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The Festive Wound

L' ANORMÂLE

and

EL QUEMADO

twin fictions

by Lee Gotham

A Thesis in the Department of English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of:

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ABSTRACT

The Festive Wound

Lee Gotham

The Festive Wound is a pair of thematically related short novellas. Their theoretical underpinning is concerned with the interstices, or liminal moments, where polarities dissolve in inversions and admixtures of past understandings. The Festive Wound can be construed as the paradoxical product of its twin constituent parts, contradictory as they are complementary, alike as they are dissimilar.

The novellas discuss the psychic trauma we experience in our contemporary urban lives and the problem of healing the resulting wounds. Emotional dependency is figured as resulting from our confusing the physical, intellectual and psychical properties of our lives. These considerations are both exaggerated and undercut by a narrator whose experiences are as picaresque as his meditations would be profound. Alternating levels of diction, double-entendres, false endings, dreams and hallucination are all employed to heighten the subjective character of the narrator's experience.

A most heartfelt dedication of this work is made to:

the cherished memory of Ivor T. Gotham,
to Mrs. Irene M. Gotham for her unfailing motherly love,
to Lindsay Erin Vollick for her lovely love,
to Adeena Karasick and bill bissett for inspiring me to take
the Langue way home,
and to Apolonia Martinez, Dominique Pepin, Pierre Bédard
and Myriam Alarie for sharing their energy, wisdom and
compassion.

Additional thanks to the long-suffering and highly
appreciated occupants of the Mature Students' and English
offices, and finally, to all those who read 'The Wound' in
manuscript and offered their invaluable feedback.

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The Festive Wound

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L' Anormâle

Il y a des moments où la vie, le fond de la vie se rouvre au dedans de nous comme une plaie qui saigne et ne veut pas se fermer.

... Sainte-Beuve 1804-1869

L' ANORMÂLE

The bags under my eyes are the same degraded brick-brown as the church at the end of your street, long overdue a good sand-blasting. It's about five in the morning and raining. I take three Tylenol and crawl back to my nest of newspapers on the sidewalk under the tarp. But I'm already asleep in your perfectly comfortable queen-sized bed. I wake with the dawning of another headache, as if the night's been one long and fruitless argument. It's true, all I get now are voices in my sleep, picture-tube of my dreams burnt out a while back. That's not quite right either; none of this really fits. In the bike's rearview mirror I look once more to verify what friends have been saying for weeks. But I look fine. A few lines etched a little deeper, haven't trimmed the hairs from my nostrils lately, but what the hell? Jaw's still square, eyes still patient, nose is cool and tongue pink.

I shouldn't be telling you any of this. You gave me *La Désobeissance*, Moravia in translation. I just wanted to do something pure in return. You believed in angels, had a fetish for them, and for book-length accounts of their visitations. You claimed you were autistic until age fourteen. I didn't know what to think. Maybe the world wasn't such a shit-hole; it could shine just like a pearl.

Je suis tombé en panne. I have tumbled in pain. I work and sleep under the little tent-garage I've constructed by patching together my groundsheet and an ancient tattered tarpaulin abandoned here by some street vendor long ago decamped. Rain spatters the topside of my ragged tent in a fine and uniform interminable tattoo. It leaks through to condense in giant drips which cling in irregular patterns and drop unpredictably the six or eight inches onto my bike, into my clothing and hair, the opening at the back of my collar.

Just around the corner, in the boulevard Montparnasse, stands La Cupola. Someone told me to look for it when I got here, said Sartre and Beauvoir used to hold court there. I took to perching at the rear bar, chatting with the suave serveurs, myself a little roughshod but welcome enough while able to pay for my thirty-franc beers. Upon entering the first time I

sniffed the air doubtfully for tobacco-tinged traces of an existential brand. But nothing belied the chic austerity of decor; it was hard to invoke any foment of ideas from the scrubbed atmosphere genteelly contained by twenty-foot ceilings and ranging picture windows. Still, it was a pity when last week those windows were caved in. Tables, rattan chairs and the odd potted plant were dragged into the street, piled high and set alight in student protest of plans to tax education. I listened to the rioters with sympathy from here in your cul de sac as I dozed on concrete fitfully, begrimed and exhausted from another frustrated attempt at repairs.

My life is a regular *contretemps*; it's become a life 'à quatre temps'. *Quatre temps*, translates to four-cycle, or more commonly, four-stroke, the engine type of my motorbike. But the idea of my own life lived to four competing rhythms seems fitting. I'm confused. I know you hate bike talk, *chérie*, but as you've contributed to my confusion I'll take this minor revenge in choosing my analogy. After all, *tombe en panne*, or my tomb of pain, as you know, actually refers to a motorist's suffering some mechanical failure. *Je tombe en panne*: I'm having a breakdown.

But first I'll describe the scene for you. Maybe I misconstrued it all, you can tell me. It was shortly after I arrived in Paris. We ate steak tartare in a little restaurant you knew at the foot of Montmartre, (Picasso's favourite neighborhood haunt, you said.) Your hair was up and you smoked gold-tipped Sobranies. I wore my beat Harris tweed over leathers. For dessert we had cognac and nearly kissed in the chill night air on the empty terrace. You insisted on paying, I left the *pourboire*, and we shared a joint climbing the steps to Le Sacré Coeur. There was a midnight service, a complete coincidence, the choir was almost too sublime. I was an awkward non-Catholic, returning handshakes and greetings following the final amen. We kissed on the lips for the first time then in our pew with an old couple waiting beside us. A flush went through me like the first time tasting wine at Communion. In the cab back to your place Paris shimmered in a fog like so much jewelry under water. We drank champagne I didn't realize was a staple in your diet, and you told me matter-of-factly you were HIV-positive. I kissed you like I could suck venom from a wound. I just wanted to do something pure. Life's such a shithole; instead it should shine like a pearl. At dawn we were bucking for all we were worth, our inspired intuitive response to some oracle. I was smitten by the symmetry of our simultaneous

coming, then stunned by the irony of breaking my first condom ever. The shredded red latex made a flower of my prick.

You see, I remember everything, or at least I like to think so. Not everything? Not quite everything? But of course, that was only the beginning. And you didn't really come in 'til the middle in any case, the fraises à la crème filling one of those boozey Crêpes flambées.

* *

An introduction to the wonders of the four-stroke British twin: It was born not long after the turn of the century and it led the expanding motorcycle industry, healthy and prosperous, 'til enfeebled in the mid-1970s. To further benefit the uninitiated in motorcycle lore... Since I am not writing this little missive exclusively for you, chérie, someone who has witnessed first-hand both the glory and the shame of my own four-stroke fixation. No, yours is the provoking ear, but I write here to be read and not merely accommodated.... Who can resist the famous thunder of these venerable two-wheeled chariots? The uninitiated need realize that ownership of a classic British twin is a matter of desperate, hardly defensible, pride. A pride that is continually compromised by mechanical breakdowns which provide detractors ample ammunition for critiquing the British twin rider's ultimate roadworthiness. But what a small price to pay, the odd operating difficulty, when the bargain comprises the best of both worlds: brute power and seductive lines, strength on the straightaway and agility in the curves, a machine assertive and responsive in perfect even measures. Who'd ever imagine the slapdash pretenders, popularized in the '70s by the Japanese, could put such a sexy industry into receivership? Unfair, the automated mass-production allowing for their cheaper sticker prices. Unfair as well, their operating virtually maintenance-free. Before them, nothing was so fleet in the streets as the buff and bumptious classic British twin.

* *

I rarely admit it but I'm a pretty half-assed rider and an even worse mechanic. My single remarkable talent is endurance. Done some crazy long hauls, me exhausted, bike falling apart, but always getting there in the end. I probably fantasized the whole way about that special someone (or all and sundry) enthusing over my cross-country feat. And it just might happen. But not 'til some later retelling; there's never anyone expecting me where and when I ride. For the moment of arrival my whole reward sinks in somatically. I'm a voluptuous wreck. Neck and shoulders ache amazingly. My fingers, numb from vibration, clumsily cradle coffee and cigarette. I might shake uncontrollably from cold and fatigue. Strangest thing about riding is when you wreck a bike; the satisfaction in surviving the crash is precisely that winner's glow you'd have at the finish line another day.

Always wanted to do Europe on a bike. So in the spring I buy this cherry '69 Norton S-type Commando, a British classic with as much 'go' as it has 'show'. I clean it up like mint after a summer's riding, build a crate, and put it on a ship for France. The idea is to ride around for a couple of months, see some of the continent, then resell the bike at a handsome profit. I give my crate a two-week headstart and away I go with all of \$700 Cdn. after the bike's sea passage and my cheapo flight to Paris are paid. On arriving I hear the same story for three weeks waiting for freight-forwarders to deliver from Le Havre: — *Sûrement demain, Monsieur, sûrement demain*. The bike's late arriving, okay, I can deal with that. But I'm going broke renting space here in the City of Light. I should be down south picking grapes, sunning and feasting for a song. Instead it's, "*sûrement demain*," for three weeks while my seven hundred *menyatas* shrink down to two. To top it all off Parisians quit Paris in droves for the month of August. I'm stuck here with a bunch of fucking tourists. Each of the addresses I have to look up is a further frustration: locked and vacant apartments, perpetual answering machines.

It's drizzling and cold. I swing down off the ring-road and merge with traffic on the A-11 for Nantes. Shit weather for riding but, now the bike's finally arrived, I'm outta here. Besides, I could be a long while waiting for better weather the way the rain's been falling lately. I lean into it and take as few breaks as possible, three hours solid at 70 m.p.h. into rain too thick to see

ten yards ahead. I'm trashed by the time I reach my half-way point and pull in at Le Mans. Leathers sodden, affecting a criminal mien, I drag myself into the café-bar at roadside. Truckers see one of two things in a biker: freak or fugitive. They don't care much for either, but there's less hassle if I play the hard-ass. I muse over my coffee I'm the ruthless type with the bouquet of daffodils Genet put inside him. I'll be in the thief's own Brest in another three hours. Tomorrow maybe I'll see what I can do of the ramparts, walk the older streets like the ghost of a convict. I didn't really look for this turn of nostalgia. The only book I was bringing was one I could write in.

Just past Rennes the rain lets up for the last hour out to the coast. I pull up within earshot of the ocean, throw a groundsheet over the bike and myself, huddle close to the heat of the motor. When it's cooled I wrap myself in the plastic, stretch out and get an hour's sleep before the first truck whistles past in the dawn.

Taking the A-11, A-81 west from Paris approximates the route 19th century prisoners were marched along in chains, twenty-four days to the penitentiary at Brest. The fortress where those prisoners became galley-slaves, or even soldier-sailors, was reduced over time to a derelict rope factory then demolished fifty years ago. The German's buzz-bombs had already gutted most of the city's centre. The old Brest would take some unearthing and I don't have money to buy the time for that. I put back a warm Ricard-and-water before suiting up again to take the coast road north. The bike's running like a champ. At 3500 r.p.m. in third gear the engine's thrum resonates nicely with the warm glow of anise in my guts. No sign of rain, and the slalom contours of the coast road have me smiling.

Two hours and one gas-stop later I notice the throttle action is a little gritty. The next time I upshift out of a corner the cable snaps and the engine blubbers toward zero revs. Cursing, and shifting to neutral, I angle for the soft shoulder. The nearest place I'm going to find a new throttle cable is definitely not before the next large town. Just before the engine stalls I trap the half-inch of frayed cable still exposed and retract it another half-inch from the rupture in its sheath. This has roughly the same effect as twisting the throttle. With this precarious pinch-grip on the cable I bring the bike back up to speed. But an incremental tug is sufficient to open carburetors wide and launch the bike to break-neck speeds. Though I've still got my foot-brake, and one hand on the bars to steer, the situation is less than ideal; I'm completely

preoccupied maintaining this failing grip with numb fingers in thick leather gloves.

The first key to biking survival is an omniscient awareness of the unfurling event which is the road's surface. All transients upon it, every inconsistency within it, must be painstakingly accounted for. An unanticipated patch of cow dung, for instance, encountered in the midst of a bend in the roadway... The lesson in the inevitable result remains obscure 'til the brink of consciousness regained. Having skidded unceremoniously, not to say shit-smearred, off the pavement, I next encounter an unfortunately placed telephone pole helmet first. The lesson is drawn painfully, and in a flash, not upon impact but minutes later as I make my groggy attempt to get up from the ground. To be precise, revelation occurs at the moment I inadvertently dip the baby finger of my right hand into the still-whirling spokes of the bike's rear wheel.

In Belle-Isle-en-Terre my remaining \$100 Cdn. buys me a bottle of comfort, (the good medicinal Ricard,) a cheap hotel room, one makeshift throttle cable, and just enough coffee and gasoline to see me back to Paris. The next day in Nanterre, a suburb north and west of the city, I stop to help some obnoxious English businessmen with directions into town. Asked whether I, "parlez the fransay," my affirmative reply translates instantly to a job offer parleying on their behalf with a French clientele.

What goes around comes around, they say. Must be my excellent karma. Turns out my new employers are hybrid Gypsy and gentry, new money with the ancient nomads' mores. The outfit's a real fly-by-night: some rickety paving skids, two ancient dump-trucks, and some tools coated with thirty-year-old tar. But, hell, they drive brand new cars, and they're paying cash, 2500 francs a week, hotel and meals covered. I'd start right away for half of that. — Gazho si dilo! my new boss exclaims. I assume that's good and follow them to their hotel.

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Prolonged effects of a sleeplessness. In a twilight cocoon, on a daybed in the morning, sleeplessness. I sort through ashtrays within easy reach. Absence of hangover a bad sign. Fingering my punctured forearm, it aches comfortably under the touch. Not like years back, replaying carnage of adolescent night, "Johnny which way yer needle go?" Watching morbidly for months after, the tiny mease of broken blood vessel two inches down forearm from crook of elbow. The carload of kids out for kicks, mesmerized watching the pro flash through his routine: spoon, mix, cook, filter, fill the needle, probe for a vein. Eventual probing out of patience, in the dashlight manic jabbing rapid over wrists and backs of hands. The minor horror, so many sluggish welling founts of blood all running in together. The whole syringe slick with it. Finally hitting and plunging the shot home... Anti-climax, nothing left moving in the pro's slackened features. His careless gestures, works tossed aside, carnage blotted into beer-stained blue jeans... Next?

Isn't life mystical? I never loved you. No more than you ever loved me. We just expressed ourselves, (differently.) Denying our limits, identifying wants in place of wonder, wonder in moments without any future, wonder so full it hurts. L-O-V-E reflected upon is rarely a pretty thing; it's E-V-O-L in retrospect, evil even. An evil story: one that depraves or corrupts, leads us astray. A love story: one that elevates, a poignant evocation of romance. An evil love story, then? Histoire d'amour mort, quoi?

Three actors meet in a rehearsal studio. *Anna-Lise* is the centre-piece; she is you to a 'T', all crises and raptures, she could never function in a supporting role. *Brigitte* is the motherly one and romantic; too skinny and vamp she is completely miscast as your best friend, but dreams well of charming princes. *Marlène* is the mover n' shaker; the career-woman who never looks back to the little antique shop in a provincial town and her family's cramped apartment above. The idea is that three women meet in a waiting room before appointments to have their abortions. The play's big problem is the play's director; *Laurent* has never had an abortion. And he's asking me,

— Et bien, c'est comme ça, mon idée. Tu veux l'écrire?

I've never had an abortion either. I look from director to actors and back again, a ludicrous, "Absolument" in my mouth.

Our night-long caresses and days spent in bed... (which were poetry only for me? the sheets actually blank and white? the covers only ever between us, never snuggled around a story, however nascent?) I never sent you this plaintive contemplation. I left the questions unasked and unanswered, reminder of my having asked too much already. Therapy. A bitter little remedy prescribed by pride and reason, my joyless companions. If I grew too fond of your affection I was nurturing nurture in turn in me. I'm unready for the nunnery!

We're rehearsing in that windowless studio space, one of the last along a labyrinthine corridor, ill-lit and unswept, leading in from the Faubourg Saint Antoine not far off the Place de la Bastille. We ascertain that *Marlène* and *Brigitte* have been recently jilted. *Anna-Lise* decides to leave her own lover after a dialogue scene in which the rendered portraits of absentee wouldn't-be fathers prove remarkably similar. Your performance, as impeccable as the action is implausible, moves me. I swear I'll unwrite every word for you. But first a cigarette break, and then a run-through of your shunning the others when 'the pact' is proposed. Why do you balk, you want to know. Because, for you, this abortion is almost a given. *Anna-Lise* has always sworn never, never to have a kid.

— Mais regardez-moi, you can say, vous m'imaginez comme mère? I'm a little surprised *Laurent's* explanation suits you but I restrain myself from meddling when you collapse in my corner of the space during a break. I'm from Canada: Montréal, Toronto, a little town called Ancaster, but I was born in Britain, all my family still live there. Your father owns a successful publishing house, sometimes you go in and work for a day, that way he's forthcoming with the cash.

Everyone's time has become too valuable. It's agreed we'll write and rehearse simultaneously. But you actors are not proving great improv artists, I have no experience workshopping plays, and *Laurent* has made too many films. What's worse, I'm losing my semblance of professional composure. As the play comes unravelled I'm daydreaming, eyes loitering on you where you lounge between scenes. I rouse myself. Careful not to mess up what little

good I've written I rattle the keys and try to look busy. I've a few lines of pretty trite dialogue when the batteries go dead in the laptop *Laurent* has furnished for the project. Staring intently at the silken black screen I see myself reflected at the nexus of four characters' lives. All originate in off-screen obscurity and end by colliding with me in a blank absence.

Third week of rehearsals *Anna-Lise* leaves *Laurent*. The play is aborted, crashes and burns. I see you soon after. We love. I love. You leave. The new year Paris turns a cold damp grey. A particularly interesting penny drops when I recall the curious opinion of an armchair psychologist friend of mine: Emotional maturity is rarely reached before an individual has had at least two years' worth of sex for the simple sake of sex. Otherwise, the act remains undifferentiated from adolescent love; the sexual urge is confused with that reverence of one infatuated heart for another. Aware of what I have and haven't lost, I'll make out alright. But leaning on this construct to excuse my affections... We met in a bar because I ride a motorcycle. Now it's more like one's just ridden over me. You've given me this opportunity. For evidence of my heart's enduring susceptibility I am grateful.

It's your well-heeled, dog-walking neighbors that really aggravate me. They're interminably mooching around the fringe of my new squat. An oil-slickened wrench, fallen clanging upon the pavement, can make the most purposeful of passersby skip a stride, pause, even poke at the black and blue walls of this my plastic asylum. I mean, do they suspect they're on Candid Camera? Some actually loiter here, their midget shit-hounds sniffing and yipping, peeing on the eaves of my makeshift garage. These animals give me the biggest pain, having sniffed me out, as it were; Toy Poodles, Daschunds and Chihuahuas, yapping little dog-rodents nosing in beneath my umbrella encampment... I'm sorry, I actually love dogs. Poverty, rejection and insoluble mechanical difficulties have rendered me a little testy. It can't be helped, I'm stalled here tinkering away with inadequate tools, vulnerable to police and thieves alike 'til I've sorted out my dysfunction.

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Unlike its unsophisticated competitors the British twin's drives, and consequently its appeal, are infinitely nuanced. Its four-stroke motor develops a powerful thrust, or 'final drive', but as any British mechanic will tell you, maintenance of the twin involves considerable analysis, and not a little tender loving care. Likewise, for its performance to be fully appreciated by the layman, the workings of the four-stroke's metabolism require some explication.

First off there is intake: valves open, and a carburetor feeds a rich mixture of fuel and air to one of the engine's cylinders. Next comes compression, the piston rising to condense the mixture against cylinder head and sparkplug. The spark's timely arrival provokes ignition and an explosive release of energy within the cylinder. This combustion, or 'power-stroke', is felt throughout the entire system's drives; gears whirl, chains fly, and the wheels are in motion as the whole ensemble is engaged. The ensuing 'exhaust-stroke' is not merely the necessary voiding of cylinder. The subtlety with which the Brit-twin's exhaust is repressed even while being thrust from the system results in the engine's tuneful trademark rumble and growl.

The beauty of the whole process lies in the reciprocity of the separate functions. Through the genius of crankshaft and connecting rods the plunging of one piston is kept in perfect sync with the retiring stroke of its partner; each inhalation, compression, combustion or emission has its complement concurring in the adjacent cylinder. This smooth autocatalysis is emblematic of the classic British twin's overall appeal.

* * *

I'm just getting used to this Company Interpreter's gig, talking shit for a paycheque, evenings and weekends in town while the others are back in Britain with their families. With all its citizens home from the holidays Paris is living up to my expectations. But a month later Jesse Penfold Sr. is back to business in England, leaving his sixteen and seventeen year-old sons in charge. Now I'm company chaperone, salesman, and then interpreter. Sell as many jobs as possible and keep the big guy's kids out of jail. Back in Kent, Jesse Sr. is handling a million Sterling in estates and as much again trading

Welsh Cobbs. Cobbs are show horses and the Penfolds are Lovara, horse traders, one of the four great Gypsy nations. But thirty-five years ago Jesse started himself out conning the gullible with this same two-bit paving rig. He's only resurrected it now to break in his sons; kids pushed wobbling down the road, a feeble training wheel dangling from each side of their 10-ton dumptruck, careening from one near-miss to another. "Putains de Maudites Gitanes!" howl the small-town burghers in their wake. "Oi! Piss-off Wankahs!" comes their gleeful reply.

Finished my sauna and whirlpool, I make my way up to their rooms. Non-Gypsy, and classified as part of the crew, I'm lodged with the workers in a cheap motel out on the nearby autoroute. But since I wear a suit jacket and speak fluent French I have visiting rights here at the 4-star Copthorne. It's a quiet night, none of them brawling in the bar-room, no complaints of their harassing the chambermaids. I find about eight of the extended family, all male cousins and uncles to my goofing employers, lounging in the kids' room. They're watching softcore on the TV and cooking bangers-n'-mash on a propane stove smuggled into the room for the purpose. My quick head count reveals Jesse Jr. is the only one missing. I hand my pass-key back to Jilko, the goateed wannabe gangster, one of the uncles, a year or two my junior. He takes me aside.

— Oi, what if I was to stay on here when the rest go home for the weekend? Reckon I'd get some fucking? You know, á-la-fransay like?

Uncle Jilko's jockeying his balls from one pocket to the other of his silk and linen pants, scuffing his loafers in the plush carpet, head turned discreetly from the others, eyes lowered shyly and grinning. I love these guys. I really do. Jilko here's ready to slip me a twenty pound just to get things started. I could get a prostitute to play along for the kind of money he'd gladly pay. He'd never know the difference, and wouldn't let on if he did. What he doesn't realize is how much more, how very much more, he'd have to pay me to sacrifice my weekend respite. Loveable or not, I'm at my wit's end with these lunatics by Wednesday each week. Fortunately I'm saved the effort of making my excuses. One of the others has rolled a sizeable spliff he wants to parade before lighting up.

— Come on you lovers, come and have a whiff o' this. Look at that then. Bleedin marvel, in'it?

Minutes later the room's in a fog of tobacco and hash. Someone's yelping from the washroom for me to come read the instructions on the hair-dryer for him. There's a knock at the door, a moment's stillness, then a scramble to stash the camping stove, open the windows and dispose of the joint. It's the manager, no underling but the real fuzz. I step outside to parley. Seems Jesse Jr.'s been caught wanking in the whirlpool. No other guests present, but, as this is a hotel "de réputation internationale," they will have to ask that we leave. This is the third hotel in as many weeks. No, there is no mistake, it's all on videotape from the surveillance cameras. Monsieur Penfold may settle our account at the front desk, merci.

We've all but cleared the area of potential jobs in any case. The timing couldn't be better. I'm dispatched to rouse up the workers and do a midnight creep from the motel on the autoroute. Apparently Monsieur Penfold will be settling that account at a later date.

* * *

I'd heard good things about this bar in rue Coulaincourt, another of the delightful little pockets of humanity behind Paris's endless parade of beautiful people. Ironically, my first night there I met one of those beautiful people. But a special one, one with some brass, and a little bit crazy. We'd come into the street at about the same time and I congratulated myself for securing the only parking spot near the bar. I watched you combing the tight-knit curbs for a space while I took off my helmet and gloves. You were obviously determined, possibly urgent. My bike was up on the sidewalk and I was waving you ceremoniously into the space in no time flat.

Same time, same place the next week I sat on a bench in the little arbour at the top of the street and sucked back a couple of cornerstore beers, cost-effective appetitifs to a maincourse swilling of cognac, Ricard, or calvados to come. I watched as you worked at wedging your little Fiat into half a parking space. There was space behind the car behind you, and I'd seen it done before, so I decided to help make you some room. With engines smaller than the one in my bike the average car in this city is not a hefty affair. I vaulted the fence at the edge of the little park and did a mime routine to get

your attention. The cobblestones were a little slick and I was wearing my cowboy boots with soles worn smooth. I slipped twice, smacking my chin on the hood while heaving at the front end of the car parked behind you. There was a little more room when I'd done though, and you were polite, if skeptical, when you got out to go.

The whole episode was admittedly more than a little absurd. I didn't even watch as you must have stopped up the street to turn into the bar. I went back to finish my beer and collect my helmet and gloves. It wasn't 'til after my third brandy, when I was in the middle of a bragging match with some reject from the Foreign Legion, that I noticed your eyes where you sat near the door. The Légionnaire wore his jeans hitched up like a farm-girl; I thought you might have been admiring his butt. As the soldier grew maudlin regretting the passing of glory days in Guyane and 'operations' in the Amazon I got up to do a little reconaissance of my own. From the cut of your clothes I'd imagined you a lawyer; apparently you rode stunts in a renowned equestrian theatre troupe. A boisterous group speaking Spanish swept into the bar and swarmed you affectionately.

Brigitte and *Marlène* join a queue for a show. Imaginary Parisians fall in behind them. Always the late one, as the line lengthens there's no sign of *Anna-Lise*. Checking of watches, looks of exasperation. The line shuffles ahead.... I imagine you somewhere in the city, tapping an impatient but fashionable toe while your manicure is done. In the cold outside the salon's window two men are smoking cigarettes. One, wearing a navy peacoat, collar upturned to the wind, tenders a light, the flare of the match tinselling the other's swarthy jaw. Like the gangster discreetly coercing his victim in public the peacoated man steers the other away from the salon and up the street.... *Marlène* and *Brigitte* lean close for discreet conversation in the line-up. We hear nothing. The wind takes *Brigitte's* hat(?!)... At this last idea I respectfully suggest the scene's become a little static. I don't say filmic since *Laurent* and I have already had it out over aesthetics. Everyone lights cigarettes. You stub one out, get up from your seat on the sidelines, stretch and pace the room.

— Peut-être que *Marlène* a déjà vu le film? Elle ne veut ni le revoir, ni attendre *Anna-Lise* Elles peuvent se disputer, par exemple.

My second input in as many minutes. *Laurent*, peevish, says we're finished for the night. You sigh in obvious undiplomatic relief, then take off for an audition you can still just about make across town. I've parked the bike in the courtyard at *Laurent's* place. In the metro headed back there I hop the turnstile rather than pay and guzzle at a huge can of English ale from a brown paper bag. The stops wing past, *Laurent* crosses and patently recrosses his legs, one designer sock revealed to match his tie, then the other. At the Porte de Bagnolet we lose one another in a crowd milling around some Corsican buskers. The energetic squeezebox cheers me up. I almost wish I had a couple of the boys from work with me. The tubby bonvivant ringleader here has a commuter's hat plucked off and held back out to him for change. I toss in five francs, wheel around, and jump the stiles back into the metro.

*

*

The passengers' side door is only swinging to when I feed in gas, tease out the clutch, and paste everyone to their seatbacks through the first three gears. The kids enjoy this. My favourite of the company's cars is a brand new, fuel-injected, five-speed Orion. And it is continually being tested. If not for acceleration, then hand-brake U-turns at speed, even off-road capabilities given an adequately idle moment. A couple minutes later I gear down hard from 120 m.p.h., the rear end of the Orion writhing perceptibly, the engine's howl drowning out the excited clamourings of my adolescent employers. They've spotted a shaggin' wagon parked at the roadside. With the 'clean-up' of the Bois de Boulogne came a proliferation of these recreational vehicles. The noise of our emergency stop has roused the roadside camper and she leans, in half-open kimono, in her half-open door. In reverse I dig ruts in the soft shoulder back thirty or forty feet to her lay-by.

In the campervan it smells of lavender, mildew, and good coffee. The accidental pervert, I leaf through pages of an old Paris Match and throw regular looks over where Jesse Jr. humps away in unbridled adolescent joy, his face buried between still-brassiered boobs. A little out of patience with my young friend's vigour I toss the magazine aside and exchange a conspiratorial smile with...

— Comment vous appelez-vous, La Belle?

— O-oui, La Belle, c'est moi. La belle allée pour mes chers clients.

— La Belle Allez-Hop! n'est-ce pas?

We laugh, and I indicate the half-full, still warm pot on the brazier.

— Non-non, je ne pourrais pas, merci.

— Allez, ne soyez pas modeste.

I bring her my own lukewarm cup and, giggling, she sips what she can between thrusts of her young morning client. I hear the car stereo, the others getting restless. Jesse pulls his face out from the deeps of that hospitable crevasse.

— 'and us our beer, mate?

La Belle gives me a drole look of drowsy ennui. In delivering the sweating can I spill a goodly portion of icy lager over Junior's sweating buttocks.

— Jaysus Jankahs, mate!

He won't shoot a second time now. Though he struggles on for a minute or two the shock's taken the steam out of him, the cold beer shrinking his little nutsack tight.

Back on the road he's still prating away, veering repeatedly into oncoming traffic, bitching me out, one hand in a fist, eyes off the road.

— Ah, quit yer belly-achin'. I'm only payed to keep an eye on you lot. What is it next? I do your fucking for you as well?

General merriment at this, good-humoured threats. I recognize a massive old oak alone in the middle of a field. We're missing our turn-off. Utterly lost reading maps these kids have the uncanny ability to navigate purely by landmarks. And that big old oak is one. We'll be a while finding our way back. All the better, I'm in no rush to be back playing salesman. But there's a flicker of doubt in Jesse Jr.'s eye, and his foot's come off the gas. He senses our erring.

— What's the matter Lovara-Boy? Do you think...

This gets his goat but good. He lunges for me, forgetting the wheel altogether. We'll be lucky to stay on the road, let alone make the right turn off.

*

*

From the British twin's bottom end, drive-side, protrudes a stout shaft of tempered British steel, the 'primary drive'. It represents the first stage in the transformation of crude power to vehicular mobility. Mounted firmly on the shaft's tip is an ornate sprocket fitted with broad-linked chain. Primary drive is transferred along this chain to the clutch, a captor mechanism capable of receiving and attenuating this force, making possible changes of gear without arresting the momentum accomplished by the engine. This feat is not accomplished without the aid of lubricants at each stage. A light oil-bath prepares the clutch for the friction of transferring primary drive to the transmission, or gearbox, which is itself filled with an oil thick as molasses, allowing for the complex clash and meshing of gears.

The gearbox is the site of a second phase in the system's drives. Working in tandem with the clutch the transmission absorbs the engine's primary drive and steps it up or down exponentially. At summits of acceleration, the gears can be up-shifted to ease a labouring engine into a more sustainable rhythm, thereby deterring attainment of 'red-line', or peak revolutions per minute. In cases of truly over-spirited motoring clutch and transmission can be combined to down-shift and assist in braking the vehicle's speed.

'Final drive' is determined by a long chain coupling the transmission to a large sprocket in the hub of the rear wheel. The rear wheel responds to both drive and braking commands. It provides the traction required for quick trips to the cornerstore or the extravagance of around-the-world tours.

* *

In the obscure corridor wending its way out to the Faubourg St. Antoine. A crinkling of vinyl, a pale stick of forearm exposed, the sudden glow of a cigarette swung into view. The sounds of footsteps and keys. More dark and scuffing down hallway, now carpeted now not, scattered refuse underfoot. A stretch of ancient window panes admit a weak nightlight, look out and down onto a dank courtyard, up toward glinting moist rooftiles. In the court it's, à-la-fraîche! shirt ripped unbuttoned to the waist. Over your shoulder, two vague silhouettes behind the bank of windows neither of us

see. Your mortified flesh insubstantial, even this shroud between us disintegrating. I hold pure hunger, feed it at my breast, take your long cool kisses in return, and melt everywhere around a single aching muscle. A car alarm sounds in an adjacent block. Roused at this signal we accelerate our sweating tryst, the meter running after all, almost to the corridor's end. At the labyrinth's mouth the door swings open. Orgy of neon, squall of streetsounds, a tumbled clochard, piss and blood on the sidewalk around him. *Laurent*, with videocam and tripod over one shoulder, café au lait in hand, steps over the man's misfortune. *Marlène* stubs out her cigarette, takes the coffee, laces cool fingers of her free hand in the curls at the nape of his neck.

— Il me faut quarante balles. Cheri? Je te dois déjà, je sais, mais...

My back aches; I feel every strain and bruise I got kissing the pavement back in Belle Isle. Weather's been bad, business is bad. Now the gearbox on the bike is trashed and I haven't been paid in six weeks. I'm marked the way rusted fenders and blue exhaust mark the beat car on its way to the scrapyard. I've had it. I drag myself into the city, unhealthy, unrepentant, trailing cigarette smoke wherever I go. You're so happy I'll stay full-time in town now. Your parents keep a little attic apartment somewhere in Denfert-Roschereau. A writer's garret! But you've another friend who really needs it. You insist I move in with you. I can hardly believe it, but... We walk out arm in arm every day, wearing each other like beautiful new outfits, the envy of everyone we meet. Then you're off skiing for Christmas with the family. I can work on the bike in your building's underground parking. A week later I'm to meet you at the Gare de Lyon. Your train comes in and we kiss on the platform exciting your parents' misgivings. Paris turns a slightly less damp shade of grey.

We ring in the New Year in your parents' apartment with its three balconies and their perfect views of the Eiffel Tower and the Seine. At midnight I admire the chic tableau vivant of silk dresses and cashmere jackets, impeccable coifs and champagne held aloft. I fondle an ebony objet d'art in place of my empty whiskey, smile a bit vacantly as kisses are exchanged. Half an hour later you grow suddenly sulky, lock yourself in the bathroom, complain of nausea when I plead at the door. *Brigitte* gets you to open. You are sprawled very tragically on the mosaic tile floor. You'll stay

there at the folks' for the night. But the cats must be fed, so I should take the car and you'll call in the morning.

Shortly after, an old friend is coming to town from Toulouse. Paris turns that cool damp grey again. You leave a note I find with my packed saddlebags: You must take her in, but the apartment is so small, I understand, don't I? Dining with our friends that evening I'm inveigled to relate the whole sad story of finding myself so abruptly out in the cold. They want every gory detail. A chorus of commiseration at tale's end gives directly onto speculation as to what clubs would be hottest that night. Ticketless I ride a long train to the suburbs and back, and back again, toward dawn when I'm too beat from walking the streets.

* *

I've been thinking of my life in terms of romance and tragedy, rapturous couplings, the furies hell hath not, etc. The fact that I can't raise my voice in an argument, let alone wreak some violent revenge, seems somehow insignificant. The grander conventions of passion-play might escape me but I can lose myself in a lover so completely.

L' AVANT-SCENE: You lie in bed, you won't get up. Now, is that love? I know I can be good for you, search myself for remedies. Is that love? Soon I'm as miserable as you were and you're out on the town. My emotional pile-up of dinky-toys, my tumble into the ranks of badly used pawns capriciously tipped off the board, my... my... heroic suffering the felt-betrayal. It's a favourite refrain of mine, one of the oldest thorns in my side. To be co-dependent without a co-co-dependant is a very tragic thing. To know better and yet to do nothing is a heavy form of impotence and cause for introspection. I think I'll have a drink. My parasite emotional double rejoices, crawls from the wreckage, cheers from the sidelines, orders something harder.

Just stop me if I'm stating the obvious; given the circumstances I'd like this to be more entertainment than exposé. I honestly hold nothing against you but it strikes me you never really understood. Yes, I know, that's just the

way you'd swear I wanted it. I made like I was on top of the world; I only ever showed you my best. Am I right?

ARRIERE-PLAN: You were on your way to some better-moneyed place anyway. And I just wanted to do something pure. I should have robbed your parents and slept with your girlfriends. At least I'd have kept you amused. Can I just once cry on your shoulder? I think you should hear the rest.

* * *

I'm chancing it a lot now. It's become my staple mode of conduct. Guessing, correctly or not, yields a high degree of surprise. And you know me, I like surprises. Chancing it also has the advantage of rendering one's movements a mystery to others. So I'm become something of a gambler, or rather, un joueur, the ambiguous term appeals. When I turn a corner in the street and find what I only hoped might exist, I'm reaffirmed in my destiny. I found no dead-end, and I wasn't run over, therefore I belong, in this cold damp corner of the universe. I snake past the maitre-d' and into the WC of this restaurant in the Avenue des Pecheurs, right opposite Les Halles. Just fishing around, I guess. Idle hands, work of the devil. Pêcheur, pecheur... more a fisher than a sinner, me. Still, I wouldn't wager which inspired the name for this quaint little crease in the city's grimy navel. I'm pretty good dotting my i's and crossing the t's; I'm even passable minding my p's & q's, but these French accents keep me somewhat at a loss.

Now that I'm in here I linger over a smoke where it's warm. Benoit bustles in while I'm sat on the can. I've seen him somewhere before. This is a small pissoir even by Parisian standards but this guy is determined not to back out and wait. The quick look behind him as he comes in tells me he's not just avoiding the rain like me. It's *Marlène's* junky boyfriend. The purplish pock-marked bloodless face bent in concentration over the shot cooking in the blackened spoon: the Benoit image that'll stay with me. I offer him twenty-five francs and shoot junk for the first time with a gambler's relish, la jouissance d'un vrai joueur.

In their murky but spacious apartment in Strasbourg-St.Denis. Just above the architect's where Benoit works his twelve-hour days. Shooting-up with a view down upon the street-vendors, (who watch us so closely when we pass their stalls,) their gaudy umbrellas over fruit and vegetable conversation in the bright lights and silver rain of late Saturday night. *Marlène* wants me to read her English exercises. Benoit plies me with photographs and stories of the dead. His friend, Helno, sang for Les Nègresses Vertes. They fight over the piles of dirty dishes and toilet still clogged, berate each other for inconsiderate hosting. The shot is flat, fades quickly, Benoit has bilked me again. Dawn is banished behind thick plastic drapes. The actress and the architect support each other's meagre frames and ascend final steps to a sleep somewhere on the ceiling. White Light White Heat scratches away low on the hi-fi. The metallic's gone out of my last cigarette. Dust and mold settle in my breath. Vegetable conversation drones on.

Windows covered with dusty green plastic, floor and tabletop morning-after littered in the gloom. Fully clothed beneath blankets, sweet stink of sweat and overstuffed ashtrays. I crush half a dozen butts together in a rolling paper, good as a cheap cigar. No, I'm not doing smack because of you. Love lost is no longer due cause. Revelations don't come so cheap. What I need to know. What I want. And what if I weren't just whining? Control of one's life implies perpetual combat with armies of bureaucrats, with an impossible complex of laws and liabilities, with sacrosanct directives to look good, feel good, and do big things. Hazarding death you'd have only yourself to contend with. What would it be like? Only yourself to satisfy, ravish, succumb to. Danger, romance, abandon, seduction. From the needle in a virgin arm to intoxicated tarantella up against the brink. The fleeting self-assertion, a self-penetration and reckless repossession. But as with the travestied suicide who ends up merely maimed, a life's prescription gets written, the eternal RX, a Doctor's chicken scratch like track marks on it, hooked prologue and tawdry epitaph.

*

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I've had my soak and a read in the tub. The TV in my Novotel room doesn't get ARTE, my favourite channel. Sick of the vivid blue carpet and tangerine walls, sick at the prospect of writing letters or journaling, I get suited-up to ride into town. Montmartre tonight, the little bar in rue Coulaincourt more rock 'n roll than chic. I'm just closing the door on my room when I hear the phone ring inside. I know better but I go back in to answer it, after all it might be you. It's Jesse Jr. stuck on some inn-keeper's lot with the gendarmes breathing all over him. Of course, there's a whole story that goes along with this: They started laying the stuff when the old man had gone up the road.

— But Madame's gone clever, in-she? Pulled her car in front of the tarmacker, din-she?

They've tried to convince her everything was sorted with Monsieur. Not two words of French between them; I can see them gesticulating, shouting what they've just said over again, still in English but twice as loud this time. They're lucky there've been no charges, but they can't move the trailer 'til they've got a truck with the right electrical to give them tail and brake lights. All this fairly typical. I come with the four-wheel drive, or the rig will be towed to a compound.

On the site they go into a clowning routine mimicking the rage of the inn-keeper's wife. I don't want to hear the story. I don't even check the load. I'm fed up with the 24 hr. call my job means these days. They look genuinely hurt at my lack of humour.

— Just get that trailer hooked up and let's piss-off home!
We're not doing 40 m.p.h. before the trailer starts to sway. Standard procedure: I ease on a little gas to try and straighten it out. No good, it's still got a wobble to it. We're on a small country highway without divide and there's a lot of traffic this early in the evening this close to Paris. I admire the twilight fields beyond the ditch too close to the roadside to allow for pulling off. With the deftest gesture toward braking the sway exaggerates. I'm looking in the rear-view, past the oblivious faces of our two hired hands, at the small steamroller, barrels of emulsion, and stacks of tools on the trailer. They swing gradually further out to each side behind us. The younger of my boss's sons gives me fatuous advice from the passenger seat. I curse under my breath as the trailer wanders further and further afield, the hitch creaking, the workers looking over their shoulders now. I'm fighting the wheel as the

two-and-a-half ton load describes a graceful arc forty-five degrees out into the lane of oncoming traffic.

* *

All the British twin's fiery stoking and stroking depends heavily upon that more subtle and finely timed impulse, the electrical. For which, unfortunately, the British are less renowned. All the furious bluster and tuneful canonation remain impotent fancy if the capricious network of wiring that carries the divine spark is faulty in any way. The ignominious name of Lucas (Electrics) will forever invoke the curse of the British twin lover.

The Lucas electrical system is an unruly network whose proper functioning is as vital as its currents are mutable. The tangle of the wiring harness fibrillates with an unsteady 12 volts of 'direct' current. A system of largely uncharted tributaries, it has ambiguous origins in battery box, alternator and coils, or magneto. Surviving British twins are mostly of a vintage between twenty-five and seventy-five years. With time certain of the tributaries have silted in, burst their bounds and joined divergent streams, or have dissipated themselves in the ground, or metal frame of the motorcycle. One signal symptom of the imperious electrical spirit fleeing a machine is the dimming, flickering, and eventual extinction of head and tail-lamps, giving to the British twin the nefarious nomination, Prince of Darkness. It is the shame of so many of these erstwhile noble carriers that they, losing their electrical nerve in mid-stride, have reduced their hapless riders to blind and groping subjects of hazard.

* *

Happily, my electrical system seems in perfect working order. Plenty of spark is generated; both cylinders fire resonantly as a result; my lights could shine bright, even festive. But it's all for nought. All show and no go. If I do

click on the lights of an evening, the ragged patchwork of tarps covering my wreck, this black and blue quarantine lit from within, glows like some mutant radioactive heap. My insoluble problem lies in this damned gearbox and the transmission of primary drive. Through a process of fixation, one small, roller-type bearing, supposedly freewheeling, has become inhibited, effectively fusing my countershaft to its housing. I'm in the worst of two worlds; the shaft is stuck, completely inhibited. I can't remove it to work on the bearing and in the meantime my gearbox remains open, drained of oil, vulnerable to humidity and airborne debris.

Apparently we won't be speaking. I imagine poems I've written you, but now see them scarred with fat black **X**'s, one covering each entire page. A new text, "It's fun to play with words," repeats itself ad infinitum. The world is such a shithole. But this low negation alarms me, and reminds me: I've made myself unpleasant enough dealing with this, I've no further delusions concerning you. I risk nothing telling you how painful it's been gradually perceiving your innate and inimical *savoir-faire*, the sophistication with which you wash your hands of my messy emotions.

In the library at the Beaubourg, deep in a beautiful life of Cocteau, I'm returned to my great preoccupation: J'oublie *Anna-Lise* et j'analyse l'oubli. I come upon the Cock, a great and potent symbol for Jean. I remember well when I didn't give a fuck, when I strutted and crowed and pissed in the streets. The Cock would be over there chatting her up, this dreamy academic resting her eyes in a fetching idle gaze. Somehow I'm reduced to voyeurism. The auburn bun of her hair coming undone. The kinky yet practical black rubber book-bag, oversized chrome fasteners gleaming. The pile of the carpet under her feet is superior to those of Canadian libraries, possibly not uncomfortable on hands and knees, or bare ass-cheeks for that matter. But the Cock has gone out of my life. Where and when did I lose him?

Too tired to read further I hit the audio-visual collection: *Rencontres avec écrivains remarquables*. Another two hours before Justin is off to work leaving the single bunk free for a few hours. My latest hovel, no. 5 rue St. Beuve, a shared *chambre-de-bonne* up the street from the Beat Hotel. The funk of clapped-out sneakers and cowboy boots waits cool and damp inside the door. My cardboard mattress beneath the bunk, furtive strokes and

muffled ejaculations, the midnight buzz of miniature refrigerator. Ginsberg had his saintly motorcyclists. Masoch had his yen for the Greek. Does life have to bugger me before I'll move along? Transcendence of destiny, harmonizing all choices, finding unity in the dualist West. Yukio Mishima spilled his guts. Perhaps he just wanted to do something pure. Yukio recommends I try Anderson's fairytale Rose. One hour before the building closes, half an hour's walk home... leaves twenty-eight minutes. I can afford a five-franc stand-up espresso somewhere en route. Deprived of a fix I turn empty surrogates over in a thoughtless mind, nod off with exhaustion in place of oblivion, my headphones whispering, attendants circling nearer, closing time.

Marlène invites me out to drown my sorrows. Benoit the boyfriend is out of control, picking fights left, right and centre. All ninety pounds of him reeling-drunk-problem-child cranky too long from his last shot. *Marlène* has given up on him, sips her gin-tonic on the steps of the bar casing the crowd for a promising rube. When Benoit's had his bell rung I drag him out of the fray, prop him up against a building half-a-block away, head back and collect *Marlène*. She's licking her lips, backing away laughing from some stud in a bike jacket. I steer her along to find Benoit staggering away from his puke.

Evil glare in the all-night pharmacy at Place de Clichy. The line-up better than half junkies. I pay eight francs a spike, double the norm. Benoit is going off about it. I just want the fuck out, humiliation settling in, I hiss like a cornered cat.

- Allons-y, Benoit.
- Mais, Bordel de Merde!
- Allons-y, c'est moi qui paie.
- Voleurs, Putains d' Esclaves!

He's still going off about it outside, goofing across the traffic roundabout, pissing ourselves laughing. Benoit empties vitamins, condoms, Tylenol 3's from his sleeves. Two cabs swerve, horns blaring, *Marlène* is nowhere in sight. Much later, rounding the corner in their street, spying the white vinyl trenchcoat doubled over on the step. Probably sleeping until our approach. She rears up,

- Vare za fuck are you, you fucking bastarz!

Benoit ignores her, fiddling with the courtyard latch-key. She sways to her feet and swings. I catch her wrist, giggling, enjoy the struggle, bring her bonewhite cheek and earlobe to my lips murmuring musical,

— Vee scored some shee-it.

And she sighs, going ragdoll,

— Ah, you bas-tarz boys... Come-on, come into my beautiful 'ouse.

Vite! Benoit! 'Urry-up god-fuck-you dammeet!

All is pleasure. It starts raining as Benoit succeeds with the gate.

* *

I'm stretched out on the floor, saddlebags for a pillow. Justin perches on the only chair, a rickety wooden fold-away number, for which I imagine endless histories. Its post-war fabrication by Jules Le Germain et Fils of Soissons from beechwood, stainless steel fittings and fasteners. Delivery of a cadre of thirty to the Prieuré Sainte Agathe near Chantilly. Its long service snapping open beneath variously pious buttocks, snapping shut once more in dark stowage beneath stairs adjoining House of God and house of servant. And eventual decommission from the deteriorating ranks, narrowly escaping the firewood heap, finally to embark upon a mature life of secular adventure. Justin, wincing, shifts his weight on the creaking seat. He suggests a sordid variant involving interrogations of quaking provincial schoolchildren during the Nazi Occupation. We're feeding on paté and baguette, drinking a litre can of beer from recycled jam jars. It's December-cold and raining out, but we're feeling rugged so I've taken my paperback Proust out of the window. A good brick of a book, it fits neatly in stopping all draughts, and daylight, from entering our tiny room.

Justin is a firefighter and semi-pro cyclist from New Zealand. Forty-two and feeling sexy, he's here for the food, the fashion and fun. And Justin wants me to be happy too. The way to look at things is, no matter how disastrous, a romance in Paris is something special in itself. He jumps up and takes the three quick steps end to end of our room, smooth-shaven cyclist's legs emphasizing his enthusiasm. If I feel like winter dogshit in an early spring thaw I must cheer myself repeating Justin's all-purpose mantra: — Yes,

but I'm in Paris! The guy's even had a heart-shaped, *J'aime Paris* tattooed on one of his pecs. Any visitor here determined to make resident status will have perpetual recourse to my new friend's refrain. — It's okay, I'm in Paris. He had his racing bike stolen on the TVR before he even arrived, for God's sake. He never groans climbing the twelve flights of stairs to our 6th floor unheated cell. The tiny coldwater sink in the corner is barely big enough for brushing teeth in let alone the feet-crotch-and-armpits bath I attempt from time to time. Justin merrily jogs the twelve flights of stairs, trots off to the swimming pool six blocks away, sings in the crumby pay-shower. — Just think, we're in Paris!

There's a tiny bar run by some pissant Bretons in Pigalle. Better Parisians you'll never encounter. Once they were more numerous here, perhaps the city's first 'immigrant' population. Original aliens. I fix in the squalid WC downstairs, someone hammering on the door, then wrenching on it and shuffling off again. Been up for three days nursing fears of growing invisible, inaudible, imagine myself adenoviral. Something has levered out my language and I'm speechless. No mean 'dérèglement des sens', this. Hair thinning, skin dimming, I'm ghost-flesh clinging closer and closer the bone. I have a lifestyle problem. Maybe I could read up on it. There must be a book: *Down and Out on a Dollar a Day*, or maybe, *A Biker's Guide to Eating Quiche*. In the Bibliotheque Nationale I'll find a doctoral thesis to the effect of, *Art et pratique de la vie: Quelques observations sur le problème aesthetique de l'existence humain*.

At a bar just like this one I'm being sized up by an infamous Neoist performance artist from home, Monty Cantsin. I've just seen some of Monty's work in the Beaubourg's video library. It was shit — but it was in Paris! Heard he tossed phials of his blood on paintings in famous collections. Strikes me as a dumb-ass thing to do. Then again it seems I'm increasingly missing the point. Monty's looking over from a table of his hangers-on. He's admiring my outfit and it takes the arrogance out of his gaze. I'm wearing a belted German army vest in wool over forest green leathers. Maybe it's the new thing. I say suavely to myself, — Well hello Monty Cantsin, I'm Justin Manhattan. You're nothing, I'm nothing, I hope we're here to have fun.

— Justin Manhattan, Monty replies searchingly. Do I know you?

— I lived in a big loftspace you wanted to film in. Mine was the corner with the red vintage motorcycle.

— Uh-huh.

— Yeah, well I brought it home from south-east Asia, kept it hidden in a shoebox in my closet 'til it grew too large and valuable and I had to take it out to be admired. See, I'd been going through these changes and...

— Fascinating, Justin. Listen, don't make yourself a stranger, okay?

Art is nothing, art is dead, art is living, art is bread! So went one Neoist jingle. Now that kinda jives for me. A kind of neo-positive nihilist thing, right? Every season a brand new ism; it's a neo thing. These days it's all about sucking. Too upbeat, not a good thing. I'm a loser, Baby, so why dontcha kill me... If you can't get yourself seen panhandling the week before your next hundred-dollar haircut, you'd better at least practise the pout of the tragically hip. Loserism, maybe? This Smack revival, for instance, oldest new thing on the block. I think I'm the Neoloserist type. Getting on the spike lets you off the hook. Give sex a rest, for example; careless conceptions and STD's aside, it's risky business letting someone go fingering in that close to your soul. *Histoire de sexe, ou histoire d'excès?* Or more like a story of Ex's and X's. Benoit taps me on the shoulder. Time to fix. I leave the bar shadowing him closely, shielded from the eyes of Monty Cantsin.

I decide that Justin is just one half of myself eking out this would-be expatriot's existence. Fed enough to drink in an evening he'll go over the top with this big-girl campy routine and a truly predatory look comes into his eyes. Put him in a dress and heels, he'd still be the Cock, there's no doubt about it. As a composite 'we' might explain what I've been doing, how I got here and what the hell I expected. I stray into cul-de-sacs of winter-bleak boulevard parks. Other visible aliens congregate in knotted park-bench occupations, vaguely surly Mahgreb conversations — *Vive La Révolution!* All the oomph's gone out of mine. What's left is a crap and a sleep, something to eat and another crap, a dispirited revolution. Sparrows take dust-baths in the gravel. I sigh, disgusted, settle my prematurely aging bones on a bench under some scabrous, peeling variety of Sycamore tree. Justin gets a genuine kick out of precisely these my cynical miseries. He knows dancefloors of the city await at day's end. He sees Elysian fields opening upon

our extinction. Mundane or fantastical, it matters little. C'est La Vie! We're in Paris. It could shine just like a pearl.

* * *

Brigitte arrives to let me know that it's really all very simple. Apparently *Anna-Lise* was not happy with my, — 'Ow do you say, 'art-on? heart-on? De toutes façons, quand c'est fini à Paris, c'est fini. Il n' y a plus rien à dire. I must understand that I am in Paris. I didn't actually think you would throw up everything to go with some wayfaring American, did I? (— Canadian, *Brigitte*, Canadian.) How did the script turn out, by the way? I must absolutely call if I get back on track.

Marlène spots me at a bar, comes over and seats herself, looking over each shoulder first. She has some very good advice for me. — Il faut que tu oublies *Anna-Lise*. Didn't I know you'd never given up *Laurent* while we were lovers? I am far too romantic. You must have told me your philosophy? Nothing is kept from us if we want it badly enough. You always say this when you first meet someone. Don't I see? It absolves you in advance.

I run into *Laurent*, It's been a few weeks. He's recruiting new help for a feature. — Et alors, toujours là! Comment tu la trouve, notre bordel de ville? Not bearing a grudge, am I? — *Anna-Lise*? Bien sûr elle va bien, elle est folle, évidemment elle va bien. Apparently you say, "Koo-koo." But your sickness? What do I mean, "sickness?" My earnest mention of H.I.V. provokes a cataract of laughter.

France is the best; she'll sometimes lead you on, but she never leaves you nowhere. At 'Le Quick Sandwich', in the rue de la Roquette, France pours me a very good cognac. She can't help laughing when I get to the part about the sickness. What is it with these Parisians? I'm enchanted, then heart-broken and worried sick, and they find it fucking hilarious. I'm drinking cheap French beer that's as sweet as I am miserable.

When I started coming here France would treat me to a glass of champagne each time a new bottle was opened. She even came out for a ride on the bike once. That was back before you and I met, before I blew up the gearbox and ran low on the money I'd need to repair it. I sat here enumerating movie stars in the bar's wallpaper collage of yellowing black and white stills. France rushed home to freshen up after her dayshift. We saw Godard's, *Le Mépris*, that night, (the first of several screenings for me.) I recognized the inky-wigged Bardot from the bar's wall of fame. I also recognized the husband's irreversible shame. We kissed goodnight at the foot of France's stairs, artfully but without passion.

When I show up now we're amiable but business-like. I don't cut in when some guy's chatting her up, and France never neglects my glass. So what does she mean standing me a dose of this high-dollar cognac? A hand alights on my shoulder, France rolls her eyes and tends to the other end of the bar. I turn to behold a vision in red, a stunning strapless satin and crinoline number, six feet and more of her under loose blond curls. Far from senseless with drink, nonetheless it takes me a moment to register the mocking, grinning lips and eyes.

— Enjoying your drink, motorcycle man?

Justin, or Justine, gets a big kick out of my doubletake, turns to regard the room diva-style, using my shoulder as an armrest while I get over it. It's been a few nights I've roamed the streets rather than come home to my damp cardboard mattress. Doing the ridiculous drunkard's jig with clochards outside Les Halles, combing the banks of the Seine for midnight hours, searching out clandestine entry to the catacombs and something, anything, beneath me.

Inside the foyer of 5 rue St. Beuve Justine stops me short of the narrow servants' staircase that rises the six floors to our room. She stops me before the antique grillwork elevator that services the residences of the once grande bourgeoisie, employers of maids, footmen, and nurses. This just keeps getting better: Justin's been doing our landlady. Her apartment is unspectacular, but large and airy, littered with parasols and fans, draped with bolts of brocade, fishnet and lattice. We don't switch on a light. Justine takes a turn in the dark, heels clipping the dim pools of yellow streetlamp light reflecting on the hardwood floor. The shadow of a lace shawl in the window stretches webbing across the floor to my feet, climbs across my body into the

dark of the wall at my back. Justine trips and giggles, sways to a halt and holds out a hand. Justin kicks off the heels, puts his hand across my mouth and bends me back over a divan. The fingers of her other hand are talons anchored in flesh at five points around my cock and balls. I can smell the powder on her cheeks, feel his trim two-hundred pounds moulding my torso, hips and thighs.

— What do you want, motorcycle man?

I close my eyes and exhale through my nose, feel the warmth deflect against the edge of her little finger. The other fingers part gradually, pulling my lips agape in the motion. First one, two, and three fingers, then the heel of her hand but gently, testing.

— You should have thought about it.

My lips burn a little by the time he's dragged the length of his forearm between my teeth. What do I want? A real cheap thrill behind the rides on the fair grounds. One million dollars and a complete blood transfusion. Do I want off this whirling carousel? Or never to have to decide again. I don't know, I slump to the floor. Beneath the flounced crimson hem for a moment all is silent. Twin columns of silken muscle stretch up to the obscure apex of this bawdy tent. I imagine the trapeze artist frozen up there in mid-pirouette fouettée, rain pelting down on the Big Top, everyone crowded inside, all the animals, excitement and scents of the circus. I take it all in, close my eyes, hold on tight as the ride gains momentum.

I shouldn't be telling you any of this, constant apology, nagging confession, like a dog gnawing its flank for some inner irritant. You'd think I learned nothing there under the 'Big Top'. The true masochist, I never finish atoning. I just wanted to do something pure, like with you, something beautiful. Life would go on after all. I thought that might be enough. A little overwrought I write a little under. But in this, my failure, there's a buried jubilee. In my failure I'm ecstatic, literally beside myself. It shines just like a little pearl. What does? This moment. It is quite round, it hangs in empty space like a little pearl, eternal.

At seven a.m. your chic address looks as drab as Coronation Street, a little faked and grey and tawdry. The imported English rain, the despondent early departures for work, an entire neighborhood strange as the day I arrived.

Up all night drinking, (thinking over you taking the sun en provence,) in spite of fatigue I run miles around the Jardins du Luxembourg. I pound the yellow gravel paths, even hurdle the occasional wrought-iron fence. I'm celebrating. Today I'm moving on. That troublesome ring-bearing just popped off in the end, freeing up the countershaft, allowing me to complete my sidewalk mechanics. Returning to my breakdown encampment, with smoker's lungs burning, finally exhausted enough for sleep, I no longer need to creep in and cower. Your building's uniformed patrolman, glower as he might, no longer intimidates. For the pure transport and pleasure of it I kick the bike into life and rev-up an urban rooster's salutation. When I lay back a last time under the ragged plastic tarp the pavement is smooth under my body, the black and blue light so restful.

* *

After our automotive sommersault the truck is more or less upright and everyone inside is okay. On the road headlights are lining up rapidly before and behind us. Centre-stage there's a brand new Mercedes 500 with a yellow steamroller where its engine should be. I drop down from the cab into the wreckage. Draped over the wheel of the Merc there's a man, a little stunned, covered in blood, with a rapidly swelling contusion on his forehead. Miraculously, within a minute he wants to get out and walk around. The two next quickest arrivals and I confer, inquire as to his various body parts, agree he's probably up to it. Bug-eyed and pawing at me, Jesse Jr. arrives from where he's stopped the other truck six or eight vehicles back. His brother starts gunning the engine of the four-wheel drive trying to pull it off the 100 gallon drum wedged underneath it. I'm trying to stay abreast of the situation. Our man is tottering out of the Mercedes. I'm running back to drag the idiot son out of our truck before he hurts himself. The traumatized need tending to, the irate must be ignored. I'm awfully god-damned busy when one of our crew yells: LEG IT BOYS! BEFORE WE'RE ALL NICKED!

In thirty seconds of R.E.M. time. Our lips lean together by candle-light. Your face balloons comically and floats away up out of sight. Justin has his

hand in my pants and I tell him about Sartre, Cocteau and Genet. He tells me about Sade and Justine. The cops are beating the door down as I score for the immaculate fix. Pavement speeds past under my naked ass, thunder in my ears.

There's a hundred thousand dollars worth of wrecked vehicles and equipment strewn all over the road, a man recovering from his near-death experience, an audience of cars lined up for a mile in either direction... And these kids, my employers, are panicked and sprinting back to the other truck. In the general confusion none of the other motorists pay them much notice. I'm standing there thinking: In Canada you don't leave the scene of an accident; it's only sensible and responsible to remain at the scene of the accident until the proper authorities arrive.

And since it was only a fling I learned to let go of the feathered and bloody shaft protruding from my breast. Crying's like peeing; sometimes it's hard to do in front of people, but it always feels better afterwards. There at the end of intimacy, walking blocks and frozen blocks home dejected, disturbed by ruthless cab-driver's predatory stares. I wandered day and night through my dark deserted City of Light, warehouse of my obsolete emotions.

In the glare of a hundred headlights, with a pool of tarmac sealant going sticky under my feet, I calculate my ability to aid the victims of this accident. Safe to assume my valid Canadian driver's license will weigh pretty inconsequentially in the overall balance. The Mercedes man is coherent and seems pretty much alright. The police and ambulance should arrive before long. There remains the question of legal and financial responsibility for this mess. My sitting in lock-up at the local gendarmerie is not going to compensate anyone.

Already lacking religion, the composure of the stupefied soul is easily shattered with the slamming of a door. You can hold his hand since the lights are still on. You can plead with her to let you in. But no one will be home. The stupefied soul makes or breaks it in solitude, for a time remains equal to post-meaningful experience; the overdose flees the mortal coil in the ancient, if tragic, tradition.

I know damn well this outfit's uninsured, it's just their style, but if I buy him some time Jesse Sr. can no doubt fix that. Since the kids' well-being is in the balance he'll also come through with my backpay. All I'll need is my one phone call. And to catch these twits before they've found the autoroute to Calais and the first ferry back across the channel to motherland and Dada's protection. The cops will just have to appreciate my compromised situation. Up the road the kids are completing their three point get-away turn. I duck out of the cross-fire of conversations, catch up to the dump-truck in time to grab hold of the tailgate. "Gazho si dilo!" I can guess now what that means. Hands and knees burning atop a load of steaming asphalt, no real clue where we're headed, a cold light rain and night falling as the truck gathers speed. Gazho si dilo: The non-Gypsy is a fool.

* * * end * * *

The Festive Wound

#2

El Quemado

or

El Cerro de Adoración

or

Divination Through the Entrails

or

The Inverted Panopticon of Meditation

or

Of Straw Men and Dung Heaps: The Molten Core

or

The Past Will Not Always Make Room For the Future

EL QUEMADO

Slumped against the cell wall I occupied myself by frowning, and then unfrowning, my brow. Sensing the hundred little muscular pressures mount and concentrate themselves between my eyebrows was a minor indulgence. Encouraging them gradually to desist and dissipate represented remarkable achievement. Occasionally I arched my eyebrows high in mock delight, but this required a considerable amount of energy; the simple flex and release of frowning was more gratifying. From time to time I'd remind myself that I was in jail, a prisoner, and that normally this occurred against one's will. The police at San Cristobal de las Casas were holding me for vagrancy. Scraps of the jailers' dialogue did not escape me but I overheard them without interest. ...desposeimiento... deportación muy dura... un loco, no hay nada... Mosquitoes fed unhindered on my naked arms and torso while I searched myself for reasonable cause, for signs of distress.

I came to Mexico for justice, I thought. I thought, that is, to do myself justice. Fishing among reflections in the unsettling denouement of my trip I came upon the summer my father died at forty-eight years of age. I turned eighteen, lost my first serious girlfriend, got busted out of highschool and thrown in jail for selling pot. Something had gone very wrong in my life. From that point on I was less the reckless investor, no longer the free-wheeling dealer. I defined myself as easily pleased, glad to get by, maybe get high. When over the years the boozing grew boring, and even sex began losing its redemptive thrill, I fell prey to delusions of a life too barren to bear.

Boarding a jet for Mexico I'd imagined myself on my way to work, work on myself, a job I'd only tackled fleetingly over the years. So long unemployed I felt woefully underqualified but no one was screening the applicants. Getting to work on time was all I could worry about for the moment. The moon waxed full in four short days. This is the story of what

happened on my way to work. Or perhaps just what happened to me. Either way it is also a ghost story, full of illusions and disillusion, solutions and dissolution.

ARRIVALS: Puerto Vallarta, Mexico City, Huautla?

Despacho de Aduanas. Customs Clearance, Aeropuerto Puerto Vallarta, Republica Mexicana. After which I know nothing of what will take place. I know for a time I must die to this world, long enough for necessary repairs. Long enough to get over this self-loathing. Long enough to re-learn, even the least bit, a language without violence, a medium harmonious as it is manifold, through which what's essential might be embodied.

Finding the 2-peso local bus route into town from the airport is a trick, but my humble, if bumbling, attempts with the language are well enough received. Arriving via cheap charter flight has saved me a couple hundred bucks. The bus for Mex City costs next to nothing; it's an overnighter leaving at five this afternoon. I store my bag at a tiny bus depot and find my way to the beach and a frisking Pacific ocean.

All the poised and posing beautiful bodies have me checking for cameras and a film crew but I settle into the mood as best I'm able. Everyone on the beach looks between fifteen and twenty years old. A couple, conspicuous in their mid-thirties, join one of several queues to go up in the para-sails. For fifteen minutes each, the airborne vacationers polka-dot the sky with their hard-won abandon. The bodies left below lie oiled and strewn over the sand, lounge in liquor huts, a few brave a brief encounter with the ocean's fringe.

From my post at the southern extremity of the beach I watch some local boys play soccer. Occasionally one breaks rank to pursue a passing local girl. Various suave or gymnastic displays of courtship ensue. The game continues uninterrupted with each side temporarily losing a player from time to time. Meanwhile I re-read Doctors Leary, Alpert, and Metzner as they re-read the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The mechanics of ecstasy, and how to get over it once you get into it. I first read the book twenty years ago between

games of football and seduction in our neighborhood park. It's a seriously abridged interpretation, compromised even. But it's also a serious bridge interpretation, making the ancient, eastern, and esoteric accessible to the contemporary western reader. "Turn off your mind, relax, and float downstream." The Beatles were quoting Leary quoting the 'Book of the Dead'. I nod off a while and dream I'm a heartless teenage Romeo rubbing fenders at the \$2 Squeaky-Kleen. It was either this or Community Service. My brown stomach is a glistening washboard. The sun beats down on a city of angels, pretty girl-boys who smile and walk by.

My twelve-hour bus ride to Mex City amounts to a comfortable enough, air-conditioned contemplation. I attempt to track my warped notion of self-discipline. "Chest out, stomach in, shoulders back," "Always save the best for last," It goes a long way back. Shlock American films flicker on tiny screens suspended in the dark. Subtitled in Spanish, their soundtracks turned mercifully low, they are no distraction at all. Half-way through the night I've managed to reconcile felt-escapism with what I'm travelling toward. Fleeing Lisa-Anne on short notice is no real quandary; she'd already left me, what I fled was an archetype. My first wet dream might have been kissing the satin princess's toes. Discipline, Deprivation, Degradation... I picture myself imprisoned within the letter, U, a slippery slope that tilts at bottom and, defying psychic gravity, begins a new run uphill... Exaltation, Entitlement, Ecstasy. At bottom-dead-centre is sublimation, the matrix of a violent reflexive language. To sublimate is 'to be' in my soul's lexicon. Lisa-Anne is hardly to blame. What deity disdains a little heartfelt adoration? But then, what mortal won't tire of, and eventually reject it? And in rejecting it, only intensify a truly slavish sublimation, unwittingly become the labyrinth a lover morbidly loses himself within, the wailing wall he'll bloody himself against with an obsessed reverence. Self-discipline. I'll make a project of forsaking this fantasy.

Arriving at dawn in Estación Omnibus El Norte I'm still spry and determine to carry straight on through the additional eight hours of mostly mountain roads to Huautla. Aware of the existence of another similarly named town, and not trusting my pidgin Spanish, I opt to display to ticket

agents a map of the south of Mexico. The route from Mex City to Huautla I've highlighted in orange.

Ten hours later I've arrived. I take in the dusty splendour of a timeworn town, cupped in the mountains, rooftops aglow with late afternoon sunlight. Making my way through a bustling network of market stalls I ask directions from a selection of locals.

— Por favor... ¿Donde esta la calle El Fortin?

— No sé.

— Ah... ¿Conocez la casa de Maria Sabina?

— ¿Quien es?

Maria Sabina is the subject of everything from postcards to textbooks and documentary films. Practically singlehandedly she popularized shamanism from this part of the world receiving sundry Doors and Stones among other luminaries back in the '60s. She lived to the age of one hundred and twelve. Her memory is a hair's breadth from sainthood here in the state of Oaxaca. And I get: "Don't know," and "Who's that?" I'm convincing myself of a conspiracy when, hours of frustrated inquiry later, I spy, in a tobacconist's window, a faded map. Among the ranging mountains depicted in bruised purples and greens, the town of Huautla. No, not Huautla but Huehtla. Not the state of Oaxaca but Hidalgo. Not southwest but an equal distance northeast of Mex City, by road about twenty-four hours from where I want to be.

I sprint through darkening streets back to the tiny station where a fresh driver stands by the same bus I arrived on. It is packed and idling in the flourescent arc of the station's light. Buttoning his white collar the driver waves me non-committally toward his ticket-taker, who gives me officious-sounding directions to take a post in the aisle once my bag has been stowed. One swaying, nodding, exhausted hour out into the night hills and an old couple signal the driver, collect their bags and bundles, and disappear on an obscure stretch of the roadway. I slide into their vacated seats just as the road turns rough. During the eight hours jolting ride back to Mex City I imagine elaborate humiliations for braindead ticketsellers.

Back in the city at 5 a.m., in spite of my heated explanations, the smiling ticket agents at Omnibus El Norte don't see any difficulty with my situation. — Sí, sí, claro... my map is very explicit; for another eighty pesos a

ticket can be had for the very next bus to Huautla. My plane landed at seven a.m., not yesterday but the day before. I've been in the country almost forty-eight hours, twenty-eight of which have been spent on buses, and none of which have been spent getting any sleep. Not an auspicious start. I decide to look up Daniel and Jorge, friends of friends here in the city, rest up a while before pressing on.

MOUNTAINS: Huautla de Jiménez, Oaxaca

There's a whitewashed cross on the crest of the mountain. It's the last point from which you can still turn and look back on the pueblo, and far below, the town of Huautla. The campesinos' trail divides here and leads off into plantations on either side of the ridge. If you position yourself correctly the cross is perfectly framed in a saddle between two peaks, beyond which is pure atmosphere, the next solid ground a good thousand feet down. Fixed to the cross with a rusted wire hoop is the severed bottom half of a plastic Coke bottle. From the greenish water within juts a single fleshy white lily, thick yellow pistil lolling in its folds.

Yesterday, bright and early, our bus wheezed to a halt and parked on the steep grade leading up from the main road into Huautla. Blocks were set in behind the wheels and we disembarked. Not having slept much on the bus I was surprisingly refreshed, bouyant even, equally surprising given the two litres of agua purificada I'd imbibed since our midnight stop. I took my last meal with Daniel and Jorge three days ago in the city. We had a delicious paste concoction of chocolate and chili spread on fine flour tortillas. For dessert my hosts each drank a litre bottle of Corona. Booze and meat-eating, toxins and stimulants, all have been off my menu for the past forty days. My last sexual release was just as long ago. I haven't had a cigarette since New Year's Eve.

I don't know what the altitude is here but it is seriously beautiful mountain country. There are precipitous slopes covered a good way up in shimmering green blankets of sunlit maize. Coarse grey seams of volcanic

rock emerge from the foliage to crown the peaks. One of Jovita's sons shows me around the backsides of the mountain on which their pueblo is perched. We exchange rudimentary observations in each other's languages, climb the serpentine paths of moist red earth, nod in silent admiration of the views. Rai begins punctuating his banter with lusty refrains of "las muchachas this" and "las muchachas that". He's a twenty-three year old with his own family of five. What a cultural, psychological, gaping universe there is between us. I think of my own sex life. Often enough, making love feels like an imposition I should be apologizing for in advance. I choose a good spot to chill out and contemplate my arrival.

— *Muy bonito. Hasta luego, ¿okay?*

Restless hours later, having walked for miles barefoot, tranquil vistas come and gone, I'm finally at rest once more on this endless path. Arbitrarily deciding to stop here, hungrily drinking the last of my water, mopping sweat from my brow... the most invigorating thing occurs. Sudden clouds scud across neighboring ridges. Cool air rushes up and out from the ravine before me. How far have I come? The sun is curtailed. Air currents cool and caress, chill and chafe through the sloped fields around me. More substantial black and earthbound cloud encroaches. Is it rain? Yesterday, wearing brand new trekking boots, descending the merely moist little slope from Jovita's porch, I slipped and bounced downhill on my ass. Here, I'm barefoot under storm clouds, up red earth goatpaths, a full expedition from the pueblo. It's all so romantic; with a little imagination I could find misadventure, my improbable match made here in heaven.

I need three different colours. They've got to be fresh, fragrant, and beautiful. I pick them with my left hand only. All but the tiny clustered wildflowers are cultivated on someone or other's land, and "little flowers procure little favour" was among the advice with which I've come prepared. I decide I can thief the odd lily or rhododendron blossom from the borders of these folks' properties if necessary. Or I can ask politely in my broken Spanish. But purchasing the flowers is taboo. Most importantly I pick, carry, and present them all with the left hand only.

Given the pueblo's remote locale Jovita's place seems pretty well outfitted. For a start the walls are of cinder-block, versus the more common, and less substantial, adobe brick and rusty sheet-metal constructions. There's

a blender, an electric mill for the maize, and a small black and white TV, all in evidence from my seat here before the altar. Jovita is a healer, a Mazateca Indian, a curandera. I am here for a purification rite, the necessary prelude to my meeting the shaman. My three-day fast is complete and the solstice moon is waxing full. As we begin I am silently imploring Jovita to maybe fix up my aching neck and back while we're at it. She blesses and burns some copal, a resinous incense from a local tree. With a greenish compound of herbs she rubs the shape of crosses into the skin on my forehead, forearms, neck, back and chest, all the while reciting mellifluous prayers.

I sit motionless for an hour facing a candle-lit image of the Virgin, and another of San Martin, El Caballero: the Saint on his handsome steed tears a swathe from his robe to protect an aged and naked beggar at the roadside... the surrounding hills recede infinitely... paths are lost and reappear in their folds... the pastoral setting, the velvet air of twilight.... Jovita taps me on a rather stiff shoulder and invites me to recline. The candle light picks out the silver crowns on her teeth, the silver grey in her hair, and a compassionate glint in her eye. Her little pantomime for sleeping is a blessing in itself.

That night around the curandera's cabin the pariah dogs prowl incessantly from dusk until dawn. They howl inconsolably at my arrival as if warning of danger, as if challenging my rite of passage, as if claiming me for their own. The rain thunders onto the iron roof, the doors and shutters are all but sucked from their casements, the solstice moon somewhere up beyond the tumult exerts its pull, that something inscrutable which keeps everything together. Sweating under the coarse woolen blanket pulled over my head against the storm, my fevered racing mind strains delirious, presently is absent in awe of the onslaught. The unimaginable I recollect like well-worn souvenirs. An incantation is forced from my lips. From a void to a void, caught wavering in a portal. Massed with energy, light of paradox, the weight of several worlds. An ancestral parade of newly flowering, fast-expiring humanity files down the millennia. Dark of spells etched in adobe, blood of berry-smearred pregnant cave walls. A stampede of elemental forces. All is feed to a hunger, wordless benediction over freshly vanquished prey....

With a start I recollect myself. The rain has stopped. The dogs are silent. But they'll start up again. There, already the low growling prelude to more baying. I throw off blankets and lurch to my feet, steady myself naked in the dark, assimilate the heady atmosphere, breathe and concentrate. Eyes

closed, I feel for each individual animal's presence on the other side of these walls. I'm drawn this direction and that, muscle and tendon articulating what I learn from the air, from the beaten earth floor, ephemera written as if upon rice paper. All this, an effort to placate these lives I've troubled, to avoid renewing the howls of protest. At every instant I feel their suspicion allayed a little further. They grudgingly acknowledge my sympathetic energy, my benign if alien presence.

Ideally I'm to avoid all eye contact with others and, in the wake of the ritual, take this day to myself to absorb my experience. I've come here like a child, curious and innocent to the ways of another world. I've no delusions about this. My aspirations are limited to advancing a modest step along a still-obscure path, apprehend some clue as to what's drained me. I have learned that if I don't ask questions I have only myself to blame. Why, for example, can I no longer make love without a roadmap, cerebral and fantasied? What has happened to the magical taste and scent of skin? No longer smooth as baby's bottom, no more transparent vellum. When were we stuffed into these crude paper envelopes? Each night for a week, half my life ago, in the back of a pick-up truck strewn with hay and smelling of dog, I struggled to lose my virginity. Could it have been that long ago?

* *

High above the town of Huautla sits a modern hospital compound, the only one within hundreds of mountainous square miles. Higher still, on the mountain's shoulder, a tin and tarpaper shack, before which I stand awkwardly, holding out my tri-coloured bouquet of local flowers, attempting to communicate my respect and pleasure at this meeting. A villager I've met along the way tells the aged shaman of my wishes, relates my having made the preparatory visit to the healer. Apolonia, daughter of Maria Sabina, listens patiently, turns occasionally to regard me, flowers still in hand. Her waist-length braids, coursing with silver, frame a warm but inscrutable face, folded and brown above the sky blue, pink and white of her traditional huipil smock. She asks me something in rapid Mazatec, shaking her head in advance dismay at my inability to reply. I hand her instead photographs of friends whom she should recognize. Her eyes glint with interest, the ancient

lines reconfigure around her mouth. But she bends to gather a tattered guinea hen from the dust as it passes her skirts. She hands the photographs on to the translator without comment and inspects the hen's scarred and calloused, sparsely plumed head. I disgorge a series of gifts from my daybag. There are kid-sized Nike sweatpants and a cotton floral print dress.

— Para Felipe, I suggest, y para Soledad.

The eight and ten year-old charges of this ancient woman are nowhere to be seen. The ornate silver and sandstone brooch I give her she drops nonchalantly into the folds of her smock. She turns to the translator and, squinting, refers back to one of the photos. I get a look at which one she's chosen.

— Dominique. Ésta es mi amiga, Dominique.

As I peer over her shoulder the aged and diminutive woman looks up from the photo into my face. Hers are the eyes of an amused and teasing child. They are also repositories of an immemorial wisdom.

— Dominga! she corrects me, Ha!

Finally taking the flowers from my hand, she swats me across the face and shoulders with them, brushes them along the lengths of my legs and arms. Nodding to herself, Apolonia, daughter of Maria Sabina, withdraws into her shack. The villager smiles at an apparent success and takes his leave. I stand under the sun in the scorched earth yard, absently look about for a seat.

Eventually the shaman pokes her head out the half-open door to her shack. Taking in my dumb immobility she makes an impatient gesture toward one end of the village.

— Felipe, Soledad, Escuela.

I begin stuttering a reply, then pantomime for more information. She is nodding, unconcerned, shooing me off with fluttering hands.

Shrieks of excitement and gawking disbelief welcome me from the play area about the school house. I'm not looking forward to confronting a school-teacher with my inarticulate request, but my apprehensions are for nought; the teacher is unperturbed. In transports of excitement, the assembled student population of about thirty prolong their raucous reception until the kids and I are out of sight of the schoolyard. Apolonia's grandchildren are too embarrassed to look me in the eye. I follow them from a distance as they hurry, whispering excitedly, back up towards their home.

Half-dozing, having settled in, I wake of a sudden. Apolonia stands in the doorway to my hut, smiling and surveying the room, my improvised vases of flowers. She frowns, however, when observing the bare lightbulb which I have drawn by its cord off to one side from the room's centre. She wishes it repositioned and hovers in the doorway, impatient as a big-city interior decorator, while I execute the detailing. I jog barefoot across the damp, beaten earth floor. At first contact with the primitive fixture I am fused to it, half-dancing, half-dangling from it, taking whatever voltage they have up here straight down my right arm. It triggers an adrenaline rush and sets up a cyclonic effect in my heart and lungs, passes on, an unbroken current, through my vibrating hips and legs into the earth floor. Ten or fifteen seconds later I'm arcing precipitously to land spasmed, panting and wide-eyed, on the ground beneath the shaman's interested gaze. The curiosity in her old eyes gives way to unrestrained amusement. My groans do not distress her. She seems to have divined the subtle meaning within my misfortune. My inability to speak or rise, the burns on my hand, all merely corroborate some obscurely humorous suspicion. Eventually I pick myself up and succumb to her infectious amusement, laugh though my arm is killing me, understand somehow my life was never in danger.

Dearest Darling Lisa-Anne,

36 years and still climbing... How I wish you could be (high) here in Oaxacan mountains with me. How's the new book coming? Mine's fine, I'll start it some day. "I park my pack by the shaman's door, prop myself up in a sliver of shade under the rusted shack's eaves..."

How I love life! just expending energy, putting back in and soaking it up again, a new tank of gas for the old machine, the oldest ancient craft for space beyond and beside time and the word, space beyond and time beside the point, the Word.

Living in the home of 100 yr-old daughter shaman successor to Maria Sabina gone to spirit in 1984. Myself and many other animals living joyful fretting dogs and goats, cocks and turkeys, a burrow, no pigs. Derrumbes every third day here determined to blast out psychic detritus, find myself a real job, consort to our Mother Goddess.

*Back to school in September. (Oh no! the 2nd Degree!)
For now fasting sweating tripping, long walks on
mountain air very thin, all most blessed, words flowing
and good once more to eat a thousand years. Look what i
found! Humility, Beneficence, Honesty, (of which more
later.)*

Hope U are in loving bliss. Words again when...

Unconvinced of my enthusiasm I come down to the town to post my letter, acquire some ritual ingredients, do my groceries for the week. I come down in a rush to get back up before the town's distractions break the mountain's spell. I've made a list to keep me moving:

- cambio, el banco: diez horas y media
- Rituals: - 4 oranges, chocolate, tobacco, velas, copal
- Carlos para hongos, (necesita 'derrumbes')
- compose wishes
- flowers en route back up
- For the Family: - pollo frijo, and pan dulce
- chiles in vinegar for the kids

By the time I've completed half my itinerary it's siesta time. I take a seat in the square. I look at these drunkards, not perfectamente borracho, reeling festively from cantina to quaint cantina, but sad and degraded, wearing dust and sputum for coats. I look at the screeching quetzals depicted on the wrought-iron bench backs. The real ones flap heavily, branch to branch, over my head, long tail feathers drooping from each perch or straightening green and vermilion in flight. What's wrought-iron to my repose here is flimsy currency in neighboring Guatemala. The idle thoughts enchain. How many Quetzals to the Peso? To make a buck from either, am I crossing a line? a border? I've got a small wad of cash that could easily grow during this trip; this is plan B. I have to keep things in perspective. It's just plain culturally inappropriate for me to go renouncing the world in a single bound. When I've done a little work on my spiritual self I'll still have to take care of business. I'd love nothing better than to forgo the rat race, but the monkish type I'm not. I proved this to myself ten years ago in India; ashrams and the Himalayas only held me passive for the briefest of spells; I ended up

shipping the fruits of my contemplations back to North America, trunks full of silks and jewelry for re-sale.

The sun disappears behind clouds and swaying fronds. The heat releases its grip on my lungs. I lever myself upright. The bench's baroque iron contours are impressed upon my spine. I cross the square with an achey stride toward the slumbering post-office. Still an hour to go. Why wouldn't I bring a watch? Or one of those little fold-away alarm clocks. Here we go again. The past will not always make room for the future. Never mind the time. It's always running out, anyway. In a week, a year, a day... 'Now is most of the time' ...and it's always running out.

Huautla de Jiménez
junio, 1997

Dear Brother,

Sorry about the coming and going in such a hurry, no goodbyes n' all. Hope B. and the kids weren't too mystified. I was kind of running, terrorized by this woman I'd been seeing. Terrorized, that is, by my own enduring capacity for mindless devotion. I'm down here convinced I need a swift kick in the psychic pants. If that sounds a tad flaky and self-indulgent to you — and I know it does — take my solemn word for it: this is not going to be a picnic. Why am I once again stricken by the need to make things right with the universe? Well, for quite a while I've felt pretty frustrated just accomplishing the wholesome little things that make up a life. You know, work, love, sex, feeling nice and guilt-free once in a while. A bodily well-being complemented by emotional, intellectual, and spiritual fitness, that's all I'm after. So, what, am I impotent? have I got cancer or something? Well, not altogether, but a bout of unrequited love is proving almost as chronic. Okay, it's no longer love, but a type of viral disquietude has infected my life. It regularly breaks out on the surface of my mind. When I do succeed in suppressing it, it penetrates to the heart. I don't know what to do with myself and I haven't made love in months. Sex isn't the measure of a life's sufficiency? I'd like to know of a better one. There, now, you see why I'm down here? I'll see you again when I've regained my sanity. You can help by imagining me a happy and productive individual, you can...

I give up on the post-office, give up on sending letters. In the ramshackle barrio de los bajos fondos I locate Florencia, a dealer. She presides over a cluster of rooms for rent and mothers a brood of six or seven. Florencia dispatches her eldest on my errand. I recognize some Latino teens who were busking in town. I wait patiently and smile at them as they slip in and out of one of the rooms. In full sixties regalia, they're likely doing 'the circuit', hitting the highs along a hybrid pilgrimage route patched together here by hippies thirty years ago.

Even if I could locate and identify the appropriate hongos myself it is prescribed that, to be used in ceremonies, they must be harvested by the hands of one who comes from the land. I wait for Florencia's son, Carlos, and Carlos runs a very slow errand.

— Carlos, *El Rey de España*, I am enlightened upon his eventual return.

— Carlos Quinté, I counter, referring to the terrifically popular little chocolate bars here, the smiling mustachioed monarch on their wrappers. I get a laugh out of him at that and we set about establishing our credentials.

— *Tu eres mi hermano*, Carlos concludes. Hearing which I understand Florencia has moved him up from errands to handling me as a customer. Eventually I'm presented with a foot-long specimen with twisting stem, dirt-clotted bulb, and fleshy tan cap.

— *Derrumbe! muy bueno. Fresco, muy, muy fresco.* Mother and son extoll the virtue of their wares, parroting precisely the qualities I've insisted upon. The hongos are displayed on a dozen banana leaves spread out before me. Most of the clusters include numerous tiny brown conicals, but I can't say for certain there's anything wrong in that. They're swaddled back into their sweaty leaf packets. The bargaining is hard; they start much higher than I expect. I point out we're in the height of the rainy season when hongos are most plentiful. Carlos feigns mortal wounds at my counter-offer. Her son, Florencia says, must walk for twelve hours into the mountains to find them. I strongly doubt this yet settle by paying closer to their asking price than I'd like.

The disused vehicle of my gringo spirit apparently requires much more fuel than that of the averagely proficient Indígena; my doce viajes, or twelve

'trips', are meant to provide for a single ceremony. I fondle my purchase with the same adolescent pleasure I recall on buying my first bit of weed, but remind myself that this acquisition is distinguished by spiritual intent. Reflecting on the missionary zeal of my blissed-out youth I wonder what's really changed after all this time. It's a tad unsettling that my present mode of work-on-self still happens to involve ingesting copious quantities of a psychotropic. Accompanied by the not-easily-dismissed ghost of this reservation I set out to re-climb the hour's worth of steepening paths to Apolonia's croft above the town. I must tuck my hongos, bundled into a small loaf, under my left armpit for transport, this further complicating my left-handed picking of flowers along the way.

When I return, the dark of the shack is attenuated by the flames of five candles. I offer flowers, spread the rest of my booty on the floor before the shaman, and resume my seat on the tiny primitive stool at her side. Apo is delighted by the groceries but unimpressed with my little loaf of hongos. She waves some curious neighbors in from where they've gathered to look on in the doorway. They all peruse the hongos, for the most part shaking their heads and clucking disapprovingly. Apparently I have twelve doses of primarily Majaretas, or 'crazies', and only some token Derrumbes, or the 'earthquakes' I required. Apolonia sighs as she cleans the bulbs of debris and, following some obscure design, portions out the rest onto three or four of the unfolded leaves. The family's food-gifts are put aside. Tobacco, chocolate and alcohol are added to the array of ritual ingredients. Apolonia takes herbs and copal, caresses my arms, face, neck and chest with them.

- ¿Como te llamas?

Her sing-song accent mocks a solemnity in the Spanish language. I nearly miss the question. The three words have the ring of a benevolent concession, a minor revelation wrapped within. Among other potential miracles a shaman creates a world in words. I bend near to her ear and enunciate my reply. My name recurs within her litany, her lilting incanted commentary. I also begin to make out the occasional antique Spanish or Latin phrase, ecclesiastical islets in the stream of her native oration.

In interims she carries on conversation with various members of the household from our place on the earth floor before the altar. An old segment of iron beam, pitted with rust and covered with wax from countless candles,

sits on the floor flanked by images, icons, flowers and sundry less-identifiable items presumably essential to the performance of rituals. I'm handed copal to place in a chipped and blackened brazier. I follow her example and play the flame of a candle stub over the porous coral-like substance until it begins to liquefy and the surface catches alight. The flame grows and a resinous black fume curls from its tip. The scent is vaguely menthol, a heady balm. I hand over two more velas, the ceremonial candles, and Apolonia 'reads' while brushing them over me. What does she see? Her reading is articulate and meaningfully inflected, unlike the muttered prayer and incantations that accompany each phase of the ritual thus far, all these uttered in Mazatec, tones reminiscent of south-east Asia, a mystery to me. Neither Felipe nor Soledad are in the mood for translation tonight. I've perhaps not plied them adequately with their favorites: chiles-in-vinegar and refrescos. Eventually the new candles are lit and placed, one by one, on the altar. The flame dies on the little pool of copal and a dense plume of white smoke roils up from the brazier.

Hongos sprang up wherever Christ's tears fell, and in his footprints as he crossed the Sierra Mazateca. My share of this manna passes three times counterclockwise through the billowing incense before I'm instructed to eat. This time my rush-mat is rolled out immediately before the altar. The rest of the family do likewise, flanking my pallet with their own. I realize it is dark out and that two or three hours have passed. With a grave expression, Apolonia gestures for me to roll over, reminding me I must lie with my back to her. This was the first thing I was told after expressing interest in the rituals, followed by the cryptic, "Always be sex-to-sex with Apo." Personal advice and instructions, researched accounts and the anecdotal, still I feel woefully ill-prepared. Nonetheless, I settle down semi-prone, an empty cup within arm's reach, easily to be found in the dark. To the sleeping sounds of shaman and family I nearly drift off myself before noting the dreams that have come before sleep....

Late this afternoon, preparing myself for the ritual, I wrote a fervent wish on a scrap of paper. Between the stalks of maize growing nearby on the slope of Apolonia's property I dug a shallow hole. A sharp stone served as a spade, and the red clay earth, moist with recent rains, parted easily. I placed

the note within, refilled the hole, and urinated over top it. Mingled sun and vapor couched upon the town of Huautla visible in the distance below. The rays that reached our croft lit upon the thousand shining leaves of the maize around me. I crouched, transfixed by the dazzling green sea of light, until a pair of wild turkeys came noisily foraging past. Clucking, gargling, and ruffling its feathers, the female hesitated long enough to regard me where I stooped. Having plucked a not-so-nourishing strand of loose yarn from my sweater, it carried on along followed by its mate. The tinny strains of a melancholy mariachi ballad wafted up from the town, faltered a moment later, and were replaced by an equally ephemeral snatch of Lennon and McCartney. Cocks crowed to one another from three points in the near distance and the sun set abruptly behind the bank of cloud caked on the horizon.

... All my life I've wronged the ones I love. Looking back I see nothing but hurts and the harm I've done. Insensitivity and self-interest have characterized my entire being. The realization has me weeping, weeping inconsolably in a dark exile light-years from home. Apo's voice enters my consciousness. She is sleeping, and I am 'dreaming', still her voice reaches me, equal parts compassion and remonstrance. — Repenti. Repenti... I don't understand. — Repenti. Gradually I am exposed. A tenacious mantle, worn my life long, peels away from my heart. The sensation leaves me in a fearful ecstasy of surrender. And I am sorry. Possibly for the first time in my entire life I am truly sorry. My God, of course! I'm so very, very sorry. Instantly I'm consoled. The beauty and simplicity of the answer brings me to new and more joyful tears. I beseech Apolonia. I invoke her mother, Maria Sabina, call on Christ and conjure the perfect void nature of Buddha. A final thought on a beautiful friend's love and I embark on a meditation the like I've never known. All things holy to me invoked, I undertake my ego's annihilation with the most benevolent intent imaginable.

Eventually Mother Nature intervenes. An enormous thunderclap tears my concentration from the task at hand. The ensuing deluge triggers an obscure complaint in my guts which fast becomes an urgent menace. There's a metaphor in my impending diarrhoea. I can't help this irreverence. My bowels quiver, the body revolts at this my idea of transcendence. I've got to find my way to the outhouse, and fast.

I locate the empty plastic cup beside my pallet and urinate into it, feel it fill just to the brim. I take a breath and steel myself before guzzling its bitter, saline contents. The urge to retch is brief and easily mastered. I breathe a feral air. A thick down grows over the surfaces inside my mouth. I concentrate on venerating the fleeting magic of these mushrooms I've ingested. With the next tickle in my bowels I rush to clothe myself, all the while reciting inwardly a litanous apologia. I implore the shaman and her family to forgive my coming here so frivolously, for having to abandon the ritual site in haste and prematurely.

When I've folded my blanket and rolled up the rush mat, I stand munching the token mouthful of food I must ingest before leaving. I'm dreading having to prise open the primitive corrugated steel door since it scrapes and screeches so loudly. As if upon cue, Apo rises nonchalantly from her slumber. She clicks on the electric light. A formidable barricade has been constructed against my exit, or against the arrival of anything untoward, I can't tell which. In either case, the minor dilemma I faced in opening the noisy steel door was nothing compared with this scrum of chair legs, benches and broomsticks, all to be encountered blindly fumbling in the dark. I smile my gratitude deeply into Apo's eyes and go through a rapid pantomime suggesting my urgency. She smiles her understanding, sanctions my flight, and we disassemble the barricade.

And what a flight it is. Outside the hut, through the yard, and up the slope of maize I scramble through a jungle blur of coloured black night air and damp earth odours. There are crossed swords and bayonets in the maze of coarse, bent corn stalks. Cocks crow absurd midnight alarms, hounds yawl painful attempts at a human language. A howl of reply catches in my throat. The mud runs in rivers, rain splashes up from the hillside and back down from the sky. Reaching the outhouse, soaked and mud-slick, bowel and bladder barely intact, I could cry from relief. I've made it. I've an Olympian sense of accomplishment in this. Until now sensory deprivation and spiritual context have kept my ritual focused in a meditative groove. But I've been incredibly high all the while; the gauntlet I've just run, were it not for some enhanced motor skills, might have defeated me utterly.

Back in the yard before the shaman's hut I do cry. I cry for gratitude, and for the general intensity of the night, the majestically waning solstice moon revealed anew in the storm's wake, for the bronzed and Byzantine

beauty of Apolonia's face. She reads my expression and turns contented to regard the misty cluster of lights in the town far below. They say that music and love are universal languages. Well, hongos are another. Apo speaks no Spanish, much less any English, yet her messages come loud and clear. For that matter it won't surprise me to find I reply in fluent Mazatec.

* * *

Though it's been three weeks, and I feel like I've given it my very best shot, I'm not sure I've gained much purchase on the slippery slopes that brought me here. It is exceedingly difficult leaving Apolonia.

— Necesita más ceremonias.

But I've completed my prescribed series of five rituals, each followed by a day's rest and two days' fasting in preparation for the next. They were all interrupted by diarrhoea. This seems a trivial detail, yet remaining on the ritual site means remaining in the ritual state. Then there was the translation factor; the kids were infrequently forthcoming. I've needed to trust but insist on understanding. I've come as far as I feel I can, perhaps bitten off more than I can chew, so to speak. I thought I understood that quitting the process after an even number of ceremonies was taboo. I thought I understood that a seventh ceremony is reserved for procreative purposes. I think I thought I understood. I understand I only thought.

— Necesita más ceremonias. Spiritus no sanctus, necesita más ceremonias...

The seeming genuine urgency in Apo's struggling Spanish moves me. Brooding, I begin smoking again. I'm utterly stymied; I can make no bridges between my experiences. Yet for three weeks I've followed every nudge, cue and instruction to the letter. I am impatient, feel it's time I exercised my own judgement. The sense of balance and purpose I've sought will come. I've stirred up the pot of my psychic afflictions. Now it's time to let them settle. I can't divine an inner order and just rearrange the pieces. With any luck I'll recognize what's good as it comes to the surface. Now, how the hell do I explain all this to Apo? If she's reading my mind I won't have to. In the end I don't. I lie about having a sick friend in Mex City, maybe I can come back before long. I ply her with extra money and take my leave the next morning.

On the bus back to the capitol I indulge Oscar and Orlando in their penchant for pop anthems of the '60s and '70s. At their insistence, as the miles tick past, I've led them wailing through acapella versions of everything from Santana's, *Oyé Como Va* to *The House of the Rising Sun*. Now they pore over my pocket Spanish-English dictionary with often amazed expressions. I'm not surprised; dictionary, is a little generous as terms for this type of book go. Let's just say they'll be all set if ever they need an extra pillow for their sleeper on a train that rolls mainly on the plains in Spain. These guys are working class Mex City heavy metal fans; both wear the standard issue Los Jaguars rock t-shirts, black and oversize with lurid graphics reaching to the knees. Their trip to the mountains here is the furthest either has ever been from their homes.

My dictionary's, 'Useful Phrases', proved dubious but the section entitled, 'Manners of Consonantal Articulation', ranks right up there with, "I Spy" for travellers' pass-times. We experiment with the plosive and nasal, with the roll (simple), and with the roll (multiple). Each provides us a few minutes worth of good cheap entertainment. 'Placement of Articulations', however, is another story; we know where lips give way to teeth but when it comes to the alveolar giving way to the palato-alveolar, in turn giving way to the palatal and finally the velar, I can only guess that we're headed down the gullet. I'm more taken with the Spaniard's useful additions of the *gatural* and *semivocal*. Oscar and Orlando revel in providing robust examples.

The bus winds down final switchbacks out of the mountains and onto the arid central plain. Minutes later we're stopped on the outskirts of the first town in our path and a stifling heat suffuses the bus. Diapers ripen and infant howls arise almost instantly. The bus's brake linings have burnt away during our long descent and the hubs are now seized up solid. We'll have to wait for other buses headed toward the capitol to share our load of passengers. The aisle is cluttered with luggage and refuse and children scrambling over children slumped in poses more suggestive of slaughter than sleep. I follow O. & O.'s example and snake through our window, head and shoulders first. I lose a little loose change in the transaction but my new buddies keep me from kissing the dust.

We smoke cigarettes while watching the unconvincing show of mechanics the driver and his assistants carry on around one of the rear wheels. I spring for some beers and we sit at a card table in the shade outside a rickety roadhouse. Oscar shows me his army card, at first proudly, then sadly when he must admit he's no longer in service. He shows me a bullet wound a drunken army amigo has put in his shoulder.

— ¿Amigo?

— Sí, sí, és un camarada maravilloso.

They want to know if I carry a gun in Canada. I tell them I'm glad never to have to. They look me over with doubtful expressions. Sensing a cultural divide too precarious to bridge in debate I jokingly flex a bicep, which they regard in earnest appraisal. Encouraged, I swiftly adopt a karate stance remembered from childhood and squint in a calculating attitude. This genuinely impresses them. I launch a fancy spinning reverse roundhouse kick, the seeming authenticity of which surprises no one more than me. The sum effect provokes salutes of, "Caballero!" and, "Duro! Fiero!" My coup de grâce, though, arrives when we get onto the topic of motorcycles and they hear I've owned a Harley. Orlando is nodding along with my description, his sparsely whiskered jaw gone slack, brows lightly knit with beatitude. I have a fleeting sensation I can only describe as dictator's delusion, the persuasive power of the paper tiger, a license to whimsical rewrites. Oscar elbows Orlando in the ribs for sorry negligence and I'm exhorted to join them for a night out in Mex City.

— Tequila, muchachas, cocaína... todos por El Fiero!

A scrawny pariah dog skulks in beneath our table. My new friends explode in vicious indignation, kicking like a pair of cartoon kangaroos. "You're bigger than that," is the one remonstrance I recall responding to as a child. The pleasure of pelting snowballs at my beloved dog, Bimbo, instantly evaporated. I felt such a hot shame I laid off abusing her for good.

A few years later I couldn't condemn a Doberman that lunched on the end of my nose. The dog's owner handed me the rifle herself. In the back of her pick-up, when the monster bounded in, I'd only reluctantly relinquished Bella's tongue. I figured it would humour the owner to play with her pet. Apparently I bit Borax first. It was simple tit for tat after that. I was inebriated with an enduring case of the hots for Bella, who was two inches taller, four years older, and six times as sexy as any woman I'd ever been near. For the

next week it was under Bella's patient and determined care that my mangled nose healed and I approached 'manhood'. By the end of the week patience was no longer an option. Bella wore spurs on her boots that night and I finally gave her a ride worthy of her efforts. My heart broke as my nose healed and Bella and Borax headed south in her truck.

THE CITY: Mexico, Distrito Federale

The Avenida Santa Lucia runs from one edge of downtown to Mex City's sprawling west end. From the end of the line at Metro Observatorio I take a two-peso pasearo ride through some rough-looking barrio, up a long stretch of Santa Lucia, and into Daniel and Jorge's neighborhood. Los Colinas Del Sur is a hilly, verging suburban, upper-middle class tumble of architects' building blocks. The fashionable cubes are done up in earth-tones or subdued pastel shades of stucco. Their shuttered and tinted windows look over manicured postage-stamps of lawn. Rowdy German Shepherds and Rottweilers are posted on the requisite pads of concrete for parking inside tall rolling iron gates. 3210 Calzada de los Corceles: my privileged coordinates in a city of twenty-six million.

Jorge, as gracious as a man sick in bed can be, is still more than a little un-nerving. During the three weeks I've spent with Apolonia in the mountains Jorge has contracted hepatitis. Hearing this I feel a little sick myself. My trumped-up excuse for flying the shaman's coop: a friend, I said, was gravely ill in the city.

— Yo necesito regresar, és muy importante.

I'm encouraged to stay as long as I like. I consider the relative wisdom in seeking other digs, but decide the least I can do is to keep Jorge company, bring him the odd thing from downstairs, make myself generally useful.

Daniel is doing doctoral work at the nearby Universidad Iberoamericana. This first night, Jorge dozing upstairs, his TV muttering away at low volume, Daniel and I discuss the Will. Not Jorge's, and not J.J. Rousseau's, but a contemporary, theoretical will, subject of Daniel's

dissertation, something to do with the will's role in children's education. Behind all the jargon I have trouble making out more than two pedagogic models: imposition of, vs. bending of, the rules. A single term sticks in my mind. Psychosynthesis: formation or reconstruction of the personality around a new centre. I compare it with the primitive form of psychotherapy I've just undergone in the mountains. My will took me as far as Apolonia's tarpaper shack in remotest Oaxaca then abruptly abandoned me, a tourist in Never-Never Land. Yet my education may have been profound. I've solely my intuition in this, but feel some inscrutable lesson ready to coalesce.

I camp on Daniel and Jorge's couch for the next three weeks. The cross-hatched shadows of potted palm fronds, and of the bars on the windows, tattoo my nights. Every morning the chill marble floor surprises me. The room is otherwise suffused in a warm glow borrowed from the sunsplashed tangerine condo opposite us. Under his quarantine Jorge rarely leaves his room with adjoining shower, sink and toilet. In the kitchen I prepare his breakfast first, take it up to him and chat while he eats. Back downstairs the whole area gets the first of its three daily cleansings with a dilution of carbolic.

Daniel and I cycle in to the university together. Some days I shelter in the library. Since long before I took to books I've cherished the sanctuary of libraries. At critical moments in my childhood I quit the risky business of 'shit-disturbing' and stole away to the obscurity of the municipal library. During adolescent winters, staying out of trouble or just staying out of the cold, that library remained my favoured refuge.

Daniel has also introduced me to the guys who supervise the weight room. The facility is roofed over with fibreglass, that cheap brittle wavy stuff, translucent not transparent, the kind which admits only the milkier grades of light. I sort through the racks, assemble a light arrangement of weights on a bar, and settle myself for some bench-presses. Lying on my back I stare up at the shadows of soot, twigs, leaves and other detritus gathered in the runnels of the fibreglass roof. I begin a slow, deliberate set of presses, and note with satisfaction the taut ache surging across my chest and shoulders. These muscles have been asleep for twenty years but the tonic feeling I remember well.

There are certain muscles that do not respond so agreeably under repeated exertion. In the aftermath of Bella, and rejected first love, I ruptured the tiny muscles surrounding the tearduct in my right eye. This was verified

for me by a surgeon. Five years before, unmasked in a scramble for the puck, my face was bisected by a skate. Glancing off the bridge of my nose, the blade separated the lower-lid from my right eye socket and delicately scored the top twenty or so layers of skin covering my cornea. I verified this myself, as there appeared a diagonal red slash across my vision. My surgeon stitched in a plastic tearduct, a stand-in for the severed original which would regenerate, never, however, quite perfectly. My subsequent and protracted grieving over Bella's departure should have served to strengthen my new duct. In fact the little valve simply gave out before it was ever really tested. It's rendered me tearful ever since; once primed, the saline drains away without reserve.

The knurled chrome sleeve of the barbell begins biting into my sweating palms, a pleasant and predictable pain. What was there in that second ceremony with Apolonia? At the outset she had me drink off three glasses of agua ardiente, crude alcohol I was assured would be good for my back. That purgatoried night I passed, wracked with pain the entire length of my spine, the cold earth unyielding beneath me. No revelations, not so much as a playful hallucination, the hongos I'd eaten might have been cardboard for all their effect. Eight hours I struggled with that excruciating and unflagging ache. So it was all about endurance. And assimilating adversity. The pain provoked memories, scenes flitting through my mind like minor arcana, tarot cards to the uninitiated, distorted reflections of that black teenage summer: Death dulling his scythe over dad's cancered corpse, the Fool's incarceration and eviction from high school, stigmata of the Lover's well-licked wounds, the Hanged Man bound and betrayed. Still assimilating the lessons, the past never quite giving place to the future. The ritual cup of urine at dawn, rife with the merits of my experience or not, was an exceedingly hard one to swallow.

Jorge has a thing for the English Romantics, and Byron in particular. I've been reading him Don Juan by installments, six or eight stanzas before he nods off, but tonight he wants the shorter lyrics. I bring him some tea which he sips between his day's final spoonfuls of crushed fruit. I give him, *She Walks In Beauty*, *When We Two Parted*, and, *So We'll Go No More A-Roving*, then turn out the light and take his cup and plate away to scour in carbolic.

Late in the night, the windows open to a cool breeze, I experience a sudden flood of anxiety. The tranquil air grows fraught with potential violence. A machete could slice through the bars on the window and into my skull at any moment. The life-stained beggar or borracho will heave up from his sprawl on the sidewalk the next time I pass him, divulge an automatic from his tattered t-shirt, and stitch bullets up my spine with a gangster's nonchalance. In a spasm I bite my tongue when the Pitbull next door starts up barking. I snatch up the first paper that comes to hand from a shelf above the sofa.

Dearest Darling Lisa-Anne,

Sorry (for myself) that you couldn't hear this before now. I really haven't known which way to jump over it. I've tried to make that break, fuck have I ever. But you answer to something so much a part of me, it's like trying to cut off an arm. All my life I've had this love/hate relationship with autonomy and authority. And, like it or not, you fell into the love category. And it only gets weirder: Smitten with your autonomy I embellish you with authority, over me. You're like some tribal fetish I've invested with supernatural powers.

Okay, so the point is, there's already someone in your life and I'll only embarrass us both until I get straight and weened off your charms. What's playful flirtation for you now means painful confusion for me. So, two or three months, no calls, no letters, okay? Time and space will help drive the wedge in. I'm not disappearing on you. I'm reappearing to myself. Honestly.

Wind at your back, sun in your heart...

I set pen aside, don't bother searching the condo for an envelope, curl myself into a foetal ball and concentrate on the sounds of traffic out on the avenue....

The sensation of possession is visceral. I feel hair, tooth, and claw form, the shape of my skull altering, a savage bloodlust coming over me. Beginning to soar, intoxicated, leaving my body to prowl, at terrific speed I cross and recross a grey-black pixelated plain, motionless but for the subtle

ringing frequencies of desiccated shrub and cactus, the crackle and buzz of latent energies. Then I smell it: a beating of tiny hearts, a blood-sweet tinge on the air. My new body, spine still stretching, ribcage distended tubular, riots with an ecstasy of hunger. Jaws first I plunge head, fore-legs and shoulders into a narrow opening in the earth....

The sum effect is terrifying. I wake convinced I'm in the midst of some sixth ritual with Apolonia, that this is a hell-vision conjured to confront me, some wrathful apparition imp-like separating itself from my ego. When fully awake I meditate, attempt to embrace the experience as my own, as issuing naturally from my subconscious, but a morbid shiver continues running through me. On the coffee table is Jorge's Byron where I discarded it earlier.

Morn came and went — and came, and brought no day,
And men forgot their passions in the dread
Of this their desolation; and all hearts
Were chill'd into a selfish prayer for light...

The next day, I determine, is my last in town. Nothing is taking. I'm so obviously far from where I need to be. I've got time and money but there's nothing for me here. Daniel and Jorge have been generous, our conversations gratifying, but in the end I feel no closer to them than to Oscar and Orlando, my wastrel buddies from the bus trip down here. I'm disturbed by an urge to call these guys up, score some cheap cocaine, have a party and see some of the seedier sites. Instead I wander the park outside the Plaza del Arte. It's a gorgeous bit of greenspace downtown. Expansive and symmetrical wedges of plush, unforbidden grass separate spokes of paths before they converge in a hub around the fountain at the park's centre. Life-size figures in bronze are posed without pedestals amid the trees. There are couples embracing everywhere. The loose canopy formed of the taller shadetrees admits only a measure of the setting sun's rays. They glance off the tall fountain's top as I approach and circle it, then choose a new angle from which to depart. Lovers' murmurs emanate from each of the dozen benches arranged around this quiet refuge from the city's traffic. There are no birds here. Not a single city-worker sweeping refuse. There's no refuse, no vendors selling bags of deep-fried pork rinds with chile, lemon and salt. An elegant couple in their sixties are necking with ardour on a bench as I pass.

There'll be an early snowstorm within two months of my returning home. I can't remember physical passion equal to melting a light frost.

DESERT: Catorce, San Luis Potosi

The bus tunnels through the centre of a mountain before pulling out into Real de Catorce, the modestly touristed ghost of a mining boom-town. The Real casinos, the Real hotels and restaurants, a desert mountain town laying motionless pinned beneath the mid-day sun. Everything is a powdery hue of pulverized mountain. Light and heat shimmer more fiercely from the ground than from the sun above. I stop long enough for agua. In fact I don't stop at all; I choose a roadside stall at random, snatch up a two-litre bottle, drop ten pesos on the counter and walk on between cobbled sidewalks and storefronts, not another soul moving in my field of vision.

At the town's far end, a stone church on a precipice and the first view of desert miles beyond and below: the palest of green seas bisected by a thin white line quivering out toward the horizon. The view is hidden and revealed with each turn I take following a rough trail over rock shelves and spills of small boulders. The trail clings to the mountainside above a deep and snaking chasm winding its way out to the desert. After an hour an ancient jeep comes along clambering laboriously over the rugged descent. I strike a deal with the driver and climb in beside his passenger, Coco.

Coco remembers the Real's glory days, and he can hustle in six languages to prove it. Delivering his monologue he competes with the jeep's whining low gear and the irregular percussion of its jolted chassis. Surveying the frozen Himalayan mountain pass, or sweltering on an African savannah without trace of habitation, Coco is never far off. If you're buying what he's selling — and don't forget, "Everything is possible here" — if you're buying, your basest privateer's urge will be gratified. From child prostitution to raiding lost arks, filthy lucre rules. I listen absently while Coco runs down prices for mescaline: low-grade brown at a hundred pesos the quarter key, four times that for the good fresh green. Once he's got the idea I could be interested I go after some information. Somewhere back in the folds of pink

rock hills he indicates, El Quemado: mojos and dream-catchers littering an inner circle, sentinal cacti in a dawn mist, the night's storms clearing behind me. But first the desert below.

Estación Catorce is a whistle-stop on the mainline about three hundred miles south of the frontier at Laredo. The rails cordon off Catorce and the desert from the foot of the mountain range running north-south. A single road crosses the tracks and disappears in the desert beyond. Dorotheo, sombrero tilted back, grins and shakes my hand. We walk across the tracks to his grandmother's homely guest house, where he offers me a large room with two neatly-made beds just off the reception. At the back of a warren of passages, courtyards and rooms, there's a gate to an outhouse, a desolate vegetable garden, barbed wire and the desert. I take the room nearest the gate. It is empty but for a sagging bedstead covered in a dubious patchwork of disintegrating cloth.

All but one of the other rooms are vacant. That room's iron grillwork door, like my own, is backed with a flimsy cotton shawl, through which it is nearly possible to make out the room's contents. I retrieve one of the gallon plastic jugs of rainwater arranged around the concrete reservoir in the central courtyard. At one edge of the garden out back lies a sun-bleached log of sufficient length and girth to serve as a bathing platform. I kick off my jeans and trekking boots at the shaded fringe of the garden, among dusty scraps of waste paper and plastic, dogs' turds and rusted tin cans. Perched on the log, my one-gallon birdbath just begun, I watch as a dark young Latina comes through the gate. From this distance across the yard I can make out the Los Jaguars t-shirt and a sunny, unembarrassed smile she probably picked up at Palenque or one of the other sunny dope-and-dance spots in the south. Not the first time she's seen a gringo in the buff at any rate. Under the mystic corona of a vast vegetable kingdom she'll make love with her boyfriend in the desert tomorrow. I'm towelled off and back into my lonesome boots before she can finish in the outhouse.

I've got three hours' walk out into the desert, two litres of agua to last day into night, and only one way to find out if it's all worthwhile. Maybe the rituals with Apolonia should have sufficed. But Huautla was a very female trip, the mushroom, the moon, the hundred year-old matriarch. This is my

self-styled ceremonial closure one lunar cycle later, the solo sun-soaked complement, my little male energy trial by fire. The road is a chalk-line, a dead-straight and silent continuum strung across the desert plain. There are no tire-tracks in the dust aggregate. No vehicle passes in either direction, no one on foot, not a beast of burden or bird in the air.

A little leery of cactus needles I wear my trekking boots and two pairs of denims in spite of the heat. My nylon anorak is tied around my waist; it makes a sibilant chafing sound as I walk. They say it will rain here in a brief fit, heavily, and without warning. The night will be cold, but approaching mid-day it's an expansive vacuum of heat. My chafing windcheater and the melodic slop of water in canteen mark my progress; my footfalls are all but inaudible.

I walk on for an hour or so past the point where telephone poles come to an arbitrary halt. Taking a good-luck swig from my canteen I abandon the road and begin checking in the thickets of mesquite and under the odd creosote bush for buttons. These scrawny little bushes, more branch than foliage, are scattered every twenty feet or so in all directions seemingly over the desert's entirety. The peyote buttons depicted on the cover of the *Psychedelics Encyclopaedia* resembled a cross between wooly green tea-cozies and warted grey amphibians. Piece of cake, couldn't miss them, I figured. Of course, they're all but buried in the desert's crust.

Buried or not these little treasures are plentiful enough it takes only about half an hour's scouring before I spot my first. After that I begin to see them everywhere. I harvest, prepare, and consume observing a formula I've decided is at least respectful of fundamental spiritual protocol: 1] a fervent thanksgiving in advance to this plant I've just murdered for the potentially illuminating experience it will presently yield — touch wood 2] an equally fervent prayer that my compassion for all sentient beings be exactly that and not merely my mind's way of humouring my conscience — cross fingers 3] a final reminder that I am, in my essence, as perfect and worthy a part of this puzzle as every other — amen.

But, oh-Man! is this the vilest substance you could possibly find in your mouth. It is bitter. It is sour. It takes a lot of chewing, and the whole time provokes spasms of abdominal revolt exceedingly difficult to master. I am prepared to eat until the prescribed point of puking. But I'm not sick. And I eat prodigiously, seven buttons in all, four large and three small. It

takes me perhaps an hour, roaming from patch to patch, steeling myself for the next assault on the palate. Finally I lie back, my face in the meagre shade of the desert brush and, eyes closed, anticipate a sheltering sky....

Where separation no longer separates, the void grows animate, the desert crawls with life. Lifting head from sand and stone through arms of cactus into the sun. Life teeming within the mind reflects upon the elements. A horse's skull impaled on a pike at the gate to a primitive corral. From a various vantage gathering and shedding information massed on the rolling stone. The eagle gyring up and out from the watering hole, hoof-prints left in the mud drying at its edge, a roadrunner darts and weaves away between bushes. It rains half an hour in the dead of the night. Dust devils whirl up invisible, shake trees like ragdolls, flag or pass on. The dark rekindling fires behind the horizon, wandering on beneath a local sun....

It's over before I know it. I've covered twelve hours of desert without seeing the road, encountered countless marvels, and find myself back at the rear fringe of Catorce. With my first recognition of re-entering civilization my stomach revolts and finally I disgorge a wide puddle of half-masticated cactus, sum total of the past four days' solid food. Back there I buried the severed root of each button as I harvested. This allows for the plant's regeneration, (an exoteric explanation.) I now bury my vomit. This prevents dogs from usurping my soul, the legacy of energy and fallout from my ecstasy, (the esoteric take.)

The moon's gone down. I've missed it completely. All that this "it" implies, I'm still not sure. I'll have to find El Quemado after all, make the six hour climb back into the mountains, find the Huichol stones and propitiate an ever more perplexing ideal.

The yellow dust earth glows even in the black, moonless night. The yard out back of Dorotheo's has the eerie familiarity of a place too recently encountered to bear true recognition. In my room I refill my canteen, then set out for the mountains. Dawn breaks as I reach the foothills. Dorotheo had no reservations about my going it unguided; the last villagers I spoke with gave encouraging if vague nods up this ravine. But two hours out, maybe three hundred feet up into these hills, I've definitely lost the path. The peyote still works its change in my blood but I'm already footsore, a little light-headed, lacking food and sleep. The temple site is still five hours' climb

away, and then only if I find the right path. Viewed from the desert yesterday the vast sweep of sagebrush tilted up into these mountains, an immense shovel stuck into the sky. From here looking back down, the desert is without contour, once more a grey-green sea out beyond Catorce.

The stones can't be far as the crow flies. Five hours can't take one far into rapidly steepening mountain terrain. I'll just slog on up and over this first ridge, see what can be seen. Path or no, I'll manage. The Huichol's temples should stand out plain as day against cactus-studded cliff face otherwise uninterrupted by so much as a ribbon of path. This slope is a spill of boulders, threaded throughout with fat clumps of decomposing cactus, rigid towers of healthy cactus, and hardly a crack or crevice between wide enough to accommodate the human foot. Gaining the top, panting with a fleeting satisfaction, dizzy with a moment's vertigo, I survey slope after receding slope ascending further into the body of the range. I peer down into the dark crux of a chasm before me. My eyes pick their way meticulously along the spindly ridge I've mounted, away in either direction to points where focus gets lost in succeeding facets of the rock's many faces. On the variously revealed cliffs of ten or twelve mountainsides I can now observe there is no sign of a temple; there is no hint of a path. Of course, I can only see a percentage of each, the remainder rest hidden behind neighboring ridges and peaks. Of those which might be explored within a well-directed day's expedition none bear so much as a distinguishing mark.

The prodigious sweat I've broken is whipped by a stiff buffeting of winds that surge up from below, die off and give way to others scouring along the ridge. Useless to seek out the leeward side of anything atop this crooked elbow of rock. I slump to my haunches, back against a boulder, guzzle a guilty mouthful of water, close my eyes and commune with my various told-you-so's and could-be-worse's. I'm not really worried; I've never been seriously lost in my life; but damn it, you can't see the mountain for the boulders here. I hang my head and rest my eyes. When I rouse myself I'm looking at the scuffed leather uppers of my trekking boots, the variegated grain of yellowish pink rock, and a neat little cluster of shiny black pellets. Pellets of goatshit! Hallelujah for tender mercies, and praise these little turds!

Striking out along the ridge I trust to intuition, a peyote sense of animal congress allaying my misgivings. Sure enough I begin encountering regular little piles of the granular turds. A narrow but discernible slip of a

path gradually establishes itself connecting the dots of crud lodged between rocks and cactus stems. Maybe an hour later, with another swig of my dwindling water supply I celebrate encountering an unmistakable sign of civilization, a copious mound of not altogether desiccated donkey shit. Like me the common ass needs a bona fide path in rugged surroundings. For a while I can measure my progress by my heart rate, if not by evidence of approaching Indian temples. My clothes are soaked and I've had to wrap a bandana over my ears against the wind. Then I spot them, their majestic facades carved from sheer mountainside rising up to new heights distant across a long arching alpine mound. For ten minutes I tumble down out of the rocks before I'm on the nibbled grass surface and striding up its slope. Another hour or so at a steady march and the lunar consistency of this moor finally crests and reveals a small collection of stone huts amid patches of cultivated soil flanking a shallow ravine. The temples are almost directly above me now, massive, with ramps connecting each cluster of columns. I gallop down the slope and stand breathless among the huts, half of which appear deserted.

Adrenaline, and a fear I didn't like to admit while climbing aimlessly up ever more treacherous cliff faces, apparently obscured my sense of time. From this cleft in the open alpine meadow it is apparent the sun is about setting, I've been climbing for an entire day. Fatigue sets in. I eye enviously the black cavities of empty huts but resist the temptation and amble along to the opposite end of this desolate habitation. Finally I meet an aged campesino bent on a gnarled walking stick perhaps returning to his dwelling from the fields.

— Buenos, Usted. Es muy bonito, su pueblo.

I nod and smile at the primitive hovels, then gesture toward the ensemble of stone edifices dominating the meadow view from high on the rock wall.

— ¿Cuántas horas para los templos?

The old face beneath the soiled and decrepit straw hat swings away to follow my gaze. The bent figure straightens tall, transfers weight from one foot to the other, and one hand comes to rest on a hip. In dirt-stiff denims and weather-beaten jacket he suddenly evokes the pioneer homesteader of vintage western films. He chuckles only politely.

— ¿A donde? ¿Las minas?

Mines? Above us the mirage of my spiritual Eldorado dissipates revealing one of the disused, turn-of-the-century silver mines littering these hills. Turning and stretching an arm out to the horizon, the old man indicates the folds of mountain back the way I've come. Then the tall figure shrinks over his stick once more and a shaman's amused old eyes look out from under the battered straw brim.

— Es para allá, El Quemado.

THE TOURIST TOWN: San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato

The rejuvenated man sat on a cool terrace sipping a marguerita dipped from a pitcher prepared by his hostess. It was late afternoon. The day's heat would have persisted even here were it not for the terrace's eastward vantage, and its being constructed exclusively from marble and tile. It was luxury, the deep shade in which they sat, spectators to the brilliance of a sun-soaked collection of flowering bushes and dwarf palms in the yard. The man felt rejuvenated because for the past ten days he'd been rambling ceaselessly north and south the length of the land. He'd resisted the urge to find an airport and the first flight available to any major North American centre. In this way he'd reserved the option of retreat. Shunning even the cheapest of hotel rooms, he'd taken a continuous series of non-air-conditioned local buses, occasionally backtracking, never moving further ahead than the next town visible on his tourist's map....

Given the choice, that's how I'd write myself at this particular juncture, the mysterious new character on one of the soap operas even more popular here than at home. Gwyn, my hostess, looks on while I attempt to satisfy her other guests' curiosity. Earlier she and I were alone in the kitchen. While she mixed Cointreau and tequila I offered to crush some ice. She replied something witty yet vaguely resentful about our ice having been broken a long time ago. I shook several largish cubes from a tray into a bowl, then paused and looked into her eyes. She turned away and I asked her to look again. And this time to just relax and feel... the moment... who and

where we are now. She gave me a look as if asking whether she should take deep, easy breaths as well. She then made a politic study of her ceiling until I went back to crushing the ice.

Back in the company of her friends though, I finally get a smile, good-humoured and conciliatory. Maggie and Shelley are a practical pair. They've arrived at attractive compromises here, in their late forties, in San Miguel. Shelley one day read *Women Who Run With Wolves* and Maggie began playing the stock market. Shelley rejected the boredom of big business wifery and Maggie began a business of her own. Now they're partners, designing and distributing fashion ceramics. They're adamant about keeping their ring of friends here exclusive; aside from Gwyn and Servando they're interested in only the most casual of interlopers, preferably younger European men, fluent in English, generous with compliments, and quick to intuit when the game is over. I'm not sure how I'm meant to receive all this confidence but smile, I hope not foolishly.

Gwyn giggles as if I've told some ribald joke and for an instant we're alone again; twelve years haven't passed and we lie on the beat-up couch in her student's apartment caressing each other with conversation. I don't stay, she doesn't protest, and neither of us leave a second message on an answering machine. Gwyn is holding a platter out to me: baked-dry tortilla, cheese and peppers ringed round by a fan of tomato slices bathed in oil and fennel. I have a very distinct impression of utter transparency, as if these three commiserate openly with my not having had sex in a very long time.

In a nervous reflex I begin telling them about El Quemado. No, this isn't exactly, as Shelley inquires, some kind of health spa, although it is a place where things are laid bare. Neither is it altogether, as Maggie supposes, like the 'Running of the Bulls', although it does indicate a type of a fierce consummation. Gwyn rolls her knowing eyes as I avoid spelling anything out. While five minutes ago she would have wheedled for a straight answer just to put me on the spot she's now content to let me extemporize. After which I change the subject as nonchalantly as possible.

Gwyn is still writing film scripts. She's travelled fairly extensively but eventually chose San Miguel de Allende as her base.

— It's a bit of an expatriots' culture spa, so what? The weather's good year-round and there are still enough Latin men to keep things interesting.

With the arrival of Don Servando our little party takes on another air. There's a little dust in it, almost a fine talcum powder, raised from the imported gravel in the driveway. This hangs, suspended, light as a scent. It almost catches in the throat. And it clings to the lacquered purple fender skirts of the Don's new Ford pick-up truck.

At lunch today we all shared a table at La Huerta. The chic, and very crowded, restaurant was set in a rustic stone courtyard. Feeling equal parts dirt, sweat, and fatigue, I'd left my pack at the entrance and was working my way around the restaurant's clientele. I'd just arrived in town en route south from the desert and I needed some information. The Canadian Consulate was housed in a pair of modest rooms located on the back wall of this same courtyard. Before I could reach it I was surprised by a familiar voice amid a decorous group of diners in the heart of the crowd.

Gwyn was sporting a broad white sunhat that obscured her face while she picked her way out between the tables. Having done so, my ample, apple-cheeked friend greeted me with the smile I remembered from the best of my school days. At her table, a hasty round of introductions accomplished, Don Servando, an elderly, dapper and dignified type, dispatched a waiter to obtain an interview with the Canadian Consul. After a polite pause he resumed relating his recent acquisition of a wrought-iron candelabra, early Columbian, that would grace the dining room of his hacienda. The Don touched a grey silk hanky to his temples and ordered a fresh round of drinks. He himself no longer drank, though he referred repeatedly and with relish to his former waggish years. He encouraged me to catch up with their party and gave me a wink I received with a shiver. The old man's face was not familiar but something in his look tugged at my guts as if I'd stepped too close to the edge of a cliff. A few minutes later a waiter bent discreetly at my ear to say I could visit the Consul in half an hour's time.

Not having had a drink in three months it took me less than half an hour to catch up. The chill Chianti kept arriving in buckets. I kept busy furnishing playfully compromising anecdotes from the time Gwyn and I had spent together at school. Tennis at the Don's club was proposed for the next day.

By the time a handsome woman arrived and paused at Don Servando's elbow I was in the full flush of an apparently charming inebriated

glee. No one would hear of my moving on before at least a few days, preferably longer. The woman was wearing a silver-grey pantsuit, one of the new fabrics, heavy but clinging, with a bit of a sheen to it. Eyeglasses dangled on her bosom from a pink gold chain which matched another she wore doubled up on her wrist as a bracelet. This pink gold on this particular silver was far from a fashion transgression; I appreciated her style perhaps a little overtly. She rested a hand on the Don's shoulder and pressed him not to rise when he turned in his seat to recognize her. An hour had passed since my request had been relayed but the Canadian Consul, Elsa, as she insisted we call her, though now obliged to pass on to her next engagement, was not visibly perturbed.

Shadows have consumed most of Gwyn's yard and the Don is waxing exceedingly eloquent as I grow less coherent. Elsa is due to arrive before long but the tequila overtakes me and I must beg leave of my new friends and stagger after Gwyn to where she can aim me at a bed. She expresses surprise, a little cruel and ironic, at how poorly I'm holding my liquor these days. I begin to complain of how forlorn I've been but the softness of the mattress subdues me, the alcohol buoying my brain....

Lisa-Anne has turned me on to a cult, the basis of which involves invocation of some animal energy or spirit. Turns out the spirit is carnivorous, voracious, all but insatiable, using the cultist as vehicle to murderous ends. I bring Lisa-Anne to an expensive resort intending to propose marriage, but there's another older, wealthier admirer of hers tagging along. We both make mention of that recent, 'something in the air'. — You're picking up on the charge, says Lisa-Anne. At this I begin transmogrifying on the spot. The pure feral rapacity infuses my nostrils, lungs and stomach. I can't believe she just looks on, letting me go it alone; this was something we were going to explore together. She begins tuning in just enough to explain she doesn't trust this energy, isn't going to pursue it maybe, could be something dangerous... I'm terrified, struggling with the nascent bloodlust in my jowls, in my soul, when she says, - You know why I'm not coming, why I'm not with you. You never told me. You can never just come out and tell me....

I wake unable to open my eyes, struggle a while helplessly with a terrible dis-ease overwhelming as was the dream struggle preceding it.

Sweating, cramped and exhausted, eventually I fall back to sleep. The Don's purple Ford is no longer in the drive when Gwyn finally rouses me from my renewed slumber. Hangover hardly explains my fevered sweat and haggard attempts at rising, but once I've bathed and fed I'm a little more myself and Gwyn's a little less alarmed. I begin anew to give her the lovelorn preamble to my soul-searching sojourn here in Mexico, (the involuntary celibacy stuff I'll leave 'til later.) Inexplicably I find myself relating an experience I had during my stay in Huautla:

I was in town buying pan dulce for Apolonia's family. A few choice rays of sunlight entered the bread-seller's tiny stall on the edge of the mercado. A mother busied herself cleaning and refilling the large glass display cabinet while her lazy daughter lounged, legs haphazard, one arm thrown over a stack of the flat round loaves. The young girl watched me where I waited in the frame of the stall's entrance. Her gaze was direct, though detached and innocent. Her lips were unset between a smile and a pout, and she stretched the smooth bronze contour of one nostril, probing it with an index finger....

Fortunately I regain my wits in time to avoid relating to Gwyn the effect of this encounter. What the hell is she supposed to make of it? I was disconcerted myself as I hastened into the maze of the marketplace, shoulder-bag shifted to conceal my arousal. I satisfy Gwyn that I've forgotten the whole point of my story and we head out on the town for the evening.

From one of the more touristed drinkspots, we move along to *El Latigazo*, a large showbar more popular with the locals. There's little room anywhere from the door to the thronged bar, tables, and dancefloor, but the vibe is good and the doormen know Gwyn. We manage a delirious string of dances before thirst and a shortage of oxygen drive of us back out from the fray.

Negotiating the crowd with a hard-won pair of Coronas hoisted overhead I'm accosted by the waist and spun around before I can find Gwyn with her drink. Concentrating on minimizing spillage I complete my reluctant pirouette and, navel to navel, regard my 'partner'. Maralena won *El Latigazo* in a divorce settlement and has worked here managing it ever since. It's now a huge favourite with the chalangas, or Mexican tourists from the capitol. Maralena is also Gwyn's aerobics instructor, a remarkably lithe,

muscular, and candid character. Tonight, she declares, is her first night off in three years.

Seats are immediately made available. Maralena hooks an elbow around my neck, drink held high in a toast which I miss, confronted as I am with the Superman crest tattooed where swell of pectoral muscle makes its subtle transition to the fleshier curve of breast. Before long we're drinking each other under the bar's tables and climbing on stage to howl adhoc back-up vocals and generally, dizzily, terrorize the band. More than once that night I look to my friend and escort to rescue me from this full-on Latina party-in-a-dress. But Gwyn has found her own admirer in the band's harmonica-player, a tight-jeaned beefcake candidate for the daytime TV dramas. At the back-ache end of a particularly strenuous Lambada, from my sweating happy exhausted post at the dancefloor's edge, I feel a distinct unease imagining ornery growls and scores of angry hombre eyes upon me. I excuse myself and make a bee-line for the washrooms.

The rough wooden stall stinks from some recently relieved prior occupant but it's good to sequester myself. For a moment I'm in the thatched outhouse at Apolonia's, shakily regaining composure from apprentice shamanic flight. Someone steps up beside the stall disturbing my reverie. An immaculate patent leather loafer beneath grey linen trousers appears below the stall's partition. I'm certain it is Don Servando's voice which addresses the air.

— La Jornada del Muerto runs north to south, El Camino del Diablo, east to west. They meet just north of Trinity.

— Don Servando?

I pull up my drawers and hasten to exit the stall.

— The Rebis was sundered with the very first atom and its halves won't out-live one natural lifetime.

My wallet falls to the sodden floor-tiles and I smack my head on the toilet-paper dispenser in my rushed attempt to retrieve it. By the time I've recovered, scooped up my wallet and escaped the stall, the washroom is empty and I'm talking to myself. I splash some water on my face, comb my hair to conceal the little triangular dent in my forehead, and rejoin bedlam as it is manifest in the frenzied action of *El Latigazo*. I'm immensely relieved to catch Gwyn's eye, first thing, as she whirls past with her harmonicist.

Anticipating over-hospitable resistance to our departing Gwyn and I swing out the saloon doors without farewell and giddily traverse the cobblestones as far as the square a block away. Under cedar boughs and cathedral spire, a bold argentine moon on the wane once more, we share a superfluous final litre of Corona. Gwyn says my dent looks like a little pyramid. Funny, in the bathroom mirror I thought it pointed down. I ask Gwyn if Don Servando had been in the bar.

— Come on, can you picture him in there? It's not exactly his style. I tell her next about death, the devil and the divine Hermaphrodite. She reluctantly agrees that the crossroads probably referred to ground zero and the atomic test site at Trinity, New Mexico; she's less keen on a notion of implied apocalypse.

— Sounds more like acrockalypse to me, my friend. One thing about San Miguel: there's a local *diabolo loco* for every new-age nutbar from Pasadena, and no shortage of either.

Gwyn wants to know if Maralena joined me in the john. I counter, inquiring whether she got her just beefcake desserts? We have a good laugh while finishing off our bottle. In the dark she doesn't see it coming as I feign providing her a light, remove the cigarette from her lips, and replace it with a kiss. We struggle drunkenly but directly with the urgency of desire, Gwyn's robust limbs scissoring mine the way I'd ached for them that far-removed evening on her threadbare student's couch. The accumulated effect of a prodigious night's boozing comes over me. I steep myself in a liquid joy welling up between our lips. I fight not to subside comatose in the pleasure, seek instead the inspired flash of her eyes in our gasping pauses. Gwyn recovers her breath before me.

— Nice, but hardly worth twelve years' wait, do you think?

JUNGLE: Estados Oaxaca y Chiapas

There might've been little I was qualified to aid in but I was going just the same. Or so I thought. Where the main road forks, sixty miles east from Huautla, the military had cordoned off the southern route. Chiapas. Why

would I go in the first place? As an international observer? More like an interplanetary one given my state of mind. More like some vaguely guilt-assuaging mission I was on. But I could help. An opportunity would simply present itself. Something would have to come up. And if it didn't I'd continue down to Guatemala and load up on typico clothing, jewelry or something. Humanitarian or capitalist, my progress would profit someone.... The bus was turned around, no one allowed off before we're returned to Huautla.

I don't know if it's back to the earth I've been heading, back to the womb, or just back to the drawing board. Today I'm climbing back up into the hillside barrio. Immediately upon leaving here two months ago I felt there was something I'd overlooked. And when I'd moved on from Mex City, the same sensation: regret, though nothing was left for me there. It's embarrassingly obvious now: of course, there was nothing left for me, it was something *from* me that was required. And not having delivered was what I felt missing. Jorge was sick. Why didn't I stay with him 'til he recovered? Because it would have taken a few more weeks? No, I didn't really see him. And what of Lisa-Anne, Gwyn and my teen-angel, Bella? I negotiate the narrow mud-slick switchbacks, flagstone fragments set in the steepest sections, as the path angles upward. Mid-morning sun slants in between the shacks, lights up a flowering vine tressed about a small gnarled tree, the turn-in for Florencia's place.

The dealer's three youngest, all toddlers not more than a year apart in age, solemnly herd me through the gate to their courtyard. I take a seat in the sun and the little boy climbs into my lap, pulls the pen from my shirt pocket, turns it over end by end. One sister runs to find their mother, the other squats over a basin of brownish water, launders something or just plays about. I close my eyes, listen to the neighboring kids chasing their family's hens: shrieks and scuffling bare feet, clucking, warbling and fluttering wings....

— Un peso!

The boy is tugging at my collar. I rouse myself, swing him onto my shoulder, and pace the courtyard from end to end. A swart young Latino, could be one that was here at my first visit, enters the yard. He looks me over quickly, shifts his Rasta knit cap back off his brow, levels me a set Che

Guevara stare and passes into a room deftly wielding an ancient latch-key. I wonder if I looked so serious, so untrusting, in my teens. The flimsy door he closes behind him practically floats in its frame but the lock could be centuries-old cast iron. People come from the world over to see Apolonia. In the weeks I spent with her I was amazed never once to encounter another foreigner. I'd been incredibly fortunate. Even these trippy young Latinos, wanting nothing to do with the bruja, the witch up there on that hill, remained down here in the town. They kept the door to their room here closed, came and went in somber clouds of grass.

Coming down here from Apo's croft I'd felt a sinking of spirits as if entering some profane realm after the magical atmosphere atop the mountain. It still feels a little sordid, but I can't climb back out of it this time. Certainly not up and out of it, back up to Apo and that mystery equation of faith and magic and psychic delving. I've talked myself down to the reasonable. There are wonders to be worked in the 'real world' as well. And if I'm to start over again here at Florencia's, with a daunted feeling in the pit of my stomach, so be it.

Last night, through the boards in the wall at the head of my bed... on the brink of oblivion, into my head passes the tale of a country priest who loses his faith. The voices on the other side of the wall relate the story, first hushed then excited, suddenly angered then quelled. They rise and fall out of earshot as though I follow at a distance along a twisting mountain path. The Padre had been tending a small congregation of Zapotecas in the hills of eastern Oaxaca. First came the *insurgentes*, then came the army. Each came laying claims to the peoples' fidelity, moved on or retreated, then came again with renewed threats and demands until nothing could distinguish them one from the other, not uniform, not rhetoric or weapons. One morning at dawn the village was half decimated by anonymous artillery-fire.

- Las metrallas, como una lluvia horrorosa....

In the morning I'm paralyzed, twisting the thin sheet I've slept in around my fist, tensing my stomach against the impossible difficulty of getting up from the bed. The story keeps repeating itself. My own little struggle embarrasses me....

The next day there'd come an ultimatum: if the people on a list were not killed that day by the villagers themselves, they, and what was left of their

village, would be gutted on the morrow. Three elders and one particularly proud and handsome farmer were all accused, the Padre's was the fifth name on the list. They were given the day to spend with their families, the priest was left alone. At dusk four graves were filled but the man of God had taken to the hills....

I can't just languish here, even if crippled with anxious indecision. I could still do the import/export thing in Guatemala, but this just seems pointless. I could smugly pack myself off to Big Deal, Nevada, or humbly to Patient Progress, New Mexico, or to Trinity and ground-zero for that matter. No one destination makes more sense than another; I've yet to make sense of where I've just been....

In a nightmare of fitful dozing the 'Wheel of Fortune' revolves: - 500\$, the perfect nylon grinning horror of Vanna White, teeth stretching to cathedral heights, strains to implode from expectations. - 1000\$, a sweating brick of bullion between the dictator's praying hands, a tongue of blood oozing from the space between his eyes. - 5000\$... In the teetering moment before this next minor terror comes a sky-blue glimpse of the natural course of things....

I wake anew with a decision half-made. If I've left any paper trail as far as Huautla, here it will end. I buy bottled water, a compass and machete, start off into the hills heading south and east, already uncertain why I bothered with the compass. Anyone observing my climb up out of the barrio into the wooded mountainside will hardly guess a gringo so ill-equipped would be heading anywhere far. In the room I've left my pack, clothing, odds and ends. There might be a stir, some curiosity at first. After a while they'll put some things to use, and sell the rest in the market.

* *

There's a deepened shade of verdure where the slope curls in out of sight ahead. The ruined soil here, all powder and pebbles, fills my boots and encumbers every step. Too much wood's been taken from this area. Must be a lot of villages, possibly a town nearby. The sun, hardly filtered by the remaining foliage, calls me out of the woods. I scrape a heap of pebbles together and sit on them in deliberation. A solitary and scrawny coffee plant stands beside me, an impartial observer, a single cluster of darkening red

berries glistens in the utmost branch. I hear it, then it's masked by the long unwinding song of a cicada. The occasional distant hatcheting sound carries on the breeze. I rise, unwilling to hear corroborated the more ominous march of machetes I've imagined behind me. The inviting greenness of the slope proves largely illusory but rounding the mountain does fold me back into silence.

A tiny gekko is frozen in a paisley curl, stuck to the mesh of my mosquito net, a fixed arabesque silhouette against the night sky. He climbs ambling clouds and moonbeams in a flash, then rests once more, a poised mark of punctuation in the day's closing remarks. These remarks, begun with the dawn, were suspended for hours at a time, only sputtering back to life for reflective moments, fits of exposition. A vegetative state has consumed me. I move, but ponderously, within an obscure design, like a vine seeking sunlight through a series of detours, elliptical progress. A skunky vegetable musk fills the air abruptly, some huge night-blossoming rhubarb of the jungle. The dialogue may stifle but there is never a moment where nothing happens. A million tiny events erupt within the calmest instant, ants munch on leaves, gum drips from wounded trees, the gekko inhales a mosquito. Even my own overgrown stasis merely masks a concert of nerves coursing, oxygen surging, moving me in chrysalis.

Pairs of long-dead pine needles, brown but still joined at their base, shed from one branch, hang perfectly poised astride the next below. No breath of a breeze penetrates here to disturb their balancing act. The valley bower is so dense day passes in shades of twilight. Any view from without is impossible. Warmed by the sun as it filters through the uppermost layers of limbs, resin runs down along trunk bark, its scent penetrating even to my obscure district on the ground below. The damp earth is resilient beneath a soft rust blanket of long-dead needles, slow to decompose, steadily replenished, perhaps never truly expired, an insular membrane sheltering and supporting life.

The vines trailing from the canopy fall purposefully a hundred feet only to defy gravity, catch a limb, and begin a new ascent. There were vines like these in the woods on the Niagara Escarpment where I grew up. Like

here, there were mossy slopes of tumbled boulders, waterfalls in ravines. The discovery of a large horned beetle or colourful salamander explained my estrangement from the Saturday morning cartoon crowd. The fudge-rich humus caked on undersides of upturned rocks, the riddled and disintegrating guts of a log, the discoveries always contained mysteries twinning those already burgeoning in me.

- ¿A donde vas, amigo?

I never completely grew out of the woods.

- ¡Eh! ¿A DONDE VAS?

I quit beating paths but never lost the inclination.

(- Es un gringo...)

There was ample opportunity for bushwhacking in town; it never occurred to me I could simply read the signs.

- ¡Alto!

I was caught readily in the web of an affluent town's mistrust.

(- No tira...) ¡ALTO!

In many ways I've stayed close to the forest ever since, able at an instant to find cover in the foliage, the world safely screened by a lattice of leaves and snaking limbs.

*

*

I said at the outset that this was a ghost story, and so it is. I construct my narrative just as I pick my way through life. If I encounter a cul-de-sac and retrace my steps only to encounter another, I feel I owe a debt of verisimilitude, be it at the expense of my entire expedition. Deviations from the path, shortcuts easily buried in a book, will always out in the end. You see, I came here hopeful of leaving behind self-absorption and complacency in the face of others' suffering. Once put to the test, though, like the Padre in my tale from behind the wall, I haven't proven myself rigorous. And it seems impossible now that home and hearth await a mere jet-ride away. I pass my time moving from uninhabited place to place, avoiding any potential road home. And this makes me a ghost, neither here nor hereafter, merely roaming day to day, avoiding trouble. I've abandoned my notion of personal progress the way one commits the dead in a burial at sea. Yet I remain

buoyant, committed to my lateral drift. I have a mournful preoccupation with the occasional, convincing hallucination, swift enough to take the mind in tow a while.

I'm sitting cross-legged, occluded at last from a dark and whirling chaos. My fingers are curled into the earth beneath a brown carpet of fallen pine needles. I'm able to open my eyes. Fine jewelled contours of cross-hatched pine boughs click into focus with excruciating clarity. Too much so, too beautiful, the boughs overlap once more, blur and fuse. Closing my eyes returns me to the primordial psychic soup, equal parts obscure origins and impending apocalypse, from which I've just emerged. I focus on a single tree's trunk until inexorably its ten-thousand surfaces separate. Squinting, I can fan them out like a deck of tree playing cards and bring them back together again at will. The child's optical trick revives my sense of self-control. I snap upright, negotiate the narrow twilit footpath with lunar smooth efficiency, instants later find myself in an open sun-soaked meadow. The light and heat suffuse me in a sublime organic epiphany. My lengthy sojourn, densely dreamed, collapses in pure non-event, ellipsis without beginning or end. The world will endure; it never was whole; it's sundered but always achieving new balance.

I'm sitting cross-legged on the stone floor of a jail cell. My arms hang limp at my sides. My hands, palms upturned, grazed knuckles burning cool against the floor, mimic a supplication. All my reflections are only that, reflections. I've no sense of having come through anything of substance. The answers I come upon are, without exception, immaterial. Using the blunt instrument of my intellect on an infinitely subtle problem I remain in the dark; seeking to harness the ecstatic I remain a civilized slave. A stray ray of light may yet find me but I'm no longer waiting; I merely remain.

Have I been coy? I didn't need to write a book here; I mean, you sense what's essential, repent having missed it, and then you move on. I may be no monk but I will get over this. Repenti, Apolonia told me. I call for the guard.

— Diccionario, amigo? Es posible un diccionario?

He shrugs and moves off out of sight up the hall. A moment later he returns and hands me an ancient volume. Repenti, repenti... let's see, repenti... does not exist. Ah, here it is, **repente**: 1) Movimiento subito... **subito**: sujeto a un

autoridad soberana con obligación de obedecerla. Hmm, a forced act of submission, then. **repente:** 2) Arrebato... **arrebato:** 1) Furor. 2) Extasis. 3) Arranque, manifestación brusca de un sentimiento... **arrancar:** 1) Sacar de raíz, sacar con violencia. 2) Obtener con violencia. I have to pursue every other term to eventually come up with: a violent passion torn from within, and separating, the self. **repente:** 3) Presentimiento brusco. A sudden premonition. No, it's not so plain as that. An un hoped for, unforeseen, impulsive impression or announcement... Where is the repentance, the whole moral imperative to make amends, quasi-confession of guilt implicit? I continue flipping furiously back and forth through the pages, looking up definitions for terms used in definitions for earlier terms, all accumulating to re-define my, Repenti. And there's not a religious reference anywhere. My eyes begin swimming in tidal rivers of type; my head bobs in a cross-current of infinite regress....

Lisa-Anne's, Gwyn's and Bella's images fuse and hover above me. For an instant they are poised straddling my hips, my prick become their prick, a magical phallus ministering to the divide between us, plying a reluctant invagination, my ability to accept what is taken from me. The want sated, our phallus consumed, we float and separate, swell into the sky, ballooning miracles of equanimity....

The jangle of the jailer's keys rouses me. I am being released. I pry myself up from the floor, limp a little stiffly over to the door. Bemused, I return the incongruous handshake offered me as I exit the cell. There are equal parts Indigena and Columbian conquistador in the smiling eyes of my congratulator. Outside, the sun is shining stoically down upon San Cristobal, a hillside town stoic itself in localizing, without succumbing to, a violent instability. The cream and the pinkish cobblestones reflect and absorb the sun's light in perfect even measures. Everyone seems on their way to some work, the barefoot turbaned marketwomen and the wannabe soldiers lurching in the backs of rickety pick-up trucks.

* * * end * * *

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