-Stutterer

“I-I r-remember twilight t-t-times, b-b-backyard kilns, yellow smoke wafting down the street, and s-s-sucking,” he said, fixing his eyes on the volcano.

Marble pillars wreathed with green ivy supported the balcony of the cool café. The banister crumbled to rubble. He spoke softly. There was no other sound, except for the occasional cry of a bobwhite or Neapolitan swallow. The bobwhite was invisible. The swallow dove overhead and then rose to a comma in the afternoon sky.

“Is that your first memory?” I asked. It was time for lunch.

“S-s-sucking and r-red r-ruby r-r-rhubarb p-planted in a p-patch of dirt above the stables, below the peonies. What a smell, dung and peonies! S-s-sucking, s-s-sucking, d-dripping w-white dew squirting on blades of g-g-grass . . . M-m-me trying t-to catch every d-drop, every p-p-precious drip. The orb, s-s-soft and fleshy, came at me th-through b-blue s-sky. There were n-no shiny carriages or silver dragonflies over the horizon. Night bees never b-b-buzzed, b-b-l-linking lights of red and green. As my f-f-fingers grew strong, I learned to plonk teak and ivory. I liked m-my m-melodies.”

“What tunes did you play?” I asked.

“O-one evening the s-stable door s-sprung. The Appaloosa bolted down the alley t-to the square. Its shoes c-clapped on the c-cobblestones. My uncle R-Rock caught up with it on the far side of town, n-near the old c-canal.”

The waiter showed us to a table. A Vespa sputtered. Inside, a huge log smoldered in the fireplace as if it were late October. The white grotto that sheltered the burning logs was big enough to stand in. Speckled retrievers, black and brown, slept on wooden shelves on either side of the hearth. One sprawled on the floor.

“We m-moved away to a house below a mountain, where a s-s-stream ran pure and bounced on rocks, splashing in the summer and trickling under ice in winter. It let out to a meadow where cows grazed in chunks of mud and sparrows p-pecked at their feet.

“The windows, the white-framed w-windows of the h-house faced south, away f-f-from the mountains. A black pond k-kept t-t-turtle secrets f-f-floating, echoing y-yellow-spotted shells. They mounted rotten logs in m-m-moonlight, when in s-s-summer I snuck out to hum.

“I-I-I was h-h-happy there, especially in September, playing near the baskets of p-p-peaches. Each peach rolled down a rubber ramp. The sweetened air smelled of juice, and I sang of their fuzzy pink skins, some bruised or p-perfect orange and yellow, soft and damp in dark storage.

“They pressed apples to make cider. The froth gripped my s-s-soprano and moistened my tongue. Oh, m-my nose, my-my tongue, my throat—I longed for that juice!”

“Frogs?”

“F-f-frogs are more approachable than turtles. Quick t-turtles sunned on the island, inaccessible. Frogs sat on the bank, easy to catch. C-croaks gave them away. After diving, they doubled back and hid near the water’s edge where you could s-scoop them.”

“Do you want a drink?” The waiter had come and gone.

“C-c-cowslips grew in shaded springs. Blueb-b-bells filled the meadow in April. Trailing arbutus hid in crannies, and red-winged blackbirds teetered on crackling c-cornstalks. Dragonflies circled the canals at dusk, and firef-flies b-b-blinked before s-supper. I s-sang a song of nights in June. I s-sang a song of withered moons. I s-sing a song, my little s-son, of what I did, what I’ve done.”

The volcano rippled in purple haze. “Any regrets?” I asked.

“The winter would have been pleasant if we’d had toboggans. But we had no toboggans or b-buffalo skins or s-snowshoes, or crampons for getting over frozen drifts, or hearths to slide our feet into, or goose-filled comforters, or hot bricks to heat them with. If we’d had a long-suffering disposition, the w-winter would not have been too bad. The pond froze solid.

“Winter p-pennants are poignant, delicate and in keeping with the ice and s-s-snow that locks the earth’s b-b-b-breast when the sun’s rays are weak and slanting. The sumac’s faded cones were scraggly, irregular branches silhouetted above white-capped stone. On upland pastures and around old orchards, scrub oaks’ b-b-brittle twigs held tenaciously to the s-s-scrubby limbs. In the sloughs the pine oak’s broad acorns in shallow c-c-cups clung to gray-brown branches. In fence corners and around upland fieldstone piles winter-b-b-bleached goldenrod and silver-frosted milkweed bent submissively. In areas where the wind had s-s-s-swirled much of the snow to spotty drifts, the t-t-twisted, fragile stems of June grass and the upright heathery hardhack wrote s-strange hieroglyphics against the whitened p-page.”

He stared at me blankly, then glanced at the waiter bringing rattling refreshments.

“The c-c-color of a green frog’s skin is the r-result of a c-combination of pigments. Specifically, blue and yellow. Like a-albino b-bachelors, it is possible for f-f-frogs to lack either p-pigment. Since a frog’s pigmentation consists of t-two colors, there are a number of equations. If both the y-yellow and blue pigments are missing, you have a white frog, which is unlikely. In the absence of blue pigment you have a yellow frog, and, likewise, in the absence of yellow pigment you have a b-b-blue frog. There was a blue f-frog, blue as the sky. It sunned late on summer afternoons when the sun l-l-lit the grass on fire. The l-l-long shadows of the willow trees lay flat across water disturbed only by the occasional touch of a d-dragon. Unlike most frogs, which croak regularly, the blue frog sat quietly in a shaded spot on the stone wall at the edge of the canal while, in the f-f-fading lemon

light, p-p-pale greens and g-gentle oranges turned p-p-pearlish gray. On a clear day, we could s-s-see the mountains f-f-far to the north. These mountains, topped with snow, glistened g-g-old in morning. By m-midsummer's noon, a haze blurred the distant p-p-peaks and they disappeared into the horizon. M-my dad told me springs fed the pond and promised we would find them someday."

"Shall we order? This looks like some kind of salmon, I think, and herring, and these are little fried fish. You eat the head . . ."

"The b-b-boatman was a round, thick-s-s-skinned fellow with a broken nose. After boarding the t-t-teetering boat, he took us around to a floating box office to buy tickets. Then, one by one, we entered the t-t-tight opening of the pitch-black cave. There must have been ten or t-t-twelve boats already inside. The boatmen were singing, each a different song. We heard their voices with the l-lapping and slushing of the water. Then the boat t-turned. As it did, the paddle splashed and sapphire droplets fell into a pool of a-a-azure blue. The water glowed, illuminated from the entrance. After a turn or two, we drifted back toward the white light of the hole, which had become, in the few minutes we spent in the cave, h-h-harsh reality. The boatman's thick fingers grasped the chain above the h-hole, and we t-t-tucked our heads down in the boat as he pulled us into the bright light of day. It s-sufficed as a facsimile of b-b-birth."

"Well, maybe this melon and prosciutto, or this soup. I'm not sure. It's a kind of . . ."

“Our g-garden was an island. It s-sloped to the s-s-sea. In ancient times it had been a v-v-vineyard. The tiers of rocks that lined the slope, overgrown with grass and thistles, would have been constructed with patience. Twisted olives and figs now grew there instead, and d-dahlias, oh, the b-black d-dahlias!

“My primary concern was with several varieties of p-peas that spread among the tangle of thorns, the s-s-scrubby underbrush higher than my head. I split open the pods to find the tiny orbs buried inside, and filled my pockets to give them to my m-mom.

“Though the garden was overgrown, nothing was remotely classifiable as a weed. Weeds were unknown to me. In this tangle of g-g-green, yellow, violet, and red (the red of hot peppers and poppies) lived Persian-patterned insects of various varieties. Some looked like pencils, some like pink erasers with pairs of s-s-spindly legs. Some locked together in the morning in what later I would learn was f-f-friendship. They preferred rose-petal cushions.

“Snails played hide-and-seek in leafy green ivy that grew on the stone wall.

Regattas, tiny specks in the sea, s-s-sailed between the island and the main. Dark cacti rose like gloved demons. I was not afraid of the tiny d-d-dragons that roamed the sunny walls or of the s-s-snakes or spiders with fat sacks. I had my mahogany s-s-sword.

Dilapidated shacks, almost invisible in the thickets of underbrush, sheltered tools, rakes, shovels, and hoes. Gardeners had long since sought employment elsewhere. M-mosquitoes inhabited the damp arrondissement around a cistern but n-n-ever attacked, at

least not on our territory. Nor did the bumblebees that lived in the hollows of bamboo stalks in the groves where we often ate lunch.

“Of the different kinds of downy white seed pods, d-d-rifting parachutes, some were difficult to blow. One, the size of my nose, resisted all p-p-puffs. Black ants, bits of ambling pepper, speckled white lilies. And the mouse, the m-m-mouse I thought was sleeping by the side of the path, never, day after day, even after the sun set beside the distant island that floated in the sea, moved—even when evening rain fell gently on the hillside.

“We s-s-skipped stones in the s-sea. I remember traveling for days along a different coast before we came at last to this retreat. Rocky shoals and green vineyards surrounded the holiday sea. The waves roared, and the w-wind was up.”

The café filled. Two girls giggled at a table close by. One had light-brown hair that flopped to her shoulders, and brown eyes. The other had short hair. Both wore thin, layered skirts that fell off mid-thigh. Patches of light danced through translucent cloth as branches swayed gently in the afternoon breeze. He cast them a familiar glance as if he knew them. They couched their giggles in an old dialect of Mesopotamia, which, he explained, was the language of the silk routes.

“These are Nebuchadnezzar’s p-pronunciations. The king b-built hanging gardens for his w-w-wistful wife.

“O-once a yellow-breasted chickadee, larger than an a-apricot but smaller than a peach, fell from a mulberry tree. It chanted *w-wuck w-wuck*. Mulberry trees are the traditional habitat of the silk w-worm. They were common in Mesopotamia at the time of Nebuchadnezzar. The worms eat only the leaves of this tree, and chickadees eat the w-worms. The young chickadees are quite tender and taste like walnuts. They can be eaten whole because their bones are s-s-so soft. Of course the feathers should be p-p-plucked. Tart goldfinches sleep late. I d-do not think there is any r-relationship between s-sleeping habits and taste. The finches are yellow with b-black-tipped wings and tail, and sleep quietly anywhere but in p-palm trees or p-pine. A barn swallow once made its home in the c-cellar beneath our kitchen. It attached its white nest with bodily excretions to the rough stones that formed the arch of the ceiling. Quail prefer the pigmy plum, a small juicy fruit about the size of a cherry. The bobwhite—s-size unknown—I mention last, because I have never seen it; I have only heard it s-sing. The bobwhite is the least tragic of the b-b-birds, for his brief song consists of two whistles, the first low and even, the second accented with an upper lift.”

“More wine?” the waiter asked.

“L-l-look at the sun, so bright in the sky. It warms our skin as it warms the dirt. We take them for g-granted, the d-d-dirt and the sun. Look at the reflections in the g-g-glass, the way the wine light flickers on forks. For a moment, the sun hides behind c-c-clouds. We could dance to the flickers to bring it back. Then, after everyone stared, we—you with your fumbling feet and me with my wine—could rest, having celebrated our sun. We

would have known warmth that will outlast our knowledge of warmth or of t-t-the s-s-sun, for that m-m-matter.”

At least he hadn’t danced. I thought the two girls had overheard and were making fun. They glanced our way a couple of times, smiled at each other, amidst their Mesopotamian mutters, then turned and blew casual smoke in the direction of the hills.

“It d-d-doesn’t matter what color the s-s-stones are, but they should be perfectly round and flat like a tiny d-d-discus.”

“Discus?”

“The water should be calm and s-s-salty. Then the stone will s-s-skip ten times a throw, though each s-s-skip, of course, is weaker than the one it follows and s-s-s-stronger than the one it p-p-precedes. Finally the stone f-f-falters, then sinks to the bottom, where it lies in r-r-repose, r-r-rocked by waves. Any deviance in measurement or s-s-shape results in a c-c-clunk.

“When I found a stone that fit the criteria, I had to decide whether to s-s-skip or s-s-save it. Once on a s-sunny afternoon, when the water was calm, I found a perfectly sh-sh-shaped stone—round, flat, and white. It came alive when I held it to the sun. Its milky translucence revealed fissures that s-s-s-swirled round and glowed with the delicacy of a f-f-fractured rainbow. I lingered, s-s-squatting in the sand, and held the stone to the sun t-t-to admire—”

Someone tipped a glass. It rolled, clanked, and smashed on the marble, creating a stir. An elderly waiter appeared with a dustbin and brush, bent down on one knee, and swept the glitter away.

“T-to admire its s-s-subtleties. Then I laid it on the sand to savor its s-s-shape. I s-s-stared for a long time. In my m-m-melancholy, I did not notice the clouds that drifted across the water. When I held the stone up again, I found the sun g-g-gone. The stone, now dull and gray, lost its glow. The storm brought threatening w-waves.

“My mode dropped with the dip in barometer. Any attempt to resist would result in inevitable f-failure. The only trick that worked was amnesia through distraction. My feelings of attraction froze in these depressions. I asked myself, ‘Can I allow this to continue?’ Before I could answer, in a little pool—warm, temporary, and dependent on the tide—a fish jerked then p-p-paused at a right angle to its previous self. That was enough to free me, though it c-continued to r-rain.”

I did not remember the stones, though I vaguely recollected a rocky cove or inlet, a small overturned boat with a blue-painted bottom, near a concrete battlement just behind the beach. There was a plum tree. Its fruit fell on a dusty road. We batted the plumbs with Ping-Pong paddles late in the afternoon.

“My l-l-l-lips, m-my t-t-t-tongue, m-my throat. One is rarely conscious of one’s tongue, unless it is swollen. Mine was not. I have a dark g-gap between my teeth, and you can

still see the blight. However, I am ashamed of my l-lips. They are too l-large. Mozart had full l-lips. They did not h-hamper him.

“Once a bartender made fun of my l-l-lips. I was y-young and impressionable. So I ventured onto a nudist beach. Painted phalluses pointed seaward. In the old days sand sufficed, with water, sun, and naked bathers. No nudists. They had not yet organized. Cézanne understood this.

“At puberty pictures transformed me. One was stashed on the shelf of an apothecary. The other was a page from the Renaissance. From the look of the leaves it was a shattal tree, with boys standing stiff on each side. A b-bare breasted girl dangled from a branch like an opossum. My p-penis swelled—a phenomenon absent from my experience of Titian.

“Because Tuesdays are less suspect than Fridays, I hid behind rhododendrons and buried the book below frost. I tucked the daguerreotype under my mattress. There it remained, shifting nightly to my pillow. I do not know if history is mildewed, w-w-worm-eaten, or if I was in love. Can you be certain of streams that meander in meadows as hazel signals the coming of s-s-spring?”

During this dissertation he sat calmly. But without provocation his manner changed. He turned his eyes from the horizon and in a vexed tone asked, “Who are y-y-you?”

“Why did you c-c-come here?”

“You have asked intimate questions.

“Are you a b-b-b-barmaid?

“I don’t need a barmaid, and in any case you are not nosey enough to be a barmaid.

Are you the thin man who shovels my driveway? If so, you are dependable. Every time I come home I can open my door. But here there is no need for shovels. It is hot as h-h-hell. Perhaps you are you the m-man who brings oil to my lamps and coal to my fire? I don’t think so, because the man that b-brings coal to my fire is a midget. He is p-p-p-plump and has warts all over his nose. You are neither f-fat, short, nor thin, so you do not qualify for either occupation.

“I have a chimney. You may be my sweep, or you may be my m-m-m-mother. I fell in a stream and developed a fever. She kissed my forehead. Nevertheless the fever rose, so she bathed me in salts then gave me m-molds, into which she poured plaster to make a r-r-rabbit, Alice, and a man with a top hat. When I recovered, I became obsessed with white r-r-rabbits, and then, of course, with A-Alice, who is vegetarian.

“May I have some M-Montrachet?

“You fought in the battle of the Marne?

“At Gettysburg?

“What side were you on?

“Cheyenne’s or Custer’s?

“Are you Henrietta? If so, I would not have invited you. Once she stopped b-b-by my home, hugging a sponge. It was larger than a f-f-football. She had dipped it in plaster and spray-painted it ultramarine. But on the way over she dropped it and it s-s-spilt, a-and she thought I could just stop whatever I was doing and glue it back together again, like Humpty Dumpty. I said, ‘Why don’t you b-buy another s-s-sponge?’

“‘I cannot do that,’ she said. It came from the lagoons of Tortola, where the sea shimmers c-c-cerulean blue.

“She liked the idea of taking a sponge that had spent its life surrounded by cerulean and painting it ultramarine. I asked her, ‘Do sponges nap?’ She told me sponges do not nap because they must remember to breathe. I asked, ‘Do they have eyes?’ She replied, ‘Sponges have no organs at all.’

“Since it is apparent that you are n-n-not Henrietta, then you must be a man. This narrows the p-p-possibilities considerably. You cannot be my m-m-mother. She died of dementia years ago. The last time I saw her she was in a wheelchair, wearing deerskin slippers. They put her in the c-c-corridor to give her a change of scenery. The wallpaper was atrocious. They abandoned her next to a closet of bloody b-bandages and severed l-l-

limbs. Her silver hair lay flat and matted. She looked up at me and smiled like a child hoping for a kiss.

“My fever d-disappeared though my m-maladies linger.

“But I am not one to c-complain.”

2. The Story of “I”

“I admit I was drunk. Bottles of gin, vodka, sherry, and vermouth were set on a smooth sandalwood s-sideboard lit from behind with c-candles. This translucent array included a green bottle without identification. I poured the aromatic liquid into a glass while my friend Malcolm, a pianist-painter, played Chopin.

“Malcolm was famous for his orgies, quite fashionable in Paris. Mattresses strewn on the floor provided both comfort for reclining guests and safety for trapezists.

“He lived in a church, or at least that is what it *was*. P-Presbyterian, as I recall. Vaulted ceilings soared overhead. To these he affixed tightropes and trapezes. Long tables lined the walls, filled with figs and festive fowls. The c-circus was in town. He befriended clowns and acrobats, and invited them for dinner. From the bathtub a harlequin cried, ‘Have you seen a naked clown?’ I found him wearing only his nose.

“By then most everyone had expired. Sleepy jugglers spooned on fluffy comforters. The single swig I took was far more p-potent than I had expected. I felt like I was flying but was in fact flat on my back.

“I bid Malcolm good night, slipped on some s-sperm, and stumbled out the door. I swayed to and fro as I negotiated my way through the dark city streets, neither phaeton nor c-curricule in sight. I knew I was home when ahead I glimpsed the sidewalks aglow, a spectacle particular to my arrondissement. Basements extended under the sidewalks to

the curb. The city fathers set monocle-sized lenses into cast-iron grates anchored in the sidewalk, and installed lightbulbs in the buildings' basements. Oil lamps would have been too hot, particularly during the summer's dreary doldrums. Bulbs, as we came to know them, can be much brighter than a lamp fueled by an unfortunate whale.

“On this particular evening, a small pile of refuse covered the lights that glowed on the sidewalk in front of my door. It was neither Tuesday nor Thursday, not a night for disposal.

“Two wooden Ts lay silhouetted on top of the grating. Because of my inebriated state I thought I was seeing double. I happened to have a measuring device in the pocket of my great coat. I kneeled down on the sidewalk, cushioning my knees with my kerchief. The Ts had been fashioned out of lengths of wood that were four inches by four inches square. The top of each T was exactly thirty-nine inches long, and the stem was seamlessly fastened at a perpendicular midpoint. One stem measured thirty-one inches, the other twenty-nine. The bottom of each T was rough and irregular.

“Upon further observation, it became evident to me that the stems of the two Ts had once been a single unbroken length, and that someone had sawed it in half. I held the rough ends together. They fit perfectly. I thus surmised that I had, not two Ts, but a single symmetrical ‘I,’ broken, battered, and abused. Evidence of this mistreatment sobered me. I carried the two elements up to my rooms and stuffed them into a closet. I donned my nightgown, powdered my backside, cleansed my teeth, and fell asleep. That night I dreamt of an amber room with tables arranged like a grand café.

“Years passed, p-punctuated by brief affairs—both amorous and f-fiscal—of no particular consequence. But I was always aware of the broken ‘I’ stuffed in the closet next to my trumpet, my banjo, a saxophone, a bottle of turpentine, and my model steam loc-co-motives.

“I had histories to write, on Poussin and Caravaggio. I visited my barber on the second Friday of each month. Henri was a garrulous man, prone to tirades and extended dissertations. It was difficult for me to get a w-w-word in edgewise. For holidays, he vacationed in the small fishing village of Collioure, and there met many notables. Naming names, he dropped only their firsts: Georges, André, Othon, and of course Pablo.

“It was sometime after *l’affaire* ‘I’—as I came to think of it—during one of my monthly visits with Henri, that I had an ep-p-piphany.

“Henri had finished most of the s-s-scissor work and was about to employ his razor. As he sharpened it on the long leather strap, an activity that obviously brought him great satisfaction, a lad came along with a broom and swept away my c-curls.

“Henri and I had been sharing intrigues. Mine was about a woman with r-red hair. But as I categorized my mixed emotions, the boy swept the remnants of my hair into a pile, then into a long-handled dustbin, and from there into a red bucket labeled F-FIRE in strong black letters. The boy took the bucket and disappeared into another room. It came back empty.

“I felt no nostalgia for my strands. I had, after all, volunteered for the cut. I was no victim of this t-trim. But the question I asked myself was: at what point had my hair separated from the ‘I’ that I employed while telling my story of the girl with red hair? When was the hair no longer a constituent of that ‘I’? Was it after the scissors cut, when the hair lay on the black shroud that covered my shoulders to protect the fine linen of my blouse? Errant hairs itch. Indeed I welcomed the shroud.

“Or was the ‘I’ dispossessed of this hair when the b-b-barber brushed the curls to the floor, or when the b-boy swept them into a heap, or when the b-boy poured the heap of hair into the red FIRE b-b-bucket, or when he left the room carrying the red FIRE bucket with him? I did not know where to d-draw the line. Meanwhile we continued our banter.

“But it was then that I knew I had to repair the ‘I,’ the ‘I’ that had languished so long in my closet, the ‘I’ I had literally stumbled on the night I swigged then swayed through the city.

“I purchased some g-glue and a can of putty, and m-meticulously set about my repairs. First I cleaned the dirt and paint out of the moonlike craters created by a hammer’s blow. This was accomplished in what I called my ‘auxiliary time,’ taking a break from my histories. I filled each hole with a putty used for repairing leaks in small boats. The work was tedious and often accomplished while reclining on a c-comfortable c-couch.

“I finished filling perhaps twenty-five or thirty notches, smoothed the surface, and glued the two Ts back together to attain the original silhouette. Then I proceeded to p-paint. The creamy white I chose was similar to the color of the p-plaster casts of Alice, the h-hatter, and the r-r-rabbit with which my mother had r-rid me of my melancholy. It was also the color of the Florentine boy who stands frozen just before slinging his stone. But this ‘I’ had neither Alice’s gentle curves nor the sinewy muscles of the naked boy. It was a mirrored cross.

“The restoration gave me great satisfaction. I was not ashamed in the way Dorian abhorred *his* decaying likeness. I had restored it to its former glory. I hung the ‘I’ prominently above the couch whereupon my spaniel lay content and asleep. It remained there for m-most of m-my p-prime.

“The girl with red hair left me in Westminster Abbey. I was distraught. She bid farewell to Chaucer then ran for the towering door. I knew she was gone forever as the door swung closed behind her. I felt camaraderie with the poets in their tombs. She returned to her husband and lived happily ever after for quite some time. I am not sure if they are still together; we no longer c-correspond.”

3. D-Darjeeling

“E-e-eventually my collusion with white extended to the aesthetics of my diet. I developed a longing for bananas, coconuts, cauliflower, Bavarian asparagus, the breast meat of C-C-Cornish hens, Dover sole, Montrachet (white in name only), and syllabub, a key ingredient of trifle.

“However, my bride-to-be r-refused to wear white for our wedding. Her former lover was a thespian she had met on the set of *Macbeth*— she d-dressed and perfumed actors for the cinema. Her perfumes and colognes were of no consequence to the audience, which would only witness the drama on what c-c-came to be known as the ‘silver screen.’ But they did have an amorous effect on the cast, lending eros to l-love scenes and i-ironies to war.

“Her gown was festooned with a mix of roses both silken and real. Her body shimmered in crimson. But I needed to compensate for the l-l-lack of white satin.

“So with great expectations, on the d-day of my wedding, I stopped by the Victoria and Albert to have a look at a tea service that was f-featured in an article in the *Illustrated London News*.

“I was not disappointed. So delicate and thin were the porcelain cups that the afternoon sunlight p-penetrated their silky skin, creating a milky iridescence that refracted all the colors of the rainbow. Curiously, there was no ornamentation—no painted figures, no

girls on swings or playful puppies or kitschy floral patterns—only soft, creamy white, flawless as the cheek of a cherub. The lack of ornamentation, indeed the cups' emptiness, struck me as r-radical. I had not expected to be rendered s-s-speechless by a tea service. I applauded its m-maker. The identification card read only, 'Anonymous, February 11.'

“After vows of fidelity both in p-p-poverty and p-p-prosperity, I ran along King's Road looking for p-porcelain. My impetuous quest bore no f-fruit.

“That night I could hardly sleep and woke in a c-clammy sweat. I made inquiries among my more c-cultured friends concerning the d-delicacies of porcelain, and hastened to ask advice from Henri, who happened to be a connoisseur. He counted in his collection a beautiful pot wherein he mixed his l-l-lather.

“He directed me to a shop on the east end of town. Since it was raining heavily, I hired a hansom and directed the hackie to w-wait. The shop was dark, musty, and riddled with webs. A distinct smell of wet clay emanated from the back, where an elderly woman sat rev-v-v-volving her wheel. A wobbly lump of clay clung to the disk, spinning off center. Her fingers were knurled and rheumatic. She gazed at the rotating lump as if in a trance.

“A portrait of a young woman hung on the wall beside her. Its eyes had the same s-s-spark as her own. After anthropological small talk, I enquired as to the identity of the p-porcelains at the Victoria and Albert. She changed the subject to varieties of choc-co-l-late and truffles.

“I watched her work on several occasions over the next few months. We had an arrangement whereby I visited her on Sunday afternoons. As the d-days grew shorter and drops of rain gradually changed to s-sleet and sorrow, we spoke of beauty and confided intimacies. I told her of my diet of sole, bananas, and Montrachet. She visited her icebox and returned with vanilla.

“Finally she confessed. It *was* she who years before had fashioned the tea set at the Victoria and Albert. She had tried to duplicate its delicacy, but nothing since had succeeded. She did not know why. She was using the same formula and clay gleaned from the riverbeds of Colditz.

“One afternoon late in January, I dropped by and she looked sadder and f-frailer than ever. She bent low over her wheel and seemed resigned to whatever fate life would bestow. White flecks of wet clay g-glistened in her hair as she rose from her seat and walked over to a rough-hewn cabinet. She opened the top drawer and pulled out a couple of old stockings and what looked like the bottom of a pair of yellow polka-dot pajamas, except that the polka dots were matt white on a shimmering, silky background. Then she slowly lifted a white bundle from the drawer, set it on a little table, and gently untied its satin sash.

“A porcelain teacup appeared from under the wrappings, identical to those in the museum. She had originally fashioned thirteen cups for the tea set, just in case one broke in the making. Since thirteen was unlucky, she offered only twelve to her patroness. She would n-never wish misfortune on her queen.

“Now a single s-s-shaft of sunlight fell through a small open hatch. The beam penetrated the thin walls of the cup, setting it aglow. She smiled and poured a dash of cream into the cup, then filled it with D-Darjeeling. When I finished, she took the c-cup and gently wiped it d-dry and handed it to me.

“I want you to have this. She was a spinster, she explained, and had no heirs. She said, rather ironically, that the only th-th-thing she could cause to rise now was clay on a potter’s wheel, but even that was not what it had been when Victoria, on the occasion of her b-betrothal, commissioned the service for Albert, her handsome p-prince.

“She asked me to accept the cup; otherwise, upon her death the c-creditors might come, clean out her drawers, and t-toss it away. Or p-perhaps the cup would find itself among the bric-a-brac of a flea market and eventually d-disappear into an obscure cupboard. In any case, she said, good porcelain should be accepted as a gift. And then with a smile she whispered, ‘My cup runneth over,’ and handed it to me.

“I left in the waiting hansom, holding the cup wrapped in white satin.

“I did not mention this encounter to my wife. Nevertheless, I set the c-cup out in full view. Suspicions hung thick as the fog.”

4. Red Hair

“The girl with the red hair, did she have a name?” I asked.

“Yes, of course she had a n-name. Everyone has a name. She in f-f-fact had twelve.”

“Isn’t that excessive?”

“No.”

“What were they?”

“In May she asked me to call her May; in early summer, June; and in February, Feb, for short. This seemed reasonable. To keep track, I memorized the jingle ‘Thirty days hath September, April, June, and November. All the rest have thirty-one except . . .’ Actually, I forget the exception. It doesn’t matter. I have not s-s-spoken to her in y-years.

“The problem was not with her n-numerous names. The problem was that she was m-m-married. But her husband became jealous only when she had a philosophical conversation outside their marriage. If I may add a bit of intrigue, this rule applied to both m-men *and* w-women. Discussions of philosophy constituted betrayal—idealism versus pragmatism, for example. Carnal discourse—no p-problemo!”

“That’s it, just philosophy? I imagine her husband did not mind if she had her own philosophical thoughts or if she simply *read* Wittgenstein,” I said.

“Reading Wittgenstein in the quiet of her room was acceptable as long as she did not exhaust herself. What young m-m-modern would object to an act of self-pleasure? On the other hand, by sticking to subjects like the w-weather and s-sports she remained technically loyal, no matter how long or passionately we spoke. No g-g-guilt there. The only problem was that there’s not much one can say about the w-weather—rain, s-sun, humid, etcetera. And I am not really interested in s-sports, except for the occasional g-game of t-tennis.

“We shared an interest in cooking and had frequent debates concerning spices. Our experiments with Pre-Raphaelite recipes were so frequent that we feared gaining weight. Frantic love, chopping firewood, and long walks at eventide burned off the plump.

“Another safe haven was religion. ‘Philosophy questions truth. Religion promotes it,’ she rationalized one unusually cool afternoon. So August suggested we make a grand tour of churches and cathedrals. ‘There can’t be anything wrong with that. We can start at Chartres and ended up at Westminster.’

“It happens that Darwin is buried at Westminster, a kind of anomaly that might provoke a philosophical question. Actually, I thought the church was quite generous in giving its permission, but I did not mention it to September. We were quite happy on our pilgrimage, and I did n-not want to spoil it.

“All was idyllic until I developed a s-s-strange obsession. We were in a little shop in St. Leonards-on-Sea, just a c-corner grocery s-store. The window display featured a box of bric-a-brac with an old watch, a pocketknife, a couple of jacks, two carved figures, and some c-c-c-crayons. Across the street, as the tide came in, fishermen unloaded their catch.

“A blue ball lay amongst the trinkets. I asked the shopkeeper if I could inspect it, but when she handed it over, I dropped it and it b-bounced on the floor. Upon its return it rose c-considerably higher than its place of departure (the palm of my hand). It shot straight to the ceiling then back to the floor before I was able to catch it. If Sir Isaac were alive, he would have been intrigued, for it defied his laws of g-g-gravity.

“That morning the devout attended church and the agnostics slept, fatigued from Saturday’s waltz. I had the sidewalk to m-myself. With little effort, I sent the ball up to the housetops. But I was afraid of loosing it in a c-chimney.

“The stone and marble floors of the cathedrals, as well as the flagstones of the humble churches we visited, proved perfect for this sport, their ceilings much higher than any shop’s or hotel’s. When no one was watching, I bounced the ball with such force that it rebounded against the ceiling. I was careful not to break windows or topple candlesticks.

The rules posted outside the cathedrals were similar from parish to parish:

No cigarettes

No cigars

No spaniels

No bare ankles
No cleavage
No paintbrushes
No easels
No navels
No rum
Speak only in whispers

“They said nothing about balls.

“One afternoon, when the leaves were riotous and an autumn breeze s-s-shivered with nostalgia, September suggested we talk. We were having lunch, and planned to go to the abbey later that afternoon. I told her we were already speaking and that our discourse, however limited, was a great joy for me. In short, I was in love. I t-told her so. She responded plainly, ‘Your incessant ball bouncing is sacrilegious.’

“I asked her where, in all the scriptures, anyone wrote about balls, or bouncing, for that matter. Moses’s tablets mentioned n-nothing of the sort. And if in fact the act was sacrilegious, what characteristic made it so—its texture, its color, its sound? Bouncing high can be interpreted as transcendent. Emerson would have agreed.

“‘Don’t get philosophical with me,’ she said.

“During a silent dessert, a single tear dropped on the perfectly singed surface of her crème brûlée. She sampled a mere spoonful.

“The afternoon light at the cathedral was extraordinary. The sun illuminated the blues in a way that made me believe in virgin b-births. In consideration of September, I didn’t get out my ball. I simply fondled it in my pocket.

“They had removed all the chairs from one section of the nave; janitors prepared to mop. Inlaid in the surface of the marble was a circular maze, its circumference studded with creamy white candles. One could meditate by finding one’s way to the center. The path twisted and turned back on itself as it v-veered to and fro. Communicating with its ancient masons, I bowed my head and p-proceeded to meander.

“In time I reached the center and there allowed myself the indulgence of a victory bounce. This turned out to be both tragic and historic, at least in the limited texture of m-my life. She uttered unintelligibly; to this day I do not know what she said. She ran from me, past tombs of physicians and poets, physicists, novelists, and queens, past Robert Browning; Charles II; Charles Darwin; Charles Dickens; John Dryden; Edward the Confessor; Elizabeth I; Thomas Hardy; Henrys III, V, and VII; Samuel Johnson; Rudyard Kipling; Mary, Q-Queen of Scots; Matilda of Scotland; Isaac Newton; Old Tom Parr; Alfred, Lord Tennyson—not necessarily in that order—and into the l-light of d-day.”

5. Vienna

“I have several fears. They keep me awake at night. My greatest fear is becoming bourgeois. To thwart this malaise, for which there is no medicinal cure, I traveled to Vienna to purchase a frock, a loden coat, the fashionable wear of European intellectuals. These green woolen coats fall below the knee, midway between calf and ankle. Accessories include gold-rimmed spectacles, a gaily colored scarf (optional), a worn leather briefcase with a copy of Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*, a pack of Gauloises, and Lewis Waterman’s recent invention, the fountain pen, which is not nearly as messy as a quill.

“Coincident with my visit, young Austrians slid down snow-covered slopes on radical footwear. These extravagant shoes were all the rage. Their elongated soles curled in the front and extended some three feet before the toe and as many behind the h-h-heel. As I lounged on the veranda of a chalet in Igls one Sunday morn in December, I observed what I assumed to be the avant-garde laughing and giggling as it slid down the mountain and right up to the porch where I was p-perched. They unfastened their footwear and ordered schnapps.

“It looked like fun. I suspected this activity soon would be bourgeois, if it hadn’t become so already. To compensate, I insisted on having my salad served on the unclean plate where my entrée previously l-lay.

“But, I confess, I was also mistrustful of the p-proletariat. From what dictionary did it glean its definition of toil? Granted, its manifesto was scripted in northern climes, where wood is chopped and clothing sewn, not lying naked under r-ripening m-mangoes.

“Nevertheless, I rejected any activity that could be even remotely considered bourgeois. I boarded no ships of pleasure. This left me with few options: so I appropriated the dawn, undulated fronds (on days other than Palm Sunday), coveted hillsides, and s-slept in tepees. My logic here was that Cheyenne, Crow, and Comanche were impervious to bourgeois categorizations. I collected arrowheads with my uncle Andy. (I did not presume to appropriate the sea. I would leave that to others.)

“I often took walks after midnight, when my spaniel, Sorrow, needed a pee. He woke me with polite but persistent whimpers. On evenings when the sky was clear and Orion, sword in sheath, hung overhead, I lingered, sometimes for hours. I was not compensated for my time. I possessed the same equity the following morning as the evening before. But I regarded these solitary walks as labor of the highest order. I would go back to bed, my toes warmed by Sorrow, and wake guiltless. Fortunately, this bliss did not last long. After tea and kippers, I reverted to self-reproach and shame.

“So I constructed a chart, which as you see, concluded judiciously.”

	Bourgeois	Avant-Gardists	Aristocrats	Beggars	Bankers
Sleep	till 7 a.m.	till noon	till noon	till 6 a.m.	till 7 a.m.
Baths	every day	intermittent	milk	intermittent	daily
Guilt	little	occasional	0	0	0

Sex	evenings	self-referential	afternoons	self	lunch
Shoes	abounding	sandals	slippers	multifarious	wing tips
Death	salvation	salvation via history	?	inevitable	deserved

“The cafés were abuzz with topics of class and struggle, the meaning of modernity, morality, and Herr Freud’s three specters of the unconscious, which had much in common with the Trinity. But my chart proved of little use. I could draw no conclusions.

“Spring arrived. Snow melted in the lower climbs. Useless on gravel, the radical footwear disappeared. Instead avant-garde footwear progressed vertically, with each season’s heels reaching higher than the previous one’s. The shoes were so tall that their occupants, both wo-m-men and m-men (this was Vienna), teetered on the avenues. Dresses constructed of frayed chiffon, and festooned with tartans and lace, complemented the high-rise footwear. A line of clothing designed especially for hunting camouflaged wearers with splotches of brown and antlers.”

*

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

—Only the monstrous anger of the guns.

Only the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle

Can patter out their hasty orisons.

No mockeries now for them; no prayer nor bells;

Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

WO

“It was winter then, and now. A few expatriates were discussing Nietzsche and tartans in a pub heated by an iron stove, when two uniformed officers entered the room, presented each of us with official p-papers, and asked us to follow them outside to waiting broughams. They took us to a place where tall snow-covered pines rose high above our heads. The flakes fell ominously and soft. We w-were told to get out. It was pitch dark. They left us there.

“We waited expectantly, and soon heard a j-j-jingle of sleigh bells and the trotting of heavy-footed horses. The coachmen invited us to board the sleighs. In an hour’s time the oil lights of an inn appeared amidst the virgin forest’s pines. We sat at a long table and dined on applesauce cake, *tragédie* chicken, blitz bacon, and roasted shanks of oxen.

“An officer rose and explained that we would be trained in the arts of w-war. He gave us each a copy of Sun Tzu’s ancient treatise, and commanded us to do push-ups in the fluffy snow.

“I do not remember very much about the next few months, only that there were very few birds, amongst them a solitary red-crested woodp-pecker. His bright crest blazed in the

otherwise blanched landscape. Like Kant, whose neighbors could set their watches by the precision of his afternoon walks, this p-pecker was p-punctual. He pecked for breakfast and for dinner. He skipped lunch, so we rang a b-bell.

“They taught us the basics: how to load and clean a rifle, and how to go about climbing craggy cliffs in ice and s-snow. They also taught us how to ski, the most expedient and s-silent way of getting about.

“Soon I found myself frosty in a foxhole, in the heat of b-battle, near the village of Zürs. Frequent rounds of gunfire p-p-pocked the snow from positions in the forest above us and below. A stranded Cheyenne lay close beside me. I asked his name. He changed the subject muttering about his mother’s major in art history on what was then a dilapidated reservation. A small hut painted red functioned as the schoolhouse. So I asked him, ‘How did you come to be a warrior in this Austrian clime?’

“His ancestor had fought with Crazy Horse at the battle of Greasy Grass, known to the white men as Little Bighorn, and had souvenirs from the battle, including the revolver Custer held when a squaw named Buffalo Calf Road Woman knocked him off his steed.

“My Cheyenne studied philosophy with an itinerant professor named Wilde who ministered to the reservation. With the inheritance garnered from the sale of Custer’s revolver and gold fillings, he had the means to pursue his interest. Philosophy led him to Stuttgart, Hegel’s birthplace; to Basel, where Nietzsche taught classical philology; and then to Saint Moritz, where Nietzsche had summered some years before. It was there that

he learned how to ski. This led him on a tour of alpine resorts and to Austria, where he found himself on the snowy slopes of Igls. It was there, of course, that we were ‘rounded up’ to fight this ridiculous w-war.

“Midst the r-r-r-rat-a-t-t-t-t-at t-t-at-tat of the *Maschinengewehr*, he preferred the swish of an arrow. But this was no place for arrows. They could not penetrate the heavy armor of war wagons that crawled along bumps and hollows like the fuzzless fat larvae of lepidoptera.

“Crows picked innards of the fallen, but the solitary p-p-pecker seemed oblivious to the r-rat-a-tat-tat. Although the practice was long out of fashion, the Cheyenne confessed a desire to scalp a white man and wave it victoriously from his bayonet, across the field of glory (his terminology). He asked my advice on this. I so responded: ‘Here in the mountain hollows of Zürs, where we find ourselves in this profound predicament, no one will care if you take a scalp or two. First we must figure out how to escape the fire from that machine-gun nest. At least we do not have to worry about being bourgeois. This concern pales in the light of our present p-predicament. Here our primary preoccupation is not one of fashion, the style of our rifles, of our bayonets, or for that matter the design of our helmets and belt buckles or skis. It is about invisible and therefore fashionless fast-flying flack, as well as the occasional m-mortar shell.’

“He was terribly disappointed. ‘Fashion still matters,’ he said. In any case he did not associate good taste with the abstract qualities or trivial concerns of the bourgeois.

‘Fashion is self-confident and fearless. It refuses to bow to commerce, or even to the

sound of the white man's machine guns rat-a-tat-tating over our skulls. Fashion generates a constant flow of new ideas and therefore a sense of liberty. That is what frees the soul.

Did you know that Wittgenstein designed a house for his sister?'

"I did know that Wittgenstein designed a house. To flatter him, I feigned ignorance.

"'Stonborough,' he said. 'The philosopher designed the house without adornment, without window ledges, sconces, doorknobs, not even a chandelier. He wanted no hint of fashion. His attempt was a lost cause, for our homes are now attired in minimalist decor. Naked lightbulbs hung from the ceilings. Carpets were forbidden in the house, no matter what tribe—Luri, Kurd, Bakhtiari, Baluchi, Qashqai, or Turkmen. There weren't any curtains on the windows. But true fashion generates a constant flow of new ideas. It will certainly get us out of here.'"

6. Conception

“*Galanthus* appear in t-throngs, an avant-garde of spring. Fragile, only a few inches high, they send up green spears that break through ice and snow. Their dainty white bells dangle but do not ring. The blossoms are darlings of horticulturists. The Galanthus Society meets on Saturday nights, but only for the duration of their bloom—three weeks. I avoid societies, even the equestrian club, certainly d-derringer devotees, those sneaky l-little things.

“But there is one association in which I allow myself the pleasure of membership because its interests cannot be held in one’s hand. Ruskin c-counts among our members, as well as his student Oscar and a colleague, Walter, who to his c-credit also attends meetings of the Diaphanous Alliance.

The Cloud Club

We believe that clouds are unjustly maligned and that life would be immeasurably poorer without them.

We think that clouds are nature’s poetry, the most egalitarian of her displays. All one has to do is look up.

We pledge to fight ‘blue-sky thinking’ wherever we find it. Life would be dull if we had to gaze at cloudless monotony day after day.

Clouds are expressions of the atmosphere’s moods, and can be read like those of a human countenance.

Clouds are so c-c-commonplace that their beauty is often overlooked. They are for dreamers, but often bring rain.

“At the height of Indian summer leaves turn gregarious red and yellow. I was in dire need of an umbrella, for the heavens p-poured forth. With luck, I managed a cab. Even so, when I approached my destination, I was s-soaked.

“I stood dripping wet in the vestibule, a threat to the furnishings, so Wednesday, who received me in c-cerulean, told me to remove my clothes rather than mar the m-mahogany or wet the Persians. After she perused me back to front, she instructed Tommy, the butler, to bring me a s-smock. She asked her maid to heat the iron and press my t-trousers. Meanwhile we would warm our feet in front of the f-fire.

“She was a patron of progress, with an excellent collection. These artists were the first to travel by t-train; they painted the blurred landscapes they glimpsed from the coaches of fast locomotives. Their p-portraits featured s-swaths of epidermis usually concealed b-beneath t-textiles.

“Progress brought the p-possibility of song to her p-parlor without the intrusion of sopranos. The invention sported a brass horn protruding from a spinning cylinder. This tube held melodies, releasing them on cue by means of a needle pricking its s-skin. A crank turned the cylinder for an interval that lasted approximately seven minutes; then the device had to be cranked once more. This interval could present tactical problems. We would have endured the presence of a butler to wield the crank, but by this time Tommy had gone off to the p-pub.

“Wednesday had arranged the furniture tastefully, according to Eastlake. Nevertheless eight great logs cluttered the floor. This made navigation awkward, even hazardous, and tango impossible.

“I did not comment on the logs’ composition. Rather than take any chances, I settled on the couch. She had no difficulty in negotiating the impediments and brought me a tray of biscuits, Camembert, and a teetering bottle of Petrus.

“Since we had neither b-butler to assist nor soprano to sing, we cranked the c-contraption ourselves. Our passion waned periodically in anticipation of slow lyrics and low-pitched tunes.

“Taking my turn, I negotiated the crossing. But the robe I was wearing, Roman in nature, c-c-caught under my foot. I was close to the contraption when I tripped and fell against the table. The n-needle jolted across the v-v-vertical t-tracks, etching a g-glitch. The damage was irreversible—the r-result, a s-skip on each t-turn.

“Before m-modernity, flight was impossible, at least amongst adults. Evading c-carnivores was t-tricky, often t-tragic, until brothers invented a machine that elevated humans to the c-clouds. Now we can escape from predators and observe the world from the viewpoint of a finch or a kite.

“Progress has also produced tooth powders. First invented by Greek philosophers, the powders employed cleansing abrasives of crushed bones and oyster shells. Epicurus combined these with tasteful herbs, sage oils, and oleander. He splayed branches of neem trees, a subtropical plant with a white and fragrant blossom, and used the twigs as applicators. Now we have brushes made of horsehair and tooth powders made of chalk mined from the cliffs of Dover—a step down from oysters and oleander.

“Flustered though I was, I m-managed to crank the mechanism that released the s-song as the cylinder turned round and round. On each rotation a small but noticeable c-click coincided with the cadence of my heart.

“A creamy white painting hung on the wall opposite the couch. Unlike Constable’s clouds, these puffs were ill defined. (I assumed they were clouds because Wednesday was an enthusiastic member of our club.) Strokes swirled around the center of the painting like a storm. I could identify neither carriage nor schooner and saw no horizon. With the specter of this horrifying tempest, I was lost in lugubrious white.

“She understood for she slid like a friend and laid arms round my s-shoulder. Together we stared at the frothy paint in a forthright but futile attempt to escape our demise. My eyes are blue. Her eyes were green. I do not remember how long we coupled in that composition, ancient as the Nile.

“The s-skipping s-s-slowed, the s-song expired. Tommy entered, back from his night on the town. ‘Is there anything you need, my lady?’ It took a moment for us to embark. She instructed him to bring tea, cream, perhaps a scone.

“We know, through the observations of N. Wallerius, that the s-sun reclaims its seas and time returns them as rain. Drizzles drench and caused me to change. While rivers run to the seas, humans recline, often amble, sink to depths, and sometimes soar.

“We were not aware of the change in *her* c-composure. It took months for that. I apologize. I should have m-mentioned it earlier.”

7. P-Paris

“My big toe, the one that was already swollen, has since been trampled. I can no longer practice ballet. I enjoy balancing on my toes and practicing positions—*croisé devant*: left arm raised above the head, right leg crossed in front of left; *quatrième devant*: toes together, both arms outstretched and slanting slightly down from shoulders; *effacé devant*: left arm above the head, legs spread apart, right toe pointed; *epaulé*: right arm stretched forward, left arm stretched back, right leg stretched back, left leg forward. Consequently, my left testicle swelled to three times its normal size. Of course I felt lopsided. (I wore loose trousers.) At first I suspected a mosquito bite, but soon discovered a hernia. I ingested dandelion in spring, wild cherries in summer, and sarsaparilla in winter. These remedies are reliable. I thought ‘malaria.’ So I chewed sage and ingested peonies. The door to my house did not lock. I could not turn the key. I tried lubrications—olive oil and sesame. Anyone could enter. There are moths in my pantry that feed on fettuccini. Ghostly transparencies, they flutter so fast they disappear. I clap my hands to catch them, but they are clever and evade. I want to protect my woolen great coat, but if I succeed in eradicating them, there will be no more transparencies. So I miss on purpose. The moths interpret my claps as appreciation. At the Sistine Chapel I forgot my glasses. This was particularly unfortunate because Alessandro sang that night. The ceiling was high, the serpent blurred. My tea bag tipped. Mice took advantage. It is difficult to procure good tea. If it spills, it trickles in the cracks. I must travel by foot or perhaps on donkey—if and when he is amenable and often he is not—to shop amongst the fig trees

where the harlequin s-suns. Often she is out of D-Darjeeling and I settle for Assam, not the end of the w-world.

“Though days grow long, I have my little pleasures. The volcano rumbles and I think, ‘Will the lava flow down the slopes and cover the harlequin?’ Years ago it flowed into a chapel, down the stairs, into a crypt where a virgin stands. The hot flow stopped when it touched her toes. Cowboys have come to town. A miracle I suppose.”

“Which town?” I asked.

“Thereabouts.”

“Thereabouts?”

“Kensington. Yes, Kensington. Once a Highland cowboy approached me at d-d-dinner thereabouts and said, ‘Howdy, pardner. I’m Annie.’ At first I thought this to mean ‘pardoner,’ a seller of religious favors. I long to be pardoned for variances, so he fixed my interest straightaway. As he spoke, he lifted his right l-leg up to a low table. This may have been acceptable b-behavior in J-Jackson Hole or Clachnaharry, I don’t know, but this was Kensington Palace. The sun was low in the sky, but his knee was high, so high that I saw the nether side of his thigh. I have no name for this anatomical location, the same for girls and boys. I too wear kilts on special occasions, but I never gaze above the garters.

“I was concerned about his silver spur scratching the table. Annie had placed his boot upon it for my delight. But the boot had its practical points: The tall heel slanted forward to hold ground while lassoing m-mustangs. The toes were pointed to prompt acceleration in case Sioux pursue. The upper covered the calf to protect the wearer from rattlesnakes. The outer layer was so tough that fangs could not penetrate, and the inner leather soft to save tender skin from chaffing. Of course there are no varmints in Kensington Palace. Thereabouts, these amenities are destined, not to defend, but to adorn.

“Annie whispered, ‘My sister sets on yonder sofa. Wanna ride a copula ponies?’ Just then the butler entered the room. ‘Mesdames, Mademoiselles, Sirs of all flavors—dinner is served.’ Annie removed his boot from the table. My head was filled with questions: ‘Are spurs mere embellishments or do they serve some darker purpose? And ‘Where is yonder?’

“Is ‘yonder’ an expression of distance common to parlors, the twenty or so steps it takes to initiate s-s-small talk? I am shy and would yonder shift. If we were outside on the patio, a star-studded evening gazing at the rings of Saturn, would that be the same yonder Galileo observed on his golden hill? Or is yonder the far step of the thousand stairs approaching Sacré-Coeur?

“Later Alessandro, the finest of castrati, invited us all for drinks. He lived in a glass house on the mount of Sacré-Coeur. Coincident to the cathedral’s elevation, he sang and spoke in high octaves. His vast collection of musical apparatus complemented his voice. We squeezed bellows. Music spewed forth—*Christus am Ölberge*—inspired by Caravaggio’s

painting *Christ on the Mount of Olives*. We sang along as he cut into a version of ‘Streets of Laredo,’ the lyrics rendered mournful by his extraordinary falsetto:

As I walked out on the streets of Laredo,
As I walked out in Laredo one day,
I spied a young cowboy all wrapped in white linen,
Wrapped in white linen as cold as the clay.

“A desert, mesas, horizons punctuated by prickly cacti—yonder is the Goliath a boy conquers with the same stone as his sculptor. How tall is Goliath, David’s invisible foe?”

“We lit a fire in the hearth and listened to the castrato till early morn. At the crack of dawn he announced in his fragile falsetto, ‘The sun rises, time to fly.’”

“A collection of kites appeared stretched with diaphanous layers of blanched silk balanced with tails of long chiffon. We climbed to the roof of his transparent house and unraveled our strings. The sky was riotous that m-morning. The kites swept in the air high above Sacré-Coeur as the low-slung sun turned clouds kaleidoscopic gold, orange, peach, and lemon. What would ‘yonder’ mean to a ladybug sitting on a sink? Would she fear a slip?”

“The plumbing runs under a forsythia bush, splendidly yellow in the spring. I uncovered the septic stone and let in the light. Astonished spiders scattered then froze. Adversaries of Ra, they had reason to run.”

8. Loose Ends

Incomparable flower, rediscovered tulip, allegorical dahlia, it is there, is it not, in that beautiful country, so calm, so full of dream, that you must live, that you must bloom?

CB

“Rat-a-t-tat-t-tat t-tat-t-t-tat tat r-r-r-r-tat-a-t t-t-tat—all I r-r-r-remember that day on the m-m-m-m-mountainside. B-b-bullets so far had m-missed my s-s-skull, but what kept f-f-f-flying through m-m-m-m-my-head were verbal fragments, an old c-c-c-chaos of the s-s-s-s-un, is-l-land’s s-solitude, rat-a-t-tat-t-ta-at-t-tat-t-tat f-f-f-free of the wide w-w-water rat-a-t-tat, inescapable . . . or so I c-c-concluded as all went white.

“I w-w-woke up a month or so later, on the other s-s-side, in a church that had been converted into a hospital, with beds of m-moaning w-w-wounded.

“I inquired about my Cheyenne friend. “What happened to C-C-Cézanne?” (This was the name his m-mother gave him back on the r-r-reservation.)

“A young nurse sat at my bedside and c-c-comforted me. I could see she was beautiful, even through the foggy vision of my disquiet. She told me I was left for d-dead but retrieved by a long-haired gentleman camouflaged in furs and disguised as an elk. A single yellow feather dangled from his crown of horns. ‘He carried only a knife, and a sack of bloody wigs,’ she said. She didn’t get his name. I knew Cézanne had come back for me.

“In my delirium the memory of the m-machine gun melded with the c-c-clicks of the g-g-gramophone s-s-s-skipping a heartbeat elsewhere. A white b-blanket covered my b-body.

“I felt a breeze on the top of my head. I had no h-hair. So I asked, ‘D-do I have my fingers, m-my hands, my arms? D-do I have m-my toes, my feet, my l-legs? Do I at l-l-east have my l-legs? Has anything else been removed while I d-dozed?’

“She answered s-softly, in a whisper, ‘There are no Cheyenne, or Cézannes, for that matter, present in our village, at least any that we are aware of. Actually, we speak an old dialect of German from the time of your Shakespeare, and certainly we would be aware of a modern accent. Here in the church we have only religious paintings, and even those have been hidden in the crypts so the enemy will not steal or destroy them. You will find your legs and arms, fingers and toes, all in the correct locations. But as you may know, you have no hair. We had to shave your head in order to remove the bullet lodged in your skull. The operation was a success. Don’t worry, your memories will return, your hair will grow back, and you will once again play your banjo if so you chose. This means we soon can release you. You can claim your possessions between 10:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m., at the dispensary just to the right of the altar.’

“I did not remember mentioning my banjo. I kept that to myself. My only audience has ever been my composers—Beethoven, Bach, Mozart, Bartók, all dead, except, of course, for Bartók.

“I woke early the next morning and checked out my belongings, which included a watch my father left me, my helmet, and enough of the local c-currency to eat and d-drink comfortably. I had no means of transportation other than my l-legs, so I bid farewell to the nurse and set out on foot.

“Rambling to f-freedom, my ears were clogged, but I still carried with me an innate fear of snakes and some species of s-s-spiders. I hiked over hill and dale. Initially I was without destination, but as I grew famished and lonely, I knew I had to find Cézanne. Eventually I came to a fork in the road. On the right a sign said Broadway, although the path over which the sign was placed was thin, mossy, rocky—certainly not b-broad.

“The other path was Lundy Lane. I reached in my pocket and pulled out a schilling, an Austrian coin I could spare if in fact, when I flipped it, it bounced into a nook. I thought to myself, ‘Heads, Broadway. Tails, Lundy Lane.’ It bounced first on a tuft of moss. It ricocheted off a rock and into a patch of trailing arbutus, my m-m-mother’s f-f-favorite f-flower. The bloom is tiny, white, and glows in dark environs. She spoke of it often when she was able. The coin read heads. I took Lundy Lane.

“A bronze plaque, wrapped all the way around the trunk of an oak tree, read:

This is Lundy Lane named after Frederick William Irving Lundy. From a little pushcart he sold clams and oysters that he picked up in crannies of small inlets along the shore wherever he could find them. His shellfish were always fresh and sweet, and people came from all over the boardwalk to purchase them because they were so delicious. But he abandoned his cart and bought a restaurant in Sheepshead Bay, and people came from near and far to eat oysters and clams. Eventually he owned the largest restaurant in the world, and he became wealthy and retired here, at the end of the road. Alas, he died some years ago, and the

manor was sold to a young couple from Chicago. Happily the new owners have kept it in its original condition, white and pristine. Perhaps it will remain so forever.

“By the time I finished reading it, I had circled the tree seven times. I accomplished this with some difficulty, paying attention to the text while negotiating the slippery m-moss.

“I walked on through a desolate area of dilapidated houses, called Pottersville, before I reached a clearing, whereupon I spied a large hulk of a man silhouetted against the evening sky, his gaze fixed on a target some yards in the distance.

“He pulled the longbow back, bending it as far as it would go, then let l-loose the arrow and struck the target directly in the c-center. Curiously, the center was green, while the outer perimeter was red, so the colors were reversed, seemingly without rhyme or reason. Each arrow sounded a whoosh, then a thump. Otherwise there was no sound; the ripples of a brook were silent, birds in their treetops content.

“I did not run to greet him or to thank him for saving my life. I do not know why. I just stood there watching him as he gazed intently at the t-target and landed a few more points in the middle of the eye.

“I rambled down the road to a bridge that spanned a stream near Lundy’s manor. Ornate iron gates flanked the bridge, and yonder I could see the white house of the man who, as a small boy, collected clams and oysters at the end of the Great War. The sun turned the stucco yellow, a little p-patch of yellow wall.

“But I did not climb the gates. I stepped daintily down over rocks in a stream and up the other bank until I was at the edge of the clearing. Two wooden fences ran parallel to each other, creating a runway eight feet wide. An Appaloosa appeared at one end, with sparkling spots, white and gold. She was without a rider and ran fast and straight between the fences. The c-clop-c-clop of hooves sounded loud as she approached me, then softer, soft, and s-silent as she galloped into the forest, out of sight.

“These memories are not adequate, and certainly they do not compensate, my child of multifarious toons, my child of magnificent tunes, for my absence. This is what I have. You may want m-more than shellfish s-stories and p-poor excuses, and so you have every right.”

*

For a moment neither of has anything to say. He broke the silence.

“You are p-probably wondering how I got here from Lundy Lane. Did you think I was d-dead? And perhaps you are wondering why I posted you a letter. There are s-s-simple answers to all these questions.

“I t-took a boat. Perhaps you could help me. I want you to read this h-history.”

From an envelope, a standard eight and a half by eleven, he pulled out several sheets of paper held together by a clip. The title, stamped from an old typewriter read:

“An Essay on Modernity: From Manet to — — and Back Again, or Why, through Myths of Progress and Hope of Titillation, We Now Pluck Banjos with Aluminum Finger Picks Instead of Plucking the Strings Naturally with the Tips of Our Carefully Clipped Fingernails.”

The second name was smudged and illegible. He told me to wait until I returned to LA to read it; then I could send him a telegram with my opinion. I wasn't sure if it was possible to send a telegram or even if a company called Western Union still existed, but I promised I'd check into it.

In the meantime, we asked for dessert.

The dessert menu read:

Chocolate encerraditos with Jamaica pepper ice cream and
pineapple and muscovado ravioli
Liquorice sponge with green apple, lime, and chocolate sorbet
Sweet version of Michel Bras's "gargouillou"
Snow
Earth
Textavazza of wild blackberries, shiso, lime, and yuzu peel
Sea
Chocolate in Declension
Financier
Frozen apricot timbal and amaretto toffee with almond foam

“What would you like?” I asked.

“I always l-loved the s-sea.”

I chose the Financier, although I was quite curious about Chocolate in Declension. Was the chocolate nominative or subjective, genitive or possessive, and what gender in fact is chocolate? (Of course in Paris it's "he.") The Financier concoction, comprised of a white creamy sauce with two raspberry Jell-O cubes, was tasty enough, but I regretted the choice.

The waiter carefully placed Sea on the table in front of him. I could not guess the ingredients, but it was a sumptuous sticky substance, Yves Klein blue. A sprinkle of white powder, spread in a wave, resembled frothy ocean foam as it meets the shore.

*

Dark clouds, rain, light drizzle; then, as the sky grew dark, it began to pour down insistently but slowly, in huge drops the size of grapes. Magnified, they fell at a rate different from what one would expect, given gravity's easy pull. The restaurant staff scurried away with our drinks and shepherded us, under black umbrellas, into drier quarters—drier, that is, than our tables on the veranda.

A roof hung over our heads, but rain leaked in through the open slits between the boards. The sides of the room were open to the landscape, with only a veil of vines screening the view of the valley below. Rain trickled over the leaves on the roof and down through the cracks as the sky turned lavender.

Of course this sudden change in color cooled the temperature; wet and chilly the evening became. The guests ran to their rooms for plastics. The aesthetics of these raincoats annoyed him to no end, so we moved into our own little niche, still with a view of the hills.

The spectacle of the dark clouds, and the eerie light that set over the vast landscape, more than compensated for our damp circumstances.

“Th-they did not c-c-come back for d-d-dessert,” he said. “They came b-back to s-see the sights. In Tibetan *d-dorge* means ‘thunderbolt.’ *L-l-l-ling*, ‘land.’ D-Darjeeling is the land of the thunderbolt. It does not happen often, but p-p-possibly it will t-t-tonight.”

The raindrops grew to the size of figs. Flickers of lightning were reflected in the drops, creating prisms like dreams in an opal. The gray clouds lay above the golden line of the mountains’ silhouettes. Quick jerks of lightning flashed with no thunder, perhaps because they were so far away. The small audience we formed sat transfixed amidst phonemes of the sky.

The waiters stood with us, cloths under arms, as we watched the drama unfold. It was as if all previous joys, agonies, comedies, tragedies, intrigues, and betrayals transformed into prisms of light.

“A p-p-proper audience sits still, no matter what happens on stage. No one p-p-panics. Memories of s-s-s-seasides and glittering suns light inlets and ferocious waves. Do you r-r-remember?”

As the rain let up, a congregation of fireflies blinked their lights against the gray bold sky, accompanied by a choir of cicadas—insect violins, the chorus of Orestes. Of course the males were signaling female connoisseurs. Otherwise their lights would have had no meaning. I had no idea how the females kept track—a blink here, a flicker there—and in the meantime the guys jittered.

All at once the taillights stopped blinking. Total darkness. Seconds later a thunderbolt stretched across the northern sky and lit the landscape. As my eyes adjusted to the raging light, I saw cows huddled in the meadows, trickling streams falling down mountainsides, and tiers of tea growing on hillsides. Then a crack numbed my ears and left me short of breath.

I wanted to pronounce a word that I had not uttered for years. My tongue tapped on my palate where my gums meet my teeth. Air pushed through my parted lips, completing the vowel. But before my tongue could backtrack to the first consonant, he raised the forefinger of his right hand to his lips. My tongue didn't touch down again. He did not return my gaze. Rain washed his cheeks.

As a result of the downfall, mud, loosened from the cultivated tiers above us, slid down the hillside. I had heard of this hazard before, most often in LA. I looked away from the

valleys, from the distant mountains, from what seemed to my imagination infinite, to mud sliding down the hillside nearby, something I could reach out and grab.

He could not have anticipated this calamity. Torches relit after the rains subsided illuminated brown smears that had obliterated the nearby hills. Mud wobbled the fragile foundations of our shelter.

Then from the froth a face appeared, a woman, ageless, silver streaks of hair flattened with slime, her open eyes amazed. This image lived for a split second, and then froze in time as if a film had slipped, a single frame surrounded by blurs. She seemed an itinerant actor on a muddied stage, as half-submerged chairs, tabletops, and lampshades swept by in the cascading backdrop of mud.

“I-I do not know if s-s-she was alive,” he said, his tone calm and pensive.

“There is nothing we can do,” I said. “The lines are out.”

“N-no, th-there is n-n-nothing.”

Gradually guests found their way back to their rooms. For safety’s sake, we were advised not to leave the hotel until morning. The staff provided tea, biscuits, and a few folding cots. They gave us the space in the entrance where the great dogs slept near the hearth, and left a silver bell to jingle for service.

It was chilly. The rains had lowered the temperature considerably. In the course of the day the fire had gone out. Only a pile of black embers remained. I knew I couldn't sleep.

"Do you think I should ask for more blankets?" I whispered. His cot was very near to mine.

"Y-y-y-yes," he uttered. "I-I-I-I am v-v-v-very ch-ch-ch-chilly. And I-I-I-I have not b-b-b-brushed my t-t-t-teeth. I-I-I- n-n-n-need t-t-to b-b-brush m-m-my teeth. D-d-do you have a t-t-t-toothbrush?"

"Yes, I happen to have an extra one in my bag. It's okay, I haven't used it." I fumbled around. It was pitch black. I couldn't make out anything in the room, let alone the contents of this dark canvas bag. As my camera, my wallet, pens, and other necessities filtered through my fingers, I felt the slick shiny surface of the toothbrush packaging, pulled it from the bag, and held it up. "Voilà," I said, as it glistened in the half-light.

"C-c-c-could you t-t-take off the wr-wr-wrapper? P-please? I-I-I don't want to t-touch it."

"Sure," I said. Of course this was difficult in the dark. It was vacuum-sealed in unforgiving plastic. You needed good scissors or a knife. I had neither. So I opened it with my teeth. It crackled. He cringed. Everyone else was asleep.

"W-w-we n-n-need a f-f-fire. I am v-v-v-very cold." He shivered.

“You go brush your teeth. I’ll ring for someone.”

He got out of bed and disappeared into a hallway, looking for a glove and a sink. I gave the bell a jingle. A tall, rather handsome attendant appeared holding a candle in one hand. I explained that we were quite chilly and would like some extra blankets and perhaps a fire in the hearth. He said he would look for additional blankets, but of course with the extra guests staying gratis at the hotel, there were few if any amenities.

“Still, you are in luck with the fire,” he continued. “The person who makes them has stayed on for the night. She lives far up in the mountains, and she was afraid to go home.”

“Oh, please don’t bother her,” I replied. “I just need a few sticks and a couple of matches. No problem, I can do it.”

“I’m afraid guests are not allowed to start fires. The technique has been passed down through her family for generations. No one else is permitted. Don’t worry, sir. I will find her.”

In a few minutes he returned with the woman and a young boy lugging a large woven basket filled with carefully cut hickory sticks.

“This is Anna.”

She curtsied politely, and the boy proceeded to empty the basket, laying out each log according to its length and circumference.

When the boy finished, he sat on a stool and folded his hands. She took a handful of dried leaves with sweet aromas and placed them at the center of the hearth, then began carefully selecting the logs he had organized on the floor beside her, placing four long ones on the bottom in the form of a rectangle, and on that base constructed a pyramid of many tiers. When she reached the top, I said, “Thanks, that’s super!” and thought it was over.

She didn’t respond. She simply kneeled and waved to the boy. He got up and left. She remained in the same position.

He returned shortly with another basket filled with logs. These were longer than the previous batch. She went through the same procedure as before, surrounding the first pyramid with a second one. When it was finished, she signaled to the boy, and he brought a third basket of even longer logs. She went through the same process until a third pyramid enclosed the second and the first.

She signaled to the boy a final time. He returned with a small stick; a fragile flame flickered on its tip. She took it, held it above the top of the pyramid, and dropped it in the

center. The leaves at the bottom lit instantly, and soon the inner pyramid was aglow. The great dogs slept.

“Oh wh-what a premonition. A p-pyre I s-s-suppose!” he exclaimed, as he entered the room.

“Yes, soon we will be warm.”

“I-I-I-I feel t-t-toasty as Tolstoy. Th-th-this is a h-h-h-happy night. And despite it all, I m-m-managed to brush my t-t-teeth. L-lets go to s-s-sleep.”

I couldn't. I stayed awake and watched the fire. After some time, the inner tier burnt and collapsed upon itself, creating a hot bed of coals. Then the second tier began to burn brightly. I fell asleep long before the third expired. The fire was still aglow in the morning. He snored. This “ooooom” was the only sustained sound he ever uttered.

In the morning the workmen shoveled the road in front of the hotel. The local radio station mentioned the slides but reported no casualties. By noon we were able to depart under clear skies, he on foot, and I in a rusty taxi with chipped cerulean fenders. We stood for a moment at the juncture of the macadam road and a small footpath that led down the mountainside to the valley below. We shook hands. I gave him my number. He turned and sauntered down an amber path, translucent pebbles crackling like Rice Krispies beneath his crusty sandals.

*

Three years passed. I stayed up late nights, flipping through a thousand channels, pausing sometimes on wrestling. I took notes on dishwashers, mattresses, detergents, and Grey Goose.

The economy had its dips and dribbles, and I worried about cash even when I had it, and about health though my vital signs were normal.

I bought a cow at a small country auction just south of Valencia. I raised my hand impetuously, and that was that, I was the proud owner of a Holstein. I realized soon that this was irrational. I had no place for it in my small one-room flat near Marina del Rey.

I learned to cook a simple meal for myself by buying a dozen shucked oysters. They came in plastic containers, and I sautéed them with butter in the bottom of a pot. Add a few bits of chopped onion, milk—whole or otherwise—and you have oyster stew. It was the only dish I could cook besides scrambled eggs.

One morning the phone rang. I was groggy. I still had a landline but hardly used it. My smart phone had taken over. I was addicted to apps and collected hundreds. There is a flashlight app that gives you a bright-white screen—great for fixing flutes on Mulholland Drive—a Proust app that directs you to the nearest madeleine in the Venice Beach area,

and a Lolita app that lists the best tennis courts in Beverly Hills. There is even the Cham app. It shows a close-up of a chameleon's skin. The screen color changes to coincide with the colors around the phone. Since the phone is then difficult, if not impossible, to find, a recording of Truman Capote reading *Music for Chameleons* switches on automatically.

I picked up the receiver. On the other side of the crackly line was the voice of a young girl who introduced herself as Aakanksha. She spoke in halting English, but from her simple explanation I understood that my dad had died some days before. According to local custom they had burned him on a pyre of hickory sticks and, as he requested, sprinkled his ashes in the sea.

"The sea?" I said.

"Yes. "He didn't want a plot."

"A plot?"

"He was claustrophobic you know--better to be dispersed."

Actually, she confessed, there was no sea anywhere near, so she sprinkled them in a brook, hoping the brook would eventually trickle to a stream, the stream to a river—she didn't know the name of the river since geography was not her main interest in school—and eventually the river would run to the sea, or so she hoped. She asked if I would come pick up his possessions and see to some legal matters. Her sorrow seeped through the crackles of our connection.

I thought for a moment. I mean, what could they be, his possessions—a couple of books, his old electric trains, his banjo, maybe a watch or two? As far as I knew, for the past twenty years or so he had dabbled in history, but how good could the market for history be now? Of course I had already missed the funeral, if indeed you could call it that. Recently I enjoyed a lobster bake on the beach beneath the bluffs. Everyone went skinny-dipping.

Plane tickets were expensive, no real deals. Surcharges and recessions. Anyway, didn't I want to go on a real vacation? Yellowstone National Park, the Everglades just south of Boca, somewhere in the Caribbean? There's a great hotel on Virgin Gorda—previously owned by the Rockefellers. And then, of course, there is Bellagio, the real Bellagio, not the simulacrum in Las Vegas. Lake Como, in the very north of Italy, is shaped like a pair of pants. The southern foothills of the Alps surround Bellagio right up in the crotch of the lake.

I could drive somewhere, but then I would have to consider the mileage on my lease. I was already up to thirty-five thousand. The limit is forty-five. After that, it's fifteen cents a mile. I didn't really want a XXXXXX, but I was thinking practically, even with rumors of sticking gas pedals. It's possible the problem was overblown and politically motivated. "Stop being cynical," I said to myself. "Maybe a couple of people did step on the brake and run a red light." I kept bumping the phone button on the steering wheel. Whereupon a female voice led me through all the rules of making a phone call, rules I could recite by heart.

I couldn't remember what the international dateline would mean for my schedule. Would I be going backward in time or forward? And wouldn't the whole trip be déjà vu?

"Okay, I'll come," I said. "But I will need a few days." She thanked me and hung up the phone. It occurred to me that I didn't have an address. The last time I visited we met at the restaurant. He hadn't invited me home. Perhaps he didn't want me there.

That night I jogged along Vista del Mar. I put on my shorts and Nikes and ran for a couple of miles along the beach, noting the sea's surreptitious association with his ashes.

Two days later I boarded a flight to Delhi. From there I took a prop plane to Bagdogra, and then a rickety old train to Siliguri, which still is about ninety-six kilometers from Darjeeling. In Siliguri the bus drivers were striking. After a good bottle of wine, I hired a cab—in this case a shared jeep with camouflage markings and bullet holes in the fenders—to take me the rest of the way. The roads were in ill repair and one headlight was burnt out. We arrived early the next morning.

The cabby, if I can call him that, dropped me off at the restaurant. But it was much too early for lunch, so I inquired at the reception desk of the Windamere Hotel. The concierge pointed down the road, in the direction of where we'd last said good-bye.

I took a shower, shaved, and changed into a fresh set of clothes, then ordered coffee and a buttered croissant.

In Los Angeles I'd never opened the manila envelope he had given me. I put it aside with a pile of other papers, bills, and ephemera, saving it as a memento. So when I packed for the return trip I thought, why not bring it along and read it where it was written? But now wasn't the right time. I was anxious to see his house.

*

I retraced my steps down the steep hillside. A couple of homes stood along the way. None seemed like his. Near the bottom of the hill I felt out of breath and rested for a moment on a bench that was placed strategically near a little spring. A metal pipe protruded from under a stone and water trickled forth. In bold hand-painted letters the back of the bench read, "Courtesy of the Girl Scouts. Drink up!" I passed a house that looked very much like an English cottage—probably built at the turn of the last century by a homesick Englishman. I peered into a window. When I knocked no one answered, so I pulled at the doorknob. It fell off in my hand.

Following a bluestone path, I found a door with a shiny new bell. A girl appeared in the glow of a dim light. She was about sixteen, light-brown eyes, wearing a floppy Brooks Brothers shirt.

"So you have come."

"Yes, I have," I said, enchanted.

“I am Aakanksha, but you can call me Ada.”

“Ada?”

“Yes, Ada.”

“Okay.”

“Come and have some tea. I can show you around. Why don’t we walk through the gardens?”

Bluestone paths led this way and that, from the back of the house to the front, and to a pond with a small island. Turtles sunned on floating logs. Large golden koi surfaced then disappeared, flicking their tails and rippling the otherwise placid pond. A great green heron circled the tops of the trees that grew around the far perimeter of the water.

Two fenced-in gardens—one exposed, the other sheltered—held flowers for sun and shade.

“Oh my God!” she exclaimed. “It’s the black dahlia, actually blooming. You don’t know how hard I’ve tried. I ordered the bulb from Glasgow, and it took a couple of weeks to arrive. Then a year went by and nothing happened. In the winter I keep the bulb in the basement to protect it from freezing. Hellebores are a lot easier.”

Parallel rows of peonies lined pathways to the pond.

“Here in the mountains we have elaborate winters, and witch hazel blooms first, the yellow blossoms appear when the snow is still on the ground. I wouldn’t want you to catch a cold. Let’s go inside, have a look around. After all, it’s yours.”

Paintings, prints, and faded photographs hung on the walls. All looked like they dated to the turn of the last century. A portrait of Queen Victoria with her stallion hung near a print of George Washington. The glass on both was uneven and pocked. A primitive drawing of three America Indians perched over a couch. In the dining room an unusually ornate clock, gold leafed with a gushing wave on top, hung above a side table. On the opposite wall was a painting of wildflowers, mostly daisies, on a dark background. A dark cabinet straddled one corner of the room, its heavily varnished surface crackled with age.

All in all, the house was in better shape than I expected. “Of course you can look through the drawers, certainly in the closets. There’s gotta be a skeleton somewhere,” she said. “It’s your house, or it will be as soon as you sign the papers. Anyway, you see, I *have* stopped smoking.”

I changed the subject, asking what, in retrospect, was a silly question.

“Is there an ‘I’ here?” “I believe it’s about this big.” I stretched my arms about as far as they could go.

“I don’t think so,” she said. “It’s only me. But feel free to look around.”

I did in fact make an effort. I opened a couple of closet doors, found the usual: towels, cleaning fluids, lightbulbs, and so on. I walked down to the basement. There was a hodgepodge of shelves and boxes, some filled with plumbing parts, a couple of faucets and a drain, others with electrical components, a washing machine, a dryer, a bucket, spiderwebs everywhere, and an incredible wine cellar filled with dusty vintages. The most recent was 1917.

She apologized for the spiderwebs and explained that she had so much to do with arranging the *antyești* that she hadn’t looked after the basement. There was no ‘I’ anywhere that I could see. I asked about an attic. She walked me upstairs and through the bedrooms. The small hatch cut in the hallway ceiling was hardly big enough for a thin person to get through. Besides, you would need a ladder. “Anyone up there?” I asked. “No, nothing at all. Just dust and maybe a squirrel or two.”

*

“The house is yours, you know. He left it to you.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Didn’t the man call you? I thought by this time he would have. You are the rightful heir.”

A series of curious clunks clinked from on top of the roof, which was, I had noticed, shingles of slate. The clicks were hard to ignore. Six or seven struck in a row, separated by long and short intervals; then several more fell with disparate spaces between them, just like Morse code.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“They just don’t stop. Don’t worry. It’s nothing, just the monkeys tossing nuts from the hickory tree. It’s that time of year, you know. The nuts are delicious, but it’s hard separating the meat from the shells. They do it easily. I made friends with one. I call him Harry, after the Prince. I adore him—I mean, of course, the prince. He wanted to call him Albert, after Queen Victoria’s beau. Harry brings me nuts *prêt à manger* most every afternoon. Not sure if he will today though. He might be jealous.”

“Jealous of whom?” I asked.

“Of you, you silly goose.”

“He has no right to be jealous of me. I’m human. He’s a monkey. Anyway I haven’t even met the guy.”

“But you are handsome. You have a strong cleft chin and a straight Roman nose. Your eyes are beautifully brown, and the brows that protect your eyes from rain as well as from expressions of melancholy have an elegant arch to them. You stand straight and tall. I can’t tell, your T-shirt covers your tummy, but I would imagine you have a six-pack under there. Perhaps you are a Greek god come to say hello to Krishna, or, you know, did anyone ever tell you, you resemble Michelangelo’s *David*? So where is your sling?”

“Really?” I replied, embarrassed. “So where’s Harry?”

“You have to stay till evening. He is certainly about, but very discreet.”

“Obviously. What does he look like?”

“He has a very long tail and intense eyes.” Hers widened. “If you wait till twilight, you will see him prowl.”

“Perhaps,” I said. “And what about snow leopards? Are they extinct?”

“Of course not,” she said incredulously. “If you are lucky, you will encounter one before you die.”

It was only small talk. But I was preoccupied with a still-unformed question.

“What about you?” I asked. “How long have you lived here?”

“About four years, maybe a little longer,” she responded. “I arrived when I was twelve. I love gardens and simians. There is more than meets the eye. He asked me to take care of them, and never to plant a seed or grow a bulb—no matter what—that did not exist before 1917.”

“Yes, I know. The turn of the century seemed critical to him.”

“The banquet years, he loved them, when modernity was a little girl.”

“I know. It was way before he was born. Why would anyone want to stop time before they were born?”

“I have no explanation for that, or for love, for that matter,” she said.

“Where will you go?” I thought—but I did not say it. She must have known because she shuddered.

I did say, “This is a beautiful house, and it would be a tragedy to separate it from its contents, although some of this furniture might be moved around a bit. Where’s the TV?”

“Yes, what will you do with it all?” she replied. “Perhaps you could sell the furnishings on eBay.” She paused for a few seconds, then continued. “Perhaps the house too, but I don’t know if they sell houses on eBay.”

The mention of eBay here seemed an intrusion. I wondered if she meant it intentionally. Perhaps she was making fun of her feelings as much as mine, whatever mine may have been.

The clickety-clack happened again, this time louder. I could hear them chattering away. “Maybe you should do something about those guys,” I said.

“They have never annoyed me.” And then a little pause. “Or him, for that matter. You get used to it. At least we did. The nuts ripen in autumn, just before the turning of the leaves. Earlier in the summer whip-poor-wills cry and, of course, the peepers mate and the bullfrogs comment on the peepers mating, and it gets a bit noisy. If they annoy you, soon you will become angry at the world, at least what’s left of it. There is still much left of it here.”

“Yes, I can see that,” I replied. “I grew up in on the East Coast. We had whip-poor-wills and hickory trees but, of course, no simians.”

“They groom each other. They pick out the lice.”

At this point I wanted to call her by her proper name, long and complicated as it was, but I could hardly remember it.

“Aakanksha,” she said. “It means, ‘wish,’ or ‘desire.’” She took a strange little instrument from the shelf, a drumhead of sorts, shaped like an oval. A small metal contraption that looked like the innards of a music box was glued on top of the skin. It had twelve metal arms, on average about two inches long. They varied depending on the note they played. The arms bent up slightly at the end, making them easy to pluck.

“Does your name mean your desire or that others desire you?” I asked, half-seriously.

“I do not know the answer to your question, but you can look it up in the dictionary. We have one here.” She pointed to a bookshelf filled with old leather-bound books, their covers flaking away. Some were titled in English, others in Sanskrit, or at least that’s what I think it was.

“Actually, that is why he selected me. My father had no photograph to send, just a rough sketch. He had only my name to go on and, of course, my age.” She held the instrument close to her belly and began plucking it with both her thumbs. When she lifted it away, an eerie vibrato emanated from under the drum, like a sigh released from its prison.

9. The Amber Room

“Won’t you have some tea?” She turned down a narrow corridor lined with old black-and-white photographs of officials of the Raj, including Lord Salisbury and Lord Canning, the first viceroy of India under the rule of the Crown. (There were little captions under every photograph.) Portraits of two women hung side by side: a picture of Lakshmi Bai, the rani of Jhansi, a leader of the Great Uprising of 1857, and a photograph of Queen Victoria, this time as empress of India.

“We have a kind of love-hate relationship with the British. Actually, I think its more love.”

“That’s cool,” I said. “By the way, do you have a word for ‘cool’ in Hindi?”

“Yes, I believe we do.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Cool!” she replied coldly. “Do you think we are back in your Middle Ages? We have also heard of Jimi.”

At the end of the hall was a door I hadn’t noticed.

“Oh, that’s what he called the Amber Room.”

She opened the door a crack and politely waited for me to finish perusing the photographs. A warm glow emanated from the slit.

“You know what amber is, don’t you?” I asked.

“Old tree sap.”

“Actually, I think it’s a kind of resin.”

“Whatever,” she replied. “Actually, there’s an amber room in the Catherine Palace near Saint Petersburg. Ours is smaller but no less beautiful. He was proud of this. It is where he wrote his histories.”

Bits of amber ensconced in the walls, as borders and baroque floral designs, glowed against carrot-colored woods.

A long walnut table inlaid with amber initials—OW, FN, ED, PS, JR, WO, WP, EB, CD, etcetera—stood on a frayed Persian carpet. Each pair of initials marked what would have been a place setting, but otherwise the table was bare. A golden alabaster lamp with sculpted filigree on the upper edge floated overhead.

“It was carved in Sweden in the late Victorian era when, with the advent of electric lightbulbs, alabaster became fashionable. Heat from burning oil would have cracked the stone.”

She sounded like a tour guide. Actually, every detail was endearing, from the rubber bands circling her wrist to the misplaced strands of hair flying from her head to the chipped cerulean toenails peeking from her sandals.

“How do you know this?” I asked.

“He was a kind mentor. I learned a lot. I am a connoisseur, perhaps an aesthete like Pater and Sontag—maybe someday I’ll be as good as Oscar.”

The room was far more elegant than the other rooms in the house. It felt like a dream. I was wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and sneakers. I wished I had changed.

“Actually,” she said, “why don’t we go back to the kitchen. It’s more relaxed—totally.”

We sat at a blue-green table. I supposed it was first painted blue then green, but the paint had worn off in places. A wood-burning stove stood on one side of the table, a tall ochre cupboard on the other. It was cozy, almost cramped. She put on a simple kettle, one with a spindly spout, and pulled out a small, fat, green teapot from a lower drawer. She carefully transported two level teaspoons of black tea from a nondescript brown paper bag to the delicate silver bucket on top of the pot.

She pulled out a loaf of heavily crusted bread, cut it in half, broke off a few pieces, and laid them on the table. I took a couple of bites.

Without a drink, I got the hiccups. She smiled. “We must wait exactly seven minutes for the tea to brew. Don’t worry. The tea will cure your hiccups.” I calculated: one hic every ten seconds, six hics to a minute: $6 \times 7 = 42$. I thought, “Not a magical number. There will be at least forty-two discomforting moments before I sip the tea.” I tried dry swallowing. It didn’t help.

She poured the hot water into the teapot and carefully closed the lid. In the meantime she slid a chair over to the cupboard, stood on it, and reached for the top shelf. She pulled out a white satin satchel tied with a bow.

Hic. (That’s me.)

She giggled. “Don’t make me laugh,” she said. “I wouldn’t want to drop this.”

Hic.

She stepped down from the chair, placed the satchel on the table, slid the chair back, and sat down. She carefully untied the two ribbons that held the satchel together.

Hic.

“Actually, would you like some water while you wait? It cascades down the mountainside. The sun aerates it as it ricochets off the rocks, eventually finding its way to our well. It would be a great idea for bottled water, wouldn’t it?”

Hic.

The water didn’t help.

“Just kidding,” she said. I would never fill our house with plastic bottles, especially the Amber Room. He would turn over in his . . . I guess that’s not a very good metaphor.”

“Yes. He had an incredible aversion to plastic,” I said. “And, by the way, Bakelite was invented in 1907, the same year as Picasso painted *Demoiselles d’Avignon*.”

“I never *did* like diet pastry. I mean, if you’re going to eat cake, go all the way. Those artificial sweeteners really suck. Sugar never killed anybody.”

“Actually, I think sugar may have, but Bakelite isn’t sugarless pastry. It was the first plastic.”

“I always thought he was allergic,” she said.

“I’m not sure you can be allergic to plastic. Can you? I think it was more like a phobia. I knew someone who was phobic about high ceilings, getting sucked up in them, and

someone who had a phobia about sugar but not salt, or maybe it was the other way around, I could never tell. Actually, I kind of like Bakelite, especially the doorknobs.”

“We don’t have any of those, just brass and a couple of amber ones, you know. I think there is a glass one up in the bathroom. I don’t really care what they are made of as long as you can get in and out. I mean, you don’t want to get stuck somewhere. I’m awfully claustrophobic. So was he. I’m so glad it wasn’t a coffin.”

A saline solution ran down her cheeks.

“Here,” she said, more cheerily. She set the cup on the table. “It’s okay. We can both sip from it. He won’t mind. We hardly ever used it, except on special occasions.”

I stayed for the monkeys. Even with me around, Harry brought his hickory nuts. He did seem jealous, but he graciously offered me the meaty particles he had picked from the nuts. I kissed her hand then walked up the hill to the hotel.

I didn’t sleep that night. I couldn’t separate the cup from that house or its furnishings, and certainly not from Ada. I wanted it to stay like it was forever.

I asked the concierge for chamomile. He returned with a teapot of flowers. I was still wide awake. I took three ibuprofens. No result. I picked up Proust.

As a last resort I opened my carry-on bag and pulled from an inner pocket the manila envelope he had given me. “I’ll try reading his history,” I told myself. I know Manet is Manet, but now there are naked people all over the web and thousands of them stare at you just like Olympia. Does anyone care about exposed skin or lascivious smiles? And with respect to his formal innovations, his flattening of pictorial space, for example, there was a time when Europeans thought the whole world was flat. If you sailed far enough, you would fall off the edge.

So wide-awake, lying in bed with an oil lamp to light my reading, I opened his “Essay on Modernity: From Manet to — — and Back Again,” with the smudge on the second name. I thought, “This will put me to sleep.” But after the title page, it was all just repeated alphabets, both in English and in Sanskrit:

abcdefghijklmnopqrstvwxyz,abcdefghijklmnopqrstvwxyz,abcdefghijklmnopqrstvwxy

z,

क क्व क् कण क्त क्तय क्र क्रय क्तव क् क्रय क्म

abcdefghijklmnopqrstvwxyz,abcdefghijklmnopqrstvwxyz,abcdefghijklmnopqrstvwxy

z,

क्य क्र क्रय क्ल क् क्व्य क्ष क्षम क्ष्य क्ष्व र्व्य ख

abcdefghijklmnopqrstvwxyz,abcdefghijklmnopqrstvwxyz,abcdefghijklmnopqrstvwxy

z,

ग्य ग्र ग्र्य घ्न घ्य घम घ्य घ्न क् क् क्त क्त

abcdefghijklmnopqrstvwxyz,abcdefghijklmnopqrstvwxyz,abcdefghijklmnopqrstvwxy

z,

क्ष क्ष्व ख् ख्य ज् ज्य झ् झ्य ञ् ञ्य

abcdefghijklmnopqrstvwxyz,abcdefghijklmnopqrstvwxyz,abcdefghijklmnopqrstvwxy

z,

abcdefghijklmnopqrstvwxyz,abcdefghijklmnopqrstvwxyz,abcdefghijklmnopqrstvwxy

z,

झ ञ च्छ च्छ्र ञ्च च्च छ्य छ्र ज्ञ ज्ञ्र झ

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झ ज्म ज्य ज्र ज्व ञ्च ञ्च्र ञ्च्र्र ञ्च्र्र्र ञ्च्र्र्र्र ञ्च्र्र्र्र्र ञ्च्र्र्र्र्र्र ञ्च्र्र्र्र्र्र्र

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy,abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy,abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy
z,

क ka [kʌ] ख kha [kʰʌ] ग ga [gʌ] घ gha [gʰʌ] ङ ña [ɲʌ]

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy,abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy,abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy
z,

च ca [cʌ] छ cha [cʰʌ] ज ja [ʃʌ] झ jha [ʃʰʌ] ञ ña [ɲʌ]

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy,abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy,abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy
z,

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy,abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy,abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy

z,

ट ta [tʌ] ठ tha [tʰʌ] ड da [dʌ] ढ dha [dʰʌ] ण na [ɳʌ]

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy,abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy,abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy

z,

त ta [tʌ] थ tha [tʰʌ] द da [dʌ] ध dha [dʰʌ] न na [nʌ]

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy,abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy,abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy

z,

प pa [pʌ] फ pha [pʰʌ] व ba [vʌ] भ bha [bʰʌ] म ma [mʌ]

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy,abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy,abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy

z,

य ya [jʌ] र ra [rʌ] ल la [lʌ] व va [vʌ]

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy,abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy,abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy

z,

श śa [ʃʌ] ष ṣa [ʂʌ] स sa [sʌ]

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy,abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy,abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy

z,

Or just white like this:

“He asked me to type for him,” she confessed the next morning. His eyes weren’t good, though his fingers were nimble.

“I thought he would insist on a quill,” I replied.

She seemed to resent this little joke. “The typewriter was invented in 1861 by Father Francisco João de Azevedo, a Brazilian priest, just about the time that Manet painted *Déjeuner sur l’herbe*. Of course Father João and Manet worked on different continents, and this mutual progress may have been a coincidence. But he had no problem with typewriters, or Manet, for that matter. He didn’t care that Olympia was a concubine. After all, here am I. He was quite progressive for the time he pretended to be living in. He loved the way the metal typebars sounded as they struck the paper. This pleasure was slightly sadistic. After I finished for the day, he loved to run his fingers over the indentations the type made on the page, like J. G. Ballard did with all those scars. He would touch both sides of each page as if he were reading brail. Quite erotic I would suppose, even though it was all history.

“Anyway, I typed and spell-checked for him. I also know a good deal about comma placement both practically and aesthetically. Then one day we had a fight. Usually we fought about the weather, umbrellas or no umbrellas, raincoats or no raincoats. He was always worried that I would get sick. One little sneeze and that was it, but this time the

fight was more serious. It was about Harry. Actually, I wanted to take Harry with me to visit my girlfriend down in the valley. It was snowing, and I thought I would ski there with Harry on my back, but he didn't think that was a good idea. He thought Harry would throw me off balance. So he instructed me to make sure all the commas were correct, even though I had already checked them twice. Then he stormed out of the house. I was furious. So I grabbed it and threw it into the fire. We always had a fire in the hearth that time of the year. Longinus loved hearths."

"Who's Longinus?"

"Actually, Longinus preferred volcanoes. I regretted it immediately. I knew I shouldn't have done it. It was the day he was meeting you at the restaurant. He really wanted to impress you with it. But I didn't have enough time to type it over, and in any case how could I remember it all? So I typed up the title page and then just typed alphabets and scribbled on the rest of the pages. I hoped he wouldn't notice. He was in a hurry, and anyway he had lost his glasses. He was always losing his glasses. We have many modern amenities, but there is no optometrist here. We had to send all the way to Düsseldorf for them. He preferred German frames. They are well made, like their Mercedes. I didn't have time to rewrite the whole thing, so I just typed in anything, as fast as I could. At least he would feel bumps. When we hadn't heard from you for so long, I thought I got away with it. But he thought you didn't care about him anymore. I think it affected him deeply. I'm sorry."

“Well, you did get away with it. He never found out. Do you remember anything he wrote? Just curious.”

10. The Valley

I used to live in a room full of mirrors, and all I could see was me. Well I take my spirit and smash my mirrors.

JH

“There’s a meadow down the road. Your toes wobble on the pebbles. You can feel the earth slope down under the high grass, daisies, dandelions, and butterfly shrub. A phone line runs across the meadow. That’s okay. The line is jammed with banter all the way from Mandalay. Soon we won’t need the poles because the chitchat will float in the air and through us in snowstorms or on October afternoons when the leaves fall. Eventually the poles will fall too. I wonder what finches think sitting on the wire, the gossip in their grasp.

“A path leads though the meadow, first down the hill then up again. On the right there is an old cedar barn. The sun sets behind it, depending, of course, on the season. There are three empty stalls where horses slept in days gone by. They romped in the open meadow on summer afternoons.”

“How do you know this?” I asked. “How many years have gone by since the horses romped in the meadow?”

“Don’t be silly. That’s what horses do,” she said. “Actually, I saw hoofprints after a summer shower. Whenever I want, in spring, summer, winter, or most often in the fall, I walk down the path and up the hill. The evergreen tree near the other end of the meadow has peculiar needles. It’s not a hemlock—no suicide here. A vine of some sort, wisteria maybe, winds its way through the branches to the top of the tree where, on the winter solstice, they could affix a star.”

“Do they?”

“Do they what?”

“Put up a star”

“No, silly. That would be *way* too glamorous. And in any case if they wanted to light it up, they would need to use a candle, and the winds up there blow candles out.”

“Who are ‘they’?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You said, ‘if *they* wanted to light it up.’”

“Of course they could use a bulb, and in that case they would have to go all the way to Mandalay to buy a proper extension cord, because the tree is about a kilometer or so from

the nearest outlet. We have an outlet right here, and as you see, it is attached to a standing lamp with a beautiful shade so I can read to you. Would you like to hear it?"

"Hear what?"

"When I knew you were coming, I retyped the modernity thing."

"I could always take it to bed with me."

"I want to read it to you. It is the least I can do. And this way if you have any questions or comments, you can ask me as we go along. I almost remembered everything. Anyway, it's about the same number of pages. How about a drink?"

"I wouldn't mind some white."

"We have a fine Montrachet from Domaine de la Romanée-Conti. May I recommend it? Joyce loves it. She's my girlfriend."

She stood over a wooden barrel. As she lifted the lid, a mist rose from inside.

"We always keep it here. It's just the right temperature. He said the mist came from a genie, and that someday the genie would pop out. I almost believed him."

"Did it?"

“Not yet, but it will shortly,” she replied wistfully.

“Please, read it to me,” I said. “I am curious about what he wrote.” But I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to separate the melancholy in her voice from the melancholy of modernity.

She pulled out a manila envelope, the same color as the one before. The title read, “An Essay on Modernity: From Manet to Jimi and Back Again.”

“Are you sure about this?” I asked. “Who’s Jimi?”

“Come on, you know. He’s the guy who wrote ‘The Star-Spangled Banner.’”

“Hendrix? He would have never written about Jimi Hendrix. He never got past Bartók’s String Quartet no. 1 in A Minor. That was 1908. Hendrix was in the sixties, and he played electric guitar. The pick guard and all the dials were plastic. You know how he felt about plastic. In any case Hendrix definitely did not write ‘The Star-Spangled Banner.’”

“Then, who did?”

“I don’t know. But it wasn’t Jimi . . .”

“I understood his nostalgia. He was always nostalgic, especially when he chewed his gum, Wrigley’s Spearmint.”

“I know. What’s that gum with the yellow wrapper?”

“I love the way he wrapped his fingers around the neck of that Stratocaster. He plucked the strings with his tongue.”

“Let’s not talk about Jimi. What’s this obsession you have for Jimi? Jimi’s been dead for years. Let’s forget about Jimi.”

“I wasn’t talking about Jimi. I was talking about my simian pal. Anyway, I’m due next June. We still don’t have a name. I will now read you the essay.”

She pulled her glasses, a pair of tortoiseshell grannies, from her shirt pocket—“I’m nearsighted, you know, always have been”—and began to read.

Part 1. Modernity, Maternity, and Lips

It all started with Olympia, her lips. Kind of smug, don’t you think? And that look on her face—I mean, what was she thinking, “You should have knocked”? Victorine Meurent posed for it, one of two models Manet employed frequently. The other was Suzanne Leenhoff, his piano teacher, who married him after his father died. There was a reason for the delay; she was his father’s lover. A son was born, and no one was sure if he was the son of the father or the son of the son.

*Some years later Lee Miller modeled for a man, Man Ray. He painted her lips floating in the sky. The painting, called *Heure de l'observatoire*, was his last resort. Man didn't want to finish it because he knew he had already lost her. Marilyn's lips are also renowned. Both de Kooning and Andy painted them. I never knew de Kooning, but I have known his Marilyn, her lips so red, and so was her belly. I refer to Andy by his first name because we met on several occasions, once for dinner at *Un Deux Trois*, a restaurant in the theater district. Andy's assistant, Fred, trying to prove a point, stood up on the table and dropped his pants. Andy asked softly, "Fred, why?" If it weren't for Andy, we would all have been kicked out. He stands at the entrance to the Greenmarket in Union Square, silver and shiny, particularly on September 23 at 9:04 in the morning, the autumnal equinox. I buy my radishes there, as well as my green beans. Bananas aren't local, but I often I buy fish, which is very fresh, caught off the coast of Montauk. Gandhi stands at the other end of the park. But we always called him Bapu. He visited Darjeeling in the summer of 1925. Marilyn wore a dress with 2,500 rhinestones, and Lee Miller wore nothing but a metal veil, but she photographed the lips of the inmates in—*

"Wait a minute," I said. "Her photographs also included their eyes and noses and ears, or what was left of them. It wasn't only their lips. He seems to be omitting a lot of details to justify this thesis, whatever it may be. Sorry to interrupt."

She glanced at me over her grannies and then back at the page.

In Dachau. And though I hesitate to diverge from the subjects of maternity and modernity, I cannot help but mention the lips of Mona Lisa. She was modern in the sense that she was a man. Her lips are thin and rather pursed, similar to the lips of Olympia and unlike the lips of Marilyn, who for all practical purposes was a woman. Modernity embraced acts of transgression because they enlivened its discourse. Is Latin dead? Of course it is, because it has no naughty words, or if it does, we can't tell them from the nice ones because they are so immersed in convention they lose their knack to alarm.

“But there are no lips in Malevich’s *White on White*,” I said, “or space, for that matter. Go look. It’s up at the Modern.”

“There is a dance hall down Sophienstrasse with a *Hofgarten*. It’s called Gypsy Hall. Gypsies actually appear on Saturday nights. On Monday nights it’s salsa. Tuesday it’s tango *Argentinischer*. (He taught me how to tango.) On Wednesday, it’s the menuet. Thursday, cha-cha-cha. Friday, swing. The guys hold their pants up with suspenders. The girls spin like umbrellas. And by the way, Stalin or one of his minions, minioning, insisted that Malevich put the lips back into his paintings, and the noses and ears too. Oh, oh, the wind and the rain. Did you know he designed his own coffin? Malevich, that is—kind of morose, don’t you think?”

She glanced at her cell phone, which had recently bounced to the floor. She made no effort to pick it up. But her hands twitched as she air-thumbed a message.

““From Manet to Mondrian, Pablo to Pollock—diminution of space, or paucity of pucker?”

“Our rewards cannot be measured in mere ciphers.”

And, “Our life has no end in just the way in which our visual field has no limits.”

Then, “Flatbread or pizza without its toppings, but we only have chips.”

She dumped a few from a bag she had fetched from the pantry.

“I am sorry,” I said, “I don’t get it. I’m grasping at straws.”

“Oh my God!” She gagged, her mouth full of potato chips. A couple flew out on the *G*. I was afraid she was going to choke.

She closed her eyes and tapped the concavity between her clavicles. “I am happy you are grasping at straws,” she said. “It is your prerogative. But we are sipping tea. We do not slurp milkshakes or require straws. They were in with Pollock and silly historians who pondered space, sucking it from flat to flatter. If it wasn’t for maternity, or modernity, for that matter, where would we be? Huh? There wouldn’t be anything to be post about. And if modernity was a ruse, then guess what?”

“What?” I asked.

“We are free!” A long pause, fists tucked on hips. “Though, as you must be aware, we already have a physical liaison as well as a philosophical affliction.”

“Could you clarify tha—”

“Our vocal cords make our eardrums flutter. That is why a history of lips is so essential.”

She continued, softly now. “Then the snow came, and after the snow came the frost. The streets looked as if they were made of silver, they were so bright and glistening; long icicles like crystal daggers hung down from the eaves of the houses, everybody went about in furs, and the little boys wore scarlet caps and skated on the ice.”

“I like ice hockey, but it does get a bit brutal,” I said.

“I love to ski. So did he, but he always felt guilty because it was so much fun. All that white! You can’t tell the sky from the snow. But you can feel the bumps, so you know there is a there there. I want to get back to it soon, maybe next winter. Perhaps Joyce will babysit. I need a new pair of goggles.”

She scrunched her lips into an ironic pout, paused, adjusted her grannies, and looked back to her papers.

Part 2. Yellow Tail Feathers

Without lips it would be quite impossible to speak. Therefore any theory of modernity, or maternity, for that matter, would have to be silent. Historians should consider the soft fleshy parts resting on the nether side of one's teeth and puckering sensually into space. Lips are as essential to modernity as space or the lack of it. Speaking of space, did you know that they have discovered a planet orbiting two stars? It does figure eights around its suns. Consequently the inhabitants don't need lightbulbs. And they discovered another planet that might be made entirely of diamonds, not sure if it is just one big fat diamond or tons of little ones. Proposing marriage on this planet is quite ridiculous. By the way, I was looking for hickory nuts the other day and discovered a bird lying in the grass. It was so perfect that at first I thought it might be sleeping. But it wasn't breathing: no inhales, no exhales. I think it was a waxwing—a beautiful gray bird except it had yellow tips on its tail. The tail stuck up in the air with a yellow tip on the end of each feather like a little flag proclaiming, "Here am I. I'm just a little gray bird but I have these yellow tips on my tail, see?" I didn't know what to do. I was afraid the cat would get it and rip it apart. So I went into the shed and looked for a shovel. I couldn't find the common garden variety, so I grabbed the shovel we use for snow. The ground was still soft from the rains, and I dug a hole where the lawn meets the forest. I scooped up the little bird and carried it over to the hole and dropped it in, and it fell belly down, with its neck twisted to the left, but the feathers on its tail stuck up just like I had found him, saying, "Here am I. I am just a gray bird, but I do have these beautiful yellow tail feathers." The next step was to throw dirt on him, covering, of course, the yellow tips of his tail. And I knew the worms would soon get everything, including the yellow tail feathers that would be bent over from the weight of it all. I held the shovel over him. I didn't know what to do. I felt like Hamlet or Ophelia

or something floating in a stream. One often encounters streams in meadows, as well as whispering children, laughing boys and girls and girls and girls and boys and boys and girls . . .

She laid the pages aside, put her glasses in her pocket, and looked up, the full moon in her eyes.

“There is a meadow, not far from here. A new home in the sun. You walk down the path until your toes wobble on the pebbles.”