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NAIL A CROW TO THE DOOR

Tamas V. Dobozy

**A Thesis
in
the Department
of English**

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University**

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

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To be gnaw'd out of our graves, to have our sculs made drinking-bowls, and our bones turned into pipes, to delight and sport our Enemies, are tragicall abominations, escaped in burning burials.

-Sir Thomas Browne
Hydrotaphia chpt. 3

for a father is always your master even when he's gone

-Charles Bukowski
"The Twins"

ABSTRACT

Nail A Crow To The Door

Tamas V. Dobozy

Nail A Crow To The Door follows the exploits of several characters within an isolated west coast town as they try to cope not only with themselves but the society around them. The narrative's central concern is alienation and community. *Nail A Crow To The Door* also explores the experience of psychological trauma within the world of its characters--trauma resulting from upbringing, disease and alcoholism. The novel follows the characters in their struggles either to achieve reconciliation with fate or to manipulate the surroundings. Central conflicts in the novel are: the public versus the private self, past experiences affecting present realities and individual motives versus community concerns. The novel explores the life of a west coast town and its harsh, magical and sometimes comic predicaments.

PROLOGUE

The Cessna landed on the runway to receive their rainslick bodies and equipment. September's day in Oxbow meant incessant storm clouds, wind, rain's driftnets. Deadline made filming of the special mandatory. Airborne, the plane banked south and the frail cameraman propped his camera in the open doorway. The community network's director sat up front, laminated map on knees, and directed guttural communiques through the mouthpiece. The director and studio execs have no knowledge of discomfort, the cameraman thought, muscles cramped from holding the camera. A dispatch from the front let him know they'd reached the south tip of Oxbow--filming could proceed. Yeah, we'll spend five hours filming irrelevant mile on mile so some cutting room idiot can extract fortyfive minutes of choice clips. The cameraman knew exactly which locations would figure in the footage--the mill, the Indian Reserve, the original townsite and, of course, Oxbow Cemetery. The Cessna buzzed northside at two hundred feet. An acne of rain spread on his forehead, equipment, hands. September was in the wide doorway--this chill September--and his nerves were soured. The windfactor gnashed with its frostbite at every finger. If those assholes slackened two feet of my contractual leash, the cameraman thought, I'd have the film they need of the spots they want in a quarter of the time, quarter the cost. Worse, he was salaried not dollars per hour, so extra time in the freeze and piss were no more valuable than warm studio work. They just don't appreciate my coming up, my frozen testicles knocking together like clackers. They could've at least supplied some thermal underwear.

The director yelled, "Zoom!," through the comlink regularly and the cameraman would reach outside the hatch to make focal adjustments--the wind a nailgun at his neck--with arms stretched out into shirtsleeves of liquid nitrogen. The zoom in! directives became frequent as they buzzed inhabited areas. Fucking cheapo executives, he thought. If the job conditions don't murder, the quality of equipment does. Someone should've done electrical repair on

this console years ago, then I wouldn't have to do it manually. But those assholes couldn't care less. And why not? It's not their asses in this phobia hole, dizzy with fear of heights, hands frozen fragile, to reach out when some idiot yells zoom.

Three hours had flown, in which most of Oxbow's topography was canned, when his knuckles knocked against the hatchway--a nutcracker suite on each joint. "Ow, shit!," he screamed just as the director yelled, "Zoom in!," over the luxury of steam from his coffee thermos. The cameraman stretched a hot mouth around the lobster raw knuckles. His other hand felt the camera's weight twist to urgent gravity. This town ain't worth anything. I'm tired of this asswipe work. I can get a better one anywhere.

When camera and tripod were jettisoned and began cartwheeling like a gyroscopic acrobat into the forest surrounding Oxbow Cemetery, the happy cameraman had one thought. Now fucker, how's that for a zoom shot!

That September day, words were cause for vertigo. Doctor June's statements had put his inner ear on spincycle. Nausea spurted saliva between his tongue and palate. The limousine whose wheel he sat behind was sleepwalking along. The outside world played a sideshow he payed minimal attention to.

Then a collision cracked open the daydreaming.

By the time the crow noticed the limousine's eighty mile per hour trajectory its reflexes sidestepped just fifty percent of the impact. The halfdead crow kicked a ruckus up, crackled terribly, hobbled. Its wings mopped the road. One sharp clean shriek after another sounded a death rattle closer in volume to a choir of crows than one in solo. His doctor's words rang more profoundly. Gordon Chatterton stepped from the limousine wishing the chauffeur hadn't been sent home

early--that coolhand would've known how to cope. The nearby crows went skyhigh with fugitive fuss and flap. Their destination could've been anywhere, anywhere but here. Envious of flight, Gordon wished for wing and migration.

Even with hands plastered over ears the crow's music rippled to his brain in a bluefunk which almost caused buttons to pop, bowtie to unravel. The crow's technique could've caused the Devil heebiejeebies, driven death itself away, except that death and Devil don't ever care to listen. Fear dithered Gordon before he remembered heavy objects in the trunk--wrenches, winterchains, screwdrivers--something to kill that bird with. Hand among the trunk's hardware, he pulled out a crowbar. Missing the irony, Gordon edged near just as the bird flopped. Nevertheless, he pulped up the bird with the bar just for stress relief. The crow's downfall was the day's cheapest thrill.

Something was unreeling inside him like footage, slicing at his heart with celluloid edges. A hand, probably his, batted dust off the tweed suit over him and the same hand

jingled keys. He backed into the car, fired it, continued in the graveyard's direction. Halfway there he remembered to close the door. Treetops--crow spangled a minute ago--were now vacant. He thought of a gardening rule his grounds keeper held up as cardinal: dead crow on a pole outperforms the scarecrow.

Arrival at the cemetery's parking lot and his mind was dizzy. Out of the car he stared down at his clothes. Normally he would've tidied them. But why? Normally he wasn't behind the wheel--driver's licence long expired. But who cared? Law and looks were silly now. In one afternoon society's legitimacy had been written off--tomfoolery wiped from the agenda. No time now for taxes. No time now for lawabiding. No time now for social graces. He'd acquired a death row giddiness--all gallowshumour and metric ton grin. *I've never found it easy to say this, Gordon.* He thought the doctor should have added with a smile: *But it gets easier to say all the time. Da, da, da.*

The stretch limo wheezed like the accordion it resembled while the carousel's wooden horses pranced in September misery. The sky's stratocumuli moved across the sun, making the cemetery strobe like a nightclub.

The cemetery was Oxbow's monetary mainline, a financial shot in the arm the whole town was cold turkey without. Before him stood Chez Mort, a restaurant owned by the municipality and established twenty years now on the graveyard's exterior, just off from wrought iron gates--a pricey place of Dom Perignon and caviar, steak tartare and basted pheasant. The municipality took tallest profit from the restaurant, but Tom F. was chief administrator. Hair dyed black, Tom F. was Oxbow's leatherjacketed master chef, cooking with Jack Daniels on the hip and marijuana bag, labelled parsley, under the hat. Late at night, when he'd gone farfetched, there was no assurance the salmon garnish wouldn't blast you slanted. *What kind of salad is this? It's turned my eyeballs inside out.* They came in, big spenders, and by midnight were either Narcissus or antisocial with absent attention spans. Trained by the Parisian culinary avant garde in the chichi world of nouvelle cuisine, Tom F.

came home to combine their recipes with local herb, making something so unique and renowned that visitors often occurred from distant Japan with no interest in the cemetery but just came around to taste Tom F.'s unique specialties. Led Zep blasted a shellshock from the kitchen. After closing, Tom F. would head home to a cedar triangle of a house in Stillwater for quick fixes of Kraft Dinner. He had no imagination for grub outside the restaurant--the culinary knowledge impotent inside him.

The place had never been investigated because it was the municipality's. Half Oxbow's police force came voraciously when they could afford it. The tour guides made certain that people were usually hungry enough after the graveyard tour to sample at least coffee and hors d'oeuvres. Enough tourists came to make Chez Mort high end by the profit scale. The restaurant was sheer New Orleans architecture. Its eaves and iron balconies were melancholy and mournful in the afternoon--a matinee of death. It had square, shuttered windows and numerous balconies connected by spiral staircases. Crows perched atop seemed less vagabonds and more like live Rococo ornamentation. Designed like an architectural rendering of hell's acoustics, Chez Mort was an aerie for what was dark and elaborate. It was all perfume and lassitude

On the other side of the gates Gordon could see the booth from which cemetery tours were conducted. Painted with black and white zebra stripes arced to rainbows, the booth was where tickets to the graveyard sold. The tour guides took groups of twenty through the cemetery and related burial rituals at each checkpoint--most of Oxbow's major denominations being represented. There were mock services of Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, and Baptist burials. There was even one checkpoint explaining how Native populations interred in the graveyard were there under duress from local missionaries who'd established themselves in Oxbow late in the last century. They detailed how local Native tribes had dealt with death previous to European interference. The history of the graveyard's extraordinary relation to the town was explained with precision and tact in a valid attempt to justify the ten dollar entrance

fee. The tour proved reminiscent of every effort to placate loss with ritual. All the while *Skeleton Closet* played funeral marches, dirges, eerie carnival music. The groups rarely sniffled, but stunned silence was regular by the time the crowd exited towards the restaurant. Gordon remembered it well. Addled by marijuana, he'd often undertaken the tour to enhance the drug. He was a regular in the late teens and out of the whole crowd one who giggled frequently.

Behind the cemetery stood the old carousel with neither creak nor tinkle for the time of year. A small playground for infants had been set up--admission at two dollars--to keep them occupied while parents took the tour. Town council hired two daycare workers dressed as clowns to supervise. Everyone who worked here was union. The playground was usual fare with monkey bars, swings and merrygoround. The carousel had palominos, lippizanners and one unicorn--all carved from oak. When the carousel spun, it spun to tintinnabulations of a hurdy gurdy. The clowns were all good natured with bulbous shoes, impressive grins and partycoloured hair. They greeted children with affection but dropped the buffoonery during smoke and coffee breaks. No kids were ever harmed here--the clowns helped avoid that through scrupulous attention. Injury saved the infants for death. They'd all be in a graveyard soon enough anyway.

The outstanding event here was when the cemetery band took to the stage. A small auditorium was set up with squared stepseats around a raised platform. Today Gordon saw that the stage just off the playpen glittered gaudily with lace, banners, plastic flowers. Fresh *Appearing Soon* posters sprung up on the wooden fencesides of the outdoor theatre. It looked like *Skeleton Closet*, the cemetery's resident band, would be playing soon, giving a concert that was a break from their regularly scheduled position as entourage for graveyard tours. Gordon harrumphed, not interested at all.

Gordon's head was swollen to explode with each pulse of blood. His facial muscles jerked with the heart's heavy constrictions. He wanted to rip himself out of his tweed

standards like an illustration from the page, but only loosened his tie. Closets at home were filled with suits similar as baseball card faces. But why think about clothes? They were extraneous.

Calibre of thought below fair, he remembered insignificant details and irrelevant childhood facts, but nothing of why he'd felt urged to this. His brain wanted to dole priority information, but it became lost in the interface between the subconscious and conscious mind. There was a notion in him--spruced with the scent of saving grace--but it was still embryonic. The information remained in lunaticfringe language, indecipherable. He couldn't concentrate.

Gordon turned from the brightly painted fronts to walk through the cemetery's gates of iron macrame.

White painted crosses flanked rows of tombstones--the badlands began immediately. This was the graveyard's first quarter--ten acres toppedup with the recently buried left precious space to spare. To the right stood a pitted sideboard and tarpapered construction. The caretaker's place contained a basement suite--a large soundproofed room was a recent addition that gave *Skeleton Closet* rehearsal space. The shack's walls scanned in a scrapbook's worth of billboard layers. Years dried and sloughed off in the wind like names off of the tombstones of minor players and nobodies. Diagonally down from here a monkeypuzzle tree stood at the cemetery's centre--composed of spikes instead of leaves or, actually, leaves sharp as recently stropped straightrazors. The tree was impossible to climb without scraping off all flesh along the ascent. You could have started all fresh and spiffy in your best Sundaysuit and by the time you hit the heights you'd be hanging in tatters around a mainframe of bones, ready to boot ghost. The forty acres were divided into four sections, each with separate characteristics. Section two roped off large plots, with nameplates that said, "Mass Graves, Native" and detailed lists of tribes and types buried there. A white unmarked cross sprouted from each pit. Section three was devoted to renowned Native corpses, ones with name tags. Finally, section four held inhabitants of Oxbow buried no more

recently than five years ago--stiffs brought in because their hosts expressed some fetish about this gravesite in last wills and testaments. This area of daisypushers was marked "imports," like finewine in the liquor store.

A humdrum twang, probably there all along, entered Gordon from the caretaker's--the doldrum notes of someone adapting "Tuxedo Junction" into acoustic mode. Josephine was practising in gingham dress, a wordballoon of vapour before her mouth. Leader of *Skeleton Closet*, she sat on the porch among fiddles and guitars. The upright bass propped itself against the door and the score of the classic Glenn Miller made standard leaned on the railing in front of her. She filled empty sheets on the floor fulltilt with notations as she tried to transpose the tune. Josephine watched his approach, put down the pen. Her hand absently plucked violin strings as she shifted gaze past him into the sky, trying to act low key. Her hair's rich curls reared up in the breeze the way animals react to unnatural deathsites.

"Hello, Gordon. What are you doing 'round here?" Josephine asked quietly. The tenor of her voice went up and down a worried scale. Gordon had been known as a strange one ever since highschool graduation--a real weirdo, a dabbler with social deviance. "Looking for a plot, for" Even before the words leapt out, at quadruple the planned volume, Gordon knew he'd go crazy if he'd have to carry conversation. A torrent of hardcore distortion travelled his headspace with firehose force. An ultrablare went in one ear and out the other. He felt that if his mouth opened again, the smooth action of jawbone would close off the exit hole through one of his ears and the flow, with nowhere to escape, would come out between his teeth, rattling his voicebox on the way in a fortissimo register--a torrent of muttered malevolence that'd burn right through Josephine. He looked silently at her while listening to this incomprehensible message recordlooping through him.

Surprised at the cutshort response, Josephine analyzed his rumbleface, the pale brow's perspiration. Pencil in mouth she watched the complexion darken and pale. "Well, if you're going to pick out a plot, you'd better hurry. The graveyard lease is up. Drainage round here

has gone critical. Looks like council won't have the cash to pick up two tabs. So take higher ground." Josephine handed out local scuttlebutt, nudge and wink. The news known only by Town Council and Mayor hadn't yet made public domain. She'd overheard privy talk from the caretaker. Josephine assumed that normally tidbits concerning money and town management would probably have interested Gordon.

He walked past her into the deadzone beyond the caretaker's lawn.

The welds along the joints of his body flaked and fell. Loose teeth rattled like rivets. Large deposits of grit were causing abrasion in his joints. Something unidentifiable was on his mind, something crossreferenced under big, dangerous and crazy. Yes there was a counterrhythm, but attempts after it filled him with hocus pocus--topforty ideas mediocre at best. Some scheme sat waiting to be unveiled.

He stumbled deeper into the cemetery.

Josephine shadowed. He turned to look at her, eyebrows butting fronts at the centre of his forehead. He resumed the stagger, some exploit returning to his brain. That "something" on his mind was definitely coming out into shape, something he recognized even at this point would become Oxbow's biggest bang. This is tonictime, intermission stretch and refreshment before the grand finale. Because there would be a grand finale, Gordon suddenly knew. It was only a question of what, a question of whether Oxbow had the stamina to take it. There won't be any hackneyed funeral march. My fortune won't be a charitable donation.

There wouldn't be any reconciliations between Gordon and Oxbow's society. Gordon had been rich, eccentric and outside all his life. A peacemaking now would have been dimly generic, a sacrilege in the face of his controversial and notorious past. He wouldn't fade.

From behind, Josephine noticed Gordon shake, his sweatplastered hair. She tried to coax him out of the graveyard. He looked ready to crumple. She even tried to sweettalk him back, but Gordon didn't respond. He brushed air back with hands, sighted in his eyes against

the crosses, then stared at grassy depressions under the shade of every crucifix.

He continued into the graveyard. Looking down at himself he saw bones agitate under his skin's surface. His skeleton wished to slide through meat, muscle and tissue like a stripper stepping out of a trenchcoat, dropping it behind. Gordon's clothes sagged. He didn't even look human.

Crows were round him now. He realized everything he'd suddenly thought about death was embodied in crows. He looked up at them. Each one behaved like a bane. Each one was another. Confident in their obscurity the crows knew they could switch pasts and purposes subtly and no one would notice. Death travelled incognito also, taking on this face or that, blending in. Just as one crow passed for another so death's masks were interchangeable. No matter what disguise it walked in with, death carried one calling card-- permanent cessation of consciousness in bold beneath the letterhead. Cancer, car crash, electric chair--all were the same thing. The crows perched along the cemetery looked as if they were rallying to rend Gordon any minute.

The flattened grass was patterned after fate, like Tarot laid traditional on a tablecloth embroidered with folkloric images of heroes whose actions were predetermined from tale to tale. And the wolf, always antihero, was also predictable, coming and going really badegg. Gordon could be a villain too--cold and ruthless.

All his feeling came to a stop. Emotions splintered. Bridges burned between territories of the heart. Some hostile force had taken him over. The wind had one message in its cacophony, one message for the divided and conquered country of his heart--notification that antagonism now owned and ran the place.

Josephine saw his knees knock, turn inward, outward, inward again like Elvis jammin'. When he collapsed backwards she was already running towards the caretaker's place to phone for an ambulance.

He felt faint. His mind scrabbled for consciousness. How many days had it been since

sleep? Five? Six? He wondered if he'd ever gather nerve to entertain sleep again. What did he need sleep for anyhow? After all, he could still dream. He was dreaming now and was awake too. What a bargain!

He sank into graveyard soil. Again his skeleton seemed to rise from his body, stepping to the surface like curtain call. His eyes lost colours as tear ducts opened up, water filming the pupils. The landscape blurred and refracted. Grass before graves sagged even further. He imagined a forest whose foliage consisted of bones, a forest of clatter. He glanced round from where he lay and it looked as if skeletons were sifting to the cemetery's surface. Skeletons swam gently in shallow pools everywhere.

His mind slipped the surrealist gear. Gordon shook his head side to side, but the images in his brain only knocked violently together. He tried to understand all--crows, doctor, graveyard--but his dilemma cancelled all sidelines.

A touch returned him to sense. Josephine's hand picked a ball of lint from his shoulder. She knelt beside him. "Are you alright? The ambulance is on its way." "Fuck off," he said. "Fuck you." "What!" She moved back, lint between thumb and index, staring through him intensely. Her country and western skirt stirred at the edges while her cowboy boots sank into wet grass. She didn't notice that there was a grave under her feet. Josephine took off her hat. "You poor son of a bitch." Weakly, Gordon scowled at her, expecting sympathetic words any second. Not wanting to wait, he tried to rise, but his hands were too weak. Instead of raising his head his mind fell back and folded in on itself

crows stay away from nailed crow, create an image of death so terrible even death will stay away, one molotov cocktail against another, use death to defeat death, create a terrible image, nail a crow to my door

He needed to create margins that would exclude death, needed an image so apocalyptic that

death would be scared from proximity, from overstepping the line. He felt there was a narrow possibility.

The crows cawed a trauma of invasion into every recess of his body.

As he waited for the ambulance the "something" on his mind had time to slowly clear. When it did he realized that the "something" was perfect and couldn't fit better with the villainous attitude. When he remembered Josephine had said the lease was up the shakes subsided. He took on a hardhearted smile. His face set itself grim and determined. Hadn't it been obvious all along--the one loophole in death's otherwise foolproof programme?

One hand pulled a bankbook from his jacket's inner pocket. He opened it in front of his face and numbers clopped down its pages. He continued to smile and look at the bankbook as if he'd just discovered friendship and opportunity. A snazzy avalanche of figures for viewing--mostly credits and balances, interest bonuses. Gordon had always invested on winners. His smile rose to crescendo, mouthcorners scaling bristly cheeks towards the ears. It was a longshot, but if only he could do it . . . if anyone could

He'd set into motion events that would blitzkrieg through Oxbow like never before. He knew it was a possible accomplishment. He'd have to hustle some. But Gordon was, if anything, a blackmarket moneymen. The financial whizzkid in him functioned best with an underhand.

Two white suited ambulance attendants zigzagged a stretcher across grass. Gordon limpwristed a right hand before his eyes as if the hand was worth a look. They lifted Gordon onto the stretcher. Above him a shoeshine sky stretched reposed. Two white sleeved arms attached gadgets to his body--electrodes, monitors, I.V.'s. Those boys piled on the dohickeys, giving it everything they had including soothing paramedic doubletalk. The sky hobbled above him until the van's roof blotted it. Josephine's head bounced beside him the whole walk to float like a crystal ball over in the ambulance. He heard the attendant report: "Hello, this is unit

twofortyone, we've got a minor"

They could sing out all sorrow's bentnotes for what he cared. Now that his mind was stuck on the gambit, nothing would turn him away. The kind of event he planned would be a catalyst for all kinds of craziness and all kinds of fame. What Gordon had always really wanted was celebrity status, a star on his door.

that'll be the lucky charm swinging 'round my neck, no beleaguered by death for this boy, make death my contemporary, better yet my keygrip, no my sidekick, wait 'til they see what I'm planning to do, yes sir, I've got plans for every one of them, and when I'm done I'll have climbed right over death, to the top and beyond, it'll bring more folks into Oxbow than any measly restaurant and tour, I'll make the winner touch bones, I'll make the winner my heir, yeah, touch bones, touch bones like a dry white casserole, noodles all over, touch bones like a skeleton xylophone, outer world is the inner, and I'll stand right in the middle, it'll look so scary no one will want to come near me, not even death, nail my crow to the door, yessir

The ambulance sped towards emergency. It passed a roadside senior citizen screened behind shades, grey hat and a floorlength trenchcoat that dragged a drab and ragged hem like a mudcake bridal train.

Inside, between beep and drip, a smile bisected Gordon's face. His hands were moving by themselves, counting money or hammering, nailing.

Over the nearby ocean were the islands of Texada and Harwood, islands ancient Native tribes wouldn't walk on because they were afraid they'd sink. Green and brown landmasses floated still as rain in potholes. Between them the calm water flatlined a dead heartbeat. Max looked at the dismembered road, at asphalt scraps torn up by children to throw at passing vehicles. The year's blackberry picking finale was taking place on the roadbank's perimeter. There were old women and children berrypicking, balanced on long boards dropped into the thicket for access to rich inner patches. The bushes convulsed in the centre where someone snared in the thorns had been pulled off balance, off the board into a basket of tacks. Berry juice trickled and smeared into pinprick wounds. A straw bonnet circled above the churning green leaves. Cream lace and florid fabric pattern flashed between the vines. Men jumped into the bush to free her. Blackberry entangled their legs until they surfaced bloodied themselves, vines wrapped around thighs like barbed wire. The old woman's face was a cat's scratchingpost--her mouth a circle howling. Entranced in the terrible opera, Max's hand was on his hat. A white rabbit watched from the edge of the blackberry patch with yellow teeth and hide streaked with purple nectar. His hand trembled away from the immaculate hat and he kept walking and waiting for that old adversary, the moon, to glower for the billionth time.

The siren from the ambulance carrying Gordon and Josephine came down to him full of romeo noise, highpitched and infatuated. Notice wasn't something Max Fuselli ordinarily took. He was focused so exclusively on the *Tombtrain Express*--always designing irrefutable claims to accommodate it--that when things came at him cold Max reacted to them as portents. When the universe performed it was always in shows of solidarity, in benefits just for him. All outside phenomena were staged to support his outlook. So obsessive, Max was sometimes overcome by the force of his own personality, by the

strength of dementia. Lights flashed lovestruck across his eyewear--starbursts of retinal impressions. His head was motionless. Then the ambulance dragged its wail south and gone. The ambulance was a message from the *Tombtrain* regarding patience and Max couldn't help knowing that.

All that shone were memories--fandangles in the otherwise total dark. He'd been digging graves by moonlight all week and he was on his night off. The trade's tools were his two hands--if you didn't include the obvious shovel--tools that masqueraded as finger, palm and knuckle. His forearms had a kind of lyrical musculature, rippling with strength gained from the steady pitch and lift, from spearing the blade down to lever dirt until the oblong was six feet deep with eight feet length. Tonight the moon really bothered him. It always did. He was an old man. He was seventy years worth of acquired grump and gripe.

With a photosensitive metabolism since infancy, Max never had beaches as a child, never sunglasses. Daylight always zoned him in with restrictions. Variegate Porphyria was the clinical term for his sickness. *Now, only two hours, and then back inside. Nothing more* Just after grade twelve grad everything went worse--charred skin with blisters and rash, vomiting, counting off phantoms at noon. His scars grew hair. His piss had a red tinge that grew vivid with the strength of each attack. Doctors ordered him out from under the sun, expelled him from daylight forever. Max slowly lapsed from Oxbow's sight over time as his photosensitivity increased to the point of purely nocturnal recreations. Life on European time ain't no life at all, thought Max. When the sun came up he went home from evening work at Oxbow Cemetery and didn't come out until the world was shade and murk, dark as a cell in solitary.

He'd set out at dusk muffled in grey light and an oversized trenchcoat, fedora, sunglasses. Even during time off he was capable only of coming to pay respects to the dead, respects almost filial. He shuffled along the road, neither geek nor devil, just a

geriatric lush--the way Las Vegas would traipse if cities could walk. Off a junction he took a dirt track that led from the highway to Oxbow Cemetery.

Max glanced out in the direction of the dark clearing that was Oxbow Cemetery. Back in the misanthropic years of his early twenties he'd been arrested for trespassing there time again. Once he was found muttering incoherently between crypts and cenotaphs. At the time Max thought he'd take a saw and cut a circle around the gravespace--through roots, earth and rock--and carry or drag that whole lot--tombstones, bodies and all--down to the beach. He wanted it set adrift on the sea, to give it one big kickoff into the Pacific. Max must have been hallucinating--too many drunken evenings spent near the nightlite probably induced a photosensitive reaction. He thought of a better idea which included a welding torch and turpentine--burn the whole graveyard up in a mass cremation. His eyes still spitfired at the idea, except when he remembered that then there wouldn't be anyone to pick up. All the friends he'd ever had rode the *Tombtrain Express*, the train of his recurring nightmares. They were coming to pick him up, him and all the rest in Oxbow's graveyard. Until the train arrived it was his responsibility to service the needs of passengers on the layover. In Oxbow Cemetery, passengers waited for the train.

He had no delusions now. He faced the fact that as an old man he could never drag forty acres plus, nevermind cast them seawards. But the stimulus to destroy the cemetery was strong as could be, the *Tombtrain* as prominent to his theory as ever. It was more than theory that aggravated his psyche. The *Tombtrain*, he firmly thought, was true as prophecy.

Max walked past the uproaring restaurant where guests stared wildly at the moon's thin rays without passing each other words over their salads. The gate was unlocked. He took a dozen carnations, always her favourite flower, from his pocket. She used to try and fit as many carnations into his buttonhole as possible. When they partied at the legion waltzes a floppy mess of petals and leaves always caused him imbalance. When informed

of her fatal illness she ordered eight hundred carnations and began to twine them into a giant wreath. The job was impossible to accomplish, she understood, but maybe death would pause for its completion. A day later Max was holding a measuring tape up to her body in a fitting for a coffin.

He went to his wife's grave. She'd seen him through the zaniest periods of his photosensitivity. She knew the *Tombtrain Express* was a crazy idea to base exploits on and she always offered constructive dissuasion. Laying the flowers down he recalled as he always could their sex life together. Fucking was the only pleasure apart from digging graves.

When sex odours would waft up from underneath the quilt Max would realize that sex was really a beauty. Claire was of similar disposition. They'd fucked in cars and in fields under spring, summer and autumn. In the winter he'd take her from behind or she took him from above in heated rooms. Everything about it had been just lovely--the hairs, the taste, the vaseline. The scratches on his prick and walls of her cunt from overzealous coitus seemed less a novelty and more like a supreme expansion and fulfilment of a love they'd shared since childhood. Remembering that period was a cocktail mixture of melancholy, pride, and erection. When they got naked she was already wet and he was already hard. They could have engaged without foreplay if the inclination was there--the kisses missing but not missed. And a devil whose tail before rheumatism used to be prehensile as a monkey's, held and clicked a counting meter for each simultaneous orgasm (they usually came within seconds of each other, or faked it). A devil sat in the shadows on its haunches and rubbed its hands together to create grasshopper sounds which they both took to be the creak of Max's box spring. The mattress itself was silent. Max would watch Claire above him, her back to his face. Her sex didn't seem to surround his cock, instead, it just seemed a crack that he wedged his dink into. Her labia didn't seem to touch his shaft. Her buttohole in his

face was black and comforting as night. Some kind of liquid dribbled white and watery out of her into his pubic hair and reminded him of solar radiance, which he didn't like even a little. He'd reach forward and massage her clitoris while closing his eyes to dream of an android without body hair, of sex that was technique's perfection but wordless, of welloiled passion with a face of Claire's. By her own admission, Claire would look down at the head of Max's penis bobbing in and out of her--soon to jerk and spasm--and think of a dildo making love to her while she sat in a chair. The head on the dildo was Max's. She wasn't absolutely convinced there was any necessity to Max's clitoral stimulation and would often weigh the question as she arched her head back and let something antiphonal form on her lips. Her breasts were beautiful, round, full and still out of gravity's grubby hands. The nipples, engorged with blood to varying degrees, were the colour of albino eyes. Her hips went into muscular ass in graceful arabesques of tendon. Claire's skin was motivated cream. She'd developed a precision and comfort into her musculature. His scrotum was withered. She pushed herself down on Max and groaned. The walls of her sex grasped after something. The devil would give a click on his counting meter and vanish between the lines of the sculpture they formed. He'd find a cranny and dig himself in to hibernate 'til next time, even though he'd no body fat to speak of. The devil would get by. They had sex many times per month.

Earlier on it had been different. The first two years of their sexlife gave each four seasons order, positions and rituals to pursue. Spring was purely missionary and it was in the driver's seat, a driver's seat pushed parallel to earth. New flowers and weeds bent and recoiled against the muffler and suspension as the shocks bopped. Summer was the spoon on the beach under a sheet. The sky between circular clouds acted as a blue heating coil for the dried starfish and sand dollars all around. They showernozzled the sand out of cracks front and back afterwards. Autumn was sixtyniners and comeswallowing in the alpines. The tall grass wound a bondage around wrists and ankles. The earth gave them

straightjackets to wear while it came to shuddering counterrevolutions at every orgasm. Winter's dead months, the old and cold time, were for doggiestyle on a plain bed, covers brought out afterwards. It was a time for feminine domination--Claire forcing Max's tongue to the point of atrophy due to all the cunnilingus. Spring was for sexuality, practicality, orderliness. Summer was for romance, for sex as a secondary occupation while they observed the universe. Fall was impractical with the excessive energy the kinky always required. And winter was for vanity, a selfcentred time for degradation, mainly his--the degrader, mainly Claire, amassing percentages of pleasure. Winter was cornholing time. Claire went at him with a peeled cucumber. He went at her with a dick custombuilt by biology.

That system lasted for three years before Max and Claire matured mentally and emotionally. Before they became simple utilitarians and just fucked, sex was a regimen they loved. Fun was what it had been then. Later they were also trying to force some kind of impregnation. Then, after failing to hammer together an embryo, sperm at seed, the sex took a turn for the third.

Seven years after they'd failed to produce offspring she started using another man's tongue as an eraser. Near the end of their attempts at pregnancy Max had begun to follow his *Tombtrain* obsessions more indelicately and so began to consecrate her body to the cause. The night was an inkwell that he dipped his tongue in to paint the private trademarks of his love and obsessions all over her. His invisible lettering was obvious as crude oil on swans. The designs were emplaced to mislead those who might search him out through her, come at him harmfully via Claire. Nobody really wanted to invade him--it was only his paranoia, only an attempt to maintain the *Tombtrain's* sanctity. She was part of his purpose and likewise had to be kept as inviolate. The painting was a game played every time they slept together. It seemed monkey business on the surface, Claire giggling, but deep down she knew the marking was serious. His tongue could catwalk all soft pads

one minute and claws the next. When they had sex his concentration was on creating barricades instead of opening himself up. Earlobes, nipples, labia, clitoris were knitted by spit into bulwarks. He was writing names on the deed and at night's end Claire always felt like a subdivision. When they were naked next he peered for alien scuff marks, but she told him his hieroglyphics had been showered down the drain. Her reality, however, knew the marks couldn't be scrubbed manually. The script required a third party for removal. So she made a new acquaintance, fucked him silly, then drifted apart from him the way people who are basically exclusive and are only experimenting or playing do. In the few weeks they were together he licked every smudge of Max's ink from her skin. Both men thought they were either in control or doing her a favour, but she knew their tongues took instructions from her skin. They slurped her sweat like truth serum. Her biorhythms produced a juice that allowed them to face the bedroom's darkness and her with sincerity. She was the day for an old pair of midnights, for junkies who needed an opposite for equilibrium, for dopefiends of daylight. She needed her counterpart too. Max rolled in the sheets with her like loaded dice, always landing on the same side. When he licked her vagina his eyes would roll in their sockets above her patch of pubic hair. He'd shake and thrash when he had sex with her and, on orgasm, the testicles popped in his scrotum like Mexican jumping beans.

When her affair was over she confessed it all. "Sorry but the nonsense has to stop," she'd said. Max backed off. She took him from the train for awhile and kept him off it. The affair was her only cheat and when she died it was wanting no other.

Max felt like he hadn't squandered a single year with Claire, but now all he was doing was wasting time. With her gone, her and all the others, all that was left for him was a *Tombtrain Express* black with purpose. The evening breeze rummaged through the urn's petals and molested Max along thighs and armpits. He tried to ignore the groping, to let his

body take holiday from stress. Max was old beyond the average gravedigger and physically mangled from the manual task. He wanted a mind gone tiresome and slack as his body-- cease from idea. But the lust for finish was only partial.

Time was getting by and he wasn't getting on. Nowhere closer to resolution of the *Tombtrain's* itinerary, Max realized he couldn't stop before success. The way to fulfilment was secret--the technique, the means. He'd worked out the imperatives behind the approach but not the approach itself. At least he'd received a message from the *Tombtrain* tonight. The ambulance was a call for patience. Take it easy, Max, wait for opportunity. He turned away from Claire's marble headstone. A hundred tombrows away the man Max approached was kneeling, forehead bent to earth. Sentences dribbled out his lips and down his chin.

Spying from behind a bush Max recognized in front of him the figure of Mayor encased in prayer. Mayor's hands were clasped stiffly in the dark as he whispered. His arms bent back and forth at the elbows as if from imbalance. His frame spun slightly from torso up--windmill rolled by force of night.

Max walked out from the trail's opening straight for Mayor's solo debate. As he glanced around at the graveyard Max imagined bonfires he'd planned, was planning, to light.

"Prayer, Mister Mayor?" Mayor jumped up, chest puffed out, without a single alibi. When he saw that it was Max, however, his embarrassment became sarcasm. Mayor knocked fist against forehead. "Well, if it isn't Max 'filibuster' Fuselli. Not here to dig up any graves are you?" "Having a little social?," Max mumbled. Mayor grimaced in a frown that forced even Max back a step. "If I ain't got enough trouble with this place already, you have to show." "Trouble?" Max kicked a stone loose from the gridiron walkway. He picked up the rock, bounced it off a gravestone to catch it on the rebound, but Mayor's hand rushed to grab it along the return. "Please. It's my sister's grave." "Sorry."

"Trouble?" "Huh?" "You said trouble with the graveyard?" "Fiscal things. You wouldn't understand." "Try me."

Mayor downsigned his necktie, glanced out westward where sky was black and blue between the fighting sun and night. He wiped his mouth with the back of a cuff. "Poorer turnout than we've had in years. Plus the town's population is growing too fast. The living are going to soon outnumber the dead. It costs too much to hand out birth control." Max's ears twitched like a latent talent. "Half the cash, if not less, than we made last year. There's the impending drainage problem. Then there's that lease." "Lease?" "Sure. We buy the lease at a couple million every ten years. This year they've raised the ante too high for us. If things don't work out this town's going to drainpipe, I can tell you."

Max looked through steadily clearing mist towards Gordon's house. Tentative light touched land. Max glanced one last at Mayor, reached up to his hat, turned to leave. Mayor called after Max had taken ten steps and Max's torso swivelled on the hips. Mayor couldn't waste a chance of warning Max with wisecrack: "Anyways, it's none of your business. Sun's coming up. Time for every good vampire to sleep." Max walked towards the gate. He picked another stone from the metal grid, turned it in his hand. Not a stone at all, it was just an accretion of sand crumbling to the touch.

A taxicab arrived with headlights through the humid evening's pitmine, lightrays strong enough to filter charcoal. The cab braked quickly as Max left the gates and crossed in front of it, senseless to traffic. Returned from the emergency ward, Josephine got out of the car. She waved to Max after paying the cabbie, but Max was preoccupied. He knew her, but the evening breeze knew him better and it sang sad as an infirmary. The wind sang him down while his feet made steady percussions.

Mayor resumed kneeling and listened to the confab between darkness and dogs. The fear felt humiliating. At night a ragamuffin band of dogs came to scout the tombstone maze and growl jackal confidentials until dawn. Windblown sea mist rolled mixed with smog towards the cemetery from the mill's direction. The panorama disappeared behind this screen until only lights and mountain peaks could be seen--points of reference in vacuum.

But Mayor wasn't a standard scaredycat and instead of running he took an alias in hopes that it would provide the guts. He wanted a face for every phobia. Tonight he adopted dogcatcher demeanour, telling those rogue mutts they'd better have tags. He chose a stance and strut carefully, trying to spell dog pound in body language all the way from brylcream to feet--argyle socks soaked with authority. Shit, though, he'd forgotten flowers and sister's vase was empty. Luckily he was a man of interview and promenade. There was always some slick blossom through his lapel button. Today he had a rose to drop into sister's tin.

He noticed that the cemetery air was supercharged with ghostly presence. A madhouse of souls rumbled around him and he tried to give them the bum's rush with a lilt of his wrist and a "get outta here!" It was ineffectual. He didn't have the inner resources for exorcism. Mayor knelt by sister's grave and pushed silent syllables from his lips, stopping often to listen as if he'd mastered necromantics and was communicating question and answer with sis. He remembered and the grass stains seeping into the knees of his pants moved him to tears, near to blubbery.

Mayor's life sometimes seemed like a playing board for bad luck and black humour. His sister went Hell's Angel in the late teens, joining the local chapter. She was squeezed out of life in a strange Alaskan highway accident--rode away on her Harley and didn't stop until hitting a bump on the lonely, icepatch asphalt. The friction of ass against ice and highway brought her to a stop thirty feet later. She was found frostbitten at the end of a scarlet trail, buttocks frozen firmly to the road. She spent the night there with icicles forming along her ropy hair and a deep ultramarine sky primping itself in her mirrored shades. The paramedics took one look and called a smoke break. One of them got back to town for a blowtorch to melt the cadaver's bum off the pavement. The weird thing was they found a kilo of crabapples in her leather satchel. The apples spilled over the road, stopped in the ditch. Mayor had given her those crabapples at the departure and now the guilt was large as that generosity had been. They found a piece in her mouth and a fresh one with a couple of bites out of it in a glove ten feet away. Mayor and his sister's relationship had always been tightly sealed--a dossier of passions and fates so mutual that no one but them could hope to understand it. Ever since her death he'd brought the wife closer to insanity by picking apple wedges from fruit salad.

Mayor had recurring nightmares concerning Mister Fear. Mister Fear's old apple eyes shone through his soul's darkness and Mister Fear's cornsilk hair punctured his face with pins and needles like four days without a shave.

Mayor never received any political flak about sister's death. The whole family was sympathetic. Wreaths and garlands were sent when he returned with her after a six month absence, but no one knew what had transpired. They thought it took him six months to return from Alaska with her body because he'd gotten horribly snowed in and they were almost right, but no one knew what happened between his sister and him while he was up there. No one knew that Alaska was precisely when the boozing stopped and he'd emerged as Mayor on campaign trail.

No one guessed. But Mayor remembered and good old Mister Fear was there, buying up acreage in Mayor's memory.

Some are born with fear like an extra belly button, the umbilical chord never severed. Some always have to feel fear even if they hate it. Mayor was like that--he was afraid first and found a reason for it later. It was like he was composed of many selves but it was impossible to be all of them at once. Where one of his selves succeeded in a certain situation--facing up to that black labrador with razor fangs--it failed support in similar situations--crying and running away when a boy two years younger kicked his ass over the schoolyard. As he got older he tried to analyze his brave selves, but the closer he looked the more conditional they were. Bravery depended on his mood, type of challenge, level of imagined threat. He analyzed his bold selves so intensively they became nothing more than dandelion seed. But the cowardly self, the one cowardly self, was constant. Fear functioned under any weather.

As a child he picked roles to adopt, personalities from comic books or movies. As he got older he realized he couldn't live up to the roles he chose for himself because they were cosmetic and he didn't have the strength of character to back them up. Mayor started boozing, to completely disintegrate under drunken self analysis. The fear remained without roles to play against it. Only the bottle kept him quietly in its arms.

Then sister died. Her death helped him establish the one role that was superior to the eighty proof placebo he'd fooled himself with. The mayorage was a base he could act out his

minor roles from again, a home to return to that wasn't himself. If he couldn't put any real backing into the roles he chose then why not let the people place the backing for him? As long as he was Mayor all he needed was fiftyone percent and that was enough support for his bad habit. If he couldn't back the habit from within then he'd get it from without. Of course, once their confidence in him fell away then the mask would erode to real tissue and he'd again have a face to fail against. Sister had taught him that. She'd provided the diagram.

After grabbing a bite at her suite in the Caretaker's shack, Josephine changed her clothes for the nightly patrol. Josephine moved among dogs and cats she'd come to know closely--all of them black in these hours. Sometimes she crawled the bare branches, skirt catching on fine points, tooth and nail, to rescue felines broken open to fright by canines circling the trunks beneath. She released the cats outside the cemetery's confines. By then the cats were either calmed by safety or primed for an easy escape homeward while the dogs' fangs snapped at their hindquarters. Darkness could've been her second skin too if she'd let it--darkness foolproof as intuition. Rehearsal had taken place hours ago, before Gordon came. The band had gone back to homes and wives, children and mortgage payments. She didn't want to be inside the caretaker's, not yet. She was still shaken by Gordon's antics in the ambulance, by his behaviour at the hospital. Josephine knew Mayor would be up to the usual. He came here every day--every night otherwise--and he always came to see the same grave.

She wondered if this would be the time to discuss Gordon. Gordon was on her mind irremovably now. She worried for him, worried that news of his collapse might be something best kept unpublicized. Josephine didn't know the information was already common. All it had taken was eight hours. Oxbow succumbed easily to rumour. Rumour quickly became fact despite truth. Maybe there was nothing to Gordon's breakdown outside of impending doom. But what had Gordon said to her in the ambulance on the way to the hospital? Words bubbled through delirium: *purchase and graveyard, they'll want to haggle heavy duty, that's*

alright, slap down all my billions if necessary, slap 'em on down, for the sticklers over details they'll be lawyers, throw them to litigation, time they sort it out I'll be dead anyway . . . And she knew Mayor would be interested in that news. Her recall was near verbatim and even the inflections of Gordon's speech had been sounding in her head since afternoon. But were they just hallucination and nervous breakdown's mumbojumbo or statement of something significant? She didn't like the way the implications crawled through her, evasive as Mayor's present incantation. She was unsure and so decided to hesitate. Mayor was here almost every day--time enough to tell him later. One thing she knew for sure, Gordon wasn't one for reconciliation--he hated Oxbow and almost definitely had some deathbed plan. All she had to decide was whether what he'd said to her among the other murmured gibberish was worth repeating.

Josephine didn't know Mayor personally, had never really gone down to him beside that tombstone and exchanged introductions, but she followed his schedule. Josephine knew he always prayed by sister's grave and the prayer was secular. He was listing bones, ritually invoking them--*canticle of anatomy. Then the right toe had a hairline fracture. You broke it on a soccer ball when you were young, he'd say. I can fit my fist into the bowl of your skull.* This prayer invoked and formed the vase of sister's bones, but without the florist's additions--empty of roses. His hands were two forceps clasped together. She never spoke to him but listened to the words. Each sentence retched out in a string of barbed wire reeled from his throat by a sadistic fisherman. The origin of his recitation always eluded her because he finished what he had to say and left without doing anything, left without whispering the relation of this knowledge to reality or to his buried sister. He left without intentions. His words were the boundary of some experience she couldn't penetrate. But Josephine had some guesses and it almost seemed like the prayer was all that was necessary to know about him--parameters with depth. The prayer continued in its eclectic list, in hush monotone. He spoke without

motive. Josephine watched until Mayor was nearly done, then swished her skirts between the trees and returned to the caretaker's shack, more informed every time. She went down her insight's temporarily blind avenues, by bare trees barnacled in the moon's light. *Ten shovelfuls of Alaskan soil would fill your ribcage. Now I'll say how each rib is known.*

Doctor June's day had gone hellbent. She opened Gordon's file and the cemetery's dim light shone on forms--medical examinations, x-rays, notations, newspaper clippings--a biography in collage. Shadows of leaves made plaid of her face's skin. Concealed, she'd watched Josephine skirt the trees and eavesdropped on Mayor's speech. Doctor June knew less about Mayor than Josephine and she couldn't have cared. Everything was September's business. Trees nude as newborns spread thin branches in a hundred filaments against the sky. During daylight the trees looked like conduits between the wild blue and the underground--dual root systems through which, if you were down in the ground, you could suck the sky like soda pop and vice versa--but in night's breeze the trees were relics undergoing stress. The wind was hypothermic and when Josephine was gone Doctor June zipped tight her jacket. She turned up the collar, careful not to disturb Mayor's words.

A spindrift of leaves blew a mayhem of rustling between the rows and rows of tombstones. The tombstones offered not a single windbreak. All were passive, without resistance. The sky was black with night. Tickle and goosebump interplayed on exposed skin. In the earth itself corpses catnapped, waiting on apocalypse--forty winks before the final catastrophe--where all things will be revealed like screen credits, where devil's will come and pick diabolically contracted souls from graves with pitchforks like escargots.

She'd undersigned certain negotiations. Doctor June opened the file protectively in front of herself to shelter it from wind. There was a photograph of Gordon's father from infonetworks and his London obituary--these she'd slipped in for her own reference as reminders of ethics gone awry, of past crimes and present guilt. Chatterton Senior's grave was the place which she'd come to see after avoiding Josephine and Mayor. Gordon's father had been buried here after a death some time ago. The tombstone stood the way pillows had propped him in bed. Doctor June had stood witness and executioner to it all

Her first practice had commenced in the mid fifties, in one of Britain's infamous alcohol treatment wards.

Isn't this another kind of lepidoptery, thought Doctor June, as she stared at the matrix of colours on the toilet basin. It was as if the patient had puked out a burst of butterflies, enough to choke a vacuum cleaner on. She couldn't help but look at his spew like that. The doctor's eyes saw something beautiful even in the most fatal circumstances. She plunked the flush knob and let the water drag the whole mess away. This was no time for nature gazing.

The patient had returned to bed. The many layers of thin sheets they used in this ward had wound around his legs, ankles and arms when he'd convulsed an hour ago--sweaty linen winding sheets. Now he was back in fetters. Eyes to the ceiling, he was free now from the raptures of involuntary spasm to relax and perspire. But the sheets aren't real fetters at all, Doctor June had thought. Chatterton Senior's true chains were interior and much stronger than steel cable because he'd fastened them himself--not without outside influence of course. The true chains were too tricky a set of traps--Houdini's last display. The psyche's bondage was near impossible for her to untie.

Why had they assigned her to this Canadian ballerina? In fact, why had she volunteered for this job in the first place? Did she hope to be some perpetual Florence Nightingale flourishing among these people in addiction's prison? Did she think she could administer liquors sweeter than the ones they'd come to escape, quench their cravings with mercy and medicine? She must have been an imbecile to think so.

They'd assigned her, because she was a young intern, just one patient. It was like they were telling her: "Deal with this. Get him off the ground. Prove yourself." Predictably, he'd been the miracle patient of the year, with a constitution too huge for even their inhumane treatments, a constitution so strong that it was its own worst enemy. If he'd only keel under just once they might pull him from the bottle and off the suicidal debauch. Coercing him into conversation was challenging enough. But words of love passed his lips during delirium

tremens--not for her, this ward, this hospital or this world--words central to his affliction, to the entrapment. The man was damaged by some form of love. As the shakes passed and he looked at her calmly, Doctor June wondered if she was meant to be the component that would allow him to open up. Psychoanalysis was a game he knew well and she didn't. He understood the problem, but was incapable of correcting it. Chatterton Senior wanted her to find it. He'd decided to be probed after so many years of bitterness and selfimposed exile from the woman who'd brought it all about. Doctor June wondered if that's why the administration had put her to this--either to torture her with impossibility or because she was the only chance.

Some nights later she heard him murmur a name in sleep: *Theresa*. Even in toxicshock the name came out like a novena, devoutly.

When he escaped after the second treatment and returned drunk, it was her job to stop his screaming outside the treatment chamber and scold away. Frustrated at his disobedience, frustrated at the whole situation, she'd raised her fists over her head to knock him into listening and he'd dropped to the floor under the crosstree shade of her arms, hands over his face, staring at her in hallucination. *Theresa*, he said before regaining composure. Again, the name. He'd flinched and cowered--the ghost of some training acquired in the past, some habitual selfdefense mechanism. She hadn't really meant to hit him, but anger's volition brought up her arms. She stopped yelling. They stood still--forms in emphasis. He was ashamed because he'd betrayed the source and now she knew it. Only after that did he begin to speak to her in words rickety enough to be dredged from the heart--a gradual confession.

Love is a mechanism, a trip wire, a chain reaction. He always described his marriage using the same trussedup terminology. He spoke only of his wife. Despite all that she'd had him withstand--the ruin of his career, the ruin of his health, public humiliation--he loved her. Everyone who knew them thought she'd sucked him in with wile but nobody thought for an instant that he went beyond basic attachment. *Despite it, despite it all,* he kept saying. What

hurt him most wasn't that he was powerless against her abuse, but that he'd let it happen. He'd taken her attacks like forms of affection because she'd shown no others--not for him at least. He had love and obsession to account for both of them. So when the bodyguards held him back from opening night commitments he took their physical restraint as another price. But his payments couldn't match her rapid inflation. She agreed to fuck him only because she wanted his progeny inside her. What hurt him the most were the public violations--when she'd slap him at galas and balls for talking to someone she didn't like or telling him to shut up in the middle of a story because she suddenly had something more important to say. He was dutiful as could be, always saying, *the price, this is the price* and always wanting to pay no matter how it wound him out.

Doctor June had looked at him and asked if they'd ever had a child, but he'd just kept talking. Alcohol seduced him only because it medicated his pride--a salve for every slam, every hard call, every threatening caress, every ring against cheekbone, every fist returning along an arc he somehow felt privileged to be part of. *Why not? What is this thing I'd come to?*, he'd told her. *To see to what extent pain and love can commingle.* He meant pain without euphoria. *Stitch the two together.* In the end it was actually Theresa who divorced him, when he could hardly do anything but drink and grovel. The whole process was directly proportional, as if the increase in drinking affected an increase in his love for her. And there was no freedom even after he'd gone back to Oxbow to tear down the wall of his emotion. All these years of separation from her he'd only been staring at the wall, drink in hand, unable to touch it. The wall was more faithful than he could be.

He spoke to Doctor June of vaccine and the vaccine was solitude, but it was obvious to the doctor that solitude had done nothing to lessen Theresa's hold on him. *Just in case you don't believe me*, he said, *I've got an experiment that'll prove it.* There was something he'd begun realizing elsewhere--a strength he couldn't replicate inside himself. He never explained the experiment. Heavy doses of solitude, she'd thought, kills. Consciously or subconsciously

a part of the psyche always reaches for community.

He continued to drink heavily but by now they'd established a dialogue and he'd seemed to confess everything. But of course he hadn't. There was that experiment. There was that child hidden in his background

The caretaker's shrivelled raisinface came up unexpectedly as a sure cure for hiccups. His flashlight beam took blind swipes at her eyes and interrupted her thoughts. "I'm sorry, Miss. But the graveyard's off limits after 11 O'clock." The sky whistled down low at sixty kilometres. Her normal angelic face was now blotchy with shock. Gordon was dying. The expatriate, Chatterton Senior, had donated this now dying boy to her, this boy now terminal with cancer. Her relationship with Chatterton Senior had involved unusual protocols, followed strange format. "Oh . . . I'm sorry." "Quite alright. Here, let me see you out." She wanted to declassify what she knew about Chatterton Senior, wanted to tell all--but how? How would she approach Gordon with the report? The caretaker took her down a path away from the grave, through wind blowing fountains of leaves.

He was alone in the office hours after quitting time. Nerves ajump, he tried to waive the darkness. Mister Fear madcapped across Mayor's nerves like taut wires, ripples sent heartwards. He'd been born in Nanaimo, devil worship central, and on this night the implications were more tailormade than a shadow. Six years ago he'd brought sister back to Oxbow for burial and hopefully taken his last drink. Sister's memory activated a switchboard of fears. Hands shook as he slid a video into the vcr. Outside the office window a moon curdled, deteriorating from the sweet, white, milk colour it had in daylight. Things go sour at night, he thought, people go bad.

He'd had to scam from the office this afternoon. Workload and stress had gotten intolerable. As usual, when job stress--that thrived inside his caffeinated, sleep deprived, nicotine contaminated system--went past critical capacity, he'd reconsider sister. Thinking of her always let him recoup stamina. He needed her memory for that, there was enough trouble without adding stroke, heart attack or nervous breakdown to the autopsy.

The video cassette slid too precisely into its socket.

Strolling back to town last night, along one of the forest paths from the cemetery, he'd found a heap of wires, glass, bent aluminum tubes. Folding down to look, he recognized a shattered movie camera. Its super eight cassette was still intact. The shambles of metal and glass had been sitting for days. He slipped the film's plastic case into a pocket, stepped over the electronic eyepiece--on the ground like wings sheered from an industrial angel--and went back to the office where it was transferred to VHS by the community network's new cameraman. He pressed play. A red arrow fired up. The teevee hummed regular channel three before the vcr kicked over channel three's digital news bulletin to replace it with grainy black and white footage. Mayor went to his desk, which was covered with empty, greasy, pizza boxes. He insulted the mess and remembered he'd forgotten to call the wife. Oh well,

he was Mayor first and the rest later. If his family suffered, then it suffered. The rest of his life really didn't exist to Mayor. He didn't even try to think about it. It scared him to think about a real life, real past, real people. He was happy considering Oxbow's populace in terms of voters statistics. The picture on the screen knocked and jiggled. The footage was Oxbow by birdseye and, judging from the visuals, was shot through hard rain--very amateurish, hurried, without expertise. Oxbow was his town. There was an OH! of recognition at a zoom shot of the Horseshoe Bay ferry terminal. Two wrinklelegged crows pruned themselves on the ferry's railings--scavengers that posed for closeup.

Someone was attacked by a crow today outside the supermarket and it wasn't a first. Viewing the film he remembered the morning's first hassle. A week ago, an adolescent girl invaded the air space of a crow rookery in a douglas fir beside Joyce Street and was assaulted by three overprotective crow moms. She got out eyes intact but the ebony beaks pecked holes in her face and head. In a small Vancouver Island town they'd thinned the crow community by issuing warrants of forty cents for each severed head. Maybe that's what he should do--sanction exterminators to reduce the population. Get those birds back to their noisy, but meek and minor, place on the food chain. Would that work? He watched the picture pan back and traverse Oxbow's thick and healthy second growth. There would be, inevitably, environmentalists, SPCA, mothers afraid of guns, who'd stand in opposition to the crow contract, either the method or the end or both. Of course, the plan would have supporters: fundamentalists (he could always count on them), the local paper and every beer drinker with a shotgun. Mayor scanned the odds. As usual, group one was the vocal minority, though there seemed some growth there. Still, group two easily contained two thirds of Oxbow, which was sufficient for third term reelection.

He looked down at the list he'd made this morning and urgently updated in the afternoon cemetery. No time to deliberate, there were more important things to do. The crows had to go quickly. He decided to forward an anticrow vote in session tomorrow. The

rest would be up to council. He crossed the crows off his list and went back to television.

Oxbow ran the coast from north to south in a thin speckled ribbon. From the aerial vantage it looked like frontiersville--more rainforest than home. Stillwater came up after Horseshoe Bay. Here, wilderness survival was the main. Other areas of the incorporated town were linked by highway. As the plane swept them under Mayor took roll call: Black Point, Paradise Valley, Grief Point, Westview, Cranberry, Townsite, Wildwood, Sliammon Indian Reserve, Klahanie, Wild Road, Lund From there, estranged islands and coastlands unfolded alone, up into Desolation Sound. The only way out of Oxbow was by plane or boat. Each area had its own entertainments to stymie the backdrop of isolation, entrapment. In Westview, men and women rioted nightly in the Blue Pig--drink and drug haven for the violent and frantic. In the townsite's deconsecrated church, children climbed ruined bannisters and spiral staircases on a dare to peep phantoms dancing among mouldy pews. In Wildwood, teenagers tested their bravery against backalley dogs--you were safe if you felt invulnerable, but twitch one fear and they were spectres after your scent.

Tourists visiting Oxbow, after they'd survived the peninsula's corkscrew highway, could camp at Willingdon campground, located on a beach beside the sewage outflow, across the street from the garbage dump, downwind from the pulpmill. The whole thing was laid out to make camping unhealthy as possible. Not that there wasn't enough to do in Oxbow: swimming, hiking, fishing, cross country skiing. But the reason no one would really want to visit Oxbow was the quality of folk. Ask a cigarette from anyone in Oxbow and they'd press a lit one against your forehead. It was habitat for those happy in the derelict, in wooden fenceposts and shacks along Paradise Valley Road, in empty schoolhouses and train stations of Olson's landing, in walls licked into black streaks by fire's resolve.

It was those who came in the winter that stayed forever. Something in Oxbow's steady autumn, winter, spring months of rain locked off exit. Those who came in the winter planned to stay only as long as the contract lasted, only until some money came together or until a big

city opportunity opened, but they never left. The newcomers got less and less noticeable until they became old identities.

Those born here never left for long and they came back looking worn as some specialty part that had been temporarily running in a foreign engine. Oxbow's children belonged to her exclusively. Everywhere else they were nothing but contraband.

The town of Oxbow devoured people. The macabre painter Bosch had arcane ideas--believed the world wound its way through the devil's intestinal tract. If he was right, and he probably was, then Oxbow was lips and jaw, scarfing its inhabitants down towards digestion. The boys crossed their hearts and promised Mom and God that they were only going through the pulpmill entrance to work a half dozen, just long enough to get their "toys" (cabin up the lake, big truck, fast car, cocaine), then they'd drop out. No one ever left. Their bellies just got bigger and they learned tricks--how to fuck the dog, the easiest of jobs. They memorized their lines: "Not my department."

The plane flew over the pulpmill. In a rhapsody of crowspeak Oxbow exhaled its dioxins. Mayor added whatever details the rainwashed picture lacked--trees and tall grass that grew from the seagull fertilized decks of the World War Two frigates and freighters that formed a breakwater around the log pond. Camera angles careened off mill smokestacks which were ringed lower down by flapping seagulls. The cameraman panned the factory from west mill to log pond.

Mayor placed details, both visual and sociological, on the picture in front of him. The mill was his private machine infernal--a place of shattered windows bleeding cobwebs and stale light along cracks. Busted up drainpipes spurted urine coloured water into rusted sewer grates. The mixtures from the mill's various departments, not harmful in themselves, converged under the sepulchral foundations to concoct new and improved toxic waste for the ocean. Abandoned buildings were everywhere. Whisky and marijuana, in Mayor's generation, had become a psychological necessity in overcoming boredom on the boneyard shifts.

Mayor remembered the pulp mill preoccupations. Though most of his memories of the place were perforated with blackout gaps from nights of homegrown and liquor shifts, he still recalled a few as the film played out and he almost forgot the day's pressures. But Mister Fear's galvanized weight remained on his nerves. Mister Fear no longer frolicked but sat still, heavy as the Mayor's concentration.

Mayor remembered paper bales, half abandoned/half stored, on sixteen foot high forty by forty foot wide piles that they used to snooze on during shifts. One of the sleepers had an alarm clock that rang every half hour so he'd be on time to press a red button in the steam plant's control room. The real experienced workers relied on biological clocks, carefully calibrated to wake them for appointed buttons.

The film camera shifted down and zoomed in on the greenchain. The greenchain-- Mayor would sit on a roller and sip coffee while waiting for lumber down the line. One guy was always fate's donkey for the evening and sweated over the chain jammed side by side exclusively with his boards. Most of the other workers just stood and watched him pull his wood into piles. Maybe one coworker helped. They'd each get a turn and didn't expect help either.

The king of the chain--sixteen years on the job despite promotion offers and threats-- rose arms folded in front of his cranked ghetto blaster. He knew who was king and expected acknowledgement. He could time his boards from twenty feet, walk to the crapper, come back just in time to pull the wood onto a roller and into their particular spots with one hand. He strutted the walk without a word to anything lacking five years union seniority. He'd resisted promotion because in his spare time he'd connived a helicopter pilot's licence and was waiting for offers to pour, so he could quit. The bosses thought it too much trouble to speak to him. He'd been known to walk off without a word and visit his brother at number eleven, expecting anyone working on either side to carry his load. He got pissed when someone refused and he returned to a pileup. He was in bad need of a sandblast enema.

He's probably still there, thought Mayor. His butt's probably still jammed too.

He'd experienced just about every job in the place. Mayor remembered riding by the greenchain with riggers, slow and directionless, and the chain gang would yell the usual: "Hey guys! Working hard tonight?" Inside the saw mill Wolfgang would be screaming psychotically at a junior joe, thinking that somehow it would make them understand or do the job better if a steady stream of fuckshitheadcuntidiot was directed at them above the confusing whirl of sawblades. He tried to create as little incentive for cooperation and effort as was inhumanly possible. The kraft mill's tanks of chlorine and sulphur dioxide--he used to pray that his gas mask was functional, shifting a tongue in the mouth's concavity, checking for that old burning sensation--were three storeys of cylinder. Boys on the wharf drove forklifts at maximum. "You've got to get that thing just to the edge of stalling and then keep it there. Then you're a man."

Mayor turned from television and looked at the solid black wall outside his window. Most managers and salaried employees of the mill had disappeared into dreams, while down there a boneyard shift continued.

The pulp mill, if anything, was a secular monastery. The few women who actually worked were intended as statuettes of feminine coexistence, as reminders of another country beyond these machines, valves, forklifts. The women here were meant to represent, for the men, sexual drives requiring a different gender for consummation. There was some lowscale homosexual enterprise happening, but it was underground and if anyone but the key fags and their associates knew about it then it was in the vaguest and most scrupulous way. "He told me that if I ever wanted to leap over and try it then I should call him. I told him my buddy and I promised to kill one another if either of us went queer." Nevertheless, love and cornholing went on delicately behind the paper rolls, under conveyor belts.

Most of the workers, however, went about the job conveniently as possible. Little by little the four days on/four days off, or the rotating five day eight hour shift, became the

measure. The mill was central, a lifelong treadmill, and they tried to take it smooth and easy as possible.

Just as the plane on the film flew over Oxbow's sections the Mayor's mind fisheyed through the mill's steam corridors and tunnels. Caged lightbulbs swung and hummed. You could stratify Oxbow by the way houses looked--affluent or shoddy. In the mill you could tell gentlemen from lowlifes by the card games they played at lunch and coffee breaks. The higher the game's complexity the more exemplary the crew. The riggers rounded off the highest sophistication with a members only circle of Hearts devotees. You only got in on that game after many intensive years. You had to prove yourself an aficionado. One chink down the electricians pegged cribbage points. Finally, on the lowest rung were yard crew or saw millers who tried adding up cards to thirtyone.

Mayor knew that key to election victory was familiarizing the mill--that was his advantage over the prime contenders. If the mill was a world with attitude, poise, cliques, then that world was microcosmic of Oxbow. This was how the people of Oxbow lived: petty, classified, sometimes mean, and with dogmatic indolence. They cruised through day. And if it was really a microcosm, thought Mayor, then there was one memory that put perspective on reality in Oxbow, only one, and it was a slow and delirious episode.

They'd been patching potholes in the mill's roadwork one sticky summer day. When the job was finished they could hardly stand from heat exhaustion. One of the boys from yard crew asked what to do with the blacktop pile that remained in the small pickup truck. "Let's dump it," one of them answered. They took the truck through the swelter, under conveyor belts where woodchips fell a blizzard of itchy slivers onto your sweaty neck, between wet workshirt and back. The blacktop was semisolid in the pickup's bed. They took it to the edge of the sea where Mayor saw thick starfish fastened to underwater rocks. Two of the men pushed and shovelled the blacktop seawards. Mayor watched it submerge and sift like an interlunar veil. He watched the sticky black mass sink between bubbles and foam, cover up

the starfish. Cover them up. Oily residue, prismatic, remained for a long time on the sea's surface--a resin it took the waves time to rip. They stood round and watched it drown, smoking cigarette stubs with tar stained fingers. They inhaled cigarette smoke puffing from between their lips through their nostrils french style, in a steady vacuum, as if pulling their ghosts back into themselves, through flared, greedy nostrils.

The pulp mill was a stable religious order that Oxbow needed because the regular religious circle in Oxbow was a roulette. The latest craze was preacher Paul, a popular firebrand who specialized at abducting and then interspersing other congregations with his own. He left other denominations recruiting new clerical staff to counteract his charisma. Soon, though, he'd lose his fire and the hungry would move to the next holy thing, shopping around. Most people in town wouldn't stand witness to being Baptist, Anglican or United but to being *Christians*--untied to choose the rite and preacher of the week. The stationwagon owned by the weird Russian family had bumper stickers from ten different churches--an ad campaign on wheels that contradicted itself at every corner and lane change.

The film on television jumped north to Lund, the one area of Oxbow that deserved distinctions. Most draft dodgers in the Pacific Northwest who'd jumped the 1960's U.S./Canadian border to escape the vietnamerican experience came to settle in Lund. Lund was one of the last hippie enclaves on the west coast. It refuted extinction again and again and again no matter how many American dollars were invested to make its waterfront the playground of wealth and fame.

Every year, Lund Daze festivities confused the yacht life. Most of them thought they'd passed through some Bermuda triangle time loop and were back in Woodstock. They were a highly specialized cadre of hippies, those Lund folk. The cops were barricaded by live bodies every time they tried to enter the marijuana charged festival. They could only sit in the squadcar and watch the sky take blue haze into protective custody. The yachters would call the police department from the marina's bar to complain about a tiedyed ragass smoking

dope on the public wharf and the cops would laugh and hang up. Lund, where the grand highway with a head or tail somewhere in Chile (that shattered into sections along B.C.'s jagged coastline), dropped with a final goodbye into the sea to be used as a boat launch.

The picture circled Lund a few times and went rapidly south, zooming in on some insignificant geographical detail every ten minutes. Mayor heard faint curses and yells under the engine's roar. Then the picture wheeled blue horizons, treebranch and cloudpatch. The camera fell in twirls, trying to catch everything in its eye before death--as if everything could teach it wings, as if somewhere in all that cyclorama there was a true secret of flight. When the smash against rock occurred, Mayor flinched. Despite the frenzy of visuals he felt, knew, that the camera had missed some minute detail and thereby the secret. The camera always misses some detail. The world has too much filigree--life has.

Mayor slumped forward from his chair, straightened, walked to the vcr and turned it off. Except for the small lamp on the desk the room went out. He turned to the window over Oxbow. Mayor raised two fingers, pressed them against glass, counted them out loud, then lowered one. Its oily fingerprint remained like the ghostly weight of problem, like an intaglio of predicament.

Mayor knew, luckily, that the crow solution, whatever it might come to, would never appear in the local paper. If they could keep it quiet, if the reporters would shut up, then only a few eligible voters would learn. The paper, he thought, what an irrelevant summary!

The Oxbow Chronicle was stuck in nineteenfifty. Anything even slightly shocking was censored. The paper painted a thick layer, frescostyle, over the cracked plaster of the town's true identity. If the townspeople were dumping thick night over the true stars then the paper was busy pasting fake stars onto that night. No drug deaths, or deals, or arrests concerning, were ever printed. Actually, there were two papers, *Chronicle* and *Herald*, but they were under one ownership so accuracies and exposes of normal, competitive journalism were a nonevent. No unnatural deaths were ever reported, no results of inquests (just a bland obituary for those

gone with age), no scandals (unless some conservative party member really goofed), no gossip, no letters that weren't quaint (except for ones by a local, fiery, radical feminist, who got printed mainly because he was a respected Anglican preacher). The papers were a bad mix of bridge talk, recipes, sports scores and charity events that made the mind regret the eyes.

No, at least this stuff wouldn't be openly visible to the subscribers.

Now only one finger stood, the index, the strongest most important finger, like a giant pin stuck in hand. He looked beyond fingerprint at the face reflected on nightbacked glass. He did his detox years ago but his face still exhibited the unpeeled, pink, potato nose--a face peppered and overgrown with gin blossoms. Yes, he did detox, but he still shook--had problems holding microphones and keeping books steady to read. His voicebox vibrated with an opera warble. He put in time and all he wanted to do was forget, but couldn't. It was the Alaskan alcohol deprivation which had constructed him Mayor and as long as he was that he'd never forget. That experience was the basis of him. As long as he held Oxbow's keys that ordeal would inspire scotch whisky appetite. If he wasn't Mayor he'd go to booze--what other option was there? This was the crux: as long as he was Mayor he'd recall every second of the kick with greater and greater clarity, a clarity he wanted dowsed with liquor and if he wasn't Mayor he could only be an alcoholic. Either way, the bottle stood rigid in his face as that index finger against his reflection.

But that wasn't really the problem the index finger stood for. The problem it stood for was Oxbow Cemetery.

The graveyard was Oxbow's only salvation. Despite all that Oxbow failed to offer, the cemetery made visitors. That unique place of tombstone and crypt contained the remains of more corpses than the entire town's living population. Thousands and thousands of graves maintained the amusing irony that Oxbow's inactive bodies outnumbered the mobile. The place had grown under the care of missionaries, who insisted on Christian burials for surrounding Native tribes. The exact number of graves was hard to pinpoint because a lot of

slaves were buried in mass graves and no one was willing to let the archaeologists dig down to make a skull count. The archaeologists wanted it bad, in fact, but the land was owned by a local family that made more money by leasing it to the town for ten year terms than the archaeologists could ever afford.

Afford to pay--there was the beginning of Mayor's problem. Oxbow treated the cemetery as a fair--restaurant, tours, public washrooms, a carousel ride, other thrills. Outside the mill, Oxbow Cemetery was the town's revenue. The tourist trade boomed because of it. A local union of municipal workers had somehow managed to worm into the deal. Now a graveyard crew did twentyfourhour maintenance straight through each season at sixteen twentythree and two thirds an hour, with time and a half over eight hours a day or forty hours a week, double time for holidays, regular meal tickets and medical/dental included. They cleaned the leaves off with power blowers in Autumn, drove a snowplow along the road twice a day in winter and mowed the lawn in spring. There was even a cemetery band, with Josephine the bandmaster, of ragtime tunes, carny songs, dirges--four dollars a request. It's all one big expense, Mayor thought, a headache working him into a heat.

The cemetery was located at the base of Valentine Mountain--among salal, huckleberry and cedar--in a margin of no man's land between reserve and municipality. An occasionally oiled, occasionally maintained dirt road lead up there off the highway. It's all one big expense thought Mayor, lifting his free hand to a thinly haired scalp. Of course, there were certain kickbacks. The International Undertakers Association held their yearly convention in Oxbow. The cemetery was good for the town's prestige, brought in big scale cash, but the bloody upkeep!

His whole power base rested on balancing maintenance against money from tourism and ticket sales. And this year had the lowest attendance ever. Plus, erosion on the mountain had created a drainage problem in the already improperly sloped graveyard so it looked like a million on drainage repairs that ignored would turn the graveyard into a swamp. The extra

expenditure would not have been a problem any other year but this was also the year for lease renewal and the latest request from the permanent owners of the original title deed was ten million dollars--one for each year of the contract. The municipality would have enough strain covering just one expense not to mention both.

He stared at the finger he'd pressed against glass. Was he losing the executive position? Did the mayorage hang from him in tatters? The fear was still there, bolder by night.

Mentally he examined the town's finances, been over them a million times manually. His brain sorted bills recollected in imagination, debit and credit slips, budget allocations. He felt like a child counting bottle deposit returns. Sooner or later, he knew there wouldn't be any bottles left to return, no more reserves to draw, endgame.

A coward dies a thousand deaths, he thought, but a brave man dies once. But Mayor failed to realize that a coward, because he dies a thousand times, also gets to live a thousand. A hero lives only once. The movie men on their tripwire white stallions live one attitude, one reaction to every circumstance, one perspective. They've no room for diversity or the marvels of variation. Mayor had backed down, reacted differently to every situation. In short, he'd snivelled but seen them all. A bullet in any part of his body would stop him moving til the show's close. He'd had a thousand lives, a thousand disguises.

The one consolation Mayor found was that at least he was still central. Oxbow propped him. He had that knowledge at least. Mayor's political position rested mainly on the fact that, when younger, he'd been an MLA for the New Democratic Socialists in the riding of Oxbow. The past affiliation, in a heavily socialist town, kept him above the waterline. Even though most found him more hilarious than serious, they'd rather him in power than a conservative. Better a geek than a jerk, they said.

He stared past his finger, gazed past his glass reflection, onto the impermeable night. The sky collected hesitant clouds and if they ever got organized it would be bad luck for the

countryside. Mayor would get buttoneyes and knockknees when he had to make a speech and for some reason he felt a similar fear now. It didn't always feel like misfortune's star shone on him, that was an exaggeration, but he suspected someone had just flicked it on. Mayor was full of heartache and headcramp. He took his coffee black, stared into it for something. His index finger was still frozen against the glass when the other imprint had long faded. Mayor looked back onto the night--its surface was no mixture of redemption and deliverance. He stood back, whispered sister's name and waited. The mill's lights scintillated off his inky, brylcreamed hair.

This evening a bird snapped Gordon's fear and let him sleep.

Gordon was occupying a new nightly routine. He stayed awake long as possible to avoid sleep. Sleep reminded Gordon of the real enemy. Sleep was a short demo of the final darkness. The black in his eyes as they closed was death's tartan. He left the house lights on, turned up the stereo, turned the television on, made milkshakes and left the mixmaster running. It was frenetic. The specific actions weren't important as long as they kept him up. But it was impossible to maintain indefinitely--sooner or later he'd cancel the lights and go to bed. Then it always began.

However, it wasn't sleep that reminded Gordon of death but the awakening.

He woke, cold, in the middle of the night. The window was usually left open because he always felt hot first getting into bed, but the temperature would slowly shift and the wind cool, as if Oxbow itself had bad dreams that caused cold sweat to dribble out of its armpits, chilling the air. Gordon would awake freezing in the dark room and think of cancer and how death came without sleep's rejuvenation, a conscious nothing. He'd mew like a kitten and grip the brass end of the bedpost, hug it.

Gordon's sleep was dreamless, waking a nightmare. Death isn't easy to think about after hours. The room left him cold and loudly mewling his sense of restriction. And Gordon, who always slept naked, would begin to piss long yellow jets of urine out of his cock that formed piano string grids on the mattress. Now at least the sheets would be warm for a while. A little warmth now, even if only for a minute. He mewed and jerked ropy lifelines of piss, shot out for help, looking for a target, for a friendly hand to grab hold and be reeled in for compassion's sake. But who would have been crazy enough to hold out a hand so Gordon could piss in it? Tonight, as he went to sleep, he thought it would be the same as before.

During the day crows scouted for shiny baubles. They kept jackpots hidden in the deconsecrated church, attics, places in the cemetery. Gordon had imagined the arrangement of these keepsakes in the shapes of glinting skeletons, but that was only Gordon's imagination. There are the paparazzi of the insane, those constantly looking into loony bins for evidence of their own insanity. He was like that--a hypochondriac of superstition. Gordon was always finding one more mystical significant in the surroundings, another strut for his theory of being able to keep out death. The world was his loony bin. He invented ways it could support his precariousness. Biology told him to expect death, but there was a mystical system that musn't fail. There must be a superstition keyed in to an immutable security. He'd be left behind for good. It couldn't happen.

Tonight the hedge outside the house rustled and a crow cawed from it. He awoke to the sound and rose naked from bed. Gordon stubbed through the obstacle course of desks, chesterfields, columns, to the door. Darkness and the fear poked at his asshole, kept him moving. He entered the outdoors. Branches of pine trees in the front yard dropped sawtoothed smiles at him. Everything was quiet except for the constant rustling from the hedge. Fear entered his butt and rose through his intestines. When it filled every artery and nerve centre, like a rubber injection in a laboratory frog it froze into shape, forcing him into a subhuman crouch, all fours. The fright even entered the delicate bloodvessels around his lips and curled them back like fried bacon. His teeth were white as a toothpaste commercial--stars wafting tinsel glints in saliva.

He loped to the hedge, head thrust back and eyes glaring down a wicked smile. He ladled a curved hand among the turbulent foliage, pulled for the stuck crow. He looked down at himself. The bird's head swivelled inquisitively above his grasp with the eyes of a scientist--cold, rational. Gordon felt his cock become engorged. He muzzled the beak and held the head, one hand over its eyes. He grasped the bird in the other hand, pinned the wings to the

body and entered the bird from the rear. As membranes parted, he felt soft, oddly shaped objects against his prick. He thrust in and out. The bird squirmed like an electric fish. When he reached orgasm his hands unclenched and the bird's wings flapped out its death throes--a reenactment of death by the reflexes on the end of Gordon's cock. He was thrown off balance so why not perform a macabre dance in the grass? Trip and pogo like a man hooked to electrodes, guided to dance along paper feet pasted to the floor and given one shock for every bad move until the dance is joit and frazzle. The crow tried to airlift him away but after flapping for minutes the bird sputtered out to hang limp from his softening cock while he gasped against a tree. Blood drooled from the bird's beak. When the fear softened and withdrew from him he was able to stand upright and his prick went limp. The bird plopped off to lay scrunched on the ground. He grabbed it, threw it under the hedge, wiped a mixture of shit, blood and feathers on his chest. Pubic hair hung in clumps. Bent double he slinked back to the house to feel better. He'd fucked death over. Just for tonight he'd sleep.

The next morning was Monday, his favourite because it meant working days so he could talk to the one person who didn't avoid him. The eight o'clock alarm went off and for once Gordon didn't have to disentangle from the bedpost. Today he woke flat on his back, reached immediately for the telephone by the bed and dialled with euphoria.

"Hello, Oxbow Clinic." "Yes, hello. It's nice to hear your voice." "Hello, Oxbow Clinic!" "You sound great!" "Hello, Oxbow Clinic, can I help you?" "Your voice is such a thrill! Better'n a band aid." "Can I help you right now?"

Gordon went into composure, concentrating not on the thr!!! of hearing someone else's voice but on business. "Yes. Doctor June please." "Oh, it's you. Should've known. I'll get her."

Once the conversation got past the repetitions of "Hello, Oxbow Clinic," Gordon didn't converse. The receptionists insulted him. Often he heard whispers of "weirdo!" in the

background. He showed up at the same time every week. The receptionists knew him. He'd always been shunned. It didn't change a thing.

"Hello. June." "Hi doctor. It's me, Gord." "Well hello Gordon. How are you today?" "Not bad, I guess. Some nightmare. . . Something last night. My muscles ache. Sleepwalking. . . I don't know. But I did actually get some sleep." "Good. You want to come in?" "Not really." "Why don't you go out and get some fresh air then. It'll do you some good." "Well. I was going to go to the cemetery." "Do you have to do something depressing?" "I enjoy the cemetery. Last time I went it was better than drugs." "Don't you think you'll have enough time for the graveyard?" "I guess so. But I hear it's a much better place to visit while you're alive. I have it on good authority." "Always joking, eh? That's important. Don't lose your sense of humour." "Thanks." "Okay. But please come in and see me sometime this week. Will you?" "I will. Goodbye."

Gordon hung up. For the first time he glanced back at his bed, at some dark fluff on the rug and bedspread, dark crimson across the sheets. He looked down himself at clotted pubic hair, at something dry, black and flaky on his chest, at down in his chest hair. He pressed the intercom which signalled Betsy. He told her to bring his clothes and new bedding, then walked into the bathroom adjoining the bedroom and showered.

Betsy arrived with efficient bobbed hair. She was as much personal attache as superintendent of staff. Gordon let her close like no other. He was the genius in terms of the finances and the ventures, but she was the one who organized the day to day, smoothing out inconsistencies between his successes and dismals. She kept the manor running--the only person around him with an allowance of trust. She was brought in from the states after several applicants failed because she could easily stare Gordon down. Betsy took nothing from him except what was deserved. She was his nun--part of the job requirement was no husband, no children--and Betsy called him hubby sometimes to make him shudder. She'd managed to keep her undergraduate daughter hidden from Gordon. When Betsy filed

Gordon's accounts she always gave herself a bonus--the price of familial detachment, the daughter's college fund. She cared about Gordon but she cared more for her own. Besides, he only watched the round figures, not the change. She did her job and that's what he really cared about.

"I've had your paisley pyjamas and your tweed suit laid out. You get a choice. Someone will be up to change the sheets. What happened?" Gordon put on the tweed suit, which fit him as comfortably as "normal" society could, but he knew the only society that didn't run from him was in the graveyard and he could only step into that society wearing a casket. "Nothing. I'll have pancakes today. Call my tailor. I want a new set of suits made. Sharkskin and satin. Red bowtie. Coat and tails. Ivory buttons. Collapsible tophats. Silver headed cane. Alligator shoes. The whole works and one for every day of the week. Phone him to get the materials ready. I'll drop by for fitting as I need one done by the weekend. Then I need some cash clearance, say sixty mill. Oh, also get me some red contact lenses, albino eyes. Then, get in touch with my lawyer and get him to draw up some legal graveyard lease documents. I also need info on legal practices involving expropriation and construction on funeral land. And the limo. I'll need it after breakfast." "That's a hell of a lot of money. Want to tell me why the radical agenda?" "I'm changing my image. I'm going to be a scarecrow." "Oooo-kaaaay! And the graveyard stuff?" "Nope. This one's secret for a bit. My business, alright? I'd appreciate all that done tonight. Oh yeah, have my bankbook updated." "You don't need a bankbook. Your money's all invested." "Betsy, we've been over this. I want to see how much I have. That's all."

Betsy waited while the bankbooked millionaire finished doing up his tie, slipping the coat on. He didn't mind dressing in front of Betsy. She'd seen him naked enough not to be surprised by his body. She'd seen him naked enough to know he looked not bad naked. In fact, he looked great naked and knew it and wanted Betsy to share the spectacle. When Gordon finished dressing he sent her away to do what he'd told her and went down to

breakfast.

He pushed the plate away from himself, pressed the intercom and found the limo waiting. There was still no response from Joe, from the owners of the graveyard lease. The original lease terminated in the middle of November, a month and a half further, and they'd told him to wait, but he was getting tired of the premeditation, wanted to get going with the design. What was there to do with a month and a half of days? He pecked at the last mouthful of coffee, taking it by teaspoons. The mansion stood observatory over the total of Oxbow, a town so elusive socially, a town that ostracised him ten times out of ten. Gordon Chatterton was an isolato. Eccentricity, rumours and his wealth kept most more than wary. It wasn't Oxbow hating him, they just thought he was weird, a resident to study instead of despise. Too strange for close proximity he was always worth the show. Not only that, but his nervous person to person ineptitude kept him asocial. Caught in the cycle of disposition, Gordon stayed away from others because he couldn't interact, but unless there was an attempt he never would. He was this township's witch doctor, one they thought played poker, blackjack, with spiritworlds and Oxbow treated him like radiation, pigeonholed him as strange and maintained space. His response was to become a professional recluse, to mature slowly in the mansion--the hillside's forgotten wine.

However, Gordon dreamt. When he awoke, he knew any dream of his could easily be realized. Yes, there was enough money to afford the exchange between dream and waking. He grabbed his overcoat and stepped out the door, off to the tailor's shop for a fitting.

Photosensitive, Max Fuselli slept through daylight hours to rise and shine at night. All through the snooze, in fact every time he'd slept in recent years, a grinning imp the color of black ink squatted on his chest with its forefingers naildeep in tears as they pressed down and manipulated Max's eyeballs, doing the REM control with his retinas, making dreams. In charge of audio and odour, as well as visuals, that cutthroat imp had, as every phantasm technician should have, tools to warp dream into nightmare. It poured spectres into Max's ears and brimstone up his nose. Max got a headful of horrific scenes. The constantly recurring train, black and steam whistling, would roar into his nightmare from somewhere behind his brain, bones rattling in its wake. When the train receded into his subconscious, leaving only a trail of sweat to evaporate down his neck, Max usually awoke. The black train was constant--skeletal arms dangling out of its windows, the clickclack backbeat of gravestone wheels. A cackle trilling from the tracks became a gurgle in his mouth while he dreamt.

The alarm clock went off and Max slammed upright in bed, perspiring.

Dusk drifted around in the dirty lane beside the white fence of Max Fuselli's garage. Morningglory grew up banks of the grass clotted ditch, entwined around nightshade, the nightshade spiralling in return--twin snakes. Old Goodyears, rotting twobyfours and disconnected metal drainpipes did a deadbeat doze beside whitewashed walls, grass turning yellow underneath.

The walkway's rainfilled potholes contained leaves, grass and asphalt pebbles, all mixed together in a vegetarian brew. Like flapjacks lying in a thin film of oil, oversaturated worms sprawled under centimetres of rain and, one by one, got picked off by birds perched on nearby eaves and gateposts. Mrs. Patterson, who leased the remodeled-as-living-space garage to Max blocked out light from her kitchen lamp as she stood in the window pouring tea, sixty feet away, into one goldrimmed china cup for herself and one for her dead husband,

who hadn't partaken of teatime years now. Patiently she waited, pouring his tea and counting calendars. It was no joke, though, that Mrs. Patterson had been a lot better off financially since her husband's death. Having Max around reminded her how happy she was to be rid of the fogey.

Nine hours away, at cockcrow, Oxbow and sun would rise, but Max Fuselli sat at breakfast: cornflakes, orange juice, coffee.

Max finished breakfast and reached for a bottle of wine. Skin across his shoulderblades crackled and stretched. It was dark and dusty through the window slats and, while flies bizzbuzzed around the blades of a wooden ceiling fan, Max moved from his bed like a man with ligaments ripped after a mechanical rodeo, stretched tall and thin, with awful twitches and gasps. Max stood beside the one window he hadn't nailed slats across. Through it a blue shaft of evening light reached past thorns and fingerstems of a rosebush grown up and over the window. The rays spotlighted a circle on the floor. Dust surged the illuminated column. Max leaned against the concrete wall. A chill moved through his shirt into blistering skin. Gazing into the light for awhile, he tested his eyesight's endurance against brightness, after a few seconds winced away.

Max's mother had been a blonde blueeye, an aryan emigre from South Africa. Hers was the genetic trace which, combined with his father's, doctors had held up as culpable for his *Variegata Porphyria*--a genetic disposition for the disease inherited from the only source he could have gotten it from: his mother. The genes were profuse in South African females of European extraction, autosomal dominant trait, as the medical jargon went, though his mother herself had been only mildly sensitive to the sun's rush of solar radiation. The sun, for Max, was a global network of hurt and affliction, a catalyst for pain. The doctors only nodded when Max listed off the symptoms--abdominal pains, blisters and scabs that sprouted thick hairs on healing, stomach cramps that made his legs stiff as two jutting butcher's mops. The doctor

told him that *Variagate Porphyria* was the inheritance of a gene that blocked a chemical conversion necessary for a certain immunoreactive enzyme. His tinged urine, the colour of red, was due to the release of three compounds--ACA, PBG, and corropophyrin--accountable for the system's malfunction. All that razzmatazz. In Max's case, which was an extreme one, attacks of acute neuropsychiatric dysfunction were common if not certain. Experiences of madness, abdominal spasms, fever, sweats, delirium, coma, seizures kept him occupied. More razzmatazz. The symptoms were a recipe of ingredients for the stasis of torture Max endured, for the barrage of pain, variable in its means but constant in its frequency. Restlessness, disorientation, and visual hallucination. The attacks could last from days to months. In periods of remission symptoms were slight or entirely absent, but, as Claire had said one night, what Max heard through his spasms, as she tried to keep him from biting through his tongue, "You never seem to be in remission." Claire had always understood, though she'd never used it to needle him, that the *Tombtrain Express* was his mind's way of finding a reasonable excuse for its psychological situation. The disease was, of course, worse after puberty's onset. The doctor had told Claire the only way to alleviate the disease's severity was to regulate Max's diet, keep him off alcohol, and be ironfisted towards his dream interpretations, which she'd done with degrees of success as long as she'd lived. They'd even gone for intravenous treatments, when she could convince him, and those had seemed to help. Now she was dead and he'd returned to red wine and a diet of coldcuts--head cheese and pastrami. Tonight, with much discomfort, he was drinking himself towards a crawl.

Max was a dim figure in the wall's shadow. Backlit from the window, half his face shone under a blue light that dropped shadows into eyesockets, outlined his lips and disjointed nose. He turned the dictaphone by the bedside off and put it away. He carried the dictaphone everywhere, recorded everything in the hopes that his sounds, or sounds of his environment, were filled with subliminal instructions from the *Tombtrain Express*. He had crates worth of microcassettes, many hours of audibles stored magnetically. The trunks were full of tapes

he'd made of nocturnal emissions, mainly gurgles and farts, and discussions with Claire on the relevance of the dream, all in hope of gathering more of fate's clues.

Max got up. Skin crinkled around his eyes as he squinted at dogeared photographs pinned to his wall, wrinkled and roughedup photos of older times--one of mother and one of father, a horizon shot over Quarry Lake, the highschool grad class photo with green greasepencil circles, smudged and signed by fingerprints, like halos around faces of friends.

A railway bridge crossed over the creek down by old Quarry Lake. The bridge held together fine years after retirement until Ron the Hog in the annual Labatt's rompin', stompin', fourbyfour blowout, convinced he was operating a train instead of a truck, tried to cross it. The bridge's middle bottomed out and Ron's truck was piledriven into the creek, sinking up to midwindow. All ruffle and alarm, more embarrassed by not being able to ride the rails than by damage done, Ron the Hog waded to the river's edge while other boys rolled by. Their hands dangled tinkling beer cans against the doorsides as they pointed through rolled down windows and jeered. The ones in the back dangled like monkeys from rollbars and chattered with laughter. Bright racing numbers and fluorescent advert stickers stuck to trucksides mocked him with speed. After the fanfare, they winched out the truck, but the bridge was never renovated--hadn't been used for thirtyfive years anyway.

A train had used to operate across the bridge, hauling timber from mountain passes and logging camps to Vancouver, Alberta, Seattle, California, other areas south and east. Max loved that bridge. While fishing as a kid he'd picture a runaway train, carrying passengers as well as cargo, careening down the tracks until it hit the bridge's broken hole and then fireworks as it dropped into the creek. Max would imagine explosions of smoke and fire, burning coals barbecuing engineers--bodies to cinders in seconds, passengers battered to mash inside cabooses tumbled end over end, water flooding in, drowned hobos submissive in freightcars. Saddened, Max would visualize himself in with the hardluck passengers, his futile

fists hammering on glass while river forced through the transparent divide. He'd envision women and children howling like carsmacked dogs--a soundtrack for the background. In the dreamworld, after the accident, when the bodybag men and the postmortem insurance investigators came, they'd find bodies of babies and ladies on the bottom and the strongest deadmen atop--the toughguys and athletes clawed to the apex, trampling the weak beneath as they thrashed for fresh air and safety from fire. Death came by water, by fire, by smothering.

Then, unexpectedly, a fish would bite and, with spinal tremor, Max would awaken and the vision scamper.

Max shuffled from photographs to the table and poured wine into leadcrystal. He turned, lifting the glass, to look at the photo of Quarry Lake again.

Some jerkoff hit a natural spring in the limestone pitmine. Seconds later there was a flood of perrier. Now, rusting dumptrucks stupidly stirred their drowned, rusting bodies on the new lakefloor. No evacuation was necessary, the miners just bobbed to the top, climbed out and went away in unemployment. Dynamite never to be detonated soaked and sulked as the dynamite shacks rotted to bits underwater, buoyant scraps floating to the surface. An interrupted crib game sat on one of the tables while waves rippled at all altitudes through the place, grabbing cards and slapping them to the floor like badtempered gunslingers. High up, cracked walls of limestone rose for sixty feet. Boys would catapult off the walls into summer water underneath. Cracked limestone peeled off in ten foot long plates, a metric ton each, and sank into the lake. Mixed with limestone dust, the water was emerald green--the color of some moon circling Jupiter.

The defunct limestone mine's lakesurface nightly reflected constellations. The train's black, spitpolished iron was a sidereal map too, reflecting the night sky it hurtled under. Max thought

of childhood by the evening lake and was reminded of the nightmare. The infernal train must have been designed in Lucifer's image. Lucifer's an athletic youth whose crackling hairdo is glazed with stars like an oilslick sea--that was the devil's physiognomy according to Jules Bois and wasn't he an authority? Designed in the devil's image the train was an athlete, sinew and steel, driven by whatever its engines fed on. The only thing Max saw inside its windows were the skeleton conductor's smile and deadpan stare. His arm bonefluttered a salute that Max waved back to. He listened to the rattle of other bones, more skeletal passengers on the inside. Max's mind navigated in circles by stars reflected there, moving away but constantly returning for the next passby of the dark locomotive, cattlecars and caboose. His feet made escape attempts from the tracks, but constantly returned him to a pyramid of grey stones piled high on the forests' edge that the tracks pipelined on. Finicky feet couldn't make up their minds to run or return. Every time Max thought of Quarry Lake, he remembered the train. Whenever he slept it was the same dream, same train, same skeletons and the rest.

Max paced back and forth like a desperado, scatterbrained and unstable, trying to figure out the train's significance. "The description's sorta beautiful," Claire had said long ago. "Terrible and beautiful, but it doesn't sound like anything real relevant." "I don't care how it looks. What does it mean?" "When you talk about it. . . . you look so alive," Claire whispered into her chest as she had begun to unbutton the cuffs on her shirtsleeves. "I don't care about 'alive.' What's the reason for its appearance? Where's it going? It's end?" "Always got to see the big picture, huh? Even when there isn't one." "I'm just trying to survive this life, Claire." She'd just shaken her head and drawn him into bed.

Click clack. Satan's hair sparkles, a mirror for stars. Memory became hopelessly interconnected and mutated by nightmare.

Outside the window four crows and a seagull haggled over worms--spat warnings forth to scuttle each others' dinner arrangements. The racket transferred up and down the lane.

Seagull stayed in the middle, the butt of jokes, and four crows encircled it cawing. The seagull shrieked into attack. The black birds scattered. These highjinks, more of malice than humour, even black humour, made the birds' eyes shine with hatred, spark with genuine badness. Bent over the table, his head in a vice between hands, Max listened to their noisy feedback.

Max's dad, pleased by wilderness, released long farts when he and Max went fishing together. In an attempt to turn quagmire into clean water, fisheries and forest service commissioned a creek built to exit from Quarry Lake into a nearby swamp. They imported trout, bred in laboratories from the embryo for the lake--a biological initiative that made the artificial river between swamp and Quarry Lake run waxy with trout. Dad's long jolly farts didn't stink except when they weren't noisy. Father smoked, fly rod a rhythmic piston over his head, nicotine clouds puffing time to that piston. Father was an old battered steam engine, pipes clogged with coaldust. He used to flick trout Max caught on his casting rod with a right index finger, smashing their heads to haemorrhage. He always got the deeply swallowed hooks out, fingers pinching way down the fish's gullet between wormy bits and roiling bloody guts to yank the barbs. Sometimes a piece of stomach came with the hook. Sometimes Max used this gut for bait. But the ecstatic moments came with the worm still attached. Max liked putting new worms on too--the shiny yellow liquid secreted while he pinioned them loop over loop. On the creek's other side were banks of quicksand. In shallow stagnant pools leeches squirmed. A couple of French revolutionaries, Max and John, a childhood friend, skewered leeches on spiky sticks to swing them around like guillotined heads. Sometimes a leech would adhere to their hands. They'd scream and run to Max' dad, who burnt them off with a cigarette, and the two backtracked to the lynch. John got stuck once, began to sink into muck, the stuff already over his gumboots. Father, busy landing a trout, said to Max, "Put pieces of wood beside John. He can stand on those and pull the boots out." The advice

failed and Max yelled to his father who, still busy landing the big one, replied, "Pile more wood and get John to step out of his boots." By now the mud was up to the playmate's waist. Max shrieked at his father. Finally, John trapped at stomach level, they looped a line under his arms, around his chest, and winched him out from the truck. The mudslick body slid, minus boots, over ground. John screamed for them to stop while Max and dad laughed against the cab.

Each memory was some dance of death. The only association to be drawn was with the boneyard. Was that where the train wanted to take Max? Obsession lead north, past turnpikes, sycamore lined streets and souvenir stores, right to Oxbow's graveyard gates. It seemed the only place. The skeleton conductor's smile gleamed of father's from the caboose window. Each recollection lined up, singlefile, in the station, waiting for the evening express with a oneway ticket. *Tombtrain* dragged Max like a tattered flag hogtied to the smokestack, taken along but never taken aboard. Black patches of shadow shimmered within bright light shining through the train's windows, docile as chandelier patterns. You could see light through the conductor's ribcage when wind lifted the back of his coattails. The skeletons on the train had become family and friends. The skullface conductor with father's smile might have been deceased dad, years on that ride, and maybe mom was in there too, waiting for family reunions. Max named the train *Tombtrain Express* and he thought it herded him cemetery ways, to pick up the rest of the relations (in one form or another everyone in the graveyard was wedded to death, all affiliated through intermarriage) for the endless ride--pick up the rest of the family.

Hymn plus father plus lake plus memory squared by train was some prophetic equation, sibylline. Some fantastic dream of death stoked the engine. Where's the last destination, last stop en route the express? Max sorted through details, skeletons, the bird's cremation, the bridge in swan song. It all seemed to lead towards the grave. All memories merged into a

train that was barreling, determined, to a particular place, showing him the way, telling him to meet it there. Departure was at some childhood point, arrival who knows when.

Tickets to the graveyard, thought Max. Fun for the whole family, graves for all to desecrate. Summertime tourists spilled drinks on headstones. Jampacked with visitors, wirefenced beer gardens swung and swayed. Scented gravestones were for sale and car fresheners for any rearview mirror. Who'd want to be buried in a place like that? Yearly Americans, Europeans and Japanese trampled over bed and bones with handycams and zoom lenses. Nobody in the cemetery rested easy, Max thought. Little tourist boys peed on Auntie Maggie's headstone because the bathroom was too far away. Crap from U.S.A. poodles collected in piles beside the fence. Garbage was strewn wall to wall--bubblegum, plastic wrappers, beer cans, flowers plucked from vases, wreaths disappeared. Max once addressed Mayor about stopping the seasonal desecration. Mayor replied: "If they can't sleep, let them get up and find somewhere quiet. We're not going to give up five million dollars in ticket sales (not to mention income generated through tourism towards gas stations, restaurants, hotels, etc.) just to satisfy some superstitious belief." True, the graveyard was the only thing bringing anyone to Oxbow--the town that managed to produce more corpses than people--but no one except Max seemed to care about the damage done as long as they continued to come. It was as if the graveyard was the only thing alive in Oxbow. Tourists meant summertime. The graves were dark and cool. It was easy to see the lean-to for Max's sympathies.

Two swallows rested in nests built in a rafter's corner outside the window. His nighttime activities subsisted in the lonely: dreams, memories. Max went out sometimes to walk streets and sidewalks, to the cemetery, to the hillside overlooking the mill. He walked past houses where bygone friends had slept, friends made obsolete to Max by time or by the change in his temperament and needs as the disease called for a different lifestyle, other priorities.

He'd been arrested in various acts of vandalism in his early twenties at the graveyard,

before he'd married Claire. The judge was always exasperated, as no fine or jail term seemed to affect Max's inclinations, his doggedness. It was Claire, in conjunction with medical specialists, who, in a final attempt to save him from sanatoriums, offered an experimental solution. They thought that if Max was somehow made responsible for the graveyard's corpses then he could claim some kind of patronage over them, feel helpful to them. The municipality, in a benign frame of mind, decided to try it out. They offered him the position of lateshift gravedigger and garbage collector. Along with Claire's voice soothing his violent tendencies the experiment worked. Everyone breathed a eureka of relief. Max stood up to the demands precariously but Claire was there to pull him back from indiscreet action. Now, with Claire gone, it was only her conditioning and the job's continuance that kept him marginally inactive. But if the job went, so would Claire's overhaul of Max's mind. Nevertheless he was always monitored. Mayor and Town Council were kept constantly aware of his emotional whereabouts through reports Max made weekly to the caretaker.

He stared out over Oxbow. It's just a question of money, he thought. Few men and a few silver shovels, couple of dumptrucks. He swigged wine, a drop resting on his chin. It was now silent in the lane. Worms left over from dinner would become breakfast or lunch tomorrow. White seagulls drifted in from the strait, the only bird to be heard at night. Crows, scared of the darkness that composed them, waited for day. He looked up Ice Street, where Gordon lived, town's richest eccentric. He'd be the one to supply the cash.

Dig up the place, warehouse it, and wait. Make the graveyard small. Then they'd stop coming to see it. Then there'd be nothing special about it. Hide at least half. "A question of money," he whispered over the breakfast's remains, again and again.

He stopped by the one of his dresser's drawers. The shotgun within was a mental laxative, something to use for target shooting, to work off steam at each release of gunpowder charge. He'd make targets of flower planters and hanging baskets in Mrs. Patterson's backyard. Unsuspecting, she always thought it was those goddamn vandals again. He

looked down at his hands. No, I'm too nervous for that tonight. Might shoot my foot off.

Maybe a walk to the graveyard. Maybe I can listen in on one of Josephine's late rehearsals.

That night, as he walked through town, the mill lights were small, cherrysaped fires, spreading. He imagined himself a gravedigger knee deep in earth, hauling forth rotted figures.

He made plans like a saboteur.

North along the coast a Rolls Royce limousine sped from town to boondocks. Landscape in slipstream bewitched Gordon. Mountain peaks moved under cloudcover. Forests gnarled and scrawny swarmed around the highway's edges. Red letterboxes shot into the opposing south as if to neutralize movement by a balancing of destinations. Gordon felt the world work to exclude him. Homes became rarer and rarer where the paved ribbon traced continental extinction. Land disappeared into sea. Occasionally a frame of twobyfours that was a partially completed home shed a wet wall of gyprock. Pink insulation fell from the boards. These and deserted homes stood sepiatoned and fog infiltrated on the country's last mile.

The highway was a paved axis Oxbow spun around, but out here in Lund, for draft lodgers, marijuana gardeners, saltskinned mariners and deepwoods reclusives, it was something to cut from and retreat into makebelieve frontiers behind cedar and salal. A careful bureaucracy of antisocialites kept things thorn and blackbear--self defensive and not easily engaged. Here time was homespun, a handicraft, a cottage industry. Those long driveways off the highway weren't stitched to civilization's spine but to old merchant routes, wagon trails, trade winds. The true expatriates were even further north of this privacy, on green islands that advertised nothing. They were rarely seen and never heard from.

Twin hands with rings on every finger including thumbs clanked together when they clasped. Gordon groaned and rubbed his hands together in the backseat. Pain strained against his forehead with titanium petals, not finding enough space inside to bloom. A headache, or something else? He didn't know for sure but the idea of disease was a constant jolt against the landscape's hypnotism. He pressed forefinger to a silver button on the armrest and the tinted glass partition between him and the chauffeur slid down. "How soon?" "Around the next bend Mister Chatterton." "How about moving faster?" Partition replayed smoothly.

Subhuman in his coolness, the chauffeur's head was motionless during speech. He sat

stockstill behind the wheel obeying every order like an automaton. The swishswash of windshield wipers moving films of rain and the steady yellow line kept his concentration honed and unbroken. He remained unaffected by Gordon's snarky comment. When they arrived Gordon told the chauffeur to neutral as if car and driver were one engine.

Stiff as a waxwork dummy, Gordon arched his back. Vertebrae popped out and in like a series of hammers off piano wires. The house stood in precincts of shadow and Victorian, in high contrast architecture of black spires and weathervanes against the sky's white clouds. It was all antique words, this place, songs from hit parades, old sensations. Fire escapes snaked down the building's backside and rattled in the wind. A totem pole of pokerfaced critters--bear, salmon, eagle, killer whale--perching one on top of another, leaned against the west wall. Their eyes were all from some halfidded honeymoon and would have looked lazy except for mischief's hint carved into crowsfeet. The totem was authentic but for the graffiti and the fact that it was out of context here. A hodgepodge of sixties and seventies slogans in red, yellow and green covered the totem: Kill the Pigs! Anarchy Now! Save the Whales! Green Planet!

The house was encircled with douglas fir, alder and hemlock while huckleberry, softrot stumps, tall grass, formed a submatrix in which dandelion, ratsnests, chickenweed, filled the gaps. From the house itself coloured glass cast ultraviolet and infrared skeins of delirium across bark and leaves.

Gordon walked inside a sleetin coat and tails down the half mile of rutted driveway. One hand jammed the tophat onto his head and the other suspended a cane over the earth. Go. Jon moved into wind and rain. Subzero gusts were bottlenecked along the driveway causing him to pinball off trees with every burst. It was winter and the weather was cold enough to freeze. Face turned into his chest, he walked the storm unprotected, one arm in front of his eyes to shield them from rain. Weave and bounce--he looked like a fifthrate demonstrator of dodge and hook. From the house's interior, the man in the tatty cocktail suit

looked to shadowbox with spooks, spooks that were confederates of his, confederates in a jittery darkness.

Inside the house, Joe's quiet accountant's eyes watched the raggedy man make his way. He held a cup of coffee under his nose. His grandfather's connection to the outside world, Joe took a sip from the cup. It was his duty to make sure the paperwork was in order and money correctly allocated--most of which he allocated into his own pocket. When the deals went sour he blamed it on grandfather's infirmity.

The thin whistle of someone inhaling marijuana in the main room was the house's only sound. Grandfather's white hair shone a highlight in the general gloom and the cherry on the joint's end grew dim and then bright. Grandfather had manic eyes, facial skin jigsawed to the point where it looked ripe for a dismantle. They rarely spoke to each other, moved through the house's vespertine gauzes and layers like secret police.

The doorbell rang. Joe answered it.

Gordon's wide eyes were patterned with webbing of red veins. His lips were smeared with bark and needles. Hair plastered to his forehead. Clothing looked a shambles. Dripping water, he opened his mouth: "say, I've got millions, got me lots of money, enough to run a whole presidential campaign, enough to cause scandal, plenty of that, x marks the spot, where do I sign, the lease, the lease, the lease, called you I'm coming, names Chatterton, Gordon Chatterton, so cold, holy, so cold . . ." His teeth clattered out their chill.

Grabbing Gordon's lapels, Joe pulled him inside and ran upstairs for a blanket and coffee. Between epilepsies Gordon poured some coffee into his smile. Joe led him upstairs, sat him on the couch. Grandfather watched. After the coffee thawed most of the face, Joe delivered his personal nightcap, a draino for the body--a shot of overproof rum, moonshine and concentrated lemon juice caustic enough to unclog toilets. Feeling quickly returned to Gordon's body. His mind began to function.

Glancing around, he saw a picture on the wall of rosycheeked Salome breathless after

the dance with John the Baptist's head on a platter to go. Underneath the painting a jukebox's silver frame was inscribed with swirls and symbols. Inside, vinyl seventyeights of jitterbug and foxtrot were platters for grime. Large rectangular boxes filled with topsoil stood beside the wall so that green creepers, vines, ivy, could crawl up the yellowed wallpaper. A wooden ceiling fan buzzed inches below a cracked plaster ceiling the color of old dentures. Despite constant creaks of leather furniture, whirl of ceiling fan, glint of jukebox, everything was silent. Ennui, come in from the rollicking storm outside, lay down a verdict of dust.

Grandfather's headband wasn't a sixties heirloom, not a period piece, to him. Time's victim, not nostalgia's, he'd travelled back to the sixties in nineteenseventynine and never returned. Timemachine Syndrome, known by most as senility, was a bittersweet remedy for the passage of years--bittersweet because the old man enjoyed it, but the present, which occasionally required his attention, couldn't part the reverie. His version was hunkydory but groggy Grandfather owned the land of Oxbow Cemetery. Every ten years the lease had to be signed over, but it was difficult to get a signature from someone so antiestablishment he reached for a shotgun at first sight of a three piece suit.

He stared at Gordon trying to determine if his apparel made him part of accepted society or if tophat and silver cane belonged to someone he remembered as Padre Ecstasy, acid king of a ballroom highway probably still afloat under the stratosphere.

Ten years ago they'd gotten Grandfather to sign the lease over by disguising it as an orderform for hydroponic equipment. Any doctor would have diagnosed the old man's brain as soupstock, but what doctor would make house calls that required him to stare pointblank at a twelve gauge inches from his crosseyed face and then have enough derringdo to ask the old guy for a physical? Only Joe the reluctant grandson could cajole Grandfather and how was a best kept secret.

"You're Gordon Chatterton?" "Yes." "Right. Well my grandfather, as you can tell, isn't exactly up to business."

The old man passed Gordon the joint in a test for the zero tolerance attitude--say no and you're just another troublemaker.

"You'd better take it. And inhale. He knows if you're faking."

Gordon took the roach, memory quickflipped back to highschool days when dope came with friendship. Gordon bent over the roach and arced his torso up to help his lungs inhale. He bent forward and repeated the oiljack motion three times. "Good lungs," the old man said. "Nice toke smile, man."

Every muscle in Gordon's face was full of verve. With a sudden cardiac flux his heart distributed bliss. He smiled back. "This is nice." He'd forgotten how good it was.

The old man watched carefully, drank in Gordon's reaction like horoscope. With a slight giggle Gordon stood and bowed low. Along with that goodtime grin he brought a flamboyance into his speech. "Well hello. Hairy hallucinogenic. Groovy scene you got here dude. Tube city." His coattails scraped the floor and his tophat was held brim up while the other hand put the cane to his chest. The old man locked a wider grin, looked over at Joe: "Hm? How's that? I'm likin' that one." Gordon slumped back into the seat with laughter's outburst. He'd almost forgotten the reason why he'd come. He was suddenly delinquent, wanting garish fun in the old man's pseudohippie world. He looked at his clothes. It should've been easy to merge with the old man's concept except Grandfather believed while Gordon could only playact. Gordon abruptly stood up, hand to his temple. Here came the downward slide. . . .

"Listen Chatterton. Could you come to the kitchen for a minute?" Joe walked Gordon into the open doorway between the kitchen and main room. "What do you want?," asked Joe. Looking down at pointed alligator shoes Gordon tried to remember the line of bafflegab he'd prepared. Gordon always tried to throw the opposition off during haggles, to gain confidence from their confusion, but with dope's insecurities and Joe's direct questioning he spoke straight and narrow. "I want the graveyard lease. I'm willing to pay a lot." "I see. . . nice

shoes." "Thanks." Joe was making time, trying to formulate a financial arrangement he could benefit from.

Grandfather had always tolerated Joe's presence, but only by doing *the act* did Joe ever get a penny out of him. However, *the act* left Joe a tad embarrassed. Joe had his pride to think about and *the act* was so silly it was reserved for strict emergencies. It wasn't worth the measly twenty bucks, besides, Grandfather would have gotten suspicious if he requested money every day. Meanwhile the old man was miserly with everything in the house including his stash. Joe had come to confiscate what he required right from the accounts themselves.

"Nice hat." Joe was still in thought. "Look. . . ." But before Gordon could continue he'd thought of something. He'd get Grandfather to sign the lease, but in return Joe wanted a cut of graveyard profits. "Profits?" "Yeah. Say ten percent." Gordon agreed. Joe hissed. That decision came by too quickly. He'd been prepared to bicker and bargain. But it was too late. He didn't want to blow what he'd got. "Okay. I'll need that informally agreed to here. We can draw up the legal stuff later." They signed a ten percent agreement on a piece of foolscap. "We need a countersignature." "I'll call in my chauffeur."

Gordon dialled the chauffeur with his cellular telephone. Erect as a goosestepping Nazi, the chauffeur walked through freezing wind, but by the time the door was reached even he shook from negative temperature. Gordon took the countersignature and sent him back.

Gordon went up the stairs and, on calling, received an answer from a hallway off the main room. Joe stepped straight from a time warp--rose tinted pincenez below rasta wig, bongos on a twine strap around his shoulders, jeans patched with peace symbols, paisley, tiedye and pieces of the American flag, Berkenstocks of course. His loose shirt from India silkscreened inscriptions of the *Rig Veda* against poses from the *Kama Sutra*, wide sleeves lined with oxidized roach clips. On his head was a genuine orange Jimi Hendrix headband. From hidden highperformance speakers came the opening bars of Hendrix's "All Along the Watchtower."

Grandfather lit another doob, fingers tapping in tempo. Joe went into the kitchen and performed mouth exercises--gurgling, tongue stretches, hummed a few bars--preparing for the act's rigamarole.

He slid, fluorescent across the room's twilight, pushing Gordon aside like a door. Joe stepped before Grandfather and the old man looked him over like a sky made fluent. Grandfather's lower lip trembled. Joe grabbed the joint from the old man's mouth and took a drag.

Joe: Yo! What's shakin'?

Grandfather: Oh not a lot. Y'know

Joe: Well get with it dude. Ride this rhumba.

[He passed the joint back. The old man inhaled deeply on it.]

Joe: Hey hold the roxie on the maryjane. Leave some for me.

[The old man obediently passed the joint back.]

Joe: Groovy. Hey cat, you plugged into the grapevine these days?

Grandfather: What's the news, dude? Message for me?

Joe: Dead centre.

Grandfather: Lay it on me man.

Joe: Well you know it's not the whodads or the howdads or the wheredads but its the I-don't-care-assimilate-or-else-dads that really get my goat.

Grandfather: Righto. I'm with the plan, stan.

Joe: Don't sell me that load, Joe. I'm the one diggin' the scene everyday, and they're all comin' down on me. They're comin' down cause someone's heard the word that you're giving the brothers and sisters the big shakedown. That's the word on the street, freak. Sellin' out the family to the man.

Grandfather: I ain't dishin' out no bad karma!

Joe: Don't hassle my ass, baby. I'm givin' you the lowdown, and it's way down. I'm

tellin' you straight 'cause I know the rap ain't where it's at and you're gonna get waycool before the trips over.

Grandfather: So what do I do?

Joe: Well, you're a brother so I'll give it to you straight, Jack. It ain't no little drag. Y'see the man, and by the man I mean **the man**, dig?, is the one who's gotta crash. But instead he's mainlining off your ass to keep on the makin' and takin'. And that's the baddest shit I've heard from San Fran to the true north. Takin bread that should hang with the gang, dig? And it's all over some halfassed turf just south of here. I know you're a headtripper and maybe you're just not jivin' with the whole deal cause it's bad acid, and I can dig that, I really can, but something's got to go down or we lose the scene. You gotta hang that fire. I ain't about to lay into you with that preachin' rap. Enough bad vibes go round without that. But you gotta haul cause this is the time and this the place. Cause you're hip to it and I'm hip to it that it ain't gonna go it alone.

Grandfather: So what do I do?

[The old man wimped, whined and grasped at Joe's sleeve--a total milksop.]

Joe: It ain't no hardcase to crack man, so chill. You just sign the line and slap the dough onto Gord here. He's a far out dude, maybe even *the* dude.

Grandfather: Sign the line?

[Suspicious now.]

Joe: The word ain't gonna treat you fine if the establishment gets the cash.

Grandfather: So if I sign the community will crash here?

Joe: And if you don't they'll do the hightail, baby.

Grandfather: So I gotta sign?

Joe: You're a hepcat--I don't need to say it twice.

Grandfather: But

Joe: I'm just the dj, you hangin'? I don't give no skin one way or another. But it's the

people that matter, dig?

Grandfather: But

Joe: Sign or fly motherfucker.

Grandfather: [signing uncertainly] I guess what's best for the people is best for me, huh?

You think they'll dig the scene here soon?

Joe: [taking the lease] Now you're on to it! Groovy. Of course they'll show. Y'know them, dude. Kudos for doing it right, babe.

Joe walked to Gordon, lease in hand. The old man went silent. "Voodoo Chile" blared its tantra.

The amount-of-sale box on the form was empty. Gordon looked at Joe questioningly. "Thirty mill. to be safely legit," Joe advised. Gordon got a good deal. He'd been prepared to go as far as fifty or sixty million.

Joe and Gordon set Sunday to sign the documents giving Joe a tenth percentage of graveyard profits. Looking back at the old man, Gordon felt fraud. The deal was rank. Not only was the old man tricked but Gordon would be dead and all his business transactions void before Joe made one nickel from the graveyard trade.

The guilt didn't disappear as he walked downstairs and out the door. Betrayal's weight sunk every footstep Gordon made back to the limo--a triple agent haunted by scruples.

Gordon continued to walk nervously, infested with the urge to work betrayal and tragedy. This road's a primrose path, soft and paved with cash. At one time he might have had sympathy for these people. They were isolated as he. Heartbreak had been no stranger to their lives. Gordon was a roominghouse which friends and affection left and left, but Death had dovetailed with and boosted his desire to bump love. It was time to stop pissing around instead of committing prize vengeance on Oxbow. He had no time to fool with these people. He had plans respect wouldn't block. By putting rivets and iron round whatever feelings

remained for friends, enemies and people he might have liked, Gordon had become Mister Heartbreak--the man with the manipulator's smile and casanova's clothes. From now on everyone was identical. Nothing mattered but keeping death far off and that required Gordon to spitball in Oxbow's face. He'd take and break anything, use anyone and everyone to accomplish his goal.

With the wind at his back Gordon easily got up the hill to the limo. He crossed and kissed his fingers, placed them on the house's mailbox, laughed and climbed aboard the Rolls Royce.

He got into the limousine and instructed the chauffeur. He was ready to begin--only one termination notice to make. He called up Doctor June. A single sentence later Gordon politely said farewell and hung up. He had the winning contract, but the graveyard still needed a lot of work done to it before homefree was achieved, before the grand prize underscored his feet secure as voodoo.

Oxbow Cemetery was inert below Doctor June. However, on the nearby highway, benzedrine truckers, after chewing coffee beans and hauling for forty-nine nonstop hours across statelines, natural boundaries and provincial divides, drove that last kilometre to an incomprehensible stop-home again for a day. Sometimes a motorcade of four-by-fours, jeeps and hotrods, headed north for beaches or logging roads. Girls and boys inside cars drove with wolfpack intensity—close together, highspeed tailgating. Though motion faster than eighty kilometres per hour was illicit, the only movement near the cemetery were these criminal velocities.

Five Kilometres from the graveyard, lower on the same dirt road off the highway, she could discern rusted cars sitting out gridlock in a swamp of cattails. Ernie's Used Car and Parts Emporium was a decrepit, ragtag fleet up on blocks--vehicles stalled forever, wheelless, vacant windowed, with lichen on antennas, moss rugs on northfacing quarterpanels. Autumn's soggy leaves lay in piles, tucked between dashboard and frame, overlapping the roof like shingles, decomposing along creases of bucket seats. "Honest" Ernie in overalls would sip beers with a friend and admire an engine's fragments like a scientist over an intricate vivisection. Named "Honest" Ernie because he only spoke truth, as God was his witness. "Good handling? Power steering? Fat chance, pal. That one couldn't turn on a Texas dime when she was still alive." But Ernie ran a tourist information booth more than anything: "Graveyard? Straight on through. Nice day eh?." Or, "From the states? Lucky to catch us on our one week of the year without snow." Or, "Ah, welcome to Canada. Velly, velly nice of you to come. Graveyard straight through, hei!" Ernie tried hard not to wrinkle anyone's racial or national misconceptions, including his own.

Down graveyard hill's north slope people scuttled by a marina, restaurant, motorboat launch. The floatplanes sized up under Doctor June's eyes like microbes. The Cedar Shack lounge/restaurant floated on cedar corks strung tight with steel cable. Inside, men from Beer

League baseball tried to decide on food, ordered another round of beers instead.

Further up Oxbow Lake there was a flooded area where bleached trees stood on end in a desolate forest right out of the water. The waterline folded out in a warped mirror. The cracked and pitted snags with occasional osprey nests on top were pylons that foolhardy water skiers dared to take. They called it the "slaughterhouse slalom course". Motorboats weaved between the snags while skiers had to judge each turn's angle of crossover in order to keep the momentum from swinging them upside those knotholed posts.

Up Oxbow Lake summerholiday shacks and shanties squatted on the waves, holding shoreline for support with fragile and thin walkways. Tin pipes wearing chinese hats shot from peaked roofs, while generators in sheds loaned electricity. Water skis leaned against windows within, supporting egg sacks and horseflies on webs. Privately owned and towed as far as lakehead, the Crown Land owners didn't seem to mind these scrapyard structures off their territories.

Underneath pounds and pounds of waterpressure trapped saltwater slithered round waterlogged wood and pieces of sunken logging machinery. When the lake entrance was dammed by the mill, right where it emptied into the sea, some saltwater was trapped in a small basin beneath the lake's freshwater. Because they trapped saltwater, they also trapped a piece of Davy Jones. That sea devil was the one cabin owners blamed when refrigerators and televisions went missing, when the water level fell so the floats sat the rocks. "He must be drinking in that lake again." Vestiges of a nearby Indian encampment rested like the faintest idea in the lakebottom's stale brine--puzzle pieces of a North American Atlantis. Even Valentine Mountain was underneath Doctor June--a narrow, steep ridge. Valentine Mountain was one side of a chasm, at the bottom of which was the mill.

Her face went into a vertical confrontation with sky. There was an indelible skull and crossbones in her memory. The mirrored aviator glasses on Doctor June reflected light like a funhouse mirror. Winter came in. A zephyr blew warm across the alpine meadow,

sideswiping the autumn chill, in and out of blackened, hollow snags. It played harmonica through knotholes. The air gave no forewarning of winter's razor weather. She was up here for the excursion, the thin air, quality time with Oxbow's amazing environment. The alpine was her only therapy other than some sexual pastimes. Blue ptarmigans poked their heads at the ground. She'd caught her breath among desperate pits and ruts full of translucent alpine rainwater before resuming the climb to this site. Doctor June trampled on fragile mountain flowers with every step--an intro across fragments of stems, bulbs and petals.

The meadow was neat, fragile, detailed, but the coastal mountains that rose by contrast all around were pale blue, snow peaked, without variations except for the curves and barbs of their upper contours. The further away the mountain range stood the lighter its shade of blue was. Clouds hung over the rock faces like dirty wool, tangled, sopping mesh. Lakes in hollows glinted when sun came on them like dental fillings. The sea beyond the mountains, down in the strait, was empty and cellophane. Logging roads up here, the older spurs, were years unused. With three to four foot alders growing in the groove between tire tracks which tickled and scratched the stomachs of every truck that passed. Still, she could see roads not completely obliterated by vegetation. All along mountainsides Doctor June saw switchbacks and spurs, almost contrails in the mountain blueness. When the rains came they stayed and stayed, keeping land cold for winter snow. Even on the sunniest days everything was damp and waterlogged. The sky rarely had the time. Sun dials would have been pointless, even wristwatches became irrelevant. The air was anaemic and circled Doctor June like a clever nemesis.

Gordon had concluded their relationship. All the years of work she'd put into tracking him and manipulating the staff of Oxbow's clinic so she could become his physician, had been negated by one phone conversation. It went to ruin. Now she didn't have any idea of how to make reparations for what she'd done. The years of guilt blamed and squeezed her. The town went by underneath--in each home a burlesque of sickness and health, death doing

people apart. The weight of remorse was heavier despite the lightness of the alpine's air, despite azure, despite a wind rare for winter--wind suave as sirocco, wind calm as the decision Chatterton Senior had made, as the decision he'd brought her to.

Weeks had gone by and he was just as far from recovery. He'd set a new, all time record with his second bout of endurance against "the treatment."

How does it fit doctor? Is there some kind of prognosis?

The sun slanted into the antiseptic room. His words were drab as the pyjamas patients wore. He was here voluntarily, something no one could understand. Nobody ever came here voluntarily. His cheeks had sunk to bone. She thought she could make out the faintest relief of teeth against them. His skinny arms lay in sleeves like lead in a pencil and that pot belly of his was no small gourd.

He'd gotten drunk, been treated, gotten drunk again, treated, drunk all over. And he was still playing a game with her that she'd long ago quit. *I don't know if there's anything we can actually do for you, Mister Chatterton.* She didn't think. Doctor June knew for a fact that this man was on a binge that neither Heaven or Earth could stop short of the killing stroke. Another session in "treatment" would murderize. She was sure of that.

I can't get out of here, doctor. He rose up in bed suddenly, the last strength flaring before submission. *I can't get out of this. Not mentally. But physically . . .* In a general calm, he sank back to bed. She parted the drapes in his room. This was a terrible ward. Why had they made her guardian of this ballerina? That's how she felt--like a guardian. And worst, why had she volunteered? Because she'd had no idea, never an idea. But maybe there was one now, a terrible one.

When Doctor June turned from the window he'd lapsed completely into unconsciousness. His eyelids were tulips gone tight, but his silent words remained suspended and trailing from his mouth like an iron birdcage from a chain that went down his throat into

his stomach--and the aviary empty, no occupants. She put one hand on his forehead. It was so cold her hand nearly froze on it, skin to skin. There was nothing for him except her idea, the one solid cure, the one option that his outburst had insinuated. *Not mentally.* No, he was right. He could never get out mentally, but physically. . . there was an option. She took one more look at him before leaving. The man who'd come to isolation via love and alcohol, and who couldn't get out of the isolation because he was spent. He'd been wrong. The payments his wife had exacted didn't come from an inexhaustible source. He was bankrupt. Love wisely, love is a tool you use and nothing more. Her feet tramped on her thoughts as she walked.

He left later that week. The clothes draped his shoulders like wilt. She had presented him with the clothes herself, but they hadn't set more words between themselves. Doctor June noticed when she handed him the clothes that his customary flinch was gone. That's good, she'd thought. He's decided. There'll be a surprise for him. She shook her head free of all ethics and shook it again to make certain they were gone.

The vial of nembutal pills in his pocket were like dehydrated romance. He could water them or leave them to dry. The nembutal pills in his pocket awaited like no big surprise.

Paperwork scattered Mayor's desk like fliers from a letterbag bomb. If you looked carefully at his sagging flesh and jowls he seemed bloated beyond all norms. His open mouth looked like a tear in an overstuffed envelope where all the paperwork vomited from. His tie pin was a bullet hole in a pressurized time capsule. If you could have looked beneath the ratty undershirt even his belly button was a fingerhole tube filled with rolls of microfilm, frame after frame of executive and corporate details. He had information indigestion and it paralysed. His gorge seemed constantly on the rise, like fever in a thermometer, with information he was too full of to use. The excessive data had turned him into a communications bulimic. Mayor gorged himself on facts and figures then had to induce memory discharge--a storehouse ready to spew.

Mayor had stared into coffee for an hour before his office phone rang. His face had stopped moving for that hour. He wanted to reach up to his ear and wind himself. Like a rundown pocket watch with the silver lid sprung, Mayor's face was open and static. During difficult periods he always waited. The secretary would look into the office every couple of minutes to check if he was still alive. She wanted to take her pocket compact and put the mirror in front of his mouth to verify his exhalations by misted glass, but refrained. It was Monday and overtime--trying to catch up to the load involved with the yearly municipal taxes. Except for his nose hairs stirring in the air conditioning he really didn't move. Somewhere, he thought, there's a telephone repairman whose ladder's fallen, clinging eighty feet up the wire, waiting for the next fatal surge, the biggest collect call ever.

When did he fall? He'd phoned the owner of the graveyard lease this evening to renew the contract and had gotten the old man's grandson on the phone. The old man was in lala land, Joe had said, zonked on some prime sensamilla. That was usual fare--Mayor had grown accustomed to transacting with Joe on the old man's behalf. But this morning Joe had grown

cold to city council. Every second of silence deepened the chill already penetrating to Mayor's large reservoir of fear. I have enough trouble without these worsening relations, without more social farce. When Mayor asked if they could set up a tentative date for renewing the lease, Joe sighed without compassion. "Oh. Sorry. I'm afraid that's already a done deal." "What?" Mayor couldn't suppress a single decibel. The office's thickness absorbed all but a slight tremor on the door's hinges. "*Chatterton Enterprises* gave us an offer that's hard to top." The secretary peeked into the office, white knuckled on the doorknob. Mayor crushed the receiver into the side of his head. Pain corroded sweetly into him. "Call for me?," she twittered. "They gave us thirty mill. If you want to negotiate past that, we could do lunch." Mayor wondered if he could maybe slam that phone right into his ear and pull it out his nose like a magician's handkerchief. The secretary turned tail when she saw his pallid face. "I didn't think so." And then there was nothing but dial tone, smooth as scalpel. It took Mayor awhile to get the phone from his face. Gordon Chatterton had scooped the graveyard. Now there'd be much emergency.

Within an hour Mayor had lost more hair than in the last year, but he still didn't move even though rapidly balding. Oily hair covered the sheets of paper in front of him and still he was immobile, the side of his head mottled by the receiver. Why Gordon Chatterton? Hadn't he heard that Chatterton was dying? Chatterton was a real fuckup. What was this game with the cemetery? Chatterton knew he was toying with Oxbow's welfare. Was it money he was after? It couldn't be.

Mayor finally worked those neck muscles to stare at strands of hair drifting from his dome, a moulting extravaganza. Just a tawdry magus whose magic had become irrevocably expended and now it all came apart. He thought maybe the graveyard really was only a game, the way it was set up as a diversion. It was disgusting to think that Oxbow's children heard death as nothing more serious than a hurdygurdy. Last night on television the newspigs crowded their cameras and tape recorders around a Texas execution as if death row

were a media construction. Wasn't that exactly the kind of behaviour he'd perpetuated during this term? Weren't these the kind of associations--rigor mortis and showbiz hoopla hand in hand--that'd been advocated by every preceding town council? Death's a laugh, given enough cash. And finally, what disgusted him the most was that his paranoia wasn't centred on the possible threat of Gordon desecrating the graveyard (could he go any further in that direction than what had already been done?), but that somehow he'd seal off the town's commercial prospects. Oxbow relied on incoming tourist cashflow to balance the books when the party was through and you wanted to know how firmly into the financial black you were before New Year's Eve disappeared into soggy January the first. Not only all that, thought Mayor, but Oxbow's morale depended on death. Those white crossed rows of acknowledged death reminded the citizens of financial assurance. They needed the graveyard intact and, literally, larger than life for it to remain a symbol of prosperity. What if Gordon dissolved that? There was no doubt in his mind that it would mean the end of his career.

If the mayorage went he was gone too, gone to grief and bottled charity, gone from sister's last hopeful lesson, from her final gesture of aid. There'd be no one to help him then. All the masks would gather on the outreach where he couldn't grasp. He wouldn't let it happen. He had to get to the graveyard, make the ritual recitation, let his words hit what was left of sister and maybe she'd rebound with response, let him know what must be done. But what if the graveyard was already annexed to Chatterton's estate? Without a glimmer of victory, Mayor put on his coat and ran past the front desk, car keys adangle. Evening had come too late to warn him--now it was a reproach he drove his car from.

The night was fifteen minutes into its daily lifespan. Josephine and *Skeleton Closet* lay on the grass outside the caretaker's shack. Johnny upright bass, Billboy guitarist, and Denny percussionist were arranged in a circle, scalps touching, bodies radiating outward in the moon's peculiar limelight, making the shape of a lit sparkler. All had identical thoughts--how,

now that Gordon had the lease, their careers and even the upcoming gig would be affected. A notice of eviction had arrived for Josephine and the caretaker that morning from *Chatterton Enterprises*--the first and only notification they'd received concerning the lease's change of possession. Josephine watched the moon but it was also audible. Her eardrums took cribnotes of infinity, of voids, while her eyes were only outriders with nothing but superficialities to report, allowing little inference from their reviews except geometry. But the source, yes the source. She tuned herself in the key of lunasphere. This wasn't the first night she'd made the boys in the band sit and listen. They'd rehearse an hour, then come out here. This process functioned to inspire and get rid of musical blocks developed in the first hour of practice. When they went back the music was free. Their notes rocketed with improvised jets, extempora. But tonight there was too much uncertainty for the boys to relax. Tonight, they lay on their backs and watched shooting stars and meteorites rocketeering off orbit. They waited, uptight, for the direct hit, the one that would reduce them to dinosaurs. Every one that went by, Josephine would say, "Hope that's a high pass." Crickets chirped and frogs croaked through broken reeds on broken horns.

Somewhere far off there was the crackle of radials on gravel. A car was busting across open night, along the dirt at the speed of four lane asphalt, and without a single headlight to flicker before it. The clouds puckered into fascinating lifeboats. Under beacons of moon and star, that vehicle had no means of sight, nothing to refract off the branches that hung over the road and snapped against its windshield. Pebbles dispersed in the air behind it with a hard rain's violence. Josephine noticed the noise, the vehicle's arrival and disignition, but remained committed to her privacy. If it's more bad news, she thought, let it come to me.

Even further back, a vehicle with bright halogens clanked along in its cast iron magnitude, iron buckets aswing low, to affect Oxbow Cemetery with the strength of a new day. Behind it was a small pickup.

Mayor had gotten to sister's grave but the assorted thoughts in his brain made him deviate from the standard prayer. *I want your bones inside me, sister.* These sentences were something unusual, something adjunct to the regular. He was composing now according to the hour's desperation and desire, working spontaneously on shaping new endearments for the bygone sister, indulgences fabricated just for these wild times. *I have to go extreme, sister, take measures against what's coming. Bring on your bone weary scaffolding to creak around me. Tell me how to take it. Gimme a persona from your shattered remains. Just like you did once. Like you used to do.* Now Mayor broke apart, flooded by the old stale fluid, a water table topped just under the skin. Fear is c'ly meat deep. He couldn't speak anymore, just kneel in front of the tombstone which was his only effigy since her death. The stone and engraving were no different from the face and form he remembered of her. He knelt and knew nothing of how to cope with predicament--the answer not forthcoming as it had, years ago, in Alaska.

He waited trembling for a few minutes then slumped. So it wasn't a kyrie eleison, but what did she expect? But bones, nevermind a whole skeleton, don't just rise for any chump, no matter how poetic and heartfelt the diction. Sister didn't move from her six foot of clay comfort and his knees were sore. This wasn't Alaska. This was Oxbow Cemetery. Here the dead rested, interred beyond Mayor's mere ideas, beyond mortal notions of complacency. Mayor's political world was, at the last glance, a bone of resentment in him. This was the peace he really wanted, not the lukewarm fear bloating him with irresistible force. But I'm not dead, he thought. He had to go home, reconsider the policies and formulate some counterattack against Gordon. Sister wasn't about to give direct response. She would work, if anything, vicariously, through inspiration. She was the twentieth century muse, favouring accident and epiphany, not direct administration from beyond. She was stark and stripped to the minimum and, accordingly, her help would come with strict economy. The colloquial was the proper way to solicit her, not prosody. When he'd avoided sighting by Josephine and the

band he went back towards his car, saw the third vehicle arrive and park, then let something near a bloodcurdle leave his lips.

Of all who heard the cry, Josephine was the first off towards the turnstile where Mayor was all agape, the limp fat of his ass squished between the fenceposts, the first stage of shock evident in beads of sweat. They saw the machine too--its driver already gone in the pickup, in tail lights down the dirt road towards the freeway. It was to be ready for work first thing in the morning.

Only the exit sign glowed above the turnstile at entrance's end. It illuminated something longlimbed and tensely waiting beyond the gates--a preying mantis impounded. The band ran and clicked through the turnstile. Mayor waited and stared at whatever it was that stood catatonic out there. They walked up to him from beside. "I don't know if you're ready to see this," he groaned. The night air scrabbled around him. The world encircling Mayor and the object had thrown its groove and was desperately trying to realign. "I think this means trouble. Horror for the cemetery. He's got terrible plans." They came through the turnstile and stared with Mayor.

In front of them stood, parked, a backhoe. Its pistons gleamed. Its driver's cab was empty, brainless. There were bars around the driver's cab that bent and flaked from rust. The control levers were porcupine. The neanderthal jaw of an iron scoop had a tremendous underbite. The whole contraption was a mobile mouth, parked and silent. On the side of the machine a white nameplate fixed the letters: *Chatterton Enterprises*. The backhoe was a steel itinerant, come to take the job efficiently--capable only of efficiency--and then move on. They recognized in themselves also that same pure potential. They knew what they were capable of at the most extreme and the machine was there to achieve only that extreme. The backhoe was like every excess they'd ever accomplished or thought of accomplishing. The backhoe that, when it wasn't in the shop, was meant to be working one hundred percent. There was some envy on their parts, recognition that the machine was more ideal than they were. They

too were machines, but gone machines, existing between breakdowns. They had the capacity but were rinkytink in comparison, they had too many flaws. The backhoe had only purpose--exoskeleton for an excavator and that was absolutely that. Its noise and smell were probably garage band and garbage dump. The backhoe waited on the dirt like something that had risen out of it. Behind them the graveyard also waited.

The flower beds within Gordon's propertyline filed up under the apple trees' shade for kind asylum. It was noon. The sun strained at leash, way high and tired, cursing God as it did every day at this time, cursing chains of orbit and gravity as it had for the billionth. Joe's old Buick stationwagon sat in perturbed steam at the end of Gordon's driveway.

Inside the house Gordon sat across the desk from Joe. Betsy was also present. There were legal papers on the desk in front of them. Joe wore a plaid shirt with orange lumberjack suspenders and on his head was a cap with a beer label patch. He kept pushing the cap back in frustration, trying to understand the jargon on the documents in front of him. Every so often a starling, drunk on mountain ash berries, slammed into one of Gordon's living room windows and they watched it, mutely, as it flopped senseless or dead onto the ground. Three or four red and purple splotches stained donut jelly on the window. The luckier starlings, ones that abstained from glassknocking, wheeled and fell among atmosphere. One starling flew upside down over a smooth pond on Gordon's property. Clouds and blue were reflected in the water and the topsyturvy bird tried to figure out this refurbished sky--why it rippled, why so easy to fall into altitude? Who'd instilled the sky with gravity? Finally, it splashed into the lake and floated there on its back, wings spread. There was the true sky, up above. The bird acknowledged the mistake with a loll of its head.

"I don't understand any of this." "Let me put it this way, Joe." Gordon leaned forward. The rims of his eyes looked tired and burnt as the ends of used firecrackers, the spark gone. "Let me put it this way. All this is," he waved a shaky hand over papers smudged with carbon, "is the legal way of saying what we already agreed to at your grandfather's place. You get ten percent of whatever I make off graveyard ticket sales." Joe pushed his hat back and stared at Betsy roughly, then back at Gordon. His smile was selfdefense. Gordon leaned back impatiently in his chair. They'd been going over it all for three hours now. "I didn't want to

bring it to this. But I guess I have no choice. These papers are for my protection"

"That's what I'm worried about." ". . . For my protection and yours. Now. You've already sold me the graveyard." "And I've got your promissory note." "True. If you want to leave it at that. Why don't we?" "No way. I know this stuff here holds up better in court." "Well then sign it and release me from this torture." "I don't fucking trust you." Gordon was about to retort but Betsy cut him. "Why not take them home and study them? If you find something you don't like, call us. If there's nothing wrong then sign them and mail the whole package to my office."

That had been all Joe wanted to hear. In the three hours of debate he'd only gotten a third way through the contract's five pages. All he'd wanted was space and time with the dictionary to determine what he was undersigning. Joe rose from the table, muttered thanks and began to stuff the document into an envelope. Gordon sighed and glared out the window.

Thieves have selfimposed insomnia. Their sacrifice is sleep. They steal all night and then night is stolen from them--all relief filched away. His frilled shirt was rumped, hair messy and pants crinkled and he looked like a bag of garbage ripped open by dogs. He felt like it. It had been days since he'd slept properly and even when sleep came there was the halfnight awakenings.

Joe muttered a goodbye and shook hands with Betsy. He reached forward tentatively to Gordon but Gordon had shrunken into his baggy clothes and shrunken into his mind. Gordon didn't notice Joe leave, didn't rouse until Betsy spoke to him. "What's the rush, Gordon?" "Huh?" He was too tired to hold sense together. There was no response in his mind to fit the implications of Betsy's question. "Huh?," he searched. "You look like you haven't slept in days. You pushed Joe so fast I'm surprised he didn't tell you where to go. What's the rush?"

"The rush is . . .," there was nothing for Betsy's query. ". . . The rush is there's no time."

"What?" "I don't have time to waste. I phoned them from my limo yesterday evening. They set up last night. They've started on the graveyard today." "Started what?" "Started everything, uh, the work. I'll need a big tent. Some cans of high grade paint. Black paint. The kind of stuff that doesn't wash in rain. Get me a nice big strong ledger. Could you order these for me? Fast?" "Sure. Want to tell me about it? Or do I have to go and look myself?" "Huh? Oh, it's nothing. Just forget about it."

The air was coiling around him. There was headache. The air was like baby snakes in a pulse of knots, trying to uncoil themselves. Whole walls of snakes--that's what he breathed and saw. They were transparent, clear as running water. His sight was going and the world changed its properties to suit him. Just as the disease and his masochism twisted and cheated his body's natural state so the world was right behind, warping itself as if in competition with him to see who could go more hyper with absurdity. The way air writhed between venetian blinds it reminded him of a fantastic game of snakes and ladders.

He was tired. Betsy walked out angrily, slammed the door to her office. She wasn't used to him being so uncommunicative. He sent his cane vertically up and down the blinds and they rattled washboard. The head slumped off his left hand and gently hit the table. He didn't awaken, slipped into dream and floated in sleep like an astronaut.

Entering Gordon's place would've been like crawling down the bass stem of a pipe organ, a claustrophobia tube, with the sound of snoring, low, resonant, whooshing along the hallway. Squeezing along the corridor the body would've shaken expectantly. Coming to the area he used as office, where he met customers and prospectives, Gordon would've been seen slumped over the desk, papers under his face, cane in his hand, his back collapsed against venetian blinds that bent under him. His sleep would've, no doubt, been slackjawed, throat rumbling at intervals. When he snored, his tongue would have easily moved like a flyswatter--his head tabled for discussion. Let's discuss. And would bats have formed a halo

in the air behind him? Would shaggy, indistinct bats have hovered like rorschach tests, with mouths open, fangs displayed? No, there wouldn't have been bats in the air behind his sleepy head. And might there have been other, even more improbable monsters--faces of benevolence and malevolent hooknosed portraits--in two dimensional penmanship on the air along with the bats? And what about streamers black and fragile as lingerie swirling perversely, upwards and parallel to the earth? No, all these wouldn't have been engraved on the air behind him. Whatever guttersnipes and hitmen and father figures and radar driven rodents might have arisen out of the trenches of his mind would have jumped from the caprice of a brain abandoned to sleep. But even though they wouldn't actually have been drawn upon air you could've heard them rustle and clack--could've heard leathery flaps and a black cat pad the ground around the legs of Gordon's chair. If seen, the images might've looked like some marvellous showerhead surge from Gordon's head.

As it was, only sounds indistinct but amazingly unified emanated from Gordon's snore--a caucus of sound like a mechanical piano overwrought by too much voltage. For Gordon, reason had been replaced by reaction, by a workaholic imagination.

Even asleep, Gordon seemed strange, moving, expending energy. His sleep looked strenuous, as if actually requiring an effort to maintain. It was as if his mind and his organs--heart, liver, lungs, kidneys--were performing some kind of clumsy but powerful dance, like a grizzly executing gymnastics within him. It was his organs' last tango as cancer took their legs out one by one with redhot superiority.

Gordon had come to feel that everything in the body had its own strange will, manners and formalities to practice. Teeth were no exception. He wondered if the most successful humans were the ones who brought, forced, coerced, each of their body parts to come under one code of conduct. The body was a political party, a nation. The brain acted as enforcer, party whip. The brain wore the tricolour armband. And Gordon hoped that where his brain failed in ordering events within, it would excel without.

A starling hit the window and that was all it took to wake Gordon. He lifted his head slowly and slitted the room in a slow arc until he came to. It took him seconds to adjust the shutter and recognition. His sleepy face was a bounty picture, but safe as a lithograph. It didn't take him long.

He finally realized that he'd held the cane throughout. Relaxing the muscles of his hand made the cane tip rattle tunesmith down the blinds and bounce once or twice on the floor. He felt his eyes float in molasses or a liquid, it seemed, like black wine. Don't run down your life-- that's what they'd always told him. But he couldn't be saddened by how right the doctors and maids, those surrogate mothers, had been. Emotions were for those outside the enterprise. Sparrows spattered like live rain.

Oh yes, the graveyard. He pulled a pocket watch out of his vest and glanced at it. I'm almost late for a meeting with the contractor. He pulled on his swallowtailed coat and grabbed the top hat. Off to the graveyard right now. Gordon's eyes, despite his attempt to check them, were undergoing oxidation, a rusting of his ironclad expression. Here was a sick man, with no hope to trump in against his death. His life was certain of failure. He'd had the arraignment. He'd lost. But Gordon would still try to bring it home. There could be no deviation from the groove, from the attitude.

He looked in a mirror to pluck a few nose hairs with some tweezers he'd picked off the table. When he got to the door, Gordon flipped open a set of sunglasses, round, granny style, and put them on. Smiling coyly, as before a confident proposal, he pressed the buzzer for the limousine. "Join me on the road to immortality," he said to the chauffeur when he arrived. "Or the road to death. I'll drop you off in Purgatory. It's along the way to where I'm going." Without allowing him a response, he slid up the partition between them. The limo pulled a presence large as a concord, except it was black instead of supersonic.

Gordon had been watching television in the limousine on the way to the graveyard. When the

chauffeur had gotten the car to the Alberta intersection, Gordon, who'd been looking distractedly at the teevee for most of the trip, told the chauffeur to turn left. It was going to happen just as he wanted it. He wasn't scared of fucking with the sacred, not now. Anyways, what's the worst that could happen to me? What're they going to do? Kill me? He let out a succession of profane, but harmless laughter like a series of blanks. He pressed a button and his window slid down. He leaned a sharp elbow, twisted tightly in black satin, out the window. The hills rolled by like angels in a circus ring, angels like the bleached horses circus ladies ride on. Were they Cherubim or Seraphim? Hard to tell them apart, he thought. The distant mountains veered off under snowcaps.

Gordon put sunglasses on and reached to block the sun out with the palm of his hand, but the light shoved knives between his fingers. In the little round glasses he was some newwave welder, guiding the sun of his torch across a hairline fracture in the blue. But the sun wouldn't move for him. He dropped his arm. Death will toe my lines, he thought.

When he arrived, the work was already begun. The backhoe moved into the cemetery and a group of about twenty men with shovels began to rip open earth, carry gravestones into the back of a large hauling truck. They stacked coffins in a special corner of the graveyard. Not one coffin had been opened. With the backhoe doing most of the digging the work had progressed quickly. However, not only were the graves themselves being dug up but the backhoe was upending the whole graveyard's earth. Deep furrows and clods of dirt were ploughed into nice straight lines--a garden turned over for spring planting. Someone had nailed boards over the caretaker's doorways and windows. There were steel rods driven into the earth with twenty feet of chain coming off them around the cemetery's whole perimeter--leashing posts for watchdogs. There was progress. Some of the caretaker's boards had "no trespassing--private property," painted on them. A wire mesh fence with running loops of barbed wire at the top was being erected around the forty acres.

Josephine and the members of her band stood against the old wroughtiron fence where

the new wire mesh had not been put up yet. Billboy had a large purple and black spot around one eye. A tissue was slowly turning red at the end of Johnny's nose. Expressionless, they watched work get on. There was a board with a drawing on it close by and contractors gathered around it to mark off areas with dotted lines like butchers marking choice beefside cuts. They lined up and sighted the lay of the land and made notations in dirty, carbon thumbled notebooks. It was Monday and the exhumation of Oxbow's graveyard had begun. Overturned earth steamed in the sun.

Gordon got out of the car and galloped over to the contractors with stiff stiltlegs--a scared beanpole man. He greeted them warmly, held their hands in both of his when they shook, so nineteenofive eastern European. "How's it going boys? Making quick work, I see." "Hello, Mister Chatterton," said the chief contractor. It was so apparent that they disliked him. He walked to the diagram taped to the table. "I see you've got everything marked off. Good. I like strategy. Just remember that I want the coffins left for myself. I'm going to be setting up a big tent up here. Should be here by the end of the week." "Mister Chatterton. We were just wondering. Well. We just wonder about the legalities. You own the lease and all. But the cops called. They're coming up here." "Don't worry about them," Gordon put his hand on the man's shoulder, who recoiled two inches down from the touch. "I'll deal with the legal rights. I'll deal with the cops too. You just do what I hired you for." He walked from the group of contractors, hands on hips, to stand tall above the exhumed area. But the tired spirit within leaned against the ribs and spine. The head of the ghost inside him drooped, pulled itself awake when its head fell forward to a certain point, gathered limited awareness and drooped back to sleep again. He'd only slept an hour today and only a small part of his consciousness was actually awake. Only the area of his brain in charge of obsession functioned. The rest of his body concentrated only on shaking against fatigue--the dramamine effect of three days with little sleep. And his hangnail stubbornness was the very fuel that wouldn't allow him to stop before a total

collapse--so much like father had been. "How about doing the tree now?" One of the contractors picked up a walkietalkie and whispered tersely into it.

Josephine and *Skeleton Closet* all walked and dragged themselves like zombies. They were limp, restless from fatigue, and just about in shock. Josephine went over to Gordon. "Mister Chatterton. This isn't legal." "No, Miss. You're right, I think. But I've got myself a lawyer who promises he can keep the whole thing gummed up in court for me as long as I want." "How?" "I don't really know but a promise is a promise. He's an expert in litigation. Come here. Watch that monkeypuzzle tree."

Gordon had gotten them to save the monkeypuzzle tree until he appeared. It stood sparkling along the edges like an arcane scrub brush.

after it's done killing you, death uses a monkey tree, twirling it like a baton, to scrub all the fat and meat and blood from your bones, uses a sharp edged monkey tree to scrub down your skeleton, handson job, death doesn't believe in machines, in fact, the more machines take manual jobs of life the further everything gets from death, from actual physical contact with the world that finds logical conclusion in burial, machines are another delusion, an escape, humans are cyborgs, part machine part mystical, so maybe there's a hopeful exit somewhere within humanity's cybernetics

Gordon's logic ploughed onward. But the tree had to go. The constant reminder and tool of death would be run down. He would leave no mark of death's prowess to taunt, not if he wanted to become master. He had to create the image, the image that would keep death scared on the outskirts with its nerve twisted into fear's radiator shapes.

The power saw started up and the faller flipped his safety screen into position over his face. The cut began. The saw was so quickly covered with sap that it had trouble revolving. The faller pressed the saw's trigger harder and the tree shook a million drops of dew from its

leaves. He made a wide undercut that opened toothless. He looked up and wiped sweat from his forehead. The tree wore its teeth on the outside. All it took was a touch on the other side of the tight bark. He waited for the wind to change direction and as soon as it blew from the north he swiped the powersaw's edge across the trunk and then backed off.

From where Josephine and Gordon stared there came a huge crack, slowly at first then gathering momentum, the tree crashed to soil. There wasn't any dust raised. The tree gave a slight bounce and rolled slightly, but what didn't stop was the noise. Josephine thought of industrial maracas--tin paintbuckets full of gravel being shaken. The sound of the leaves rustling and the branches cracking, the distant sound of the powersaw's idle, all worked together in the tree's downfall. The sound was an armada of "just married" cars, each with trailers of chains and cans, drilled into her ears. To Gordon the racket was an orchestral flourish and he smiled as pink champagne bubbles rose in his eyes. He yelled back to the contractors, telling them to bring the backhoe around and dig up the stump. He wanted it burnt today. Tomorrow musn't glimpse a trace of it. The tree was placid on the ground. It looked very much like a tool, like one of a mass produced series. There'd always be one more. Gordon didn't know that death worked off an assembly line with inexhaustible resources. Josephine kicked at the dirt and tufts of grass under her feet.

The police chief arrived almost simultaneously with the tree's demise. Her hair was tied up in a bun she'd spread a hair net over. As the police chief got out of the car she put on her police hat and walked up to Gordon who still stood transfixed with reverberation. The police chief nodded curtly to Josephine. Josephine frowned right back.

'Gordon Chatterton?' "Hmmm?" "We've come to put a stop to these proceedings." The contractors began to walk towards where Gordon and the police chief stood, but Gordon waved them off. "Got authorization?" "Not anything on paper but I know the law." Gordon put his hand into the inner pocket of his suitcoat and pulled out the lease, unfolded it deliberately. He held the bill out from his body with a straight arm so the sheet touched the tip of the police

chief's nose. "Maybe you should know more. I'm responsible for this land legally. I've talked to my lawyer about it and he said go right ahead. This is an issue for the courts. According to him, until the judge puts his foot down, I'm free to do anything. You don't have a thing to say."

Chief and deputy shifted, not staunch, just a bit ashamed. Gordon pulled the paper back at a slow and even pace, as if his arm was retractable, telescoping into itself. He methodically folded the paper and put it away, turned and instructed the contractors on. He shifted back and said out of his mouth's corners: "I'm paying overtime." The two police shifted uncomfortably. The chief's right index finger hammered in and out of a curl semiautomatically, as always when her blood pressurized. "You're welcome to watch," he adjusted the top hat deliciously. "Otherwise you can wait until the court case opens." He turned back. The two police dithered for a minute, returned to the car.

They jumped into their car, backed up, spun some dust and rocked up as they drove the road. Josephine looked down at her feet. The sky was blue and infinite. The stump began to send its fire upward.

Outside, boys would wake hours later, disconcerted in vehicles or on floors of trashed homes, in cribs of glass splinter and bottle shard. Some of the lucky would awake at home or beside the corresponding wife. The luckless would lay beside inappropriate ladies. The more luckless had gotten someone pregnant. The even unluckier realized the woman he'd knocked up was a minor, all zits and highschool in morning light, who'd been let into the bar due to masses of lipstick and coverup. Very few ended up in jail. The police didn't go into or near bars in Oxbow, except for the weekly roadblock by the Boundary Tavern. Driving home from anywhere south of town you could see the roadblock reflecting districts of red light against low clouds and, so, when drunk, you'd park the car in the adjacent trailerpark to walk the remaining way--to stroll drunkenly through the roadblock, along the road's median, cars and trucks with rednecks being interrogated on either side. The police let most of them go and concentrated, instead, on the vehicle conditions. "Hey, you better get that muffler fixed! Do you understand I could pull this vehicle in for an inspection! I don't want to see this thing on the road anymore!" Unfortunately it was returning university kids, closer to sober and more respectful than the reprobates, who had the shitty vehicles. The shakeblock cutters, chokermen, mill workers, hockey players, drug dealers had shiny new four wheel drives that no cop would look at twice, or fast rebuilt Mustangs and Camaros with fat tires--"big meats" as the lingo went--that could be shown appreciatively to most audiences interested in American collectibles. During the roadblock, in undergrowth metres away, a cocaine dealer who'd commissioned the death of a local hockey coach fallen behind on too many payments, watched his flunky knife the excustomer. But the rustic assassination was drowned in sirens. A drifter from Kelowna, only in town a few days, who'd just slit the coach's throat for the dealer, got into his stylin' fourbyfour, covered his victim with a tarp in the back, and easily squeezed his way through the roadblock to travel downwind to the evening sea where he

launched the body with a touch of sentimentality into the strait, never dreaming that it might actually wash up and be found. It was a foolish move, especially since surplus wilderness and mountain round Oxbow meant a body could be buried for years before findings. All crooks in Oxbow seemed intent on launching bodies into the sea. Something about that black runny expanse that called for food in a dark language that only criminals could decipher to understand. Something the waves said one night called to them. But it always rejected their offerings in the end, like a shark spitting out the foot of a potsmoking, California Cooler polluted surfer and swimming off into tastier salmon runs. The body would surface, police get called in, the investigation lead to suspects, to arrests . . . all after the fact, however. Meanwhile, the weekly roadblock continued like Sunday church, with everyone asleep in the pews.

That was the type of night Max Fuselli usually walked through, wincing at the harsh flashes of lights, serenade of sirens. But tonight, as opposed to most, he was gone completely crazy, having received dismissal from the graveyard--contract terminated, change of ownership, job relocation, laid off, de-hired, canned. Now he had nothing but the black expanse of nightmare, train tracks ribbed with ivory ties, human bones, the bitter advent of memory in a brain without peace. There was turbulence through which he deliberated decisive strategy. Now self-styled saviour of graves, lord of the interred, he was going to help his dependants. Tonight he stepped crookedly, with the jinxed face of a stroke victim's, with eyes gone to hubcaps, ears moving motion sensitive, shudders along spine and shoulders, abdomen in an industry of turmoil and Max intent on a conclusive initiative. Only that nothing specific came to him.

By nightset he'd found an unbeaten man in a ditch. The man was asleep and peaceful. There was no reason for Max to stop and worry, but Max could always make a reason. He bent down over the man, smelt whisky and beer. The drunk was folded like a foetus and with

creases and layers of baggy clothing he looked like a corsage for an abortionist. The rust coloured water of the ditch flowed into one of the pantlegs and didn't exit again until it flowed out the back of his collar, trickled over his neck to rejoin the stream's main flow. Along his body was a line, following the contours, that marked water's passage. The line had begun to blur and clothes to saturate, but its distinctiveness suggested recent passout. He looked healthy, financially secure and peaceful. He didn't need or call for a Samaritan but Max went to the nearest house anyway. A woman in an apron that said, "mom's the greatest," opened the front door and looked at him. It was just dusk. His face and hair were hidden in shadows crisp and fresh as the blue and emancipated morning. She opened the screen door a crack. He motioned to the ditch with his thumb and told her about the unconscious sleeper. "Oh. Has he passed out again?" "Again?" The man regularly blacked out and trench-slept two nights a week. The woman looked only bored. "He likes it there. Fuck him."

Max walked home. He left the sleeper to the weaving stream. Why not leave him? He had cattails, ditchweed for a pillow.

It was still dusk when he returned. The shotgun leaned against the door. He felt the shoulder where the shotgun's kickback had rocked him a hard mother's lullaby. Empty shells and plastic containers riddled with millions of shotholes littered the back lawn. A good thing Mrs. Patterson was heavy in sleep because she probably wouldn't have tolerated Max's target practice. He bent in daybreak to collect spent shells, threw them into an old oil barrel outside the garage. He collected containers, made expert opinions of his clumsily drawn bullseyes.

It was as teenagers that Max and John rode bicycles to one of the gravel pits off E branch on MacBlo's logging roads. They had backpacks full of primed cartridges and guns lashed to the bicycles. Originally they'd used tin cans, jam jars and coke bottles full of water for targets. It was John who'd found a couple of mouldy, halfsoaked cardboard boxes dumped in the bush. They'd started off by throwing boxes in the air and blasting them out like ponderous and

tumbledown ducks. It was also John who'd had the idea of taking the crayon they used for marking off areas on a laminated map and drawing a face on one of the boxes.

There'd been a bully in highschool whose vocation was to cause grief. The general cruelty of childhood games became refined in high school, the way ability is tempered into skill, or skills, meant to achieve varying rewards. The game wasn't played for its own sake but began to be played for trophies. So the elementary cruelty, simply for the sake of itself, that children dispensed on the playground became sophisticated in the teens. There were prizes now--popularity, girls, boys, fun, revenge, the vicious appearance of adulthood. What made adulthood distinct from childhood in these childrens' minds was the authority, its exclusiveness. The means of reaching this exclusivity, since you could not by age reach it legally or socially was to lower those around you. Sadistic methods achieved the elite. It was only later that Oxbow's youth grasped discreet ways to achieve that elite without physical or psychological violence. If children had anything to teach, it was purity. There was no subtlety in their practices. Their actions were xerox copies of their intentions.

At the time of the target practice, the boy who'd made Max's life miserable in high school had died in an accident where he was both driver and drunk. A couple of pints, a couple of joints, and a car too slow for, plus a tree stronger than, the ego was all it took to end one of the hardest and most extravagantly mixmastered teenage careers. There were grisly details of blood everywhere--shoes filled with it, clothing soaked scarlet, emergency helicopter evacuations where the victim was pronounced dead on arrival at Vancouver general. There were insurance coverups--no he wasn't drinking, no dope, no speeding. He was a good kid. The newspaper never said a thing but the real truth was crossing town within an hour. Most of the town went to the funeral, most of the highschool. Secretly, and sometimes openly, Max and John rejoiced over the incident. To them, there was no renovation of history or memory--the guy had been a jerk, gone out of his way to jerk. He'd assaulted John several times, ridiculed Max every chance. What seemed to be so hypocritical about the death was

that most students in funeral attendance weren't the highschool elite, had never come close to it. The kids crying coffinside were former survivors of the deceased. Max never understood their histrionics, or why they went to the funeral. Perhaps it was their one chance to feel popular, to share in the community of the elite through sympathy and tears. To be, even if only at the funeral, members of the ruling class. Max could only think, if John or I died, or any underdog, the funeral would be a family affair not a jamboree.

To Max, the elite had always been twisted and rodenteyed. For one day, the underlings and servants and whipping posts held hands with royalty. They were permitted. Max couldn't bring himself to believe it was heartfelt. The whole town spoke of his death as classic tragedy. So where, he asked, was the tragic hero who was noble, respectable and doped the reason for the sudden default. There was, however, catharsis enough for Max and John, but it came in the epilogue. As far as Max and John were concerned this guy never was worthy of, never had achieved, nobility or respect. The only exception to the fan club the town had become was the priest presiding. He described the deceased as a victim of the wild life--a drinker, doper, abuser of friends and family whose death was a community warning.

The funeral lasted a day, though, and things were soon hierarchical once again. Max remembered seeing the guy's friends in a greasy spoon the next day, ogling each other like lieutenants of the wolfpack after the coup--waiting to see who'd be next up the top slot. This was the inner gang, high end, the ones who'd been closest to him and some of them had sharp grins, noses, and laughs that looked lipsynched, laughs that never slipped the nasals. One of them, a particular jerk who'd whistle when John walked by, was bothering the waitress with some crude comment. It was roomy behind his eyes. His nose looked filed to a point. He was perfect sunday school upbringing, a composite of pimp for ladyboys and electoral candidate. When he died Oxbow would probably declare a statutory holiday. But the boy out of the whole crowd that Max really remembered was a boy who'd been raised Catholic (and so was endowed with some misguided apprehensions concerning death and damnation).

This one had white hair, like Jack Frost had given him some cold and emotionless helmethead. He usually looked freeze-dried, but that day he stared over fries and gravy into the dark underbrush that crept down the hill behind the restaurant. The others snickered at the insults thrown towards the waitress. He stared at the undergrowth as though sunlight distortion were all he'd ever known. These were the dead dooper's friends, runners-up for the duration, friends of the boy who was being talked about in hushed and reverent whispers by mothers and friend wannabees over town--treating his reputation to a cosmetic makeover, perfume to cover its stink. These guys had never been bad as he but someone would have to fill that vacant, executive position. They knew what the job required. That cartel of degenerates truly couldn't have given a shit about death, who had no conception of it. These good guys were the pride of Oxbow's community.

It was the day they found the boxes that John drew the dead drunk's face on cardboard, writing the appropriate name underneath. "Oh. Wait a minute," he'd said. "He had real bug eyes, didn't he? Yeah. I better draw those bug eyes." It was after he'd modified his drawing of the eyes that he loaded the shotgun and with the straightest face possible, Max laughing behind him, began the monologue:

"Okay. Picture this. I'm walking down the street. The shotgun's hidden behind a long coat. He drives by with his friends, in his muscle car, and he fingers me. I don't hesitate for a second and return the gesture. He turns the car around. He gets out and comes over to me and says, what the fuck was that I saw? I tell him not to come near me, warn him. I tell him leave me alone. He laughs and pushes. I tell him to fuck off and he laughs harder, looks back at his friends, walks forward and pushes me again. He's smiling, but those bug eyes are moving and I can tell he's getting mad at me sassing back. It's going to go past pushing soon. I'm warning you, I say. What are you going to do? So I just pull out the shotgun and **BANG!** Then I shoot him again, **BANG!**"

With each narrative explosion, John had shot the crayon face. The box was put over a

sapling's top that bent back double then forward with each blast.

"So now he's squirming on the pavement and whimpering. I say, hurts bad now, huh? Whatsamatter, ain't you so cool now? I just wanted to be left alone. But nooooo."

John's face went diabolic, trembled with psychotic passion. His tongue squished words against the teeth inside his mouth.

"I bet your friends think you're cool right now. With your blood all over and squirming like a piece of shit. Believe me, they're next. If they don't leave me alone. . . ."

BANG! Another shot ripped through the line drawn face.

"TOLD YOU GOOD, FUCKER! TOLD YOU DON'T FUCK WITH ME, FUCKER!"

BANG! He reloaded. **BANG! BANG!**

Finally, nothing was left but a large chewed hole and a treetop with branches shredded thorny. Max lay on the ground, laughing uncontrollably at the performance. John broke open the shotgun and two red shells flew out like torpedoed hummingbirds, over his shoulder and into yellow bushes of broom. John laughed hesitantly to himself as he walked over to where Max tried to regain control. John had been silent for awhile by the time Max had stopped laughing to lay on the ground, eyes tracing the pastry of clouds, wheezing. John squatted down beside him with the butt of the shotgun on the ground and the open chamber pointed at the sun. "He's dead," John looked at the shotgun. "Don't think I'll do it again." The sky went nomadic above them. John looked suddenly allergic to shame--with a heartful of blue pangs--like his conscience had been unfolded to the four cardinal points. Max leaned up on one elbow. "Someone's got to remember him the way he was." "I don't know," was all John said. They shot no more that day.

Now, dusk brightened at morning's arrival. Like a television screen suddenly cleared of static the darkness sank in a straight line, back into its manhole. The clear picture flipped into view. After night slid down, the soil looked darker, as if some of its original color had returned. Max

took the boxes and stacked them beside the oil barrel. They fit each other neatly. He yawned. He'd walked widely that night. He'd shot a lot of lead. Max wondered why he'd been fired. Wondered what was happening to the cemetery. The news had come suddenly. What were the internal politics? Soon, very soon, he'd have to go up to the graveyard to investigate and then draw up a floorplan for subterfuge, plans from which to enact salvage. When he took the shotgun into his house, he was already thinking of sleep, thinking of the train and Oxbow Cemetery.

The phone poured turpentine into Mayor's ears all afternoon. One citizen after another, mouths full of civil liberties, wanted recognition for their rights as relatives of the deceased, rights to bodies and plots in Oxbow Cemetery. Mayor's answer was almost reel to reel: "Under code one, subsection a, the rights of plot holders are suspended while bodies wait between graves, so to speak. Restricted for the duration of the disinterment." Mayor directed most of the obnoxious towards legal council and tried to be sensitive and understanding towards the meek. However, he had to admit that most legal action was pointless as Gordon wasn't in direct violation of any law.

Mayor had tried to call Max all evening. He knew Max awoke during the night and slept during the day but there'd been no answer. Finally, Mayor had fallen asleep in his desk chair. He'd told his wife he'd work all night on municipal taxes. It wasn't unusual. By the time he awoke it was nine am monday and the secretary brought in morning coffee--start of another working day. His back was fused solid from sleeping in the chair all night so he grabbed onto the top of his office door to dangle until he could hear vertebrae snapcrack into mobility. He then went to the bathroom off his office, shit, showered, shaved. By the time he'd returned from breakfast his head felt much calmer. He told his secretary to get in touch with the lawyer and Max Fuselli. The municipal map of Oxbow on the opposite side seemed the portrait of a hokey relation whose oil based eyes slid side to side on the canvas.

The one thing he'd hoped wouldn't happen had. Gordon Chatterton was actually unearthing Oxbow Cemetery. He'd thought even Gordon wouldn't have gone extreme. All the scaffolding Mayor had stood upon crumbled. He'd been looking for something more refined and more artsy from Gordon. But the brutality of ripping open a cemetery made Mayor understand how far gone, how desperate, Gordon Chatterton was. And what was he doing with sister's body? What would he do with all the bodies? That was the important question

now. The graveyard wasn't primary, a graveyard could be anywhere, but the death, the actual property that was death, was a type of real estate not valued at forty acres of rocky soil but at forty acres of cadavers. What would he do with the corpses and how could Mayor stop him? How could he fight that financial loss?

There was a knock on the door and he swung back. It was the secretary. "The lawyer's here, Mister Mayor." "In person?" "Yes." "Well send him in."

The lawyer was young, a recent graduate of law school, but for those years he'd defended all legal cases involving the municipality. His business was contracted, however, not just because he was blood relation to Mayor but because he was good. He'd graduated magna cum laude and was a conniving firewalker, stomping on legalities--his poise defined by what the feet eradicated. If he looked like he walked in the dark, it was true, someone who knew the darkness, however, like sonar. "Bobby, I was just trying to get you on the phone." "I know. Soon as I heard about the graveyard I came over. Knew you'd want to talk." "Bobby, what the hell is going on?"

It took Bobby some time to explain. Because of the unusual nature of the cemetery, because the municipality had never owned it outright, but due to the fact that it had been relegated to their possession by a private individual, the graveyard's legal position remained hazy and illdefined. "The law just isn't equipped to deal with the situation we've got here. You see" It was Mayor's secretary whose call on the intercom suspended the legal conference. "Yes?" "Mister Mayor. Max Fuselli's line is busy, I can't seem to get through. Also, the press is on line one. They were wondering if you'd care to give a statement." "Thanks. Tell the news I'm conferring with the lawyer. I'll have more than just a statement. Set up a press conference for this afternoon. Keep trying Fuselli. He must be asleep. That's why the phone's off the hook." Mayor depressed the intercom console and reached into his desk for a cheroot. "I thought you were trying to quit smoking?," Bobby asked. "I've quit too many things already," Mayor said out of the corner of his mouth, lighting up to puff, adjusting

the cheroot like a lollipop. "Have you found out what Chatterton's up to?" "I've been in contact with his lawyer. I've got a copy of the lease he signed. Now listen. . . ." Mayor leaned back in his chair, folded hands behind his head. Bobby pulled some newspapers out of his briefcase, spread them flat on the desk. He pointed to fine print in the obituary section. Mayor listened. Bobby began to speak. The cheroot fit snugly between Mayor's tongue and palate. The tobacco leaf roll began to break down from spittle, but it kept teeth from chattering.

It was many hours later when Mayor, having reshowered, strolled into city hall's auditorium to receive the press. Flashbulbs kicked up sheet lightning as he sank into a seat behind a table, behind a bouquet of microphones. The press had come from every direction--north, south, east, west. All compass lines had been hammered into Oxbow and the result was that Oxbow had come to signify and subsume all movement, all directions. They lifted noses to the breeze and the unwritten and unrecorded news already smelt like printer's ink. They'd come to discuss death. Death was the vacuum at the centre of every compass--the only true north. It was only Gordon who tried to contrive an antimagnetic suit, a nonconductor, but he'd discover how difficult it was to repel death. After all, there was nothing quite like it.

Mayor sat to the table. The audience went silent, their cameras like oversized field glasses. They awaited the fat man's song. He cleared his throat. The words were more ballad than recitative, story rather than soliloquy. He held himself like a grizzled balladeer--that's what he imagined himself to be and it was satisfactory. Traces of emotion belonged to the story and not to the storyteller. He was going to play out this conference, every word had to spawn votes of confidence, and every action had to convince teeveeland that he was still prosperous with control. A method actor from hard knock's school of theatrics, he knew how to mask and camouflage any discomfort, how to buy them over to his side. Mayor didn't want his fear brought into it. There was almost a countrywestern lilt to his voice when he ended

sentences.

He talked about the graveyard. The history was for the foreign correspondents, the visitors. How it was founded on church property by missionaries who at one time were the only white guys in the neighbourhood. How, upon conversion, or partial conversion, they had local Native tribes bury their dead in churchyard dirt. How the cemetery grew in this way from ten acres to twenty during the late eighteen hundreds. With the settlement on this part of the coast by immigrants, he recounted how the graveyard went from twenty acres to thirty. The graveyard became segregated fields of slaves here, chiefs there, and immigrants further on. The monkeypuzzle tree had been planted by a travelling missionary. Finally, when the community was still only neighbours who took care of themselves and their children, before police or even a municipality, he told how the church ran into financial trouble. The missionaries were recalled, disbanded, or sent on, and a permanent priest installed in a new church nearer to town. To finance the new church the graveyard was auctioned off under the provision, contractually binding, that the owner would insure the graves' integrity maintained by whatever method was seen to be best. Even then, the graveyard was legendary, and the missionaries made provisions to see that it was taken care of. Even then, the number of graves was higher than the number of both local immigrant and Native populations in the area. Ultimately, however, the land was in the ownership of the person who bought the rights to it. Bodies in the graveyard were the owner's responsibility, the contract said, and the owner exercised rights over them insofar as was required by the religious code and property maintenance. The law wasn't mentioned specifically because civil law was not the governing order in the land at that time, religion was. It was left unclear whether the owner's "responsibility" to the bodies signified ownership over them. Mayor explained how the contract was still legally binding. He then went on to detail the history of the graveyard's ownership. The town grew, so did the graveyard. However, as the actual town's size fluctuated with periods of economic expansion and recessions the graveyard's size increased steadily, as

excitizens of Oxbow who'd moved away had their bodies remitted for burial in the cemetery. Those coming into town and meeting with accidents were buried there as well. The cemetery remained, even after the evacuation of the missionaries, the focal burial spot for Native tribes up and down the coast. By the time the nineteenthcenties and thirties pulled around (even in the thirties when Oxbow was almost reduced to a ghost town) the segregation between the graves had broken down. And in another ten to fifteen years, with the Second World War, as the graveyard increased in notoriety and popularity, the fortieth acre was opened. The family which had originally purchased the graveyard had worked it as undertakers, embalmers, priests, groundsweepers and pallbearers all the years between the missionaries and emergence of Oxbow as a post world war boom town, when the area's rich timber became technologically viable. A logging trade had existed in the area since the early nineteenthundreds when a small mill was established. After the war, however, the site expanded and a modernized pulp and paper mill was built. It was at this point that the family, who over the years amassed a fortune through the business of death, began leasing the bill of sale to the municipality for fiveyear periods. The exact reason for this decision, according to wivestale, was that they'd had enough of "the trade" and become more concerned with the other investments which the sale of graveyard plots had made possible. They built themselves a mansion north of town and another south in Vancouver where they took their place among British Columbia's original high society. The "dirty" graveyard business was handed over to the municipality at a quick profit which could be used to finance new, classier ventures. As a safeguard, however, the lease had to be renewed every five years at an ever increasing price (one more than consistent with inflation) so that the actual ownership was guaranteed to remain in family hands, in this way the graveyard could be used as an asset or occupation to cushion periods of lean economy. The five year lease was quickly changed to ten years and the price doubled as the family found it necessary at a certain point to cover an impending bankruptcy due to troubles associated with their excessive and debauched lifestyles. The ten

year lease remained from that date on. The municipality was glad to pay the price when it became apparent that a town as small as Oxbow with a graveyard larger than its population was a topdog tourist attraction. The demand for gravespots in Oxbow Cemetery was continental. There was money to be made. In the early sixties the restaurant and the graveyard tours were added to supplement income generated through graveyard plot sales. With the signing of the lease all rights of ownership, according to the bill of sale, passed to the highest bidder for a decade. No provisions were made for legal procedures surrounding or concerning the bizarre nature of the graveyard's possession and operation. It was assumed from that time until now that, with the exception of the lease's reversion and renewal, the graveyard functioned under municipal code like other provincial graveyards, but not so.

It was at this point in the conference that Mayor pulled out another cheroot. The secretary watching from the office's entrance knew of Mayor's fractured emotional world. Cigars were the last reserve against nervousness and breakdown. Hot flashes went over his skin as if the devil's whisper was in his ear, stoking his body chemistry. Like a good, heat sensitive sprinkler system, his pores opened and he sweated. Mayor breathed deeply on the cheroot, wondered if he'd reminded his wife that it was watering day on their side of the street. Affect the pose of knackered soldier, back again from boothill, back to tell the tale. The droop of his head was indicative of the terrible weight of responsibility. He worked towards invocations of pity from the viewing audience, working himself into a poignancy. The audience waited with flashbulb eyes, wired for sound. Mayor continued.

He said that Gordon Chatterton's purchase of the graveyard was the first time in the cemetery's history that the lease had been bought by someone other than the municipality. Technically speaking, the lease had always been sold to the municipality by auction. Only, there had never before been anyone with enough money or interest to challenge, nevermind outbid, the town's treasury. Now it had happened. The municipality just couldn't come up with an offer greater than Gordon's bid. Now that Gordon owned the graveyard, the

obligations of the original bill of sale belonged to him for the next ten years. However, through consultation with Gordon's lawyer, it was understood that Gordon was taking no chances. With some minor exceptions he was in compliance with both municipal laws as well as the original contract's stipulations. His reasons for digging up the graveyard were to, "Examine and determine the suitability of the extant drainage system, and to ascertain, as far as possible, whether new graveyard drainage be required, and if so determine whether a new drainage emplacement be justified under the current status and condition of the property itself, and if the property being examined is found unsuitable to then relocate the cemetery to a more secure environs. Until such a time as a decision can be made the bodies will be stored in accordance with the bill of sale, which states that the owner 'exercised his rights over the bodies insofar as was required by the religious code and/or maintenance of the property.'" In this case, the bodies would be stored by "whatever method [was] seen to be the best," by Gordon Chatterton. It was true that some of the lot had recently flooded, the old drainage system finally clogged and backed up. Also, in recent years, with logging up above the graveyard, runoff had increased the water table in the cemetery's vicinity. However, Mayor explained, all those problems would have been dealt with by the municipality with minimal exhumation and a definite attempt to preserve the cemetery on present location. Now, however, with the drainage problems and the possible damage to gravesites, it was Gordon's responsibility to solve the problem by whatever "method" he saw to be "the best." Gordon had gotten the signature and declaration of the municipal health minister to allow disinterment for reasons of health (the risk, due to drainage, was that corpses might float to the surface or graves lower on the hill be washed out by rains). However, the civic registrar hadn't been notified of the procedures in time. Gordon Chatterton, as a result, stood within risk of being fined ten thousand dollars for failing to operate in accordance with law. But once again, while the municipality was considering taking Gordon Chatterton to court over the issue of compliance, he'd moved quickly. Because the exhumation had already begun, the registrar of

titles assumed Gordon had gotten the proper signatures and revoked Oxbow's status as graveyard while it underwent exhumation procedures. He'd managed to get the registrar of titles to revoke Oxbow Cemetery's status as a graveyard for the purposes of exhumation because, as he informed the press, "the registrar of titles [wasn't] under any duty to inquire into or verify whether a certificate of compliance had been issued under subsection one-a of the graveyard act." So, unfortunately, while Chatterton could be taken to court over the issue of compliance with certain tenets, which he'd probably ease through after a fee, the status of cemetery was still revoked and the exhumation could continue under the law's authority. There was no reason to legally stop Chatterton, because, with the exception of a missing signature from the civic registrar (which he'd probably be granted afterfact), he was perfectly within his rights to administer the graveyard as he saw best. Mayor also spoke of how the law stated that any operator of a graveyard was within his legal jurisdiction to remove any goods which, "in the operator's opinion. . . impede[ed] the maintenance or care of the cemetery." In the case of Oxbow Cemetery, in Chatterton's "opinion," it was the graves themselves which, because of their submersion, or possible submersion under the water table and interference with the emplacement of a proper drainage system, were the things impeding "maintenance or care." So, again, Chatterton was within his legal rights as operator of the cemetery to proceed as he wished.

When Mayor finished setting out the legalities of Gordon Chatterton's position he went quiet and fattened back in the chair. He cocked up one elbow on the backrest and with his face in profile to the reporters, chin tilted down into neck rolls, puffed the cheroot nervously. He didn't touch the smoke with his hand. The ash grew long. Despite the perspiration, from the reporter's distance he looked stoic. The cheroot gave him the air of confidence, as he knew it would, and he shifted the cigar in a way that made him look strongarm. But he was just a silly rube, a de facto knucklehead, sweating profusely in the middle of troubles. This was the show. He relied on his ability to present a strong portrait of himself, the simple

cheroot his only aid. Mayor didn't want to look up, but eventually did. He turned his head slightly and glanced up from under eyebrows. The questions were about to begin and the reporters gave Mayor a breather while they glanced through their file cards. The tape recorders, microphones, and cameras rustled like a swarm of bees, each in a secret dance of travel co-ordinates and flight patterns. They all had their own way of getting to the newsworthy inside Mayor. It was game of donkey in which they led the Mayor around on a leash while he moved his teeth against the rope to freedom. It was the longdrawn catechism.

Reporters: According to law, no operator is allowed to lease to any person a lot or lots. How does the ten year lease function under this law?

Mayor: The law says, "to any person." Groups of people, executive boards such as the municipality, are exempt.

Reporters: But Gordon Chatterton. . . .

Mayor: Has formed *Chatterton Enterprises*. A conglomerate, a corporation. Not a person. Of course, he happens to be the principal shareholder. The rest of the shares are divided among his staff.

Reporters: What about the rights of plot holders?

Mayor: Unfortunately, since the registrar of titles, whom it looks like Chatterton has gotten to before us, has revoked the area's status as cemetery, they don't have any rights until reinterment.

Reporters: How long a period is the maximum between exhumation and reinterment?

[Mayor tried to soften the words denoting his mistake. He would've liked to blame it on an inefficient bureaucracy but so many politicians used that excuse he thought it outworn. All he could do was adjust his tie and look honest and repentant. This was a trial of sorts, and no-one must get a whiff of whining from him. His face must now appear clear and demure.]

Mayor: That's not specified by law.

Reporters: Does that mean Chatterton can leave them out as long as he wants?

Mayor: Not if we have anything to say about it. The health inspector assures me that only those bodies that are completely decomposed, to the bone, will be left out. The fresher ones are in cold storage. But that's a high percentage of bodies, still. Most of them, in fact.

Reporters: Can't anybody put a stop to it?

[Now he had to appear prepared for tactics, for legal jostling. He set his jaw and put both fists on either side of the microphones. Behind it all, though, his ass was covered in sweat and it formed a crack down the centre of his bum--a melting waxworks.]

Mayor: Only the courts or a governmental minister. But their investigations take time. Plus, you have to remember, he hasn't done anything wrong. The worst he'll get is a fine. But even then, his lawyer has said he'll fight it all the way. Depending on the complications, because of the interpretation and legality of the original bill of sale, the court could drag.

Reporters: How long could the court date go for?

Mayor: I can't say at the moment.

Reporters: A year? Over a year?

Mayor: Quite possibly. The Lieutenant Governor has a say also. But as you know his powers are often ceremonial. Plus, I repeat again, Chatterton hasn't done anything that wrong.

Reporters: So he can go ahead?

Mayor: Yes. Until the court makes a decision. We plan to pursue legal action under the compliance issue. The first chance we can get. There's a lot of holes. The law wasn't designed for this circumstance. No one ever took someone crazy as Gordon Chatterton into account. Plus, the old lease complicates things. Legally, he's in charge. However, I intend to do everything in my power to stop him.

Mayor leaned back in his chair, arms folded over his chest arrogantly, as if to say: now you know the situation I've accepted, and remain firm in this resolve to fight, with or without your

co-operation. But in his mind he felt like no kingpin and wanted someone kind and cool to wipe his face with a handkerchief, take him by the hand. He wanted sister, and, subconsciously, he was doing the bone count prayer, desirous for sister's services.

The room fell silent. There were a few more raised hands, but they were weak and shook. A few bulbs went off. Mayor put out the cheroot like a judge hammering down a mallet of adjournment. It was over. He'd made it. In fact, he was surprised. Mayor had thought that for some reason the reporters would be aggressive. But it seemed they were in a shock equal to the rest of Oxbow. He thought back over the interview and couldn't remember a single thing that might have gotten him in trouble. He usually had to watch his mouth. There are few events, he thought, that shock people as much as tampering with death. Somehow, that was a perversity not yet fashionable. Mayor thought of law courts. There were other ways to get results--it was just a simple case of involving the right people. He knew that Chatterton's drainage proposal was a ruse. When a magician sawed the boxed girl in half he wasn't doing it to unclog her intestines or check for an ulcer. He was doing it for the shock. The magician didn't look at her stomach, but just held the saw, glorified. That's what Gordon's plan was--to have a good laugh and outrage Oxbow. It had something to do with the dying, too. He knew that. As Mayor rose from his seat he felt the pants stick to his ass with buttsweat. He knew no one watched snuff films to learn anatomy. He was an expert on anatomy, because of sister. If drainage was really Chatterton's concern, he could have done it more easily and less violently than exhuming the entire cemetery. C'mon Chatterton, how stupid do you think I am? The reporters were filing out or standing around and making live, postconference broadcasts.

Mayor walked into his office. The secretary waited with notepad, with a list of calls for him. "There's been a lot of messages from relatives. They want to get ahold of their property. Their remains." "There's not a thing we can do. Tell them that." Mayor was exasperated now, a landslide defeat on his mind. It was a lonely job to clean up the untouched food and

decorations in the empty silence of what should have been an election victory party. The caterers stood around and watched you peel the twenty foot picture of your face off the wall and wondered where all your loyal support had gotten, while the so-called loyalists were drinking across town at the first place contestant's. The caterers would laugh. He knew all about it. He'd been there.

It was the day of the provincial election loss that he'd realized defeat made the coward. While most tended to forget their losses and concentrate on their victories and accomplishments, Mayor was the opposite. His timeline had become a string of dates marking hopeless defeats, from the schoolyard to the political sphere. He was never allowed to make grandiose claims as a child. What victories he thought he owned were quickly brought down by sharp reminders of his true abilities. His sister was always stronger, faster, smarter. The swish of her skirts was independent and unique as a leap year's extra February day. Mayor had never been sure of himself. When he accomplished something he needed praise but her actions were just something she did for herself. What secret did his sister know that kept her from being afraid? Was it that she couldn't hope and so could never dream and only act? Was that what was signified by her death? Was the key to eliminating fear the elimination of hope and therefore defeat. Or was she running when she died? Had she finally met with fright and hightailed? Was her death a defeat or did her knowledge, the secret, lead her to victory? Was she out there because of coincidence or was she in full flight?

The things sister did were never services rendered, never for any kind of payment. Mayor always expected some kind of gratification, but his parents permitted no illusions. He was below average in every skill that mattered. Mayor quickly learnt to act realistic and practical, but, inside, he contained victories that he clung to even while knowing that they were only part of an invented dreamscape and could never measure up to fact, a world to escape into and avoid facing all the defeats. Every dream victory of his had some future date

attached to it--one day I'll do this, or, one day I'll have accomplished all this, or, one day I'll defeat so and so forever. He almost had them marked down on a calendar. But part of the child realized it was no oracle, that the future happened and was not dreamed into being.

Meanwhile, however, his parents pushed him further into the surreal. His father would find some accomplishment, no matter how absurd, to credit him with. On being told that he lacked co-ordination by his kindergarten teacher at a parents/teacher meeting, because his son couldn't catch a ball, the father went home to instil his pathetic senses of superiority into his son by telling young Mayor to nevermind the teach because he knew that his son could cast a fishing rod with dexterity. It took a day, maybe two, to figure out a casting reel. It was a minimal accomplishment but his father worked hard to instill a pride of it into his son, the son knowing the pride of it could only exist between him and father, because Mayor could never have exhibited pride in anything so ludicrous. The father was really interested only in saving his own sense of superiority anyway, in response to the perceived slight against the worthiness of his genetics. It was his own progenitive accomplishments that the father felt were insulted. If anyone else's son had missed the ball he would have laughed, no matter how well that child could cast a goddamn fishing rod. Mayor was put into the difficult position of having to live up to, and prize, an accomplishment that he couldn't take confidence from. Meanwhile, mother took him out to play catch and involve him in sports that he didn't have the physical capacity for, or confidence for, or interest in. He'd already been battered into submission by the teacher and tempered by the father into not having any outward respect for the sport, though he wished, secretly, that he could catch the ball just once at an important moment in front of everyone. On one hand he had to humour his father's pride and on the other accept lectures from his mother on his lack of ability and interest in physical accomplishment. What he could accomplish was heightened to the absurd so that it lost all value, while his inability to do anything in even a mediocre fashion was constantly restated.

The only place to go was into his head, but he was too insecure and scared by this

point to bring about what existed in his mind. Women laughed at his clumsy Don Juan attempts. At the first sign of a confident swagger the other boys would bring him down with jibes and challenges to fight. They called him on every aspect of machismo, knowing he was a fake. He was a coward, finally, and came to hate himself. He lived in constant fear that the cowardice in him would be uncovered, and Mister Fear brought oodles of defeat. Soon fear became more important than reasons for it, as fear usually does, and from then on he went about tender business. The fear became so strong that it could hammer him without a reason, expecting Mayor to hypothesise for it, which Mayor always did, until it got to the point where the fear wasn't localized but general and Mayor no longer had to analyze it's origin. Mayor stopped sending out R.S.V.P.'s. Mister Fear would just show. Mister Fear, his personal antagonist, could only be brought down by alcohol and in the early stages of his public life that's what kept Mayor in muscle, until the alcohol became visible, until it led to his first electoral defeat. That was when he decided he'd have to sober up and fight Mister Fear without bricks in his gloves. Of course, it wasn't until his trip to Alaska that he was able to stand up, but the battle continued. Now they were constantly locked in an arm wrestle that never ended and Mayor hoped that when he died the polls would say he'd been more brave than afraid.

He'd faced one political defeat. He wouldn't face another downfall without warfare. He'd risk it all. I'm not on the booze this time at least. For the first time he felt in control of abstinence's wagon, travelling the proper direction.

"Oh. I got ahold of Max Fuselli. I think I woke him up. He sounded cranky but said you could call him around nine o'clock tonight. He didn't want to talk at all until I said it was about the graveyard."

The Mayor smiled. "Good. Just who I need right now."

"Well, I've never bought a train before. Don't you think the price is a bit steep?" The nightmare took on narrative, straightshot plotlines. The same fantasia now had moving parts, a sense of time, urgency. Max felt that he'd jiggled forward on its periodic timeline.

The salesman was swathed in night's plumage. His fedora visored face betrayed white angularities, the anklelength overcoat a capsule of concrete around him. He freed a small groan but there was no movement visible from where his mouth should've been, chest expansion or contraction, but sound came certainly as ventriloquism. A bellyaching projected onto the mystery salesman's mouth.

The train was the same as always, but parked. Steam billowed from the undercarriage to sometime squeals of metal tightened against metal. The shadows of mechanics working underneath the train on the ground resembled the shadows of oversized flies--fixing things, fixing. Regularly, a fully smoked cigar butt or cigarette flew from between wheels, ticking orange off into the darkness. Once, his sight swore a skeletal hand flicked a butt off its thumb.

Red and black *For Sale* signs stuck the train, a phone number jiffymarked under the red, block letters. The man in front of him had a nametag on his lapel--a yellow happy face with the name Bob branded to the forehead. Other than cigarette butts the happy face was the nightmare's only color.

"Well, could I take a look inside?" The man cauntered to the train, stood beside the iron steps and motioned Max to lead. How polite, Max thought. "Thanks." The salesman bowed disdainfully and followed Max.

Inside, their footfalls hit richly filigreed, porcelain tiles along corridors and disembarking/entrance areas. Walls and roof were veiled in ivory wallpaper. The ceiling had crystal chandeliers every ten feet. Stuffed heads of bears, antelopes, tigers, poachers and

fishermen hung in every passenger cabin without exceptions. There were sleeping cars, sitting cars, dining rooms, lounge areas, lavatories, even a dance floor. They progressed through it all. Underfoot was broken glass, fine stems of champagne glasses, roses and boutonnieres, lace panties, silken boxer shorts, brassieres, even secondhand dresses or tuxedo pants. Bottles rolled in the corners like restless sleep and some chandeliers hung at odd angles as if they'd been used as trapezes for skeletons to swing on. The chairs had been stacked, overturned, on tables. But there weren't other humanoid forms at all.

"Had a party here last night?," Max asked, picking up a shattered record from the floor to look at the label. "You party to swing here?"

The man shrugged off and took Max by the elbow. The salesman seemed desperate, as if afraid to lose a steady client, not wanting this purchaser to notice defects. He led Max through a booth with clotheshangers on either side. Hats, caps, tiaras sat ajumble above slack jackets, shawls, mink scarves, fur coats, hooded cloaks. It was here that Max noticed the air bulging with bluebottles--small peppercorns still as spots against the paintjob. The air was getting hot. In this room the salesman stopped and coatracked his trenchcoat. The fedora remained. The salesman wore a purple silk shirt with tightly tapered black trousers on a hairpin frame. As the salesman rolled up his sleeves, aces dropped, not cards but aces of spades, as if exactknived from the cards themselves--flakes of aces, tokens that were antithesis to fourleaf clovers in fate's catalogue, or so Max felt. The salesman's arms were simply bone--no meat, no muscle.

He motioned Max through doors of frosted glass, an overleaf of soot obscuring the motifs scored into them. The salesman's watchchain clanked against his leg as he led Max into the next room. Heat had increased for the bad and Max noticed footprints were he'd mislaid them on the floor's fine black dust, steps to be recovered. The salesman left halfmoons with five dots across the top of each. A grindcore sound resonated from the engine room. The salesman removed his hat and Max saw that he was skull and skeleton

from pate to footarch. Beads of sweat, stinky cocktail juice, dripped from the skull's forehead. "I'd like to show you the options and gratuities you get with this purchase." The salesman snickered and swung open the furnace doors.

Inside the furnace, Max saw visual storyboards, distorted, translucent--metal casts of his life. The furnace was a melting pot of scenes formed from the warped surface of bubbling chrome. The chrome would rise and seize for a few seconds into a phase from Max's past, into, for example, a sculpture of his father reeling on a fish in silent documentary. The images drew upon his memory's thousand funhouse polaroids. He knew why the train's passengers partied to swing--this was the twenties, the pretalkies film era. Images from his life boiled and bubbled in the furnace and the steam pressurized into funnels off the manifold. The odour was of stale flowers, tulips and roses lost to time and color. Everything here was a tearaway from coloured time, reduced to black and white frames of footage. Max spun and behind him sat three dusty skeletons, stiff on chairs, each with an instrument--flute, bagpipes and snare drum. On delicate silver musicstands was sheet music they might have played in accord with, because their eyesockets traced the salesman, who conducted with the polished, pliant spine of a rat. The salesman glanced back, "It's another perk. They're not too bad, just need some practice." A scene from Quarry Lake froze then bubbled over back into the furnace's amorphous mass. Next appeared his mother reading a bedtime story from *Peter and The Wolf*. The band broke into Prokofiev while liquid settings formed quick and common, then went back to smooth surface tension, another upsurge next. There was the image of a body freefalling past a mountainside's trees. Max closed his eyes. "I don't remember that." He kicked the furnace door shut and turned a sickle of white teeth to the salesman, a hyperextended smile. "I'll take it. It's perfect. Just what I was looking for." The salesman put his icecream cone hand in Max's. "You won't be disappointed." The band played gingerly. "It's the best deal I can offer you. Between you and me . . .," he looked left and right, "between you and me . . . it's a steal." The salesman straightened and said, "Cash or credit?"

"Cash, I suppose." Max pulled a brick of thousands from his pocket. The salesman's hand was a dried spidercrab around the bills. "A-a-a-aren't you g-g-gonna count it?," Max stuttered. The salesman placed a smile, light as contact lenses, on Max's retina and, glancing around, said, "Hey pal, I trust you." The salesman took out a key, a small hourglass also on the same ring, tossed it to Max, who caught. The salesman herded the musicians off the set. The trio tripped over each other and equipment. As he closed the door behind him, leaving Max alone in the engine room, he yelled, "Hope you like it. He's still got a couple of miles left in his fuel tank."

Max was alone in brimstone heat, in the world of metal against metal, in the elongated wow of ballpeen waves on corrugated tin. Max looked at the key the salesman had given him. He stared at it, a dork who finally knew how far he'd been suckered. There was a keyhole beside the furnace and Max stuck the long skeleton key into the lock. It fit. He turned the key. A richter scale rumble vibrated through the train to rebound back to front. Shouts rose from beneath the chassis, curses, invocations. Hundred skeletons in mechanics overalls darted from the train's underbelly in all directions--a squadron of flies. Some had their fuckyou fingers raised at the engine room. The wheels began to roll, friction grasping at the cold rails. Steam rose from pistons. It was then that Max noticed the hourglass. Inside, a liquid picture of his face dripped through the narrow stem. His face, in black and white flickers, sometimes darker sometimes lighter, like stillframe after stillframe on a damaged film loop. And it was a viscous face. He shook the hour glass and the halves shattered into drops that rejoined into their separate sides. It was his face in division. A good three quarters plus had already dripped from the top bowl, glacially swift, through the stem to the bottom bowl. Max upended the hourglass but the drops continued to fall in the same direction, defying even gravity. The drip was steady, measured. His right eye, nose, mouth, chin, hair, forehead and right ear had coalesced at bottom. The awol parts--his left eye and ear--were suspended above. He turned the hourglass, imagined the completed face, like a puzzle perfectly aligned on either side but

Max dressed, a big spender with time. He made himself the usual breakfast of orange juice, toast, eggs, coffee and opened the paper. It was then that he understood Mayor's evasiveness. The headline read: "*Chatterton Enterprises Begins Massive Graveyard Exhumation.*" It was rare of the paper to report important news on the front page, but this must've been even too huge for them to ignore. The article gave little information besides excerpts from Mayor's statement, a brief historical summary, and a footnote on Gordon's reticence to comment. This was what Mayor wanted to discuss. Even before he finished the article, Max, with a piece of toast in mouth, was shoed and overcoated, out the door and on the way to Mayor's in seconds with the news open in front of him, feet finding the way by habit, the piece of toast a wet floppy.

Max was finished with both the newspaper and toast by the time he'd reached Mayor's office. He dunked the paper in city hall's alleyway garbage bin. The moon turned one blind eye to the world. The night wasn't funny anymore, or was maybe a morbid humour that required tightlipped acknowledgement. Max mounted city hall's steps, rang the front doorbell. There was a buzz and the doorknob now turned for him. He stepped into the building's dark stairwell. At the top of the steps stood Mayor, bright fluorescent lights behind him. It was illumination for the mystery guest and Mayor's silhouette was poised fat and Hitchcockian. When he motioned to Max with a curly index finger it was like the devil's indicator. Max told Mayor to dim the lights. A hundred electric currents scrubbed the wall's innards. Max mounted the stairs.

Mayor sat heavily on a stool in front Oxbow Cemetery's survey chart. Max dawdled in shadows like an embarrassment. "She looks like this on paper." Mayor held up a ten dollar bill, "she looks like this." Still in shadow, Max shook his head, a rustle his only response. "I know you see it differently and that's important--it gives you movement, lets you get away with things. I know about you, your past. It's in the files." Mayor pulled out a cheroot. Max winced at the zippo's flare. Puffs of smoke from the flared nostrils were long white nosehairs

drifting upwards of the fluorescent tubing. He lifted his cramped, knobby hands. "I'm aging, don't laugh. And my mind has no choice but to accept that as objective. What else can it do but age?" Mayor smiled and it was coarsegrained, fractured as his hands. Mayor dragged heavily on the cheroot and more white strands of smoke pulled upwards on his nostrils, as if someone above was intent on unravelling the poor guy's lungs. Mayor tapped ash onto the floor. One hand was flat on his knee, the other made the cheroot pass flatly in front of Max. "Not that I'd be physically capable. And I know you're older than me. But if I was caught damaging Gordon's equipment it would look bad because my place is to oppose him legally. Now you. You" Mayor pointed the lit cheroot at Max, "You"

The fat man's voice trailed and the cigar was placed in the mouth's corner. Max turned his head back to the stairwell. There was still the weaving cigar's red pretzel shape in his sight when he blinked. Was Mayor asking him to commit acts of vandalism? Mayor looked tired. His eyes were quiet, ears blank. "You're asking. . . ." "No." Mayor said almost finally. "I'm asking you to stay out of it." Was that smile or frown on his face? Did both his eyes wink or just one of them? It was too dark to see. "You do this for me and we might have a deal. Might not. Maybe I'll do something for you. Maybe agree to let you run the graveyard. Could keep cops off you. I might not do anything at all in return. That's the kind of deal it is. A risk. You like risks, Max?" Yes, this was an invisible spectrum of suggestion.

Mayor himself just felt tired. He couldn't remember exactly why he'd phoned Max Fuselli. He didn't even like Max. And what was this nonsense just spoken? It hadn't sounded like himself. He hadn't used a personal idiom. And why, why, why was there this constant urge to smoke? Mayor leaned back on the drafting table and ground out the cheroot. For some reason he'd felt Max Fuselli would understand this crisis. But now Mayor realized, maybe for the first time, that things had gone too wrong for understanding to be of any use. There was only action. But his suggestions to Max were opposed to law. "I can't promise anything," Mayor edged himself out of safety into the risky district of subversion. "That's the

deal. You do things for me and I don't give you anything in return. How did that sound?"

Mayor laughed. It was good to have that the old antipathy and animosity in his voice again.

He'd been getting a bit too friendly with Max back there.

"And what exactly do I do?" Max asked, stepping from shadow. "Just follow your instincts, sir." Mayor looked back at the cemetery map. "You've got a whole forty acres plus at your disposal. Impede progress. Do some damage. Do your thing." Max nodded at Mayor, turned and began to descend the stairs. Right hand inside his jacket, he looked back at the nine to five Napoleon. "It wasn't for you. What I do has nothing to do with you. Remember that." Mayor plugged his raspberry pucker with another cheroot.

When Max passed city hall's doors he removed the hand from his jacket and the dictaphone weighed his palm. He pulled open the cover and slipped the miniature cassette out with an eject. Max flipped the cassette into the air and caught it, put it into a coat pocket and began the walk towards Oxbow Cemetery. He wasn't sure exactly what to do when he got there, but was sure fate would supply.

Max must have muddled his directions. He remembered a definite trail leading to the cemetery among the tangle of paths through Oxbow's outback, but all the trails looked similar. Finally, he decided to take a chance on the one that seemed most right, yield to lucky draw.

He scuffled through forest, a migratory silhouette. The moon was superimposed with strange letters as intersecting branches stamped kaleidoscopic patterns between eyesight and astral disk. Max did a speedread to catch it all--gibberish prophecies and atonal poems, none of which affected him. I'm not astrology's business tonight, he thought. Malcontent, the forest's odour--pollen, rotten wood, skunkcabbage--hung around him. He did a morass shuffle along the trail bogged with rain. Wet leaves stuck to his cheeks. Scratches and welts from willow and huckleberry's snapback branches covered his face and forehead. Eventually, he came to the highway, far from the cemetery, but close enough. He forced through the tightknit barricade that grew in a thick weave of stems and leaves on the forest's outer perimeter, loped across the highway, water sloshing in his boots, muck footprints across the yellow line, and entered another trail, one he recognized this time, on the other side. It's only ten minutes away from here, he thought, and hurried, eventually arriving at the graveyard's gates.

When he approached the graveyard the confidence he'd shown in front of Mayor had gone to curiosity, to despair. He'd thought Gordon would be the key to establishing proper respect for the cemetery. Now he wasn't sure. Gordon was acting independently. Max wasn't drawn on Gordon's storyboard for the forty acres. Max had no idea what Gordon's imagination was capable of. Gordon was dying and that was a vaccine against inertia. Death changed everything--the way things changed when Gordon inherited his wealth and could hire people to work his idiosyncrasies into reality. Gordon's money put the best engineers, best architects, best technicians at arms length. What effects could Max produce in comparison?

What could he do for the graveyard when he was against an opponent competent as Gordon?

That night Max realized that Gordon could do absolutely anything he desired.

All day they'd exhumed graves with the delicate precision of chinese surgeons. Their shovels in dirt looked like slender acupuncture needles in daylight's body. Shovels were planted along strategic lines, along carefully mapped out meridians in a patient's firm, healthy musculature. But as twilight came on the graveyard took on aspects of demolition and desecration. At night, shovels were left at all angles in the soil like railway spikes half pounded into a huge kneecap; roots of torn plants and flowers were exposed nerve endings. It was light's absence that created the psychokiller effects. Light came on and it all sterilized into a lifesaving operation. But which was more real, night or day? In every country, every town, there were only two hemispheres--all around the world only two hemispheres--night and day. Each period of darkness or light took the other's place so quickly that it was hard to notice--like a table cloth yanked off the table and all the dishes, glassware and vases left standing. The dinner set didn't notice the shift or have a chance for motion, but it felt, immediately, that it was on a different landscape, in a new dimension with different rules, different inhabitants, different mannerisms.

But consider Max. He didn't have the opportunity to experience the day dismantle into night. He couldn't remember the last experience of full daylight. For him, everything was in darkform. Now add to this Max's incestuous relationship with the graveyard and his response to the half dug up plots and shrubbery was predictable.

Max didn't notice, or didn't want to notice, the light in the caretaker's shack behind a small stack of coffins. Max abandoned faith in sight. The dead had been dredged from the earth. The ground had been shovelled up and shovelled under. The monkey tree had been cut. And everything left behind was half done and half tidy. If you're going to fix a cemetery then do it fast and get the dead buried again as soon as possible, he thought. There was a

definite lack of respect to this arrangement. A light rain had been falling since evening and it hit the ground like a tin pan. How could they do this to Mom and Dad?, to Claire?, to the family?, Max asked himself. Well, I've bought the train and that means I've got responsibilities to its passengers. That's what that means, thought Max as he ran towards the fence. There was too much adrenalin in him--no blood in those veins except sugar. He went over the chainlink like something from the mind of a child sick on sweets. He was a nightmare candyman with maraschino cherry eyes, white chocolate skin. His untied shoelaces were slaphappy as black licorice frayed and gnawed upon. Clothing on him was just a stiff coat of sucrose lacquer.

He jumped past the private property and no trespassing signs like they weren't yet in effect, pulled a shovel from the dirt, climbed up the ladder that led to the backhoe's cab. On the top step he leaned back and swung the shovel in a slapshot. The shovel's blade hit the front windshield and glass cracked. After another impact the glass fragmented. Max climbed inside, found a heavy wrench underneath the operator's seat. With the wrench he smashed gauges and dials on the console, used the shovel to twist the foot pedals. The adrenalin in his blood helped him to bend the pedals into all odds of angle. He kicked holes in the rear window. Ankle bracelets of blood formed on his legs where the glass cut round. His shoes were spotted and stained red by the time he tore up the operator's seat. When finished with the backhoe, he slid down the ladder and ran to the metal toolsheds. The wrench failed to snap the padlocks. It took Max time to get into the sheds because the tin lock loops had to be broken off instead. Inside the shack were powersaws, jackhammers, extension chords, pulleys and slings, drainage equipment such as pumps and gauges, but most importantly there was gasoline. He grabbed the can thirstily and bent to twist the lid, elbows spangled. Max carried one of the cans outside. The other one which he'd opened was used to splash down everything in the toolshed. He reached for the book of matches he carried for situations just like this. Holding the match above the volatile mass he looked romantic in the flair, like a

middle class revolutionary with a coupon for free cigarettes--a funny guy, no doubt. He dropped the match and the shed went ablaze quick as prefab housing. Max looked in vogue before the fire tapestry that spread over the equipment on the tool shed's floor in a wall to wall carpeting that soon thinned up the sides. But Max only had a minute to watch because soon he was lugging the other gas can over to the largest heap of coffins. He'd finished splashing gas when he first heard the sirens. He groped for matches only to come up skunked. There were none left. Sirens approached. Max searched around, crouching and hopping like a three legged dog. He found a powersaw. Then he started to search for a big rock, ignoring the strains he felt on his geriatric physique.

Inside the lit caretaker's shack, Gordon had been examining a beautiful, as yet immaculate, ledger with gold trimmed vellum edges. The book was thick and he'd bought a beautiful fountain pen and lilac ink just for writing in it with. He'd been testing the action of nib on paper, a dry run. It made him horny to think of the actual notations to be soon put down.

He heard the crash of glass first. It surprised him so much he bent the beautiful new fourteen carat nib. "Fuckin' shit," he said going to the shack's window. He jumped at another crash of glass. The noise came from the backhoe's direction. "Holy Goddamn. Goddamn, Goddamn. That's expensive damage." He swivelled in the shack while one hand's palm wrapped circles around another hand's fist--ballbearing and socket. He looked around, eyes moving side to side like a slide rule. Too bad he'd had the shack gutted for remodelling. All that remained was electricity and light fixtures. All the domestic, and human, furniture had been evicted and ejected days ago. The cellular telephone was right underneath the top hat he'd knocked off the card table into a collapse on the sawdust floor. Gordon picked up the phone and punched in the omnipotent nineoneone. The police had little to do in Oxbow. He was providing jobs. And this was only the beginning. He jabbered to the nine-one-one operator when the tool shed burst into flame, an orange and red molten fan on his eyeball.

"Can I get the fire department to go with that order too, please?"

He'd hung up the operator and began to dither round the shack, pacing, infected with worrywarts. When the power saw started up he quickly made for a move. He picked up a crowbar. Second time this twelve months, he thought. And that was no coincidence, that was reincarnation of incident. Only, this was big crow. He stepped out the door with crowbar twofisted in front of him. He felt like a wife with frying pan who played hide and seek with a shady burglar. "Aw, what's the worst that can happen? Death?"

He walked straight towards the chainsaw's ripper phonics. To his right the tool shed burned and clattered apart as rivets melted. Occasionally one of the gas cans would explode and a side of the tool shed would go twirling away. The smell of gas was everywhere. The chainsaw's sound came from behind the big stack of coffins to the left. When he rounded the corner he saw a guy crouched darkly and spintripping sparks into the night. Max was tripodded on the ground, using the chainsaw against rock for balance and support. Where chainsaw tore granite, sparks flew out and arced back. Cinders boomeranged off the sawblade's lower teeth. The whole scene was like a fourth of July that never got off the ground, or Canada Day, whatever. Max sprayed sparks straight for the gas drenched stack of coffins.

Gordon knew he didn't have time and circled the trespasser from behind the coffins. He raised the crowbar and crept up. Luckily, the powersaw had deafened Max. The crowbar swung down and slammed Max in the neck. He let go of the saw. His head jerked forward, mouth dilated and uncorked, so fast that it took his body a second to follow. When Max tried to stand up his knees were plasticine. Max bobbed and staggered weakly like a jackinthebox after the first big spring. It didn't take him long to cave.

It was only when Gordon, crowbar held ready to resume, inspected the prone vandal that he identified Max. His vision was triple image but Max recognized Gordon's voice. "Thought you got rid of me? Should've known," Max said weakly, trying to raise himself on one

elbow. Max's lips were fishgills. Gordon placed the crowbar into the ground and put both hands on its upright end. He leaned forward, using the bar for support.

Gordon smiled and reached up to his head. Shit, I forgot the tophat, he thought, always such a great toy for times like this. He leaned forward again to look at Max. "You're looking good. You know how much money you've lost me to. . . ." Gordon stopped. He noticed something sticking out of Max's jacket pocket and reached down to take the microcassette. "Say, Max, what's this?" Max made a spineless swipe at Gordon's hand. "None of your business." His eyesight was really gone. Three moons and three Gordon's turned revolutions in front of him, strung with songbirds and stars. He tried to strike at the middle image but his arm had atrophied. "You'll probably have a concussion. You won't even remember me borrowing this." Three mouths spoke a three voice fugue, came together, separated. "What you're doing. . . ?" Words came as if they were bubbles in glue, rose slowly from Max's mouth and burst at irregular intervals. "Human beings don't really exist, Max." Gordon sidled into the wash of policelights. Gordon spoke what he supposed--people were multiform, ever metamorphosing robots that sometimes had feelings but always oodles of motives to choose from, motives which were only programming.

"Here come the police to arrest you so I can lay charges." As cops and firemen looked over him a darkness settled onto Max's eyes like carbon on a burnt out sparkplug. No more pyrotechnics tonight. No more blowing tinderbox kisses to make the darkness hot and bothered.

Mayor finally slept at home for the first time in a week. His wife hadn't welcomed the return, but he was happy to be home. On the same morning that Max had been put to jail Mayor arrived at work with a message to phone Gordon Chatterton. Of course, Mayor was excited. He hadn't heard that the vandalism was a botched job. The secretary told him that the phone call had come half an hour ago at seventhirty a.m. "Doesn't that guy sleep?" Mayor growled, walked into his office and slammed the door. He picked up the telephone and dialled Gordon Chatterton's number. The phone rang twice and the prerecorded message came on: "Sorry, the number you have dialled is no longer in service, please check the number and dial again, or contact directory assistance. Thank you." Gordon couldn't resist further humiliation by not leaving a number and forcing Mayor to phone the directory. Mayor dialled fouroneone and was informed there no longer existed a number for Gordon Chatterton, only a number for *Chatterton Enterprises*. He dialled the new number, listened to the phone ring. It rang six times before someone shucked it.

"Gooooood morning, *Chatterton Enterprises*. Gordon speaking." Mayor rifled through the ashtray on his desk for a smokable cheroot butt. He found one that imitated a cauliflower growth and took his time lighting it. The receiver's silence answered with equal patience. "Hello. It's the Mayor." "Oh. Mayor! Hi! I was just expecting your call." "So what?" "Well, I was wondering if you might want to call off my arraignment?" "That's the registrar's business and council's." "I know, I know, I know, I know," Gordon patronised, "but that's not the court date I'm talking about. I'll pay that fine." Mayor sucked back on the wet cheroot, which smouldered badly. "C'mon Mayor. I know you've got connections with the ministry. You won't be satisfied until the graveyard's out of my hands. You'll get the ministry to appoint an investigator. Then you'll take me to court for failing to uphold bylaws or portions of the graveyard act." This was all truth, so far, Mayor thought. He tried to anticipate Gordon's next

move, where Gordon was going to point out the snag. "Well. I just thought you should consult with me before doing anything crazy." "Is that so?," said Mayor. "Well. Listen to this," Gordon's voice whined high with glee, "before you make a decision."

A button depressed into a click, into the sound of tape hiss in Mayor's ear. A recording of his conversation with Max Fuselli, word for word, pauses included, in an underhanded syncopation, played from Gordon's end. A moment of ash quiet passed before Gordon was back on the line. "Pretty incriminating stuff, huh?" Mayor put the cheroot stub into his mouth, closed his lips around it, but it didn't smoulder. His lines, when he spoke them, sounded either mickeymouse or like a helium oratorio--mimicry of decompression. "Where-er-er-e'd you get that?" "Oh nevermind. Let's just say a little angel gave it to me." Gordon's laugh was unacceptable to telephone wires, which would not transmit it. Mayor heard mute snickering. "Now, it may not stand up in court. But if you want re-election try not to bother me enough to broadcast it." There was nothing from Mayor. The soggy cheroot finally sent up a thick cloud of smoke like a tirefire. "Why so shocked Mayor? Don't you believe in providence? I do. I think this means that we should be friends. Now you know I haven't done anything wrong . . . yet." Gordon laughed soundlessly again. "Once you see what the completion of my plan brings to Oxbow, I'll give you every chance to thank me. Have a greeeeaaaat day, from *Chatterton Enterprises.*" Long after Gordon had gone to dialtone Mayor held the receiver while the cheroot corked him. A fly buzzed around his nose and he jerked his head once in a while to avoid its tickle by reflex. The secretary entered and, like a mirror image being shattered by a baseball bat, Mayor put the receiver down, wiped wet tobacco off his lips, pressed a pen to one of the papers in front of him, signed his name with flourish and pulled down another file from the "work to be done" basket. His secretary, momentarily disconcerted by the switch from stasis to action, blinked to erase the optical disturbance. He was moving before I came in, she convinced herself. Nevertheless, the incongruity remained. "The police chief came by. But I told her you were busy with a phone call. Something about a vandal

caught at the cemetery last night." "Yes. Yes. Fine. Thankyou," Mayor said, writing his name quickly as possible on as many forms as possible. When the secretary left he looked down at the paper stack and dropped his pen. It wasn't his name he'd been writing, but *Johnny Walker, Black Label* over and over again. There was an itch on his hobnail liver, but when he reached down to his belly button he realized no scratch could reach it, no matter how deep his nails dug in.

Josephine, like most, if not all, saints, had her halo put on and buffed up for her. Saints live luxury. Saints are bourgeois but not by private enterprise, altruism being their commodity. Even in the morning, hair tangled and slept on, there was an electrical crackle to her which most mistook for static but she didn't have that much body hair.

Josephine spent the night on Billboy's couch. Of all the cemetery band, only she'd lived in the caretaker's shack. When the eviction notice arrived, Billboy offered his place but she wouldn't accept so they had to play polite persuasion. "I'm sorry, Bill, I can't. Your place is small enough. You've got a wife and kids." Bill owned a trailer, but he kept asking her and she kept refusing until he said, "Okay. Stay in the forest, then. We're all out of work. You ain't the only one. You can pay room and board out of your savings. It'll help pay my mortgage. I can't pay it myself." The last bit was false. Billboy had a lot of bonds. He'd laid investments into land and could have easily afforded trailer mortgage. Billboy was the kind who'd carried the same hundred dollar bill on himself for a good luck charm years going. Josephine put her hand on Billboy's bare forearm. She felt a pulse irregularity when he fibbed, felt the heart jam an extra pulse into veins, sweat glands break water. Josephine pressed fingertips into Billboy's forearm like polygraph electrodes. She felt the lie trip through him, but it gave her an excuse. She hadn't saved enough money to get her own place. Long as she paid Billboy rent and helped him out her conscience was spotless. She could have taken Billboy for everything she needed, but one drawback to being a saint is there's no

chance to capitalize.

Josephine moved into Billboy's place and Billboy's wife and child welcomed her with clean sheets folded around sofa cushions, kraft dinner and wieners on the stove.

Josephine woke up to mussed hair. Billboy and wife slept. Of course, Billboy could relax. He knew that somewhere, someone was preparing a U.I. cheque for him. Josephine hadn't filed yet. She didn't want to. Plus, she was in a predicament. The baby gurgled in the crib like mouthwash. Josephine showered and dressed. She was out in the backyard, what backyard a trailer park allowed. One millworker was painting up his trailer like a case of *Molson Canadian*. He was outside, in the early morning breeze, touching up the art. In a stagnant pond nearby mosquito mamas bred whole bug dynasties, generating towards that perfect mosquito, one that'd be able to suck blood from anything--cars, houses, trees, frankfurters--a mosquito that could get a plasma pint anytime, enough for itself and friends. The gene pool was eight billion years from perfection, getting closer every day, betting the odds. The mosquitos from the pond already looked like an improvement on their parents--a different atom here, a different molecule there, a gene splice here, a reef knot in DNA there. Josephine slapped at the big ones, setting the gene pool back hundreds of years. At this rate the mosquitos would never get there.

Billboy came out with two cups of coffee. He stood beside her in the early morning and handed her one of the cups. Dogs walked narrow streets of The Green Cliffs Mobile Home Park. The mosquitos, joined by blackflies (who profited nohow by the evolutionary scale, having achieved perfection already, and were evolving socially towards enlightened Marxism, already conducting Politburo purges and experiments in welfare), buzzed and boiled in the air around them like a madhouse of wayward souls. "You worried about something?," Billboy asked. "No. Everything will work out. Listen to this" Josephine went off thoughtfully. "What?" Billboy queried. "Would you and the boys be interested in getting the job back?" "Well. We love the music. I don't know." "I've talked to Gordon Chatterton a few times.

Maybe I could make some kind of deal." She looked at Billboy who stared straight ahead. "Ah, I don't know," Josephine went on. "It can't hurt to talk to him. But I want to okay it with you guys first." "Well, I'll call them. I don't know if they'll want to work for him now. I'll ask."

Billboy turned and flicked coffee grounds out of his cup. He climbed back into the trailer, turned behind the screen door and yelled: "Why don't you come in for breakfast. Those bugs'll eat you alive." "Thanks. I don't like eggs," Josephine said, slapping a buzz near her right ear. "Come on," he yelled again.

Billboy's renewed call to breakfast riled her. She slapped at the mosquitos sucking on her, at the itchy bites. "No thank you!," she screamed back. *Skeleton Closet* was something she needed, harmonic and manageable. She had to have the band reinstated at the graveyard. Everything, as usual in Oxbow, revolved around death, around the graveyard. The best way to get back in there was to resume the graveyard's musicianship. How to proposition Gordon? She knew she had to be there when Gordon's plan came to. Josephine wanted a privileged part in the intrigue, frontrow, in order to bystand further unfoldings. She had to get the boys their jobs back. She'd just go with an outright demand.

Josephine stood among flies when Billboy ran outside with an aerosol can of *Off*. He began to mist it over her body. With one hand he pinched her nose, the other guided spray lengthwise. He was careful not to get any onto her face. She sighed and let him hold her nose, gasped through parted lips. When finished he backstepped, studied her. She held mannequin poses of bug repellent, a stinky flower. "Well, at least if you won't come for breakfast, you won't be had *for* breakfast." She knew he was mad, feelings hurt. He was so sensitive. "Okay," she said, "I'll have them runny side up."

They both laughed. He opened the door for her. They went into the trailer where wife and child waited in front of a small pile of waffles.

The jailhouse was a labyrinth with Max in it. It wasn't the physical construction that made the place a maze, but the atmosphere, or lack thereof. Where jails are concerned lack of atmosphere is atmosphere. The chalkdrawn pornography on the walls had been drawn on, washed off, drawn on, washed off, until there were faint traces of good unwholesome nudity everywhere. There were days numbered like bundles of t.n.t. Bare bulbs hung behind wire mesh, incandescent specimens behind chainlink zoos. The hallway between the jail cells was straight and wide, swept clean, each drain unclogged. To the guards and freshmen everything looked extremely ordered, built functional, with prudence in mind. It was a bit dirty but the dirt didn't hide anything. Spend a night here and you'd never find home again.

Max Fuselli had lost multiple nights in this place and couldn't even find his heart's keyhole anymore. The prison explicated itself through absence--the lack of other criminals. Oxbow jail always had vacancy. The hardheads and archvillains were extradited into maximum securities, while smalltime offenders had short tenures. The cell block was empty--there wasn't another prisoner to act as welcomewagon hostess. It was loneliness that made a labyrinth--the quiet solitude of the prisoner huddled on concrete, the jailhouse halitosis, the refugee shadows. The prisoner remained unnoticed behind the bars and bars and bars. Sun streamed through windows and as the day went the shade on the floor shifted like a slowhand of solitaire. The labyrinth was completed in the secondhand items: dirt that lay fallow in the crack between wall and ceiling, different vintages of urine combining into a powerful scent.

The wall's faded popart graffiti spoke of hands with different dispositions, different psychologies. And the richness of the minds that left them were evidenced by the angles, poses and perspectives of these triple x daydreams. Girls, girls, girls--their curves and attitudes spoke a thousand complex perversities and fixations that lead from cradle to wooden spoon, from babe to monster, from citizen to criminal. These were the perfect girls, the girls of

literature, the muses, all a creation of the mind and not copied from reality. These were the girls that never existed, that were more men than girls because they were products of these men's psychology. There just aren't any girls really like that out there. In a perfect world, well, who can say? In a patriarchal utopia it might be achieved, they might step off the wall, flesh of your flesh, mind of your mind, and degrade themselves for you in an equal measure to your selfhate, if not more. They'd supply enough degradation to turn the most stubborn selfhate inside out.

But it wasn't only the petroglyphs that created a labyrinth for those that had time to notice--it was the removals. The specifics of the jail only really existed in the jailbird's mind and when they were released or bailed they took the specifics with them, carried them around all their lives like wrecking balls. Even the jail didn't like being a jail and when the prisoner left, it went with the prisoner, clandestine, in conscience or memory. And the jail liked it there so much that it refused to return. Consequently, the jail cell's spirit wasn't even there to properly greet each new guest. Oxbow jail had been removed, piece and piece, by each inmate that had ever been in and out. It had been carried out secretly, inside the memory like nail files in birthday cakes. All that was left were shadows crouched in corners and folds like flattened baby grand pianos or jammed thin against walls like overpressed tuxedos and sillyputty--thin shadows without a single spiritual or mental nutrient and all monochrome black. The sun streamed in through the bars on this maze of memory and loss and psychology's petroglyphs like flames from the blowtorch.

Max had been sequestered two days in this hardened province, shifting his seat every hour or so to avoid the patch of sunlight that inched across the floor. In patterns of shade and coolness he debated injustice. In patterns of solace he ambled to each new seat. The warden was neither unkind nor sympathetic. There was no call for consolation, as these people came in and out of the warden's life too quickly for him to make any worthwhile

investments on them.

When the court date came and Max was ushered up to law's mahogany handrails, the attorneys and judges treated him with too much esteem, far as he was concerned. Now, either Gordon lacked acumen or he was twenty steps ahead, because Gordon's lawyer wanted clemency for Max. Max was incapable of recalling that night's specifics, only the big picture. Yes, he'd done some damage, but what had exactly happened passed from him with uncharacteristic ease. His lawyer argued temporary insanity due to the *Porphyria*, but instead of harping, which could have been easy, Gordon's lawyer said it was true and solicited the court to find in its heart only a little restraining order to restrict this unfortunate old fart from the cemetery's premises. Gordon Chatterton was a rich man with no time for a prolonged court case. Besides, the lawyer shrugged, Max's damage was easily healed with minimum delays in operation.

Mayor had been present at both proceedings, initial and sentencing, and he was a jackrabbit, a jackrabbit in a straightjacket. He'd been snared by an incriminating mistake and was now on strict parole.

Max remembered that he'd spoken to Mayor before the transgression, but couldn't for love retort with any exact knowledge of that conference under cross-examination. Mayor, when called to the witness stand was all mum--fib and falsehood far as Max guessed. Mayor gave the bailiff an oath and sat down in a seat made for perjury, built to fit. Mayor breezed himself snugly into it to mock traditions of honesty. When he got up he carried perjury off with him--another addition to numerous past crimes. Max knew something subversive, breach of trust, had gone on, but couldn't remember what. Gordon was all smiles, tongue between grin the shape of an ace in the hole. He had Mayor on the griddle, or so Max intuited. It wasn't prosecution and expose that Gordon wanted, it was a servile puppet.

The judge's gavel came down with a rap of pure felicity. The restraining order was set. All these bluesuits with their courtroom drama were nothing but a congress of caricatures.

Max was issued a strict redress, handed his personal articles and told to shove off. The crowd filed out in a sad petition. The graveyard was being desecrated. They'd wanted to see Max vindicated for good intention. The sun was setting when he left, the nocturnal life on its short and sweet way.

Eventually, there's a point at which the terminally ill glance outside and see that night's composed of a sweep of particles. In some areas of the sky, the grains of maximum black are dense, in others the particles are widely spaced--that's where night's emaciated. Those places are intermezzos. For the terminal, everything, especially this darkness, succumbs to speed. The particles fling by in rapid sequence, much like tadpoles. It's in these intermezzos, these grey pits, that the terminals stow their hope, and the hope, because everything swooshes by, is carried away. Sooner or later, darkness cubbyholes and hauls off all the hope placed into its brightest moments and there's nothing left but the bootblack swarm, more and more solid, less and less spotty. The black particles are a fifty knot stream, a constant recurrence of mortality, that soon congeal into a wall you come up against.

As far as Gordon was concerned there were invisible smokestack incinerators all around him. He was in a siege of soot, among night's whizzing bits. He'd parcelled out some hope and the darkness had carried it away like a good postal service. He'd almost lost hope and night's droplets rained past him like the devil's confetti.

It rained and the rain pointed out means of flight. The men had dug, hauled and stacked for weeks. Today, their black rain slickers billowed behind them like bat wings. Their hardhats had brims similar to duck bills. As their slickers flew back the ropes and suspenders the men wore, their straps, looked like guidewires attached to wings for purposes of pull and release, to make them flap. The dark aviators had built wingworks to take air with but forgotten the pin feathers and, so, they were forever in ground school, flapping, rain soaked.

Behind them Gordon stood, a chinstrap to keep his tophat on. Clothes whipped off the gaunt frame. He walked quickly but stiff as a pair of prosthetic legs. Mostly, though, he stood still and watched men jump in levitation attempts--jump on their shovels. Mostly, he watched

the men dig with the shovels, the backhoe's scoopfuls of soil. He stood on a hill and withstood the storm at fullblast. One hand held the silvertipped cane in front of him, sometimes twirling it, sometimes stepping forward then back to every unnerving thunderclap. Pitterpat, rain fell on the flattopped hat. Stacks and stacks of coffins ringed the open graveyard. Dogs and guards were in place around the perimeters. The dogs wore chains and studded collars like chromeshop neckties while sentries were dressed in immaculate black, almost formal wear. Only a very small section of the graveyard hadn't been dug up. An archaeologist was working with the crew right now. The graves of Natives were being photographed and finetoothed before being disturbed. Gordon had the archaeologist on hand also to properly bag the bones distinct to each skeleton. The medical health officer was a paperwork man, diligent but disinterested. Gordon had doublechecked his character before calling him out. At the moment he was in the renovated caretaker's shack drinking coffee. (Gordon had given the caretaker, an old duffer and his wife, a nice pension and sent them off to a Florida bungalow). *Chatterton Enterprises* had nominated--who else--Gordon Chatterton to be the new caretaker. He took his wages in room and board and never once complained.

Betsy was in the shack with the health inspector, participating in a lunch break crib game with some of the contractors.

Gordon nodded up towards the sky. The wily cane dangled in front of him like an advisor, like something surefooted on any terrain. This was a Shakespearean storm, classical, because the worst was still in the works. The drainage contractor within waited on a meeting with Gordon.

The last three weeks sized up like Russian wood dolls, one inside another. Gordon had been taken to court for failure to notify the civic registrar before exhumation, for failure to comply. Gordon had lost the case, unfolded ten one thousand dollar bills from his wallet and paid the fine right there. Since then he'd obtained the signature (upon disclosure of his intentions and

proof of their necessity). Everything was fine as far as legal issues were concerned.

There'd been a load of complaints from the town but they couldn't do anything. As long as the bodies were above ground their rights were suspended. Besides, he'd printed two notifications of disinterment sixty days previous, according to law, in two of Oxbow's newspapers--fine print under the obituary column, but it was there. Besides, the law didn't signify maximum time for keeping disinterred bodies above ground. Gordon relaxed, took it as he stepped. Besides the regular Cemetery Act's law, his lawyer maintained that the original bill of sale's prescripts were their best benefit in court. The rules were vague, the lawyer had told him. No matter what he did to the cemetery, that original bill of sale could be used to keep him in business for two years. It would take two years at least for the dissemination and interpretation of that old receipt before the courts could come to some kind of verdict. Gordon could go ahead, waive all legalities, because action wouldn't be taken until it was understood how the original bill of sale applied and if Gordon was in contravention of that precedent. It was another way of flying, Gordon thought. You disestablish the ground, disestablish yourself from the territory.

And past all legal issues Gordon still held the micro cassette of Max and Mayor's covert meeting. It was sewn into his coat and sat there like a deck of old maids, extras of the one dirty card he could pass to any player. He knew that Mayor represented Oxbow, that he'd be called forward by the folk to press charges. And he'd hesitate, yes he would, to press charges under threat of the tape's disclosure to the constituents--and that was exactly the threat Gordon's voice had poisonpenned across their last phone call. Gordon smiled on top of the storm tampered hill, twirled his cane like a revolving door. All this gave him plenty of time, plenty time not to die, to run death off the track, scare death from his one hundred sixty pounds of clay, ashes, dust.

In the last three weeks there'd been a miscellany of incident. There'd been protestors. Domestically bred riot gangs of antichoicers and lifedenyers, who usually went at each other

rather than with each other, had joined camps, compared notes, devised strategies, and come out with new banners and new slogans in a campaign against *Chatterton Enterprises* outside the cemetery's fence. Gordon had to enlist police protection for the labour going to and from work. Gordon had smiled at the police chief as she megaphoned the protestors to keep off the barricades. Was it imagined or were her nerves more and more frayed, in a tapeworm agitation, as time went by? Hope she's taken some stress vitamins, thought Gordon. There was a billowy, royal purple circus tent set up just outside the northern fence. Right now, workers were carrying coffins and bonebags into the tent. Officially it was storage, but off the record it was Gordon's laboratory/workshop. Inside, there was a sturdy oak table set up. There were buckets on buckets of royal purple paint, oil based, indelible, great against the elements. There were fine, handcrafted artists' brushes. There was the pristine, vellum paged quarto, holding on for written instructions, and the violet inkfilled fountain pen. It all waited. Soon he'd be in there, just a few more graves to scrape. Tomorrow night, from the way it went, he'd go into purple linen hermitage.

A week had gone since the adjournment and Gordon hadn't seen either Max, or Mayor. He felt worse and worse, head and chest pains, but he refused to visit Doctor June. He didn't have to know the medical imperatives. Besides, he didn't have time. He was constructing a cure right now. Gordon watched the workers still apparently strapped to rope and wire mechanisms that flapped their wings. They dug, hunched over, then straightened up. They worked with knees and backs, shovelled like trainees did after a steady infusion of safety videos. They still looked in harness for artificial wings. They still hopped out flight attempts. Gordon turned from the hilltop vantage and walked down the path to the remodelled caretaker's shack where he now lived.

He entered the shack out of rain. Betsy counted dollars from the crib game that had gone on. When Gordon came she turned to him and said, "That guy, Joe, called again. I

finally got ahold of that Josephine for you. She's coming in tomorrow." Gordon nodded at her. "I want to see you later, when I'm done with the drainage thing." "Sure," Betsy agreed.

Gordon motioned to a contractor, who stood and went with Gordon into the adjoining office.

Gordon took off the hat and gloves, laid them alongside the cane over his desk. He sat in a chair and put up his alligator shoes. He sat like someone sprawled across a continent, but stretched thin as gold. To be slim as hairsbreadth was the only way Gordon could cross the continent of responsibilities he'd embraced. And he was a wire service that many discharges of message, letter, and idea had travelled along. Stretched thin and worn from tip to toe, he still kept himself delicately connected.

The contractor who joined him, the drainage expert, unrolled a topographic map and laid it across the desk. "What's this?" asked Gordon. "Well, I thought you'd like to see what I'm talking about." "Just give me the basics." Gordon leaned over the chart. The contractor explained to Gordon--no less than five minutes of talk--that the graveyard didn't have to be fully exhumed in order to stop erosion. "I knew that already," snapped Gordon. The contractor continued that the problem was adequately solved by replacing old pipes under certain graves. However, since the whole graveyard had been dug up, *Chatterton Enterprises* was positioned to entrench a truly advanced drainage system that would far outlast the basic replacement for the original. They were also in a position to modify the terrain for better surface flow. "Is this land good for drainage?," Gordon asked the contractor directly. "Well, it's average," was the reply. "The main problem is that it's at the base of a mountain so it gets major runoff, making it wetter than some areas." "So a higher altitude might be more advantageous?" "Yes, but. . . ." "And, of course, since there's run off, we're probably in danger of a slide too!" "Yes, but, again, that's minimal and it can be prevented by simple. . . ." "Well, that's the report then. I guess this isn't the safest spot for a cemetery."

The contractor backed off, knew what Gordon was to suggest next, but was unwilling to believe. "I guess we better start looking for a better piece of land. Of course, we'll have to

store the bodies while we survey the surrounding area for more suitable locations." "But, Mister Chatterton, that's not necessary. This graveyard could easily be secured against flooding and slides. It was pretty secure even before." "Look," Gordon dropped his feet from the desktop and pointed a straight finger. "I'm the principal operator and I decide what's best. Your job is finished." The contractor jammed his hat, clenched his jaw and walked out.

Gordon leaned the chair back, bent his legs, flipped the creases of his pants back and forth at the ankles. This is what he'd expected and planned for. Now that all the graves were disrupted, all the plot holders' rights extinguished, he could begin the slow, very slow, process of looking for another cemetery site. He thought of the law, of how pathetic and ineffectual it was outside its proper context. No legal draughtsman ever anticipated something like Chatterton's plan, so the law didn't have the tackle to counter Gordon's actions. He flipped the creases on his pantlegs back and forth in happiness. Gordon pressed the buzzer for the other room and Betsy appeared. "Yes?," she asked. "Call a press conference for this friday. And could you order me some new suits. Exactly the same but in white." "What for?" "It's summer soon. You can't expect me to wear black in summer can you?" Betsy had gotten used to the winter wear. "No, I guess I can't. What did the drainage man say?" "Distressing news my dear. The graveyard's got to be moved." "No! You can't!" Betsy sounded like a back alley brass band. She let out a wail, her throat a dented horn. "Yes I can," replied Gordon, taking her hand, taking her around the waist, positioning himself for a foxtrot. "Oh yes I can." Betsy shook herself loose and stood at tangent. "I can't let you do. . . this. Whatever it is you've got planned. I'll quit." Gordon got on his knee in front of her--the orthodox marriage proposal position. "You couldn't do that to me, could you?" She looked down at him. No. No, she couldn't leave, even with this. Soundlessly, she turned to go, paused at the door to say, back to him, that Joe had arrived to see Gordon. "Tell him I'm not in." "But you are," Betsy silkvoiced and opened the door. Joe walked in as she left. Gordon rose from genuflection.

"Why do you have to keep coming here? I told you I'd call when we were planning on opening." Joe held his cap in front of him, forehead turned to earth like a poor dirt farmer. "So why don't you just leave?," Gordon questioned. Mutual fury hammered a deadbolt between the two of them, locked them off from co-operation. Gordon tried to push him out with an anger carefully calculated, gambled on, to alienate Joe. The risk was whether Gordon had enough strength to dislodge Joe and get him out the door. No, he didn't. The fury broke into desperation. Gordon started slapping Joe with a pair of quick tempered hands. Joe was irremovable. His face grew roots down his marble body. After a few minutes he reached out one handed and pushed Gordon away. Gordon lost his balance and fell ass backwards. Joe stood there looking down. "Hi partner," he finalized. It was then that Gordon chuckled onto laughter. "Partner? You call a ten percent cut in ticket sales a partnership? Ha. Ha. Ha. Just a second. I'll get your share of the partnership so far." Gordon walked out and returned with a nailgun. He found a penny, slapped it down flathand like a referee. He sighted the nailgun on the queen's face, punched it, tossed the impaled penny to Joe. "There's your share. Now get out of here." The coin fell at Joe's feet, centrifugal as maple seed. He picked it up, put it into his pocket. "I signed the contract." "You sure did and it's safely in the vault. But you see, Joe, we just haven't started selling tickets yet. Take a look outside. Would you buy a ticket to that?" "No." Gordon held out his arms to the sides, palms up like a charismatic on Pentecost. He shrugged. "Don't try and rip me off. We have a deal." "We sure do. Ten percent of the tickets." "I'll be watching." Joe turned to leave. "I'm gone. But I better see some money soon." Joe was through the door and Gordon whispered, "If we sell tickets. And we won't. But you'll get a nice restraining order in the mail."

After Joe's exit, Gordon called Betsy into the office, told her to put a restraining order on Joe. "The same as on Max." "You made a deal with him." "Yup. Sure did. And if I ever sell a ticket to this place I'll sure get him his fifty cents." "How can you do this to people. He helped you. You would never have gotten the graveyard it wasn't for him." "And what fucking

business is it of yours, anyway?" Gordon screamed at her, punting a hole in gyproc behind him with the toe of his shoe. "Who the fuck asked you?" He picked up a hammer from the desk and threw it at her. She dodged and the hammer's claw punched a hole in the wall behind her. "Hey," she said, stunned, backing out. "You just watch it! Cause when I'm gone, cause I'm the last you can push away. When I'm gone you'll have no one else!" She wrenched the door, slammed it behind her. Papers from his desk flocked to the ground.

Gordon put his head down on the table. "You were never really here," he whispered over and over again.

When he'd stopped crying, when all had stopped, sixty minutes later, he cranked upright, gathered papers from the floor and stacked them on the desk, removed the hammer from its new nook in the wall. Gordon eased himself into his seat. The small of his back was corkscrewed. How could his temper flare so abruptly? Sleep and sustenance--that must be it. He'd been sleep deprived these recent months and scarcely swallowed any meals. He'd just let his body subsist on adrenalin. He knew that loss was gaining on him--knew it--and time was rationed. Time did a triage. He wanted desperately to make the selection. There had always been so much time at hand, just a gob away. The universe must be conspiring against me still, thought Gordon, like it always has.

Affection had always seemed just dormant between Gordon and his father--a restraint in every caress, kindness supplanted by a more brutal and blunt directive. Gordon never wanted too much though. He was compliant, with sedated eyes to calm the world coming into him. He never got grabby for dad's embrace. Gordon took whatever was freely given, which was a rare occasion. He always felt that dad was just waiting for him to get insistent so he could liquidate another of Gordon's needs. But Gordon, lonely in that mansion without a mother, was happy with just a few words--waited on them all day. And when dad turned an occasional emotion towards him it was like putting wings on pigs.

But when Gordon turned twelve dad's cold shoulders became the only thing. He had Gordon moved to a room further from his, to the east of the mansion where there was nobody at all, not even a maid raking a short handled feather duster. Gordon was relocated and wouldn't see his father for days. He was restricted to certain sections of the house, old areas--the study full of literature, the dance studio, and the front parlour (where visitors came if there were ever any)--were now off limits to him. Father never gave him an explanation. "You're not

to go there anymore," was all he said, with that set to jaw and cheekbone that ratified any new order. Gordon understood only that the game had gone past low stakes. Now, in halfflight and shadow he terminated certain ambitions, thinking this a temporary withdrawal, and just went for survival along the meantime. The house crickets a quiet psychodrama, a fetish for longing--clicks and chitters like an abacus counting off his father's many emotional intolerances and indifferences. And Gordon was chained to the command, a good boy who, along this apprenticeship, became a scavenger for attention. The status quo was darkness--his father a reference in it with a face angular as a crumpled fuselage. The boy nodded, nodded, nodded, embarking into the silence of a contrite heart.

Gordon complained only once, ever, and it had nothing to do with his own social wants. Socially he'd grown amiable as ether. The maids saw him drift around the house and when he looked at them soberfaced they always let out a smile or a laugh. It was his pagliacci-as-outcast that made them crack, despite orders not to. He played an expatriated clown so well. And Gordon was always happy to elicit a response of some sort, acknowledgement of any kind. No, Gordon never complained for himself, but reacted only when he sensed something incorrect on his father's part. His only motivation to complain arose out of an empathy with his father's loneliness. Gordon wanted to aid his drunken and emotionally destitute daddy.

One day he snuck down to the studio to peer around a crack in the door. Normally he wouldn't have come down at all, but he heard bottles smashing, howls. When his eyes veering around the door, cautiously because discovery wasn't desirable, he saw father seated on the floor, blood seeping through a gash, pouring from his forehead. A small, spattered photo was in front of him. Father's head drooped with forfeit. He'd been smashing glass against his numbskull. Three or four broken bottles scattered the floor. Then Gordon saw want, besides his own, for the first time. That was a photo of his mother on the floor. It was then that Gordon realized desire was the world's biggest loser. He decided never to need another human being, though he'd take time to adopt this as practice.

He went over to his father and laid a hand on his shoulder. Though he was the mistreated scapegoat, Gordon crouched in front of his father and offered sympathy. The father didn't move, didn't look up. Gordon smelt terrible halitosis, alcoholic shitmouth, flowing out of him. They sat there for a few minutes then his father took up the photo and put it into Gordon's hand. "Never lose this," he said, tottering to the bathroom where he plainly heaved. The boy looked at the snapshot of mother he'd been relegated, knowing tomorrow the desolate lessons would resume--on with disharmony.

He put on his top hat and grabbed his cane. The cane was thick and reliable, which was too bad, because Gordon's favourite type of cane was one curved at top, slim as a sliver, pointy at the end, campy as a pearl handled toothbrush, but without a jot of support--preferably either malleable or brittle. He liked a rod or stick that was nothing to lean on, that gave no assurances. That was his mental cane of choice--a result of dad's values. But now that death was expected, for the first time he needed a sound policy nevertheless--something reliable.

The memories were unwelcome. Joe shouldn't have affected him. And a damaged Betsy had no uses. She did a better job without battery.

He looked round the room he was in. They'd remodelled and redecorated the caretaker's place quite nicely. There were pictures on the wall. In place was a nice ceiling lamp, oak desk, filing cabinet, cappuccino maker. The downstairs had been converted into a bedroom, and the bathroom down there outfitted with sauna and whirlpool. All contemporary luxuries had been installed. The kitchen and living room had been updated with a new fridge, leather furniture, new dining room set, a tap that poured boiling water, plants. Gordon even transferred the maid and chef out. He'd added a garage for the limousine and a bedroom off it for the chauffeur. The old place on Ice Street was shut up, rest of the staff on vacation or laid off. Betsy still had a key to the mansion and that's where she stayed, making sure the place was kept and monitored against unlawful entry. Gordon was happy with the

arrangement. He'd be happier when the graveyard was finished.

The circus tent was outfitted with temporary quarters. Plumbing, bedding, and other facilities had been organized. The maid would bring him food for the time he'd soon spend in there. When the encoding and tabulating and everything was laid out then he'd tear down the tent, move back here for good and see if he could work his life into agreement with eternity. See how long, hopefully forever, he could bar death and Mister Heartbreak from his property. And that was it, Gordon thought as he grabbed his tophat, gloves and cane off the floor, just a constant attempt to keep myself busy. He was cheating Mister Heartbreak out of the emotional monopoly, cutting himself off from Oxbow before it cut itself off.

always one step ahead of emotion, that's the trick, stop a second, deviate from the plan, that bastard will claw into me again and pull me down, then I'll really be unhappy, no one cares for me, boohoo, that sort of thing, and death, as for death, well, I've got to erect some kind of defense, insurance plan, then stay still behind it, as long as I'm alone there's safety from both of them, alone behind the door, and a juicy crow pinioned to the barricade, like lamb's blood repelled the angel of death, and the door locked and boards hammered across, I'll be safe from death and there'll be no one in my life for Mister Heartbreak to twist into me like a pluck of pliers

Gordon was thinking like that, imagination flexed, when he walked out of the now empty caretaker's shack into the graveyard. Rain had gone from downpour to drizzle. Workers huddled around a truck. The coffins were stacked close to the circus tent. One of the foremen saw Gordon and waddled over to him. "That's it, Mister Chatterton. We're finished." Gordon nodded to him. "Thanks. You can go. I'll let you know if we need you again." The foreman receded. Gordon took in the graveyard.

It was the moon's surface, sure. Open pits, most of them filled shallow with mud

puddles, breached the hillside. Along the centrefold was a large burnt hole--the ground black and scarred like a giant cigar butted in the cemetery's middle. That's where the monkeypuzzle tree had stood, been felled, had its stump razed. In some of the pits the water table, swollen by rain, loosened the graves' sidewalls and they'd caved into their voids. Dandelions and grass took seed within pits and on mounds of excavated dirt to grow in patches like sad toupees. Roots hung down, twisted and stringy from the six foot walls towards the black soil--connectors searching for lost appliances. With as much life as worms in tequila, as the thin arthritic fingers of old scrubbrush, soap and washboard ladies, in open coffins. The roots stirred quietly in the breeze and the rain was cold as frost. Raindrops fell off the end of Gordon's pointed nose. His hair clung, knotted strands and lumps from under the tophat, almost like varicose veins. Thunder could be heard not often. Lightning slid along the horizon's lips, between cloud and sea. The graveyard was empty as winter flowerbeds. Gordon walked among the vacant, hollow plots. The workers, by now, were all gone. He made sure they missed nothing--a stockboy in a department store. There were large holes where mass graves had been disembowelled. But the four by eight square holes came by billions, the grass between them torn and ripped from the backhoe's treads. He stood in the centre, where the monkeypuzzle tree had been. There was a large clearing in the forest for all the tombstones, nameplates, monuments--looking unhappy as a pawnshop display. He smiled and bobbed his head. Everything looked perfect. He searched the skies and telephone wires. There wasn't crow flap or caw anywhere. Something must be right.

The circus tent billowed in waves as wind rippled through it. The graveyard itself was all sixfoot pits, earth doors ajar, skeletons come out of closets. Josephine couldn't help but recoil, involuntarily, at the b-movie status of the terrain. The sun was up and at her back. The restaurant was still shuttered tight, tourist booth locked. The carousel's wooden horses had left off poses of prestige for angles of fright—they stared from wooden sockets terrified, hooves spiked to the ground. They would easily have exchanged fright for flight, but lacking mobility had to endure, creak in the wind, soak up dew. They were highstepped in gestures of defense, raptures from tranquillity's other side, just east of an ocean minced into waves, an ocean pellmell with whitecaps.

And when she was called in to confront scrawny Gordon--malnourishment and disease--dressed to execute in bow tie, silk, sharkskin and top hat, she knew the debacle outside corresponded with Gordon's appearance. How much worse, she thought, are the landscapes of his mind? Gordon Chatterton, one time eccentric, now unappeasable even by sacrilege, was suited up along enigma's lines, enigma personified. Invisible, desperation and friends were a menagerie of his, rubbernecking around him.

She noticed there was purple under his fingernails. He told her he'd been mixing and stirring paint in recent days. Gordon was deliberate, treating her like someone unknown. She felt no more welcome than a stranger partycrashing a family reunion.

"I'm looking to get our jobs back. My band needs work." "Well. There's a recession on. Lot's of people are looking. Few will find, however." His nose looked seized by ammonia. "If you're willing to work hard. Maybe I can find you something." Josephine told him there was nothing she'd do except music. "Well it's, um, music I'm talking about, of course." Gordon winked with curved eyelashes that had dust particles stuck in them. "But a repertoire a bit different than previously." Gordon reached into the desk and took out a stack of musical

scores, some photocopied, some yellowed from age. "Here's the stuff I was thinking of. Of course, you're free to transpose them after your fashion but only as long as they're more or less sounding the same." He lobbed the stack towards Josephine. She picked them up and thumbed through, exploring some random pieces more fully. "These are all dirges?" Every piece was black and laborious, notes dragged to a limping overexertion, gone from ponderous to downright lamebrained. "There's not even one funeral march." "That's right. I want you to play that stuff. If you accept then you're all hired back. At the same wages too." Josephine thought about it. They were going to be a monotonous squad. Dirges didn't vary much. "You'd be playing that stuff eight hours a day." Gordon pulled a contract from a desk drawer. "Breaks for coffee, lunch, coffee. I want the noise. . . I mean music, to sound all day." Eight hours a day of dirges? Josephine couldn't imagine notes so unanimous in length--like a three a.m. orchestra composed entirely of highly amplified didgeridoo. "Don't you want a break every now and then? Maybe a funeral march or just something sad and comforting?" "No. Absolutely not." Gordon was more obstinate than rumoured. His voice was fanatical or idealist, one or the other--both being the same. "And where would we be playing?" "Here. I'll let you know when." Josephine knew better than to ask why Gordon wanted them to play an empty graveyard. She knew he'd treat it like a rhetorical question. Gordon took the dirges from her with exaggeration, with thumb and forefinger, pinky extended. Was he pennypinching, taking prized loveletters or just junk mail? His actions flaunted ambivalence. He pulled out a fountain pen and covered the contract with lilac stigmata, a stylized alphabet. The letters looked like big buffoon penmanship, each one in a different font. Gordon pondered each stroke before he wrote, trying to make them all different, as if experimenting towards something else in mind. "There you go. I've signed it. You can bring it back when you've thought it over. Just fill in the names of the band under employees and get them to sign." He handed the contract over to her. It felt heavy as tablets. Weeds grown on Judas's grave taste better than this, she thought, earwax tastes better. Josephine put the envelope

into a music folder that she carried with her. The band's c.v. was in the folder just in case Gordon wanted to see it. He hadn't even asked if they had one. "Think you could memorize all that in two months?" "Sure. We know some of them already." She stood and extended a handshake to Gordon. His hand wilted into hers, energy without substance, with the force of amperes. This was what she'd expected--no surprise hidden in that handshake. He slithered his hand out of hers. "I remembered you, Josephine. I would have called you if you hadn't come to see me." And that sentence was all the encouragement she was given.

The words repeated themselves in her while she withdrew. *I remembered you, Josephine.* After what he'd done to the graveyard, all the staff, possibly the town, he remembered her, thought enough of her to offer the band their job back. Either there was still compassion left in Gordon or she was integral to his operation.

Doctor June had watched Josephine wind between the excavated place, stripmined for every bone and skull, stripsearched ruthlessly. She had a pair of binoculars around her shoulders that she lifted to her eyes once in a while to spyglass down on *Chatterton Enterprises*. From this vantage, wrapped in her doctor's outfit, catching on blackberry and other flora, moss slippery under her brogues, mummified in bracken, thighs and face smacked silly by branches, she felt and looked as absurd as a hightek surveillance unit would have in this place. Wasn't this getting to be a bit of a melodrama? She sometimes felt extremely foolish when going back to the clinic with mud all over her robe, her stethoscope jammed with leaves, the binoculars around her neck. "Taking a bit of time off to birdwatch?," the quips went, reeled off short and sour by patients waiting on appointments. But here she was nevertheless, eyes bolstered by glass, a telescopic peepington. She could have easily just gone right down to Gordon and prodded him into medical checkup, full physical, but it was obvious Gordon didn't want to be in a hospital and wouldn't go long as there was an alternative. So Doctor June was stuck in demeaning forms of espionage, down in muddy squats, making diagnosis by

distance. At first, Doctor June had assumed that Gordon had found another doctor or taken his files to a specialist, but with this graveyard business it looked like he was writing a document into tracts of land. He'd taken up a glib costume and sat down to some stratagem-- death the official opposition. Gordon was failing fast, even from here she could see that. He looked emaciated, malnourished, corrupt with cancer. At this pace, present rate of insomnia included (she never saw lights go down), he might last a bare three or four months.

She couldn't help but feel responsible. This was an isolation (though selfimposed) that she'd nurtured. That's why she was undergoing this discomfort to start with. She was in Oxbow because of the liaison, devil's pact, she'd consummated with Chatterton Senior-- the sole reason for her emigration from Britain.

Doctor June had listened for Chatterton Senior's death only vaguely. She resigned from the specialty of alcoholism and went into general practice. She gathered up her hippocratic oath, what was left of it anyway, and slinked off to children and mothers and minor health infractions. When the doctor heard of his death the regret was hardly a dollop, not even the size of a small kidneystone. By then she'd become firmly convinced that she'd done the right thing. The newspapers brought her the obituary column of the rich and famous buried, tongue in cheek, on one of the last pages in the paper.

The teletype's teeth had left heavy impressions on the page.

He'd had a son. Survived by a son, it said. And her emotions brinked out immediately. Of course that nagging feel she'd had back then was straight conjecture, but it had been right. He was very much the scientist when he came to rationalize the affect his love for his exwife had had on him. He had constructed a paradigm of his situation, a theory he meant to test. His wife had wanted a child in order to play out her obsessions. Likewise, he'd used the child to compensate for his inability to hate or stop what his exwife had done to him. The boy had been schooled in isolation like some warped survival technique. Chatterton Senior had

wanted to see if a life of complete isolation was possible. The impressionable age had been spent with a father who had only one rule, one lesson: compensate for emotion by becoming intimate with loneliness.

But she only understood the father/son relationship later, when she'd become Gordon's physician and he'd related to her his incomplete understanding of his father.

At the time of the obituary, she decided there'd been a mistake on her part, an error to rectify. The child was sixteen but maybe there was still time.

What bothered her most about the whole affair was that it hadn't bothered her. He'd wanted to die, known it was his only chance for an out. She'd helped him. Was there anything positive in her act? Or was it just the easy way out for her inexperience, the simplest route to take in dealing with this incorrigible case? God, he'd had a child! She'd suspected a child lay in the background, but didn't bother to run a thorough check on--some ignorance. And she had to admit that Chatterton Senior had dazzled her by the sheer force of his death wish. Her memory mindlessly prized his words and priceless agony. He was a ballerina for shit's sake! He knew how to dazzle and she'd given him exactly enough leeway. But the child had to pay for it all--the exwife's fees continuing even with the husband/father dead.

It didn't take her long to decide, pack, and get it all together. One long blue note of introspection later she was relocating west, obvious to her on the plane that she was still very much enthralled by the dead ballerina. She was his mistress in a pact that ran deeper than sex or the grave he lay in. Or maybe he was her mistress, her first mistress, and this was the last reimbursement for a service he'd rendered her--tuition for the lesson. He'd allowed her to gaze at the wall with him, right into torture, and, for him, that was tantamount to making love. If there had been anything that came out of it then it would have to be Gordon. In many ways, Gordon was her product, her progeny. Gordon was a child consummated under the banners of misplaced pity and suicide.

She packed in the British practice, sent all her patients off to others. She wrote the

required examinations and came to Canada. It took her no time to get to Oxbow. The trip was long distance but she was there before travel fatigue affected her--an emotional stone's throw. Long before her body stepped out of the airplane she was already there, and what for? What did she hope to accomplish? Was she going to tell Gordon all? Of course not, she hadn't met him. He was a newspaper clipping in her purse.

Oxbow always needed doctors. The place was a notoriously bad locale to pursue a medical practice in. It didn't look good on record that you were a doctor in a town where there was more death than life. That's the irony, she thought. Death drew the physician to town. Death was the result of her first practice and it was the suicide that had been her first prescription, the first irresponsibility. Maybe this debacle was number two.

All along the moon we have a wicked complexion and all along Oxbow there's a similar surface area--juts of trees, sour lakes and motheaten crags. It was night when she arrived and the moon was most definitely a bonus. She went into the first hotel. There was a bar under the place. The lobby was furnished with crimson wallpaper, hung with wooden chandeliers that looked like wagon wheels. The carpet was black where most of the feet went. It reminded her of a pirateship furnished at the height of the seventies--tacky was not the word. The room they let her into was neither clean nor dirty. It had been gone over at the surface but filth was ingrained. The bed had a blanket on it, one sheet underneath, thin coverlets. It was a room that someone was planning on marching off to the front. Velour curtains were ironed straight with heavy lead weights sewn into the corners. The dresser was lined with newspaper, yellowed newspaper. The bulb above the bathroom sink blared at a bare hundred watts. There were corroded and blackened knives in a drawer beside the stove. The sheets under the blanket were rumpled like a mirror that reflected the bumps and waves of the low plaster ceiling overhead. We are far from England. She dropped the suitcase on a chair. R and b homed in on her from the barband below and half a mickey of rye had been left in the fridge. She opened up the bottle, sniffed it and poured it down the sink. She opened up the

plastic duty free bag, took out a bottle of scotch. But there wasn't a cup anywhere. She thought of drinking straight out of the bottle.

She went downstairs to the bar instead. Oxbow's one official prostitute sat on a couch examining a bruise on the side of her thigh. The welt was purple and maybe half as long as a belt. The prostitute had taken the belt out of her jeans, folded it in half and was comparing it against the bruise for thickness. Her eyes flickered up at Doctor June for a second and then slipped back to the bruise.

The bar was raucous, filled with people--a shock of noise after the steady hum of the lobby and the long squawk of prostitute's ass against vinyl seat. Also, the bar was a modern installation compared to the lobby. She couldn't see the ferns but she knew they were out there somewhere, watching, trembling their leaves. It was brass and glass and tweed upholstery and chestnut stained wood. The walls were covered with some kind of turquoise tileworks, the floor with offwhite tiles. The bar had a heavily polished mirror behind it where waitresses in miniskirts worked the soft light for scant wages.

The people here were in direct contrast to the bar. Children she was sure were underage danced in long hair and dirty denims, jackets ripped and torn with heavy metal logos sewn to the backs like tapestries. Their eyes swam in red pools--drunk or strung to Hell. Bikers in leather, tattoos beginning for the body just past the wrists, hustled the pool tables while the up and comers waited. Their long beards were perfect for hiding joints in. Rock 'n roll fuelled these raw forms. The girls in tight jeans danced with limp armed boys on the dance floor--one step forward, one step back, and do it all again--doing the Oxbow twostep. The smell of marijuana permeated bathrooms. Everyone here was a booby trap of violence and anger, only thinly disguised as individuals. There was a lack of soap on the faces, a lack of detergent in the clothes, though they could have been clean for all this muted light. She didn't know. The smell of beer wafted over sticky floors. Shot glasses cracked underfoot. It was the sheer volume of bodies, way past fire code restrictions, that intimidated her. This was

a crowd to drill through. She bought something hard off the waitress and stirred it insecurely with a finger she didn't want to lick afterwards. The biggest thing of notice was all the hair. Some fracas erupted in the bathroom and the bouncers carried out a bloody man. A few minutes later someone a little less bloody entered from the bathroom and his boy and girl friends pointed to their faces, showing him where to wipe. By now Doctor June was into her second drink and thinking about Gordon. What kind of place was this to grow up in without a father? As the evening went forward the place got hotter. Some guy with looney down was yelling at two guys pausing to converse in the middle of a pool game. "Hey! Are you gonna fuckin' play or chirp or what?" He was halfway up from the pool table when he said it, palms open on the table in front of him. The two guys slid casually back to the game. The man's girlfriend--they were a silent pair most of the night, with her staring over her drink, him staring squinteyed and angrily at the tables--said to him: "Do you have to be such an asshole?" "Hey, I want to play," he snapped back at her. By the end of the night there were at least three fights on display. There were two men beside Doctor June, who were slightly out of place in their long coats and soft cotton shirts, walking from fight to fight making appraisals. "Hey, Jimmy, take a look at this one," the blonde one said to the younger, brown haired one. "This is pure bestiality. It's beautiful." Two men hammered each other in the corner. Further on, beside the bar, a man and a woman went from taunt to tussle. The woman tore at his ear and punched him in the throat. It looked like he'd already broken her nose. Further to the back, two women were biting earrings out of each others earlobes. The two softshirted men went by Doctor June: "Let's check this one out." The bouncers were waiting for gaps of weakness before stepping into the melee, into new blood, into equal opportunity scrapping. Doctor June huddled by the bar and ordered the fifth and last. The place would be closing soon. She didn't want to see how it looked when the lights were powered up.

The prostitute had put her belt back on when Doctor June bumped her way out the bar door. The prostitute was leaving and June just stared at her in the lobby's sudden silence.

She was about to walk out the door but turned back to look at Doctor June and smile. "How much?," Doctor June asked. The girl grinned again.

Later, with the woman asleep beside her, fifty dollars balled up in the prostitute's tight fist, Doctor June rose naked and drank from the neck of the scotch bottle. The phone book lay on the counter in front of her, a pencil under the name of Gordon Chatterton. She took down another glug of whisky. She normally didn't drink like this. This town imposed its influence soon as your feet touched the ground. Oxbow replaced calm with vulnerability, resolve with flux and spun your heart dark side out. A commotion outside brought her to the window, to part the drapes. Outside on the street a small squat man, condensed into fury and spite with a dark patch around one eye, was rampaging back and forth on the sidewalk like he wanted to put feet through pavement. Taking no direction except back and forth, his tantrum reminded her of a more vitalized version of the dance she'd seen in the bar. "Where's my best friend," he sobbed. "I want to kick his fuckin' head in!"

Now she clambered downslope, grass in her pants, shoes squelching out their water. This is ridiculous, she thought. No way to go about it. Somehow she'd have to get back into Gordon's confidence, back into housecall mode, to a practical relationship. This way didn't give her anything but information and made her powerless to impart help or doctoring.

Gordon had hired itinerant workers, the chronically unemployed, the scabs. He'd given them shovels, told them to get digging, vanished into the circus tent. The reason he'd hired them instead of a contracting crew or, worse, the unionized, was because they went more easily under the thumb. At the moment they were patsies, though later many would give up in disgust and superstition--throw down shovels, rip out of dusty paper coveralls, and quit. He paid them union rates. He wanted hasslefree work. So the employees began to fill in empty graves with the original dirt, or gravel and soil brought in by *Chatterton Enterprise's* dump trucks. They plowed the graveyard's green turf down. Gordon had instructed them (leaving Betsy as field marshal, complete with specifics, after he moved into the tent) that when it was finished he wanted to see a neatly slanted plane of soil, (slanted and properly replumbed for near perfect drainage of runoff and seasonal rain). The work backbroke by the fact that there was no backhoe. The lack of diesel powered assistance increased the job to many months' time. Gordon told Betsy he wanted the work to proceed slowly. He needed the months. Before taking up temporary residence--to be seen only for a few minutes by the maid each time she brought him food--he instructed Betsy to import some fine Saharan dust, enough to cover the whole graveyard three feet deep. A new wooden fence would act as a windbreak all around so the dust wouldn't be blown off. All this was to be completed by the time he was "finished" in the tent. Betsy, no longer after clarification or reasons, did what he asked and promised to be careful with the finances during his retreat.

In the past couple weeks he'd erected an additional circus tent to store coffins and bonebags in. He'd had tunnels built between the two tents and ordered an electric forklift. Gallons and gallons of custom paint, royal purple, had been bought and installed in the main tent--outside which the maid left Gordon's meals. Then, one day, he dropped Betsy the key to headquarters and a purple flap of circus tent dropped across his back, like a flag for burial at

sea.

He could hear daily demonstrations outside, police sirens and whistles, the digging, a wooden fence being erected. He crammed cottonballs into his ears, forced them tight with thumbs until there was only the buzz of brain against skull to distract him. It was then that he learnt the impossibility of absolute silence. The discovery bothered Gordon more than it should have, more than he'd thought it would, but he kept on.

Only one call was made on the cellular phone the whole time--to inform Betsy that in his desk was a design, specifications, for a signboard he wanted built and installed on a rotating billboard high above the cemetery, order forms for carny equipment and contract renewals for Tom F. and the clowns. He worked all the remainder of the time. He didn't answer when Doctor June tried a call. Sometimes the maid's meal was left uneaten. He wasted thinner but that only made for physical challenge, and the challenge gave him vigour. When he lay down to sleep it was partial. Dreams slid by his eyes like fishtails sliming across plastic. When deep sleep came and he awoke, there were no piss urges. He was no longer scared and the presence of all the bones loaned him companionship for solitude.

The days excelled. He drove the forklift and transported bonebags to the main tent. There was a lot of room. He laid the skeletons out one by one, made sure the previous set was all stored before the next arrangement. Gordon didn't want bone confusion--that wasn't the purpose yet. He marked the bags' numbers in the book of the bag's number, numbers that coincided with the grave the bones in question came from, or mass grave. In this way he kept track of the deceased's name and original location, or tied in the proper bones with the archaeologist's notations. He was very methodical, keeping track of everything. The bones often spilled out of the bag like down from ruptured pillows. In the evening the canvas tunnels between tents became translucent in the low sunset. When Betsy saw him rumble a coffin along to his tent, the movement was like a loose blood clot tumbling in an artery--bumbling for

purchase, for blockpoint. At other times there'd be a splash that was a partially decomposed body being dropped by Gordon into an acid bathtub--the tub like something from an acme catalogue for serial killers. In the acid bathtub Gordon broke the flesh down, fished out and saved the bones. The acid effervesced. Greasy, white bubbles popped to the surface. When this seltzer became too alkaline he drained the tub and refreshed it.

The first few days were the easiest. He'd inscribe a symbol on each bone of every skeleton, minus the minute ones like teeth and toes of course. Each bone had a unique and distinct symbol. The symbols were then replicated with perfect detail under the numerical heading of the entire skeleton in a computer databank. A supercomputer stored all the minute details. In this way the *Skeleton Key* indexed the pertinent statistics of each skeleton. Name of previous owner, location in the old cemetery, descendants, archaeologist's data--a couple of sentences were written up for each skeleton, while the computer indexed the symbols on each bone and matched them under the proper skeleton so that they could be reassembled correctly even if shuffled up with other bones. But only the *Skeleton Key* let Gordon know exactly whose bones they were. He'd recorded much in the volume when the graveyard was first dug up. Now he concerned himself primarily with marking each bone and recording it under an appropriate I.D. number for the entire skeleton. In the tent he had numerous books on foreign alphabets and symbols. The first two weeks he used this bibliography, combined or separately, to devise insignias for the bones. He chose each symbol, letter, or number randomly so that a skeleton could not be put accurately together by linguistic or anthropological associations. It was mix and match, as random a process of selection as he could make it. He scanned each sigil into a computer, to create an index. The computer would beep if he repeated any one symbol twice. After a few days he realized it was easier to make an entry of all the images and have the computer give them back one at a time, randomly, with no repetitions. However, two weeks passed to find the whole set combed through and he still had over three quarters of the skeletons to inscribe. Now came the hard

part. He had to invent symbols and run them through the memory bank.

He tried to remember the first time he'd come to the graveyard after the doctor's death lesson. He tried to remember the configuration of bones he'd seen float to the surface and for a few days it was those geometries that he designated the bones with--every rib, every vertebra, every knuckle, every joint--in work designed for the complete fetishist. When it went steadily the painting had a rapture to it. He put chesspieces on some bones, games of tictactoe with himself on others. Each sign was unique. There were times when he hurt, when he sat on the floor crosslegged and beat a fist to each temple, times when he couldn't think, couldn't remember another symbol from future past or future predictable. Then suddenly there'd come a flood and Gordon would daub the purple feverishly. There were times when he'd think of the cancer, time's limitations, and the worst kind of futility crept from his subconscious repression of despair. Most often it was that futility leading his wrists, providing a stencil of sorrows he could just put his brush into--selfpity guided each appropriate mark onto the bone. There were times when he felt passive, when halfburied dynamos of fear were jerking him around. He could hardly keep it up sometimes--an ordeal of tears and perspiration making the work sloppy, tossed off. When he got up gelatin knees wobbled. At other times he stared at the bones around him and couldn't etch a stroke. Sometimes the bones were a powerful syndicate that wouldn't let him into their secret coalition. *You can mark us. You can categorize us. But it's all your invention and our real attributes, which are death's attributes, the secret to death's mystery and therefore power, we won't disclose. We won't tattle unless you strip off your skin and join the floorshow.* This was the syndicate's indoctrination, a hazing that said all skeletons take one step forward, all flesh one step back. And, some other days, at other hours, Gordon actually took his time. He thought of a beautiful boy, a beautiful girl, sometimes one or the other, that he'd never ever known. Then each wrist flick, each lick was careful and precise. That was when Gordon was craftsman. He'd objectify the desire and let that picture inspire him. He copied street sign emblems onto the bones. He painted question

marks in the shape of a head bent on a neck, the swan's spinal column, arabesques. It was at times like that, when he was being deliberate and definite that he felt most magical, dropping secret delineations by sleight of hand--that's when he really felt like he was not of time but the maker of days. His concentration, his will, had put a leash and collar around time and he was gauging it through switchbacks, turnoffs, forked roads--that's when his plan seemed the most secure, the most workable and realistic enterprise ever devoted towards immortality, towards usurping providence. On proud days he took regular breaks, slept at will. On outstanding days he never got discouraged, not even if a single symbol didn't step forth. He'd just sit and wait. It'll come to me. It'll come to me. It never occurred to him from where the inspiration would come. He never thought about that. The days were precious and for most of the time he fretted, ate little, slept deeply and infrequently. Finally, when there was nothing left to put on his bones (they were his bones by now, all of them)--no stamp, no streetsign, alphabet, map marking, sexual position, stick men, braille dots, flags, cartoon characters, religious symbols, hieroglyphics When there was nothing more to procure, when the androgynous muse ran dry for him, when the work exhausted its own possibilities, when even the mental blocks that had impeded the work's progress, the intrusive material, had been put down, he sat back, looked at the remainder and wondered what next. Silence should not be possible, especially when there was still sight, and looking at those bones he wanted to scream. He wanted to connect sight and sound through script. It wasn't possible that he could exhaust one and not the other. As long as I can see those bones, there must be something I can say for each and every one. It was then that Gordon realized how sound deficient he was. He hoped that Josephine's band had accepted his terms and gotten in touch with Betsy so there'd be some accompaniment to his demonstration, to embellish his display. He realized that what the bones had to teach him was that death was an exhausting of all possibilities. When there was nothing left for defense, there stood death, that sweet final spectre, like an inextractable speck in the mind's eye--now so clear for the removal of

everything else--and how the speck grew then to consume the eye. The lowest point of Gordon's despair was when he realized that to conquer death he would somehow have to make himself inexhaustible, come to contain everything so death would not come into focus for all the bricabrac. He'd have to induct himself into places past Baroque, past Rococo. He'd have to contain possibility always. He'd have to include an infinity of possibilities within himself, in order to always have a chance, an escape.

It was now that Gordon reached a breakthrough. Instead of searching his mind for every symbol he could think of, he thought of one. He thought of the crows. Then he began the job again, faster than ever this time, but still precisely. Each bone was marked with some part of a crow--a tail feather, a beak, eyeballs, wingtips. He made slight variations in each graphic. By placing each symbol on a different area of bone he had as many possibilities as could be devised under one subject and could repeat that symbol over and over again in a different location every time. Gordon felt he'd found the holy circle and it was a big zero--that sacred perimeter inhabited by saints and angels, who chase their tails but always get somewhere. He thought he'd discovered the frozen moment. Gordon thought this process was going to keep him alive forever--this the secret. He found a system and went with it. And what was more perfect than crow? That's were he'd gotten the idea of keeping death out--the crows. Nail a crow to the door by painting each bone with that black bird's markings. Each skeleton was a crow, witness and testament to the cycle of death that he'd discovered and learnt to utilize. He was the judge. He revoked death's patent, put the copyright into public domain.

Within a few weeks he'd marked each skeleton, recorded it all. The pattern of markings ran random with purpose. There were no repetitions and he could crossindex and identify each bone with its family skeleton. The computer had made sure everything was perfect.

It was still in the daze of creative intensity that Gordon emerged from the circus tent--bearded,

unwashed, yellow toothed--and walked towards the caretaker's shack.

Out in the empty place where the graveyard had been, Gordon stopped. A blizzard of dust moved and swirled in waist high wind. With handkerchiefs and surgeons masks over noses and mouths, Josephine's cemetery band played. Gordon waved to them. Josephine was frustrated by gagging songs into the mask. The cloth was soaked with her spit. It looked like they'd accepted the contract. The graveyard's floor was evenly sloped. His shoes sank a few inches into soft dust that rose into air, making him sneeze occasionally. From the way the slight breeze stirred the dust inside the fenced area and the way dust rose in sheets and clouds, Gordon could tell that it had been a while since rain. The guard dogs outside the fence were staked to the ground and growled without showing teeth. There was a chainlink fence, topped with wide coils of barbed wire, at the graveyard's extreme edge. A large wooden fence enclosed the graveyard on all sides twenty feet in from the chainlink. It was in this moat between the two fences that the guard dogs were spaced, just far enough apart so the chains let them touch noses, but not kiss. Gordon noticed that a kennel had been built for dogs. Both kennel and headquarters were within the main enclosure.

In the graveyard's centre stood a thick, round metal pole sixty feet high. At the end of this pole a pyramid rotated. Each of the faces displayed the painting of a skeleton with a carnation twisted around its upper left rib and wearing a top hat. In horrorposter lettering was printed the black and purple words: *THE GRAVEYARD GAME*. *Chatterton Enterprises Inc.* was written in smaller letters underneath. From where he stood, Gordon saw lightbulbs that backlit the screens on each face. When lit up, that sign could be seen from anywhere in Oxbow at night. It could probably be seen even during the day.

Long arched streetlamps ridged the cemetery's main compound--electric lanterns in a black courtyard. Gordon smiled. It looked like Betsy had done her job well--she'd contacted the band and gotten them to start playing as well as setting the cemetery up the way he'd outlined in the notes he'd left for her before he went into the tent.

Outside the graveyard, silence had taken everything from domestic to wild. Everything was in night's misfit authority. Night was a Charlie Chaplin who'd foreclosed on normalcy to become a butthead. Trees quibbled over shreds of wind. Ditchflowers lifted their tops then bowed again. The moon's slice shone like the crack of a plumber's ass from above tight pants. Either the cops and protestors were gone for the day, or had gotten bored, or gotten terrifically scared.

Outside the graveyard the carnival assumed a juggernaut's proportions, an oppressive stature. Looking at it, his mind's ear heard catcalls, balloons popping, the romp of festivities. He envisioned families hand in hand and bouncing bozos whose paste and paint locked faces had unshakeable smiles but waterlogged eyes. He envisioned chocolate bar wrappers, toilet paper, streamers struggling around tent strings in the wind. The place stood for a million miserable anecdotes, for his life's myriad social deprivations.

The parking lot's newly laid tarmac rose towards the amusement park and steeper towards the graveyard. Wind twisted banners overhead slinked their letters into a moniker--Oxbow Cemetery. Approach to the cemetery's only entrance was through the funfair. This was folly's habitat now.

A network of gamestalls neighboured the graveyard. Pop three balloons and you'd win a skeletal trinket. Topple the bottle pyramid and you'd gether girl a stuffed skeleton. Shoot three ducks and the bonewhistle's yours. There were arcades, shooting galleries, bingo halls and old fashioned strip tease. At centre was the ferris wheel, inert at the moment. There were portraits of skulls painted on the ferris wheel's side, a series in psychotic--like sand blasted heads of movie stars in some mortuary session of *Hollywood Squares*. Their eyes twinkled with a trivia he couldn't respond to. All amusement park lanes ran towards the ferris wheel. The grounds circled it concentrically--hub and spoke convergence--as if the planners had felt it right that all amusement should lead to a mockup of fortune's wheel. Staring at it, Gordon felt a dejavu. The carousel had undergone remodelling--instead of high stepping palominos and

unicorns its icons were wooden animal skeletons, as if something had eaten the merrygoround horses and left the bones. Mechanical pianos soaked up dew, their loose tarps flapping. Inside shacks, where organs awaited organ grinders, stacks of hurdygurdies, mechanical and video games dropped disconnected plugs to dusty floors. Pavilions ranged around. The clapboard booths looked erected without a worldly care. But fun's spirit was lost on Gordon. The pavilions reminded him of junkpile minds awaiting a noshow psychiatrist. Each type of carnival attraction grouped together on separate avenues that led to the ferris wheel. There was one avenue of carny gamestalls erected side by side. Most prizes weren't teddybears but irregular stones wired together and painted to create the effect of cripples' bones. There was one avenue of tourist booths and pavilions that detailed with photographs, nameplates, and writeups, Oxbow's evolution from founding missionaries to the personal history of Gordon Chatterton, the newfangled entrepreneur who turned it towards fiasco. Another booth held morbid but typical souvenirs--"My parents went to oxbow and all they exhumed for me was this crummy t-shirt!" There were pavilions where partygoers could play bingo with cheesy death's head markers and watch small productions and films. The bandstand had an avenue exclusively, separate by locale from other pavilions with fullfledged prismatic colour schemes all over the backdrop. The sound system would distribute *Skeleton Closet's* music all over the fairgrounds and cemetery. Further up the hill, behind palisades, was a beer garden and showcase--stepseats squared round a patch of grass which was a fireworks launchpad. The restaurant remained as before--all wroughtiron and devil's demesne. There was now, in addition, a small fast food stand for hotdogs and french fries. And the original tourist booth would now issue vouchers for the Graveyard Game itself.

Gordon was well pleased. He walked into his new home. This was when the band saw him. Josephine stopped playing. They were in midrehearsal in the duststrewn yard. She looked at the skinny man that bandylegged his way through the graveyard's slim dust devils, up the steps of what was now the graveyard's administrative centre. She shrugged. They

continued. *Skeleton Closet* had signed the contract no matter how grim the job. A one, a two, a three

Gordon entered the shack and went to his office. Betsy was talking long distance on the phone with her daughter. Gordon made not a creak on floorboards, not a scuffle on carpet. He didn't even seem to push air when he moved. The air created a vacuum corridor on either side of him. He was phantom silent and stood over Betsy while she finished her call, hands in his pockets, looking thoughtfully down at his shoes. With a last I love you, Betsy put down the phone, turned in the chair. What she saw shocked her so much her whole body stiffened for a few seconds like a bird dog at its mark. Then she made the sign of the cross.

Filthy, Gordon's hair was oily and strung together in dangling tails that dripped like black paraffin. His clothes had holes where he'd splashed drops of bathtub acid. He'd grown a beard that deepened instead of filling out the angles and scoops of his overladed face. His eyebrow hairs had grown noticeably towards dishevel and pointed skywards like antennas. His mouth was terse, lips tightly compressed. Shoelaces were untied and broken. On the top of one of his shoes two shoelace loops were held together by a piece of bailing wire. His fingertips had lilac stains and clothes were spattered with purple paint in the shapes of bacterias, amoebas and other microscopic organisms. He looked like a photographic enlargement of a microscope slide or oceandepths- luminous purple against black. His whole body was covered with layers of dust, deeper and wetter dirt on knees and elbows, armpits and creases. Finally, his nose was chubby as a thumb and his eyes hoed out.

"Call the workers," were the words spoken, the only ones propelled across the distance between them. When he turned his back to her she was already phoning. Betsy was now in charge of the money, all of it--Gordon's stance, his commands, made her aware of that. She owned the estate pretty much complete and Gordon Chatterton was part of the estate's overhead. His maintenance was one of the estate's necessary losses. She promised them overtime and they came immediately, arriving in an hour. Gordon set them to work.

It was late that night, in the a.m. shallows, when the work was finally finished. The forest groaned lamely. Lamps shone on the ground. Women and men moved among the dust. All along the columns of light, escalations of dust rose and fell like miniature iron elevators travelling between night's roof and the bright ground. Workers moved around, opening bags and caskets, carrying clickbundles. And there was a ragged individual in a director's chair, like a messedup pharisee, pointing to the labour, giving them instructions. A woman stood beside him with eyes whiter than oystershell. The labourers would drop part of their load here, part of their load there, according to the director's indications.

The ground was littered with bones. They were white and clean as an echo. The workers covered the cemetery floor in a jumble of skeletons, in a macabre linoleum. They dropped bones arbitrarily here and arbitrarily there. They scattered white articles so light they almost fluttered. So white, the bones looked like lottery tickets dropping into an empty tumblebarrel. And the barrel did tumble, spun, and was the world.

ornate metal holder. He reached for a magnum of champagne, lifted it from ice, hoisted up a skull from the ground by its eyesockets. He clinked a toast between the skull's eyes, the bottle a slow pendulum as it swung to bump there. He drank to the graveyard's christening. It was ready for operation. The sun circled above him like a raptor.

Gordon examined the small painted sign on the skull's roof, let it roll out of his hand onto soft ground. He picked up a rib and vertebrae, both were clearly inscribed with their own marks. Good, he thought, the paint isn't wearing off. On the ground beside his chair lay the book, *Skeleton Key* with a dandruff of dust over the gold lettered titles. He'd had the books laminated to resist water. Everything inside the book was marked and encoded for easy reference. All has been recorded in the book, thought Gordon. He had the power to reconstruct any skeleton, or to verify any reconstruction as accurate and complete. Some skeletons weren't as complete as others, bone for bone, but that was part of the game--to figure and find out just which bones belonged, no more, no less. Hell's book of blueprints had similar coverage, similar details. "But this is not Hell," screamed Gordon, arms akimbo. "This, my friends, is the land of opportunity." The workers on the truck continued to stare at the field, their beer bottles swollen, tongues protruding from mouths. The dusters on the ground looked up the hill, trying to see Gordon through the airborne particles. The earth frittered away in twirls of sand, coming apart at the cloth, dust unravelling. Some of the workers chuckled, some swatted, some checked wristwatches for quitting time.

It had taken long for Gordon to get here and his exclamations came from a man feeling exonerated. His imagination was overtired and so he celebrated in an uninspired way, a mundane way. There was paint under his nails. He'd only shaved intersections into his beard, tufts of hair forming patches. He held up the *Skeleton Key*.

this book's worth millions of dollars and millions more to Oxbow's revenue, no one understands, but they will, they will, they'll come down to touch bones

Featherweight dust crossed and recrossed each bone's surface, settled for seconds and then inched. It blew all away, returned. Dust poured out of empty marrow bones. Particles floated in the air. The wind was light and dust moved, shifted, but didn't get anywhere. And underneath the dust, underneath the thick and thin, was a banquet of bones--ribcages, skulls, ankle bones, femurs, vertebrae, fingerbones, like crusts on a porcelain of ground. The bones sank partways into the dirty earth to leave impressions there, moulds, on being pulled out.

Shirtless, Gordon sat in industrial strength sunshine on a lawnchair purchased that afternoon just for the occasion. His left hand squeezed newly formed purple growths on his sunken chest as indifferently as if he was in a supermarket squeezing toilet paper rolls. He pored over the carefully marked bones. His right hand lifted the cane and pointed at various pieces of skeleton. "I want it all white. Perfectly white. Like flour," he whispered into a bullhorn. Dust airbrushed his words. Each time the cane was pointed, sweating men in pale coveralls came over to the bones being singled out and with handbrushes quickly polished off the dust. It was a beautiful spread of bones under the sun--the remains of a world championship cannibal eatoff. The crows on telephone poles and dogs surrounding the wooden fence turned up beaks and noses. They were elitists. This stuff was below them. There wasn't enough on the bones to interest even horseflies. More labourers in coveralls, with brooms and rakes, sat on the grit floor of a flat bed truck. They motioned with beer and pop bottles towards the field, wiped dust from dirt caked faces unconsciously. Some jumped off the truck, raced to a pile of bones when Gordon pointed, but most just drank in shock, in coveralls soiled and lined with seams of dirt. Overfed toes poked from holes in fractured and ripped, steelcapped workboots. Gordon smiled and his loose teeth rattled in the breeze, kept to the front of his mouth, in their sockets, only by the tongue pushing from behind. "This is not Hell," he smiled, "this is its building blocks. Its refuse." There was a bucket beside the chair in an

He closed his eyes. The veins behind eyeballs tingled. The eyes ached from balls of grit in corners formed from a day spent in dust without protective eye wear. But he'd provided eyewear for his workers, up to WCB standards. His eyes were on the way out anyways, the rest of him on the way out.

Gordon grabbed the shirt folded on the back of the chair, the bow tie, the tophat. He put them all on, including a jacket. It was a new outfit, same as the old one but predominantly white, except for flourishes of silvery material on lapels, cuffs, pockets. He'd changed with the equinox, in opposition to the summer equinox. While the days got brighter and longer he dressed in the night, and as the days got shorter and the night longer, he dressed in day. The white suit like a sheet draped on a fossil--he was that thin--gone from robust to a wisp. His skin was tight and stretched but deeply lined. His eyes were large the way the terminally ill's usually are, as if death allowed them new perspectives, more surface area for focus, added ability for visual rotation, counterrotation. His suit could almost have been long medicated tape or bandages wrapped around and sagging from his body. He reached inside linen and pulled out his cellular phone, dialled Mayor's number. Only one ring sounded.

"Hello?" "That was fast." "Get to the point." "You know who this is?" "We've been waiting. Get on with it." "Oh yes. The police chief was here last night. I guess she saw what the protesters saw. It's so nice to be noticed. So nice to be popular." "Chatterton?" "Phone calls don't do much for me, Mayor. Not much at all. I thought they might one day. But I haven't heard a sound I like." "I understand, Chatterton. I'm just not interested." "Of course not. I just wanted to tell you the work's done. I've stored the bones in the manner I saw best. It's better than you feared it would be." "You've ruined Oxbow." "Think again, Mayor. Things are looking better and better for Oxbow." "Sorry. I don't follow you." "Would you follow me if I told you tourist dollars would triple. At least triple. And come in all year round?" "I'd have to say you're a liar as well as a sick man." "Please don't refer to my illness." "I was talking about

your mind." "Listen, Mayor, you're not funny. I'm not giving you no fanciful predictions." "I'm not interested in the future. And don't think we haven't stopped trying to get you into court." "You wouldn't want to do that now, Mayor. You know that old breach of trust. That old behind the scenes stuff." "How long you planning to blackmail me? How long are you going to keep that stupid conversation over my head?" "Not long. In about three months time I believe that you and I will be sitting down to brunch on council money." "Don't think too hard about it." "Have a nice day, Mayor."

Gordon put the phone back in his pocket and stood up. The workers bounced slightly on the flatbed truck as it rolled down the dirty road. They were going home. The night watch would show up soon. Gordon looked at what had once been the caretaker's shack, now headquarters. He felt alone. Despite the phone chat's bravado he felt like a loss and Mayor the real winner. Maybe he should offer Josephine her old room back. Yes, that's what he'd do. Then there'd be someone around always. Betsy refused to live in a place surrounded by skeletons. Gordon couldn't understand her apprehension. Didn't she want to live forever? He wanted to go on infinitely, with no terminus and no origin. But there was no escaping the retrospective--Gordon did own a personal history and his dad was the author. Gordon's upbringing was based on his father's true to life tale.

His father, Chatterton Senior, had been one local badass boy despite training as a ballerina. Father'd been a skinny child, chest thin as a stripped side of beef, a child running with children who smoked. But four times a week he was with Sandor and the purple leotard girls. The dance studio was a feminine training--Sandor was limited to the girlish side of the art. The initial technique instilled Chatterton Senior with a ladylike delivery and this precursor stayed with him no matter who else he studied under, the result dubbing him "the ballerina" among ballet circles. He trained with Sandor--one eye outside, adopting movements from the shapes of clouds for sensitive rounded minuets and a strychnine rigidity from the horizon for the sharp

notes. At eighteen Chatterton Senior was gone, first to Montreal then further to New York. Nights fell around him like long stemmed roses. The black soup beyond the floorboards sang deep, low, like a whiskythroated blues diva. Congratulations passed from dinnergloved hand to hand until presented to him.

In New York he met his wife. She'd cruise tinseltown like a turkey vulture. There's nothing worse than unemployed ballerinas, envy curls their slippers. A prosperous upbringing supported her nonexistent ballet career--money for the director's pocket when auditions failed--but, regardless, she never really made it. Her father's men slurped earth for oil, black elixir that ran society's machines. She wrapped a muscular smile around Chatterton Senior and July married them.

He danced a body that was separate muscles under the proscenium, individual muscles that pulled each other into place like a mobile hung from the sky. Each tendon was a pulley stringing physical shapes that split seconds into twos--a dance that was time's mitosis, time reproduced. The audience left with extra months gained.

Her body was a clapboard shack that had enough trouble standing.

The marriage was disastrous from the start. She wanted his fame, wanted his grace. He found himself restrained from opening nights by her bodyguards while she smiled on bannisters anticipating the understudy. His love for her broke him to writhe in a new routine. Finally, the only way he could dance was to dance with her. Those two gave bad duets. And whatever critics gave they gave to him. She moved like a jalopy--coughs, sputters.

Over the time they were married she kept him prisoner. The only thing for succour was alcohol. He was saved and arraigned by alcohol. He drank every day. Body got fat and sloppy, until stairwells had to be crawled after disappointing dances, every scathing review. The critics like to trounce the top ones and they criticized him remorselessly when his balance went and the ballet became a stupor. His eyes above the audience in alcoholic lockup.

When he stumbled and fell on pirouettes, jumped and twisted his ankle, lost grace's

every millimetre, she kicked him out. He was finally free but nobody wanted him. He was a fat dancer with muscles lax and flabby. No troupe would take him in. He was denied the boards. Old friends would've let him direct but boozing continued so badly he never made the show. Critics and tabloids tattooed him to pages under derogatory captions. She became a society cancan, dancing faux pas on wellhealed tabletops at the exquisite end of things.

Earlier on, when they were still married she became pregnant. Her veins were virgin to anything except blueblood. She got pregnant to take his blood, his genes, into herself, leach the ability latent in the embryo. She danced big belly in the studio, danced a devil's lopsided grin. Absurdly, she hoped the kid would disappear through that dance, getting thinner and thinner until it dissolved into her cell structure, bones, muscle tissue, but it got fat and drank on her instead.

The baby was born and came out rolling and laughing like an inflatable clown. It crawled down the contorted hallway from her womb, smiling the whole struggle until popping its head out. She pushed him out like a sausagemaker, but the child smiled anyway, goofy. They called the boy Gordon and despite the failure of her scheme she loved him--maybe some part of her might finally outdance her compulsions. Later, his father would also see Gordon as a guinea pig. Later, Gordon's father became a lab tech forcing Gordon towards fruition, towards breakthroughs in xenophobia. His father's plot was no less a result of compulsion than his mother's.

He was a healthy mix of clunky and nimble. Gordon's eyes were ready for sight from the first go forward.

When Chatterton Senior left New York, he took the child. It was the only revenge he could invent, the only way she'd still have any contact with him. And he wanted her, bet on suicidal love he did. After all he'd been jilted by her, not taking one step wayward from her by choice. The divorce was settled out of court because the last thing she wanted exposed was her behaviour. The divorce money from fatherinlaw was torrential. Chatterton Senior went

back to the hometown, Oxbow, back to cigarette butts, back to grad shots, back to preserved tuxedos of legendary opening nights, to a homestead surrounded by new cars and kids. Whisky bottles dropped in ditches from when he ran with the gang still rolled there like heirlooms from teenage nightscapes.

Now he tried to dance. In the early years of his life Gordon was mollycoddled by dad, but Chatterton Senior was never more than a progenitor, never a father. He invested astutely and the mother sent her kid money. He built himself an expensive house on the hill, up Ice Street, and designed a dance studio inside--dance studio where he couldn't. He sucked on bottles and cracked ankles doing *Swan Lake* routines. The millions of dollars rolled over like the years, one onto another.

He tried extreme treatments for alcoholism--travelled to Britain where the cures were cruelly radical. The doctors would sit the alcoholic in a small room--a chair, a red lightbulb, a pot to piss in. They'd lock them in for days. The trick behind the ordeal was to supply as much booze as they desired but no food and no water. Most sipped their own urine as thirst quencher before returning to the hooch. As a bonus the doctors threw in, straight to the vein, a nausea producing injection to make the dipsomaniac's mind forever associate drinking with a flip of the stomach. Few lasted more than a couple days. The delirious body was dredged, pumped full of tomato juice, allotted recovery time. Then they'd offer a martini--doctors like secret agents behind the curtains, taking notes and watching the patient's reaction. The illustrious ballerina became famous for quick recoveries and incredible immunity to the cure. The first time in he lasted fourteen days. They pulled him and three days later he was lunatic for gin. Doctors put him in for ten more. He made a getaway the first night of his second convalescence and went on the biggest bar haunt ever, returning at four a.m. howling for free drinks, pounding fists on the treatment room's door, urgent for another shot at 'the cure'.

He never gained freedom from the overpriced and overzealous lifestyle of the alcoholic. Gordon's dad was found dead in the manor, bareassed and on his face, a fully loaded

sixshooter to one side and two empty containers of nembutal plus a bottle of vodka, forty ounces vacant, on the other. Either way, it looked like he was sure to finish the job that night. No one could determine where he'd gotten the nembutal from. The coroner's verdict gave his liver a clean and tidy bill of health. Officially, he died of 'a sudden failure of the heart,' but there was nothing sudden about it. His heart's failure was gradual as a crescendo. He died of complications arising from desire, from a maximum constitution and minimal will.

A two hundred million or so bank account dropped into Gordon's billfold. He grabbed the cash like an antiphilanthropist, using the money to make society benefit him. He paraded it around in one stunt after another. It was the attention getting--the more media coverage and lawsuits his actions brought him the happier he was. Gordon aimed for *Time Magazine's* glossy cover page. He buried father in Oxbow's cemetery and treated mother as one of the disappeared. All favours were therefore repaid except finances. Cash was necessary.

The coast was killer whale country. He filed his teeth, patrolled the town as if a salmon school, hungry for a publicity that kept him from disintegrating into air. Notice was a fuel he needed.

He grew up in empty rooms, empty of presence, in rooms full of antiques, leather furniture, coloured vases, in rooms crowded with nobody. Butlers came out of the rain--walking umbrellas to a rest. The butlers disappeared soon as their umbrellas were folded. The maid's white aprons were ghost children tugging at mother's hems and not even the suggestion of a handhold left for Gordon, not a hind tit. His were rituals of disappearance, rituals of lingering. With the excessive energy that's loneliness's insignia, Gordon paced from room to room, unable to connect. When he played the piano his hands flapped above the ivories like flustered pigeons.

He grew up and the rituals continued every night. He stayed awake terrorized by sleep's presence. One night he noticed how many commercials aired on a rerun of *Laverne and Shirley*. He counted all of them, compiled statistics on number, type, style, length. He'd heard

somewhere that commercials were a distillation of culture. Television was a real life everyone tried to catch up on. He brought nihilism to the frontline. If television was real life and commercials cultural vignettes, he decided to test both limits. He made some phone calls, eventually buying out a small advertising company. The company's offices were located close to the beach at Oxbow, close to where the annual Sea Fair was held--a carnival which was an annual alternative to the cemetery, which attracted fewer and fewer pavilions, rides and games but whose crowds, incongruously, grew bigger and bigger. Once, Gordon had seen a man stumble from a beer garden over to the commercial studio drop his pants, lean back against the wall, spread his ass cheeks, and drop a big load of shit on the front doorstep, then wipe his ass with the doormat. It happened in an alley and parking lot off that door, but there were still enough people around to notice. Gordon always felt an affinity towards asocial behaviour, exulted in blatant indiscretion. He remembered the excretion as a 'sign' and when the thought of buying an advertising company occurred it was just the place. The company was perfect--located in town, convenient, and had received a business class blessing.

Soon, Gordon marauded commercial spots across t.v. networks, spots that ran like rain all over the screen. He aired constantly, during all types of shows. The menu was random and misplaced. Randomness used to be a big part of Gordon's life. Randomness was how he escaped the strictures of loneliness his father had imposed--all those constant lessons on isolation as the highest virtue from ten years old onward, the strait jacket of his upbringing. Tampon commercials ran right in the middle of *Sesame Street*. A male actor held an applicator and said, "This is a tampon, children. I have no idea what it's for. A lot of women use them. They have to use them. No choice. These commercials are pointless. This is a tampon, children, I have no idea what it's for. A lot of women use them. They have to use them. No choice" Or CocaCola versus Pepsi ads: "This one's coke, no this one, no wait, that's definitely Pepsi, no . . . oh fuck, they all taste the same." The profanities were, predictably, censored. While he enjoyed advertising, Gordon quickly got tired of following the

format of standard consumer adverts. He began buying advertising space on which he'd have short poetry readings--Emily Dickinson, Keats, during breaks in the *Superbowl*. The only poetry that football fans hadn't groused about were the Bukowski pieces. But once again the censorship board, on a big business financed vendetta against him by now, objected to Bukowski's hardboiled vocabulary. A sticker was slapped on that raunch, sound muted. It ruined the effect. Football fans get prickly with poetry.

Now, thought Gordon, time slams my idle fun. Time rips into chronic frivolity. His fatalism cancelled out everything except the greatest and most destructive plans. That was the worst part of dying--no time for the lines that made life a laugh. There was just one thing Gordon wanted to buy--the indeterminate lifespan, a life without expiry date. The trees outside the enclosure blew back and forth. In the graveyard the four winds wound themselves into atmospheric twine.

Gordon felt tired and sick. His body was sore. His lungs felt leaky, as if they weren't holding back enough oxygen when he inhaled. He picked up the *Skeleton Key*, threaded through the bones like a barefoot child between seashells. When he got to the open, flapping door of the caretaker's place he turned. Behind him stretched a thousand tired limbs whose reward was sleep. He thought of them as beneficiaries of some heavensent bursary, then shook a dismissal into his head and the thought plopped out. He disappeared into the house. The screen door swayed and banged behind him a couple of times to stop halfclosed and loosehinged--a truncated story.

He was on the platform, muffled in trelliswork and pergolas of shade. Flies buzzed razor patterns around the lobby's pale yellow lamp. The forest on either side of the tracks was a corridor, its profile a black crepe paper cutout. The train came down the tracks to him obediently. They brought it to him. The night in their eyes was like humility, respectful. *They* were the skeletons he'd seen or thought he'd seen when he looked at the train distantly, skeletons who'd had enough of the party. Hungover, nauseous, migrained and empty they took off party hats, expensive clothing, pearl necklaces, monocles, cigarette cases, and put them on the corridor's floor for him to walk over. On either side of him, the dandies, the ladies, the gentlemen and the femme fatales, applauded his walk up the passageway to the engine room, a clatter of accolades. They, too, were tired of the rave, the celebrations, the pointless happy hours and pointless happiness.

He thought he could recognize someone occasionally, among them, by the angle of a cheekbone, poise of jaw when guttering words, width of shoulders, wedge of thumb pushing something out from between teeth. He mentally put flesh on a rack of bones attempting to verify his suspicions. Did John really have a head that big? Did mother always put her hands on her hips like that? Did father always open only the southwest side of his mouth when he spoke. But, ultimately, all the skeletons were equal. None of them had any special characteristics to make them familiar, reduced by death to blank mediocrity. They were all equally close to his heart. He saw a skeletal mother cradle a skeletal child. He smiled to her. She curtsied in return. The key floated between the lining of his trouser pocket like a submarine in a dark blue sea, glistening like a lure. His hand came and closed upon it, pulled the key out in his fist. Max climbed over their offerings, almost twisting his ankles. Like a walk on billiard balls he sometimes slipped on champagne bottles or a perfume atomizer. Before strolling into the engine room he looked out the window and sighted the train against the

tracks. Now I'm behind the black eight, he thought. The sun rose over the horizon at the end of the train's ride. He entered the engine room and engineers moved under loose coveralls--wind under flags. They all gave him a wave and stood to the side, waiting on further instructions. He held the key to a lantern. Arteries of coal precipitate ran up the window glass like slender abstractions of thread. He shook the hourglass on the key chain. The face was almost fully formed in the glass's bottom--not much time now. He went to the control panel and inserted the key into its lock, turned it. The train rumbled to life. The boys eased off the brakes and the wheels began to spin against the rails. Steam shot from pistons and billowed up from underneath the train. The engineers knew what they were doing. There didn't seem to be any reason for him to interfere. He'd done his part, provided the key. Steam flew past the window he leaned against like released souls that travelled into the sky, like parachutists in updraft, like a flurry of cotton balls. The sun was three quarters above the horizon, but seemed to have stopped there. The train built up speed. He noticed that darkness had drawn its kilt back from the forest's edge and underneath, like a pair of white hairy legs, there were crowds. The whole forest on the railline's side was full of televangelists, tomb sculptors, hot dog salesmen, who entertained the huge crowds watching the train pass, taking photographs, reaping profits. The business of death was a morbid and terrible exploitation.

Looking back along the train's body he saw that panic was pressurized into each and every skull until their eyesockets were bursting, convex with black, artesian wells of liquid darkness. Some of them leaned against window frames. Some of them peered through. Others hung their arms over the open windows, cigarettes dangling between their fingers. Whatever the pose, one thing was sure--exhaustion rose infallible across their bones. He urged the boys to speed it up, but the faster the train went the faster crowds on the forest's edge seemed to appear. Was it the same crowd? Were they following the *Tombtrain Express*? The sun grew larger in the distance and Max got hotter. The crowds streamed around the train, tight, bustling, murmuring like bottled flies. Someone was selling tickets,

barking out prices. Did they want to get on? Is that what they wanted? No, it wasn't their turn! There wasn't enough room!

Max pushed one of the boys aside and began to shovel quickly into the furnace. His shovelling slowed as he noticed, remembered, that it wasn't coal they used for fuel but that liquid metal that formed his life's images. The other skeletons handled their shovels like large spoons, dipped them into the hold and ladled or splashed heavy drops of molten metal into the furnace. Images seethed inside that oven, forming and reforming. Occasionally a bubble burst, sending a rain of metal droplets crackling like oil, but Max and the skeletons were unaffected by the shower. Max tried to shovel the flowing metal, but didn't have the skill. He couldn't keep liquid in the shovel. The fuel sloshed onto the floor to lay there in a mirrored sheet before he could get the shovel into the furnace's mouth. He stepped aside and gave the shovel back to the boy who'd originally handled it.

He looked outside and saw that night was gone, the forest gone, the crowds gone. The woods were behind them now and they ran through rock and sandy hill country. In fact, the train was slowly mounting an incline. Broom, dandelions, blackberry, yellowed grasses, were rooted here and there in the fine grains of sand. The passing train kicked up dustclouds--a trail of sand in their wake like a comet's tail. Max noticed, squinting out the bright window and down the train, that all the sharp, hard, black metal of the *Tombtrain Express* looked minimal and pared down as a starved horse. Like a skintightened ribcage on a hawkfaced nag, a plaguehorse of typhoid and malaria, of bacterias and viruses, the train rounded the top of the hill. The gorge came into view and the broken trestles of a canyon bridge. There was a hole in the middle where the bridge's beams had caved away, a hole too big for the *Tombtrain Express* to leap.

The train clacked down the tracks. The last drop was suspended in the hourglass's neck. Max was too shocked to speak. The wide tear in the bridge was before them. When the train hit space it ripped through the gully's air, gravity yanking hard. The train doubled

over screaming--a cliff diver suddenly afraid of heights in midflight. Like Max imagined, *Tombtrain Express*, as seen from behind, was an emaciated horse, all bony hips and deformity, all lips stretched back, teeth wrenched at gums, as it careened into the gulf. It was like watching a sick equine's fall, the flightless twist of its plummet, as the express capered into angles. On the way down there were signs stuck sideways into the gorge's walls, obviously meant only to be read by those on the plummet, that said: GRAVEYARD, DEAD AHEAD. The arrows on them pointed down.

The train fell in silence. Only the configuration of each car on its sheared couplings spoke. The skeletons were silent, a breeze lifting their clothes. The boys stopped shovelling and fell to pieces on the floor. Max looked down into the gorge. There was a sun at the bottom, a plain circle with spikes pointing at all angles off of it. The sun was hard, solid as a door knocker, but beneath that prickly exterior it had a warm heart. The train hurtled towards it at critical speed. Max opened his eyes wide, wider. The halt, the bone shattering halt, would come soon. The train would be impaled onto sun like a snake on a double hook, like a scarecrow on a stake. The train slammed down with a teeth on tinfoil crunch

Max woke in bed, the sound of torn metal still in his ears. His body felt freeze-dried, fingers frictionless when he rubbed them. He looked at a clock. Night was just in its prime. Silently he put on clothes, the movements rapidly confused as he was still in half-sleep.

It had been a while since he'd dreamed the *Tombtrain Express*. The dream, the nightmare, was long overdue--no surprise that it had come tonight. It was no surprise at all after what he'd heard about the Graveyard Game.

There was no time left, the dream had told him that. He had to commit immediately. He didn't know what to do, but he knew that the desecrations, the skeletons as public toys, were as abhorrent an undertaking as he could ever have imagined. Gordon had laid the bones out, but there was more to it still. What was the Graveyard Game? What was that? He left the

court order not withstanding. Law was hackwork he left for someone else to practice--all of it a tired old litigation he couldn't even like. But the *Tombtrain*--now there was a relevant litany, a thing of prominence, a zeitgeist. He went to the freezer and opened it up, cold vapour against his forearm. The freezer was dark, the bulb burnt out. He groped at a package in the bottom. Six steaks or seven. Alright. He tiptoed into the kitchen and popped them into defrost. The microwave sounded a steady majorscale hum. He gathered rope and grappling hooks into a backpack. The hook had been built out of two garden claws and some duct tape confiscated from Mrs. Patterson's tool shed. Just before hammer hit bell, before the ding, Max pulled the steaks from the microwave and slid them from plate into a plastic bag that he put into the knapsack. Before he left he pulled a bottle of wine from a cabinet, took a corkscrew from the cutlery basket. Mosquitos buzzed around the red sticks of square time on the digital display. Out in the yard he uncorked the wine and dropped the cork, took a long haul on the bottle with his adam's apple bouncing like a yoyo. He left the property and entered a trail just off the edge.

The forest parted for him and made a barrier against lunar illumination. Like a game of hide and seek the moon pulled clouds over herself and Max began to count. He pulled on the bottle and called out a number. "Two step forward, two, three, four. Drinky, drink, drink." Winedrops rolled into his collar, down around nipples. He hiked his pants up, said to the moon, "I can see you. Your turn now," and ducked behind blue huckleberries and cypress. The moon glowered, crouched on all fours to root him. He was never long out of its light. The wine went down his throat, to his veins, to his brains. He stopped to piss and it was into pure night because the mad moon's face had clouded over. By the time he got to the graveyard there was a hard wind so the forest complained and creaked like a crotchety old war vet--by the time he reached the cemetery.

He stood well back from the first fence and made out the silhouette of the carnival. Max pulled out the rope and tied it to the grappling hook with a loop. He carried the coiled rope

on his shoulders. Finishing the wine, Max dropped the bottle. He took the steaks out of the knapsack, but left the empty knapsack on his back. He crept up to the fence. Watchdogs bristled and growled nearby. He lobbed some meat over the fence towards the dogmutter. There was a sudden quiet, the wet sound of lips, tongue, teeth. He climbed the fence quickly, back straight with correct posture. When he came to the ground on the other side of the chain link he threw a steak both left and right. Silence overcame the place. He gave an ejaculatory prayer--"Ave Maria, please God"--when he tossed the grappling hook over. He pulled the rope slowly back as if a lightly hooked fish was on the other end. The hook knocked against the second fencetop and fell at his feet. "You fucking bitch," he said and threw the hook again. It stuck. I knew it would work if I swore, he thought. Before he began to climb he dropped the rest of the meat left and right. His feet pushed flat against the fenceboards. He began to shimmy up the rope, slipped once in awhile and swung against the wooden boards. He held onto the rope and stayed there for a minute with his mouth shut. His lungs, squeezed between diaphragm, yelped mutely. He kept climbing. When Max reached the apex he made sure not to look at the graveyard. He straddled the fence boards, shifted the hook from one side to the other. The signboard spiralled above him. Long cylinders of light the diameter of a mousehole probed across his forehead and hands. It was like being inside the cathode ray tube, like being a teevee personality. Shifting that metal claw, he tested it to make sure the hold was positive and slid down the other side of the fence--spider with spinneret on one steelworks web. Once on the ground, he turned to face the bones.

Max was at the bottom of the hill and the bones played out in front of him, long, polished and prim as a chorus line staircase. Overhead, seagulls flew by, not even minimally impressed. The beams from the signboard were the rods and cones of a dead eye. Max looked up and rubbed his mouth, afraid to make one noise, even to adjust his throat. Is this the way you take care of things? The billboard's lights scampered over earth, caressing the

ivories. The bones were every place. There was nowhere clear for him to look. He stood mesmerized by the dismembered skeletons all over the graveyard, left hand still holding the rope behind him. It was at least a full five minutes before he took a step forward and then another.

Light travelled the length of a bone so white, and, at the tip, before the light left it, there was a speck, a black blip on the chalky surface. Max reached forward and picked up the bone to examine the end where he saw the black dot. Bringing the bone up to his face, he smelled decay, ambrosia of calcium and dirt, undertaker's cologne--the smell of old bone. Max noticed on the end was a small drawing, in purple, of a crow's beak. He dropped the bone and inspected another. Here, a feather. Max picked another. There talons in triplicate. He examined another and another. Where a wing, here tail feathers. Where an eye, here genitalia. He noticed that the drawings were eventually repetitious, a sequence of the same, but the placement of where the note was on the bone varied--that was how they all differed. Intermingled with these were nondenominational bones, each of them covered with a different symbol, with signs Max had never seen before. All the signs were unique--no apparent relation to each other. It was hard to tell if the myriad crow sigils went together or were meant to conform with the other symbols. Squatting on his heels he turned a face to the breeze, dropped the bone he held. Gordon had had them all annotated, that bastard. He knows where they all go, whose property belongs to whom. That's his illusion of control. That's how he thinks he can keep tabs.

The whole graveyard was set up for an easter egg hunt, just so. Let's see who can find the proper bones. I think I know now what he plans and that's worse than what was before, Max thought. That's bad beyond horrific. He twisted his shoulder blades asymmetrically and the knapsack fell to the ground behind him. Now here's where that plan finds an end.

He reached forward and grabbed a handful of knuckles from the dust, blew on them for good luck and slid them into the knapsack. Too bad I can only go for the small ones. Here

was a medium grade skull that went into the knapsack. He stole a couple of vertebrae. Max walked over to different parts of the cemetery to make sure he hit all the spots, to ruin the plot entirely and not just sections. It was a camping knapsack. It could fit a lot. He took advantage of the space. He packed femurs and a pair of hips like moose antlers. I would have been good at stealing stereos, he thought. I could have nabbed televisions, mixmasters. Oops, there's a prime headpiece. In you go kid. When the knapsack was full of ribs and spines and toes and shoulders, like anatomical spare parts, he started to scrounge small items for his pockets. There were always teeth to spare and even though they weren't marked they were still prized. Here were fingers and a thigh bone to stick down the front of his pants. He filled his pockets with fingers and toes.

When all loaded up he put his knapsack on, walked back to the rope under the heavy load. Small fragments fell out of his trouser pockets to mark the way. He was unbalanced--fell onto his back once or twice, arms gyrating wildly for balance as he tilted. He struggled for a few seconds before having to pull out of the backpack straps, stand up, pick up the pack, put it on, start off again, fall. He finally ended by dragging the pack behind him over to the rope, drawing a straight furrow in the moonlight. He put on the pack and leaned back on the rope. His face was red, teeth gritted, and upper shoulders shaking like Parkinson's. Max climbed up the rope very slowly--a picture of strained muscles and imperfect health. Fingers, toes and knuckles dribbled from his pockets, rained to the ground underneath the rope's snaking end. By the time Max reached the first fence-top he panted and flexed weak knees. The world swung slightly in his eyesight. This job is a real deboweller, no question. He adjusted the grappling iron in the billboard's glittering lightbeams and, still not fully recovered but in a hurry, began dropping down the opposite fence side. He was halfway down when his hands couldn't grip the rope anymore and they let go. At first he thought he was fine. The ground was solid but so was he. There was nothing scary. But when he tried to stand, his ankle bent sideways.

It was only when he noticed the twisted, maybe broken, ankle that he also noticed the dogs--red eyes that shone in the dark to the presence of any light--and their raspy mouths chockablock with canines, molars, eye teeth. One dog leapt forward but its chain caught short and whiplashed its head back. The other animal ripped into him. Max twisted on his back, feeling the bones grind in their sack, hopelessly kicked at the dog with his operable leg. All the dogs barked.

Josephine had moved back into her old room downstairs. Actually, it wasn't her old room exactly, since Gordon had had the whole place renovated, but it still felt like her room. Gordon hadn't been able to exorcise the place's temperament. The two of them had just settled down to a silent nightcap when they heard the dogs' commotion. Gordon reached for a flashlight, revolver, night watchman cap and went outside. She followed him with notions. She had a lot of clues about who the trespasser would be, a guess that proved right.

Max beat the dog's head with his right fist while his left was jammed in its mouth like bubblegum. The dog had glazed eyes and nothing except terror came from Max.

Gordon was a few paces ahead of Josephine. He stopped to watch, then walked deliberately backwards, still watching, to the shack. Josephine began to climb the fence. She would have gone around and in between the two fences, but would have had to face all the dogs. She didn't know all their names yet. By the time she'd gotten over the fence Max had managed to free his hand which was, by now, a meatball. He kicked at the dog every time it approached, every time it lunged with a snapping mouth that turned from bark to bite. Sharp snaps, orderly even, she thought.

When Josephine got to the ground, she jumped in front of Max--protectress of the invalid, the helpless--to face off the watchdog. She looked at its fangs wishing she hadn't clipped her nails. It was Max, touching her hamstring from behind with a finger, who offered her a weapon, a baseball bat or a thigh bone that he'd pulled from the knapsack. She

grabbed the bone, repulsed by it. But sometimes you've got to make do, she thought, and swacked the bone off the dog's eyebrow. There was a yelp. She was already wound up for a second swing, as the first one hadn't connected properly and was judged foul, when Gordon screamed: "If you bust that bone I'll kill you!"

He waded through a pack of hounds that growled and lubricated around his hips like watery grease. "Rover, here boy!" The dog Josephine had hit backed off and came up underneath the flat of Gordon's outstretched hand. A sixshot revolver poked handle and barrel out of Gordon's pantwaist. He had a flashlight pointed at Max's face. The other hand, when finished smoothing the dog's hackles, pulled out a cellular phone. "Now give me half a reason not to call the cops."

Just as he said that, Max, trying to twist out of the flashlight's glitter, put weight on his ankle and rolled sideways with a moan. The open knapsack, from which he'd handed Josephine the bone, tipped and spilled its innards. The bones fell in a torrent of bleach and clatter and small bones dribbled from his pockets, like aspirins from parted lips. Josephine just stared. She dropped the thigh bone to the arrival of a shock signal along her motor nerves. Gordon, now master of the hunt, looked at his fallen quarry. "Well, well, well. Ain't that theft. And on top of this the court's injunction violated. Nice one for the authorities tonight." He moved the flashlight beam from the bullseye on the bridge of Max's nose and began to call the local police on the cellular phone. "Don't." Josephine stepped towards him. Gordon stopped jabbing the buttons; she went back and crouched beside Max who was L-shaped on the ground with pain. She lifted a pantleg carefully. There was no compound fracture. The skin was smooth, but swollen tightly. "I think you should call an ambulance instead." "Aw, shucks, Josephine. I'll just let the cops figure it out." Gordon had that ersatz bashfulness. "Don't you think that he's had enough for a night? Let him go Gordon. He doesn't mean anything." Gordon dropped to all fours and crawled forward into Max's face, gazing into Max's eyes, one hand reaching forward to pull up the chin for a better view. Max

wincing. "That true, pal? You really that sick, buddy?" Gordon was a weeping brother, careconsumed, with words overblown by false pity. "I don't think so!" He wrenched Max's head down, all vengeance. "I don't think you're that sick at all." He stood up on two legs as if all it required to go from four to two was cruelty. For the first time since the fall, Max could speak--his voice enough to quiet Cain. "It's all a game, hey?" He tossed his head back to get the hair out of his eyes. "Just a game." Gordon rubbed his forehead as if feeling for the mark of a brand, sacred and profane, that he thought might be somewhere near the scalp--the sign of a seven by seven curse on anyone who tried to kill him, including death itself, death inclusive. But to get that scar, to get his death underwritten like that, required *fratricide*. Could he do it? He reached for the revolver, flashlight dropping to the ground. A halo of light flashed on trees far from the cemetery. And Gordon whispered, "It's just a game. Yeah. You gonna try to be my heir?" Gordon pulled the hammer back on the revolver. Josephine sat in front of Max like a replacement, calmly pulling the cell phone towards her as if blessed with total privacy. Max crawled out from behind Josephine and spoke softly. "Is that the prize? Your precious fortune?" "Yes," Gordon said, holding the gun straight out in front. "Put together a skeleton properly. You get to be my beneficiary." "That's the Graveyard Game?" "The tourism industry."

Josephine dialled Oxbow General. "Get out of the way, Josephine." Gordon came forward, steam chugged out the dogs' many nostrils. "I'm not going to let him ruin this thing." "Naw." Josephine's refusal was disinterested. The barrel in front of her face was not a big importance. The gun was only a measly invention in a world skewered shishkebob on its axis. The revolver was only part of the night. The cemetery around them was only part of Gordon's temporal fixation. Faced by homicide, she wasn't concerned. "You know I'm not going to move, Gordon. So put it down."

It never happened. The three of them jammed. Gordon wouldn't shoot Josephine and Josephine wouldn't move from Max. When the paramedics arrived and put Max on the

stretcher, Gordon said nothing. As Max went by he whispered, "You just don't understand these bones the way I do." When the flashing reds had disappeared, the knapsack emptied and waving in the slight breeze, now laden by nothing heavier than mortality, Josephine sat on the ground, hands in her lap, eyes askew. Gordon still held the revolver, its tip lost, losing poise. His pride was in traction, inside a hollow armour and drooping slowly. Clouds raced the sky. The moon guttered in the dust like a drafty candle.

Frailty moved its permafrost into his system, but he was still diligent, still the executive--on the phone and submitting to the press, dry cleaned and starched for the jury, relishing the interrogation. After the Max incident, Gordon rented better security--a night watchman to patrol the outer limits. When free of Betsy's vigilance he treated himself to life like a fattened turkey trying to lose every pound. Latenight insomnias helped him fret away with sleeplessness. Mealtime was a joke--dogs under the table lapping at entrées from his fingers, arranging food on the plate to make the meal look diminished, stealthily coughing mouthfuls into napkins. He scratched appetite off. In court he looked at his hands, scoping them out like a palmist, the crumbs in the lifeline, heartline, fate lines. The crusts looked like law. He made a fist the size of all justice he'd known and became determined to damn the regulations and damn the rules. They'd taken him to court over "storage" of the graveyard's bodies. The new site hadn't even been looked into, nevermind proposed. Newsagencies treated the idea of a new site like promised land, their eyes full of milk and honey, but his lawyer swamped jury and prosecution at neck level in details and baffled their hands with red tape. Gordon even tried to get himself excused from the proceedings. At first the judge refused to grant anything, so Gordon had to procure a quack's medical report allowing the trial to proceed except he was granted amnesty. The original bill of sale turned red hot under debate's friction. The defense contradicted itself. The case travelled nowhere. Tired of it all, one day Gordon returned to the courtroom with a tape recorder; Mayor fainted. After that, the case was retracted. Mayor told the press that somewhere there were other strategies to deploy. The protests continued on schedule. They screamed. They had slogans. They frisked and frolicked. The rhymes got better--from doggerel to limerick. Mayor stayed away. The police presence became less apparent.

Things changed over time.

Gordon purchased the top salespitchers, sloganeers, admen for hire and set them between the four winds. Publicity spread across the continent--COME AND PLAY THE GRAVEYARD GAME--from Vancouver to Halifax, from L.A. to New York, in a week. Fast as Fax machines could wire in the messages, newspapers printed them up. The game was easy to learn. Admission was free. Just come up to Oxbow and try it out. The game was simplicity--put together one skeleton, complete in all components, not one foreign bone, not one more or less and the Chatterton fortune was yours. The whole graveyard--assets, estate--put into your custody immediately. Traffic was diverted more than usual. The road forked away from Vancouver, away from Victoria, filled with tourists, enthusiasts, adventurers, for Oxbow. The ferries were crammed with bringing all visitors into town. Like some feverish neogoldrush, like the ghost of that malaise, the Graveyard Game engineered euphemisms for itself such as "the skeleton plague" or "bonefever" according to the preference of individual newspapers. It infested North America. The "fever" multiplied exponentially, slow at first, then doubling and quadrupling rapidly.

Gordon's plan prospered. Newcomers came to Oxbow who'd never seen, maybe never heard of, the cemetery before, shin high in dust and picking up bones. Big provisions of lemonade and hotdog, draft and pickled sausages, were provided. Some people came to spectate and drink, with no intention to partake in the race for Chatterton's estate--to watch the clods and dopes bumble with bones. This practice became so bad that eventually Gordon had to install a turnstile and bouncers by the ticket booth, not to collect money, but just to make sure that those entering had sound reasons. He wouldn't have minded onlookers except space was limited. This was a game for contestants not audience. The bouncers were big boys and they tossed out all gawkers. All were free to enjoy the carnival, but the Graveyard Game was exclusive to players. Gordon had even set up a press box and the real big names showed--*Time*, *Newsweek*, *The Globe and Mail*--to exploit the photo op. The influential television crews treated it as media horseplay--the stilettoheeled anchorwoman,

lipstick smudged to one cheek, wrestled with an unruly, windblown diagram, while a couple of bones hindered her hands. Trying to fit it together according to the facsimile, she eventually surrendered and laughed into the camera. Four small children persevered for weeks, finally getting together a reasonable enough bone rack. They took it to Gordon, who sat on the veranda in whiteness, tall hat, straight cane. He pulled out a portable keyboard and monitor, connected to a large computer nexus inside the headquarters, and began to crossreference. After two ribs he looked up at them with a smarmy grin and just shook his head. He stopped, stared at them, shook his head again with a sympathetic, "Tsk, tsk, tsk." He motioned for a lackey to pry the bones from the tizzied children's hands, take them out to the field, scatter them. Those were the rules--you could take long as you liked for assembly before presentation, but once inspection was done, details crossreferenced, and the assembly found incorrect, your structure was decoupled and dispersed, as you had to start all over. Those were the regulations. "No one was forcing you to play," Gordon told the tearstruck children. Just to make sure of incentive, he published his net worth in the local paper every week. He got a notary public's countersignature for sticklers over legitimacy. One eccentric with a jeweller's eyepiece waded in bones for days, eyes magnified to falconfocus. He looked for hairline cracks, confluent grooves, signs of wear, anything to connect ball and socket. Out of all contestants that far, he came the closest, but even he missed a good one fourth. From then on a ban was placed on all specialized equipment.

Over the weeks tourist influx reached overflow. There weren't enough hotels or restaurants in Oxbow to contain them, so the town began expansion to accommodate visitors. New shops went up, new bakeries, fast food stands, bars, restaurants, bed and breakfast hostels, even a new motel.

Time passed.

A U.S. governor came up with family and bodyguards for the weekend. Gordon's phone rang constantly with investors, prospective business men and frauds barking new deals, new

ventures and candied coercion. Television networks called up about filming the event one day a week with celebrities. The Japanese, with their love for the latest western sensation, called him up and invited him over to advise them on an Oriental version. But this one cemetery preoccupied Gordon enough without going global. The contestants could come to him. Gordon, finally, when even rudeness failed to dissuade, disconnected the line. There was no sellout, no compromise of principals. His number became unlisted, guarded by staff under threat of dismissal.

All Gordon wanted was peace. Celebrity status had lost its draw. Everything here was the complete package. The Graveyard Game was the plan's completion, the fulfilment. Extraneous details didn't distract him, didn't interest him. In the past he never overlooked opportunity. Now he figured this was the only chance that mattered.

The cemetery was the backdrop. There was more to the crow on the door than ambience--the milieu, the spectacle, had to be injected with spirit to succeed. Even Frankenstein was just a block of gangrene and electrodes before voltage flowered him. He looked out over contestants, who flapped like roosters, and saw that it was grim, hopefully grim enough.

when a crow dies, it keeps other crows away, but keeps them close enough, crows mourn fallen siblings, they sing, beaks turned skyward, the spilled dissonance is their eulogy, they sing a song past sadness, past sorrow itself, a song with toothache's simplicity, as many toothaches as singers, a song that is pain itself, worthless pain, ineffective because it doesn't induce resurrection, the sibling stays dead as ever, all their song does is push everything away, push anguish away, kill desire, and because it does that time is repulsed, and time is death's escort .

. . .

Gordon needed more than a picture, the sight of a dug up cemetery. He needed emanations.

He needed a theme song painful to hear as the crow chorale. These were the ones--the contestants provided that great irreverent chorus, that loud, greedy, useless chorus that perpetuated pain. As long as there was pain there was life. Gordon's chances for life were about equal to one of the contestants properly assembling a skeleton, but like the contestants, instead of making use of what he had, he went for the big, impossible trophy--immortality. They're a terribly disgusting thing, he thought of the players, but they're the true tenor of this. And as long as they keep going for the prize I'll string along.

Gordon drew parallels between what he'd done and mortality's maintenance:

spirit's an invisible force, and the irreverence and avarice that flow around the cemetery are an invisible force, the crow's song is likewise avisual

He kept inventing reasons why the Graveyard Game kept death distant. It was so sickening death *had* to stay away. He sat in his chair all day, in the cemetery, and came up with connections, illogics, excuses--every day another fragile link. He built a web tighter than a spider's around himself--a web as easy to break.

Fred tried to place a skull on a vertebrae, found it unsuitable and booted it out of the way. He was a rugby player. Mother Allison, whose husband was unemployed, collected a rib or two while her son banged two of them together like drumsticks. Luckily the dust was a cushion so nothing crunched underfoot. Everyone got checked when they left, especially the ones with an edgy kleptomaniac air, with that forced sense of relaxation and confidence. People quickly learnt it wasn't worth the shame of being caught with shoplifted bones. By the end of the first month Gordon had everyone x-rayed and searched against the wall, frisked to ensure the graveyard's integrity. He introduced free lockers against one of the fences to store partially completed skeletons--bones contestants could come back to. After two or three days' absence those skeletons left unattended were discontinued and scattered. Crowds came

constantly. Each bone, at day's end, was smeared with a crime catalogue's worth of fingerprints.

Every two weeks the Graveyard Game closed down for a couple of days and bones were polished and pampered. Damaged bones were quietly repaired with bone grafts, plaster casts, and removed from play like an accidentally marked deck of cards from a legitimate casino. Gordon made sure all the bones pertaining to the damaged skeleton were removed. He played fair. There would always be more than enough bones. Nobody noticed absentees. No roll call ever happened here.

Joe showed up on Tuesday, the graveyard contract a declaration in hand. He demanded that Gordon sell some tickets. He wanted his part of the deal. Gordon told him he was no one to tell him how to run the cemetery. Joe got thrown out by bouncers, bounced outside the gates. He called out lawsuit. Gordon said, "Wait in line with all the rest." Two cop cars eventually showed up to talk him off. Just before they did, however, a news crew interviewed him live. In all anxiety he broke the whole story. The terms of the contract and the story behind grandfather's signature were aired nationwide, picked up slapdash by other media. No time passed at all before Joe was subpoenaed and the case reopened.

Mayor grew stubble too precious to shave in the weeks and months of the Graveyard Game's inaugural season. He'd go home to the wife but she'd gotten tired of kisses scraped off against her face like a match off a zipper. The kisses were only habit anyway so when she told him to shave he stared at the razor, decided kissing wasn't worth it. It wasn't that he didn't shave at all, but only shaved every five days. Oxbow was outgrowing him, he felt that. The time to stop Chatterton had been when they'd taken him to court over the game's initial opening, but Gordon's ultimatum had caused him to foreclose prematurely. Now most of the town was behind the man. Gordon was god for business, a profit curve headed for Heaven. Chatterton was getting too popular--not exactly pagan idolatry, but close to it as the century permitted. Every time Gordon's face appeared on a magazine, it looked mysterious, inviolate, like Turin's shroud, but Mayor knew that Gordon was no miracle xerox, no supernatural photo negative, only colourful and static. And who needed Mayor? Mayor still needed the mayor, that's who. He still needed that final, all important identity to keep him from flying fourways.

It was when he saw Joe's face on the news report that he knew it was no longer possible. The persona of Mayor just wasn't feasible anymore. Gordon's threats had wrung the mayorage hollow. He thought, when the first case closed, that there'd still be a way to avoid the inevitable, some small act would come to him, but nothing. At least if he had admitted to inciting the vandalism immediately he would have felt less disgrace. Now time had passed his term of office by.

He'd have to give up the last identity. Give it up and that meant fear's renewal, constant fear, with no safe crevice to cram himself into while horror rushed past searching for him. He had to go back into exile, superstition, terrorism, the true thing he was, his final and irrevocable self--back to paralysis, to cowardice. It was the night Joe appeared on television that Mayor went and shaved himself too close to the skin, into a worst case scenario for razor

bumps. Then he slapped on aftershave and made love to his wife for the first time since their ten year anniversary. This is the final time, he thought, as their bodies jockeyed into position. This is the last time. And he was tender without being tired, tender without that weary devotion she'd always resented. The wife responded with kisses that loved and hurt, kisses that were love and lust, cradle and crush. This the end, he thought during the long night. It was the final incidence of love, while night and sweat curled ivy leagues over them. It's the final time we drink this wine, this fragrance.

In the morning he rose and stretched his muscles, called the secretary. She prepared a memo he dictated over the phone, a note like no other, a last memorandum. He told his secretary to call a press conference. Foul play was the hourly word on the lips of newsladies, newsgentlemen. They spoke those two words like an immoral conjugation. The conference was for three o'clock and the press worried that the graveyard had maybe gotten too newsworthy and it was time to start ignoring it. There was no waiting in alcoves for Mayor this time. Mister Fear was strangely absent, seemingly preoccupied with other errands. By coming out to confront the occasion, Mayor had frightened Mister Fear off. It was too bad-- this would have been fear's good joyride, the moment when Mayor was most susceptible. He walked to the podium and looked around himself. He was bored. Mayor leaned towards microphones, making sure they were on. "Testing one two three. Testing. Testing."

He used an old voice, one that parliaments feared, a voice corrupt with the child's honesty.

"A few months ago I made a terrible mistake. Breach of faith. In return for legal and social protection, favour owed for favour granted, I enlisted a local man (whose name I don't see any reason to mention) to do me a service. I called him down to my office and, in not so many words, requested of him vandalization, to cause damage to the property of Gordon Chatterton. That property was Oxbow Cemetery. In return for this favour I promised immunity from the law. My position as Mayor, I thought at the time, granted me this privilege. It was

wrong. I knew it was wrong," he mused, "must have known it wrong because I called for it at night. This may sound like a noble confession but it's not. I haven't come to make this speech by choice. I'm being blackmailed and this is the only way out. The conversation I had that night was taped. Gordon Chatterton has that tape and has been using it to control my office. Why was the case against Gordon Chatterton dropped so quickly? Because he threatened me and I was afraid for my job."

Mayor had made no notes. This was one of his few instances of extemporization, the whole package ad lib.

"I was afraid of that conversation being revealed to the public."

Sometime during the first minute of his speech flashbulbs had stopped popping. The t.v. crews fumbled with chords. Movie cameras were pulled off shoulders. It looked like they were taking it down--that's how it looked from the height of Mayor's podium, but he went on.

"You may be asking why I've decided to reveal all this now. The answer is that new evidence has been uncovered, evidence that clearly amounts to a greater case against Chatterton than before. As Mayor, it is my decision whether or not the district should proceed with such a case. I know that public opinion, at the moment, condones Mister Chatterton because of the increased benefit Oxbow sustains from the Graveyard Game, however, public opinion, majority opinion, is not always correct. That opinion is usually based more on emotion than information. This case, I believe, is not an economic question but an ethical one."

The camera crews packed it up. The reporters stood around in casual discussion groups, in garden party quartets. Some even had their backs to Mayor. What didn't play on the heart wasn't hype, and where there wasn't hype there wasn't news. The dopey subscribers and the teevee boxheads weren't into the rational. What was in, what the news had made fashionable, was theatre. And this wasn't much amusement.

Mayor rambled like a dingbat. This press conference was a fool's errand. The rounds

put up their cases, chords and jackets.

"What *Chatterton Enterprises* is doing is wrong. It is my wish to see the case against him proceed, however, since my position has become more a liability than benefit to both this case and the proper government of Oxbow, I hereby tender my resignation. I resign as mayor of Oxbow. I have sent memos to my colleagues instructing them to hold an election. In the interim I'm certain some provisional leadership will be enacted. It will be council who must proceed in the case of Oxbow versus *Chatterton Enterprises*. Thank you for your time."

When the last word came out he hooked a finger into his collar for a second. A vein just under skin jumped like champagne on a hot plate. One last flashbulb winked quietly from the corner--the warbride's eyes after the conscript. In a second the flash was gone forever--probably the last time he'd ever be photographed in office. He paused at the podium without answers, but with the hope that there'd be some raised hands, questions on fingertips. There was zip. And when his eyes adjusted from the camera flare he saw that only his secretary stood among the broken off extension chords littering the floor in hundreds of abandoned streamers. Most reporters had gone before he'd finished. No one was interested. He'd hoped to assume sad nobility, some apologetic righteousness. But he was no disgraced outlaw, just one unforgiven, just lost to mercy, just another carpetbagger who'd had the top slot and now was due for replacement. His confession wasn't sympathetic--an honesty not worth recognition. Truth meant diddly. Only closet contents interested the media, only the scuttlebutt they exposed personally. Public inventory of conscience wasn't their fave kind of arousal.

At home that night he drank only whisky and bedtime wasn't a consideration.

But there was one interested party. Later that night, Gordon Chatterton just happened to glance at the teevee in the legion hall where he was celebrating with Oxbow's notables after having received the Citizen of the Year Award. He was squirming for the festivities to

discontinue, so he could get back into graveyard immunity. The anchorman came on at the show's close, where they always gave briefs of less important news, and mentioned that the mayor of Oxbow had resigned over breach of trust. Gordon turned his weatherbeaten face, a metaphysical crumple of skin and pimple, wrinkled to sphinx by death's riddle, to one of the local authority figures seated on either side of him. He asked them about Mayor.

"Oh, yeah. Haven't you heard? He called a press conference and resigned right in front of the cameras." "Over what?" "I don't know. Something to do with foul play. 'Breach of trust,' I think he called it."

Gordon stopped talking, stopped laughing at their jokes. Mayor had been a wildcard, a shirtsleeve ace. His removal took out the buffer between him and the courts of law. This meant that the case against him was safe to proceed. It could reactivate. And now that Joe had blabbed there was a good chance of a guilty verdict, or at least an injunction to shut down the 'yard. If they proved the old man incompetent, which was no raffle, then they might invalidate the contract. Everyone knew the old man was crazed of course, had been crazy for a long time, but it was okay long as the craziness worked towards council's payroll, on council's terms.

Now there was Joe, Gordon thought, only Joe. Why had he been so stupid not to collect some ticket money. If he'd only listened to Betsy none of this would've happened. Joe would have gotten some cash, been content and the press wouldn't have clued. It wasn't even the idea of a trial that Gordon hated, but all the time that courtroom attendance kept him away from the Graveyard Game. Irritation travelled byways of minute and hour.

He felt death was waiting to ambush him when he was out of the graveyard's protective circumference, nab him in the courtroom. He wouldn't have minded to pay the fine in advance and skip the proceedings. The best thing, however, was to somehow become Joe's favourite patron. That's what he'd have to do. He was a key witness that Gordon put his mind to like a locksmith, to recut and refit for a different lock.

He looked around the table he sat at. Everyone was smiles and talkative faces that looked insignificant as photos in a locket, their faces were nothing but keepsakes. Suddenly, when the graveyard started making everyone some dollars, he was nominated for Citizen of the Year--from public enemy to number one son in only two and a half months. He was Oxbow's recession buster. Gordon looked around the table at councilors, chairpersons, treasurers, pastors, other local aristocrats and laughed suddenly. Everyone jumped and then patted their hair. Weren't these the ones whose opinions and tongues had made him notorious? Didn't they know that he was terminally ill? Maybe he should get drunk and kiss them at night's end just for fun. But why not enjoy hypocrisy, it was something too. Hypocrisy was also life.

As night continued he thought more infrequently about those around him and began to concentrate on Joe and, finally, on Max. Why hadn't he shot him? It would have been easy to avoid Josephine. It didn't take a rubber barrel to bend around her. Maybe the reason he didn't want to pay Joe was the same reason he wanted to kill Max. Payments to Joe and emotional leniency to Max were both a kind of bond--one he didn't want to establish and the other he wanted to abrogate. It was almost as if the Graveyard Game required a kind of neutrality from him. He had to be totally enclosed within that skeletal ground. There had to be nothing leading to or from him because those weaknesses were conduits that death could exploit, travel along and get at him. He had to be in sole possession of himself, in sole possession of the yard, with no percentage displacement. The plan had to be completely under his ownership and he had to be totally and only devoted it. Well then, what about Josephine? Why had she moved in? Gordon didn't know, but he had a hunch she was part of whatever was going to happen. She seemed acting on clairvoyance. Her participation felt final, conclusive.

When Max was still employed at the cemetery he'd often dig through a layer of nutrientrich topsoil then hit some hardpan. Coiled worms jutted from dirt chunks like wires from piping. Just under his skin, where the shirtsleeve was rolled up, veins showed on his body--a blueprint of the blood vessel tubing inside the human device, configurations of veins and arteries. The sun would move down past stars like an electronic eye and the harvest moon rise like another except its color suggested infrared. At night the cogs and wheels, microchips and circuit breakers that ran the universe became obvious, but Max would concentrate on none of that. He'd try to see only the onbreak of dark, to interpret night as no different from day. On Max's watch time's display was inorganic--an eggtimer schedule, aberrant, divested of essence. There wasn't any time here anyway, none of his specific time. Sometimes a bear's body tumbled, wacky and disjointed, a bundle of black rags, as it moved across the cemetery with strange grace. Marmots moved in quick jerks like a movie projector stalled and then run at double speed to make up. Even the rare birds were marionettes, pieces of theatre machinery, with an epileptic at the strings--sitting still to suddenly twitch and scatter, beaks chattering. Between undergrowth the stars glanced off the eyes of deer, eyes like black dials that at a twist might open their jaws to weird dialects. At night it seemed everything in the universe wound to a slow uncoiling. Death's a mechanic that disassembles. But Max's mind, refashioned into a backwater to which only basic goods were delivered, was usually lulled from all by the steady digging. He had the imagination to uncover how eerie and morbid the evening universe appeared to be, but Claire and the doctors had helped neutralize it. He worked hard not to hear the funeral oration when the wind passed through the trees' skinny branches. He rose in dusk to boot his body up and out of the fresh grave, narrowly avoiding notice of a forest made entirely of hanging trees. Owls sat in crooks like convicts in electric chairs. Frost stretched platinum nylons over them, but the trees were black at centre, dark as

a jack o'lantern's guts. Something horrorblack and dead at the centre made the trees frighten and obstruct. Not safe to trespass here. Keep away. Beware of night. Sometimes Max couldn't help but notice how the vegetation ringed him with rotten drapes, alive with sinister motivation. Owls opened yellow eyes with precise timing--a series in cuckoo. But Max just wouldn't want to see it and, so, he was nonplussed by those terrorists, safe from the scary. Seeing is fearing.

He walked home through underbrush and painted moonlight, black strips across his eyes and thick lips. Branches hacked twenty lashes at his legs and face. But, back then, to Max, the forest was no dominatrix. Claire had helped erase symbols from Max's mind-- moonlight was moonlight, a rose a rose, and a bear running a bear running. He hiked all night. Sticky branchsap cemented his hands. The red, yellow leaves and green needles rustled. Morning came along the walk and his light looked no different from the dark. He didn't feel as if he'd passed from insecurity. Perfect 3-D clouds rose fantastic architecture into a clear blueness. The wind, a saline disinfected breeze, smelt sweeter as he got closer to the sea, but it was all the same to him. See no evil, hear no evil, comprehend no evil. Max walked in a cautious equilibrium. He skipped a handful of stones off the road, past the spot where there were summer imprints in tar: mark of crow and cat; toes and heels of kids on a backwoods roam; deep marks of bloodhounds, deeper ones of wolves.

Now, up in the graveyard old darkness midnighted its sad heart away. The music--flute, tambourine, fiddle--was stolen long ago by a thousand composers, troubadours, but there was nothing like the original sound, the original choreography it led to. Darkness wasn't just music but movement and that was foremost--the agent provocateur, the original temptation, the option to see experience your way.

Now, Max heard a tin whistle and left to follow it. It led him up through Mrs. Patterson's pear tree, grass seed, blackberry, overgrown backyard onto the main highway. A short jag

later he turned into a narrow pickaxe avenue, rutted dirty road with bigger rocks picked out and thrown to the side. He kicked one rock off shoetip. It clacked into another which veered off sideways into a pothole. The wind was strong. Rain fell like rusty tacks around too distantly placed lamplights. There was a whistling from neither wind nor rain drawing him--a conscientious whistle. The homes along this road were some of the oldest in Oxbow and that was no history lesson, they looked it. Vacant windows, loose green shingles, dented hollow doorknobs, gardens with thicktrunked rosewood bushes--more stem than flower--on which roses dried brown instead of bloomed, were characteristic of houses here. The cars were all tailfanned. Each garage they were parked within had holes in the roof where rain sluiced through. Twisted trees waved leafless branches in a thousand gonzo batons. No history lesson was necessary to know that these were the oldest homes.

Max felt a train close by, a shudder under his feet, the diesel powered ground was unbolted, surging, stampeding. Each gust of cold air was an expulsion. "The *Tombtrain Express*," he vented, then said it again. A chrome weathervane, chicken shaped, spun on a rooftop. It creaked and flashed cryptic winks at him which said, "Welcome to the secret society." He didn't wink back--none of his business. His business was with a cemetery or in a schedule he'd invented, in the train's itinerary and bedside arrival. Instead of the exact time all his schedule said was soon. He trudged past houses until they fell behind and all that was around him were yellow flowers. Broom bushels went from rustle to thrash. The road was dirty beneath his feet and the sky overhead bottomed out with thunder. He heard from all three frequently--broomswish, gravelsnap and thunderclap. Of course, there was a whistle more outspoken than any other noise.

He travelled towards the cemetery, not a thing hindered him on the way, except maybe the past--a hundred kilogram tail he dragged behind. He thought of the old themes that led to this: the wrecked bridge, the night, Father, Claire, Oxbow. He tried to smash what he thought was his life, like a clay piggy bank, to count the pennies--as if all the copper years he'd saved

up in memory would give some clue as to the currency's expiry date. But money never expires like humans. Money becomes collectible, humans worthless. How many more years was he allowed to save up? That whistle sounded more and more predetermined.

It wasn't in moonlight that he reached the cemetery but along obscure streets. The temperature was cold, but the wind and rain only seemed comfortable to him, cool. The graveyard was silent. But the storm had a torrid voice, eloquent whisper. The ground was littered with everything from fast food wrappers to shirts and socks, even shoes, but everything pairless. Rain tamped down the fine dust and the bones were spattered to a shine under lights. Max stood at the front gate, far enough from dogs, but close enough to see bones and the light in the headquarters outlining two silhouettes slapping down cards and lifting cups.

What should he do? Try again? No. That was pointless, besides, his ankle was painful. He'd been a swinging limp the whole walk. There was no way he'd ever make the fence, no way he'd outrun the dogs and leap the next one. And maybe, for a minute, he was lucid, or maybe he remembered Gordon's threat, Claire's ministrations, the doctor's advice. Stay away from the graveyard. Stay away. Whatever the motivation was he turned from the cemetery and with three long backward glances, one of love, one of shame, the last of fury, disappeared into a trail that led home.

This was no world for elation, this graveyard enclosure. Inside the shack, Betsy and Gordon played hearts, Gordon with the highest stakes in mind. Josephine was out walking in the cemetery, in the pitchy scent of evergreens whose rustles were audible only in the leastways. Her bracelets glinted off the last tracers of light, bracelets carved with Native images of bear, orca, and the raven, who was big sister to crows growing more numerous around the graveyard every day with their feathers weaving a synthetic night over them. This was a world of emotion and profit.

It was the sight of Max Fuselli skulking on the graveyard's borders that finally convinced

her that she'd have to intercede directly to stop the Graveyard Game, before something more drastic took place, before Max Fuselli killed Gordon or viceversa, before Gordon wouldn't have any need for medical attention.

Josephine thought about Mayor. She'd heard about the oncamera resignation and subsequent public disfavour, about how most members of council had prepared statements saying how graveyard policy was singlemindedly engineered by Mayor and that there'd be a major revamping of that policy for the new election. The unanimous council passed a motion in support of the Graveyard Game and its beneficial effect on Oxbow's economy. The protests had stopped long ago. Nobody had any spare time from increased business to rally against what brought that business to town in the first place. Most of the garbage on the cemetery's outskirts were old banners and picket signs, long cones that were homemade voice amps. The protestors had separated and gone back to old battle lines, refugees from unified demonstration, splintered again to factions. The exmayor, thought Josephine. Could he turn benefactor?

She spun towards one of the storage sheds when Max finally disappeared into forest. The mayor had resigned and Josephine was positive that his renewed participation would swing on sister's displaced skeleton. Josephine knew that the exmayor had come to visit sister's grave every day even if only for the length of prayer. She needed to act. Together with the exmayor she could proceed in some way against Chatterton. She had to get him, very soon, definitely soon. She'd go to him in the day and reminisce about the Harley Davidson sister--that would inject motivation into his ass, if nothing else. Then they'd figure it out.

When Josephine went to sleep that night, she was like a dove, that lover of dogfights, that blanched boxer of a bird. She cooed like a rough and tumble dove. Josephine was no Holy Spirit kind of paraclete, just an old scrappy bird, just a minor saint.

Max walked south. His feet were on compass but his mind fazed. What to do tonight? His hair flapped, windstrewn, as if he were partways scalped. Home--he's got to be home before day. If only he could get there soon the night would allow him some hours. If he could get home soon. Trails were smeared with the sound of cricket strings, sticky music the black insects played. Max Fuselli had formally turned from the cemetery, whose retreat wasn't final.

Max realized it was because of Claire that he'd turned. Claire--whose presence lived on in him, stubborn as DNA, though physically she couldn't even appear ghostly. The crickets repeated the same note all night, b flat without joy. He came to a junction in the path, thought of her with legs separated, moved down the right one at the speed of a trickle. He tried to look at things from underneath. Here was Max Fuselli, turning away from the cemetery without a good reason. He sauntered down the trails, heard mud slide under his heels--with no good reason.

He'd turned away because of Claire, for memories of love and sex--not a good reason, but bad reasons also cause action. Sex didn't fit the *Tombtrain Express*, and no matter how much he projected things to the maximum, to coincide with prophecy, he couldn't get rid of sex. Having had sex with Claire and the fact that she'd often instigated it lent some hope almost worth keeping secret from his insanity. He wanted to keep known some aspect of himself not squeezed into that iron brastrap of a train, something left to dangle. Oh boy, soon the sun would soon be up at his eyelashes, sun to chew on like a pharmaceutical for insomnia, a sun that fit under his eyelids like a sleeping pill. Fade to grey, fade to another black, and then wake up to continue. Meanwhile the *Tombtrain Express* occupied his time day and night. Its railway ties and spikes were covered over with creosote against rain. Nothing to consider anytime except that train soaped with memory and fate or so Max thought. It was terrible to be Max Fuselli, but sometimes you recalled the freedoms of orgasm and night dripped to a kind of clear water that was neither light nor dark, something you couldn't exactly see or hear and you could wash your face for once, rinse your eyes and, thankfully, for that

half hour there'd be no train, no laconic click clack. Claire was there. It was terrible being Max Fuselli, but tonight memory took him from the graveyard enclosure. Recollected Claire, the ecstasies remembered, could derail even Max's pricey express.

Max was home and nothing registered. He was still in brush, blue night glancing off the backs of willow leaves. Antennas on nearby roofs stretched hypodermic into a sky laced with carbon dioxide like a vein. His doorknob snickered unsportsmanlike. He considered nothing now. The graveyard had turned away from him or he'd turned from it. There's no nostalgia like the one you've put aside, intending a return to, but coming back too late to wallow--telling yourself, always, later, always telling yourself first I have to leave.

The shotgun was on the wall. The lamp tipped shade like Cocacola to lady moths frittering. I've got plenty of shells, Max thought, pulling a fresh box from the cupboard--prepackaged salvos to make the night reverberate. There was a crayon on the desktop and he took that too. He left his shed door open and went to the oil barrel in the backyard where Mrs. Patterson exercised her burning permit. Here's a box that's square as a head I know. Beyond the wooden fence was a big meadow where the shotgun could blow its pellets into the air like hormones, blow like rage from a shrapnel trumpet.

He was about to go over the fence when the one soft light in Mrs. Patterson's window led to another above her back door. It flicked on and the light spontaneously generated mosquitos and flies to buzz slaphappy at it. The bugs scattered odd vectors when Mrs. Patterson cracked the door open. Of course, they all came back. "Who's there?" she called, but Max, at last, had no reasonable answer. He said nothing, but grasped the shotgun until the patent and serial number scored his hand, marking him.

He jumped the fence, grass on the other side thrust itself into each trouser leg, wrapped each calf like corncobs. Here he was. Behind him the backdoor light of Mrs. Patterson's house was followed by another that came sharply on in the kitchen. She opened the window, listened to him thresh the meadow. Need to find that stump, the one a green bush grows out

of, he thought. Mrs. Patterson was without her glasses, besides, his shadow would have meant nothing to her. The first blast opened up the a.m. quiet like reveille, like a revivalist.

Max found the stump, loaded up the shotgun, put the box of shells into his pocket. He took the crayon, clumsily drew a face on the cardboard box in distant light from Mrs. Patterson's window. He didn't have the artist's hand, not at all, but he drew anyways, as best as he could, retracing the picture as seen in mirrors. What about Mrs. Patterson?, he thought, while his sketching continued. Why's she up at this hour? She'd never awoken to gunshots before. Maybe she'll go back to bed, he thought. Yes. Maybe.

While he drew he thought of the call she'd directed towards him, a who's there? directed at his noisy footsteps in the garden. He'd answer her question with the drawing. The movement of his fingers over the cardboard surface dropped an answer. This is the way a mute states his identity--images in place of words. This was how Max finally came to an answer himself. Max Fuselli was a waxy trace on cardboard, a paper baby in distant light. This is Max Fuselli, he thought, stepping away from what he'd drawn. Now I'm finally outside myself--thinking that during his two steps back to raise the twin barrels. He aimed along no sights, just ran an eye down the barrel's length. For a moment he believed Max Fuselli could be removed this way--no blood, no entrails, just pellets through a weak facade. Freedom's skin was thin as a postcard. He could get away from the train and all Max Fuselli was by blowing a hole through cardboard portraiture. By stepping forward, he'd enter through freedom's mothersized hips back to liberty. Well, that was an error to make that night. That was his mistake in the dark. He took mistake and error, made them by prescription at least once a night, at least once.

Mrs. Patterson had a kind of sovereign affectation. The last thing to be done was notify policemen. Her independence excluded taking strangers' help. She was a prom queen gone crone and still maintained the elegant traits that had carried her more than successfully through Oxbow's social circles. Now, she was determined to find the source of this noise

herself and to come down on the perpetrators with a screech and bash of black umbrella. She put on her housecoat and therapeutic shoes, got a flashlight. Gripping the umbrella's handle she moved out towards the source.

BANG! BANG! A flock of crows raised commotion into daybreak. Crows don't chirp, that's important. The night was spotless with crows--black on black. The dark swallowed their sound without a single click of teeth. The birds were disoriented, smashing into each other, stooges. They're not on friendly terms with night, the way dark things are never truly on friendly terms with each other. The way night is only best buddy with the day.

Max rose from a crouch, snapped open the gun's barrels. Acrid smoke rose in front of his eyes like from extinguished candlewicks. The two spent shells flipped to either side. Day was oncoming and while sleep was usually Max's favourite state of being now he hated it. "Don't come," he said. He no longer wanted to sweat in bed, no more REM, no more nightmare overdose. He slipped two more shells into the barrels and whipped them shut. This time he didn't crouch among the weeds, tall grass and anthills. Now he stood. **BANG!** The gun kicked a horseshoe into his shoulder, but he braced it hard. The box twirled in the hail of pellets. **BANG!** He fired the second barrel and the box got slammed off the stump. He walked over to where the white cardboard glowed moonlit, with a tabula rasa, on an unmarked side. He held the shotgun over one wrist, its stock wedged into his underarm. He carried the firearm like a European gamebird sportsman, rich and overeas. He squatted, turned the box over to the cardboard face and looked at it sideways before picking it up and pulling out the crayon again. When the Box was placed back on the stump there was a name stencilled beneath the face, a signature of the artist, a title--letters in a long straight childlike font. He looked back at the house and saw Mrs. Patterson's face pressed against the darkness like a monarch butterfly against glass. She was on her flashlit way towards him. The gun was loud enough to wake the dead, clicheed Max. Maybe I should go and fire it in the graveyard, then watch the resurrection. He broke the shotgun open. Two shells ejected with

wisps of smoke like parachutes behind them. Parachuting upwards, Max thought. Another two shells slid in like missiles. Spent ammo rolled in the grass. Better not slip, he thought, walking up to the picture again.

He considered John and the act he'd played when they went target shooting long ago. Funny, he thought, funny. Back then it had been Max who'd laughed at the joke they'd made of a deceased and John who'd sobered up in the end. Now it was the shift. Max was the one, had become the one, who found nothing humorous in the dead, only solemn homage. Max was serious about death. He'd been slowly disentangling himself from life, a slow process almost complete. Maybe I'll try to be funny tonight, Max thought.

He approached the face on the cardboard the way John had most of these years ago, Max's movements were a ballet in pathos. He stared for a minute over the box out into the field. The wind frantically raped a scarecrow over one of Mrs. Patterson's cabbage gardens. Oh, night all the time, he thought. He looked at his self portrait. "Here's a geek who needs to take a tumble," he spoke. "Here's a boy walking on the street. A boy so perverse he scratches every roadkill he comes to behind the ears. Here's a boy every nightcrawler has a name for, every worm fattening itself for fishing season. A boy even the worms nickname. And he always feels so sorry for himself. He's got more self pity than a Judas."

As Max monologued the sky put out lights, each star dimmer and then switched off, but a long footlight was warming up on the eastern horizon. Sun started its chore of lighting the dome above the world. Birds braver than crows--sparrows, robins, swallows--stood off. Mrs. Patterson had come within sight of Max and, with a spinster's curiosity, not that she was a spinster, stood by the fence to listen and partake.

"So I'm driving by one day in my car and I see him. I'm with a whole bunch of friends. Wholesome healthy jocks with good ears for lifesounds. They move like each action is naturally ordered. Their joints aren't connected to symbols. Their bodies don't stand like trains. The only recurring dreams they have are wet ones. So we're driving by and there he

is, with a bowl of milk for a cat that looks passed over by a rolling pin. He's batting off the crows to protect the cat smashed by eighteen wheels. He puts the saucer of milk by its mouth, hunkers down and stares at it like a kettle about to boil. I pull out the shotgun. Don't even stop the car. Hardly aim. We just pass by him and," **BANG! BANG!**, "keep right on driving." Max unloaded the empty shuttles and slid in two more with trick shot finesse. There was very little left of the face--an eye, maybe a row of teeth. He took careful aim with each shot, fired twice. The box was blackened from the pointblack shot, smudged as by greasepaint. "Then we put the car in reverse and shoot that goddamned pervert two more times. He's still twitchin' and struggling to cover and guard the cat. We drive off. Leave him like that."

Somewhere near the field's perimeter, Mrs. Patterson reached up a hand to pat her hair, partly to hide the grey streaks while she prepared to confront Max. Mrs. Patterson watched the shape just becoming unblackened in the field by dawn. She picked out the access road that would let her get closer to the public nuisance. She spoke, feeling her arm get tired from holding her hand to her head.

In the meadow, Max propped his back up against the old stump to watch sun come over the edge. He didn't fear the sun. He wanted to watch sunrise and hate it, enjoy the hating of it. His body didn't flicker. Not a shadow crossed his face since the monologue and no shadow infringed on it now.

Mrs. Patterson turned the flashlight towards him. A ray gleamed across the field. The old woman squawked at Max, umbrella over her head--some Mary Poppins after a secret service indoctrination, but her toothless mouth was sad and deep as chimneys: "Drop that gun immediately." Max wouldn't drop the shotgun for just any cheap call. He didn't want to turn from light, but his head turned. Half his face downplayed to shadow and, because the other side remained in light, he'd become a halfwhite, halfblack joker, hidden in the tall grass and weeds as if a deck of cards. Somehow, for that moment, the sun worked for Max's face like it

hadn't since he'd sucked on mom. Mrs. Patterson was cubbyholed in darkness with her umbrella, hair tint, fading sense of authority. Jeepers, he hasn't dropped the gun yet. Waitaminute, that's my Max For the first time Max felt something nasty expecting him in the night's heart, while the sun over the ridge held for him hate sweeter than melancholy, a hate which would be lost to landlady interference. The harlequin, old pierrot, the perfect description of him at that moment--half in all respects, undecided in all respects. Hats off to harlequins, even if it's against better nature. Hats off to those who see the story from all sides, both sides--the perfect spectators for tragicomedy--to those enthralled by contradiction, happy with it. Max became his audience in that second. His humour was his sorrow. Max, who found fear of dark the funniest thing, was mortified at the fact that his years would have to be spent at night. His worst fear was most logical but most absurd--that night would abandon him like an estranged lover to dump him for day.

Max turned full front to face Mrs. Patterson. She nudged forward, umbrella aloft. The sun used the umbrella's metal pole as a reflector, sparking into Max's eyes. Max raised the shotgun at her and the umbrella went back reflexively. "Max Fuselli, you ought to be ashamed. Why, I could've called the police. . . ." And then Max was all hotfoot, running from that juncture of night and day into a culmination of sorts, into the forest's cool celsius. He felt daylight in a few blisters. The skin on his nose strained. The warming air stretched tight as a steam whistle's chord against his adam's apple.

Gordon had been poking redial all night long to hear unanswered rings, monotonous as Sunday, and never a Joe on the other end. Josephine remained with him through the dark, examining calluses, harder than any previous, on her fingertips. She'd never before played eight hours a day. The last crack in silence had been her request for salt and pepper down the dinner table, the total contents of their conversation. He'd held the phone all mealtime and irritation skittered up Josephine's ribcage faster than prayers to Heaven. "Who're you trying to call?" she asked, flipping the television to a channel that displayed a news printout, sentences with short onscreen lifetimes. "Huh?," Gordon asked her, still counting each ring as if their total was important. "Who are you trying to call?" "Joe. Joe Frank."

Josephine left him then, walked out into warm summer darkness. Was that a piece of linen she carried? What for? Gordon wondered without really caring much. He didn't have the stamina for multiple concerns. He was too preoccupied by Joe, had to make contact with Joe.

At one point he heard sounds of clatter, but it didn't come from the graveyard and that was all his care. No dogs barked. He watched stars fade to blue, glanced at his watch. He'd never worked a regular day job so he was ignorant of mainstream routines, of when others arose, but he aimed for eight thirty.

He got his lawyer out of bed and made arrangements. The lawyer was edgy, worried about Joe's testimony being brought up against their position. Gordon wanted to know what could be done for Joe. "What kind of package could he be offered to keep him off the stand." The lawyer didn't know offhand, but was certain loopholes were available somewhere towards Joe's recruitment, some obscure precedents that contravened a subpoena. The last thing Gordon told the lawyer was that Joe'd been interviewed. The lawyer reminded Gordon not to worry too much about the trial as its resumption would have to wait for the election of a new

mayor. Council was in no hurry to move until that time and even then, with the way opinion polled in Oxbow, things stood in Gordon's favour. Even with Joe's emergence the prosecution's key witness was hardly eligible to substantiate any claims. Hadn't the council been dealing with the senile grandfather for years as well? Their aggression in court would be as much self indictment as anything, a shot in their own foot. The legalities could only turn complicated if Joe decided to press his own charges, rather than remaining the crown's witness. "But don't worry Gordon," he said, "nobody wants to see the game shut down. The only way they'll go after you is if there's pressure applied from the legislature."

"Still. It would be nice to be sure," Gordon told his lawyer. Having heard that voice from Gordon before, the lawyer knew he was preparing some kind of transaction, maybe a bribe, downpayments for a promise or an exchange with Joe. The lawyer only warned Gordon to proceed tiptoe, since he knew Gordon's focus was unwavering.

Putting down the phone, Gordon went into a coughing fit and collapsed. His chest was covered with purple spots, growths, tumours. His insides were filled with a million steelwool pipe cleaners jamming back and forth. He woke up on the floor to the maid dispensing oxygen into his lungs. He had cancer enough for a ward. Cancerous as cigarettes, he pushed the mask away and tried to rise, but couldn't. It's Joe, he thought. Death's getting closer because Joe will tattle and take the graveyard away. The maid held his head on her lap. He asked for a glass of water. She got it for him. He took a cupful and asked for a telephone. "You're too weak to talk," the maid insisted, but he begged. "Please. I've just one call to make," dry sticky swallow, "so much depends. . . ."

She rose and came back with telephone and pillow. She put the pillow under him, dialled the number, handed the phone over. "Hello? This is Gordon Chatterton. Is that you, Joe?" He was intrepid as a bombfuse tinkerer, but Gordon had gone from maestro to crotchety in the space of eight months--you could tell by the scowls at the corner of his mouth. He'd become dainty. He rested in the maid's lap like a knickknack, but with nerves

volatile as wartime. Again, he asked: "Hello Joe?" Fracas filled the voice. "I feel ashamed of myself, Joe." "Yeah?" Joe lunged at the word with a gulp. "You helped me so much. Now look at you. And look at me. Ungrateful me." Joe shifted the phone in his grasp. He'd almost forgotten about all the reporters he'd spoken to. It took two for betrayal, but it looked now like he wouldn't have to tango to blackmail. Gordon had phoned for reconciliation.

Joe sat back in the chair and waited for Gordon to start the offertory through the mouthpiece. Gordon had been to enough auctions to feel the bid had slipped once, twice, maybe three times, if he didn't speak up. "That graveyard's made for two, Joey. Me and you. I'm sorry I gypped you. But now. . . ." Joe dropped the telephone receiver that he and Gordon communicated through. Gordon kept on for a sentence or two before noticing the lack of response. All Joe wanted was a cigarette. Joe didn't need these simpering apologetics, these words too saccharine for comfort. Joe had never owned a sweet ear. The truth was usually a simple thing and Joe detested ornament like a Protestant.

Joe put the phone down, waiting a full three minutes before resuming. This time only Joe spoke. "You don't want me to testify. I know. Save the rest. First off. I want five hundred thousand in my bank account. That's ticket sales I think you owe me." He also wanted a good lawyer who'd speak circular until the jury offered condolences for causing inconvenience. When all this was delivered, he'd be prepared to negotiate with Gordon, but only then. And if his terms weren't met in the next couple of days he'd call the first talk show host and reporter who wanted to go indepth on the Graveyard Game. "Sleep tight," he said, putting down the phone, leaving Gordon holding the other end like a tiptless bellhop before a slammed door.

Gordon hadn't verbally agreed or disagreed. He leaned his face against the maid's belly and imagined chutes and inroads opening for death. Then he pulled out his cellular phone and dictated the demands to Betsy, telling her to follow through.

Later, when they'd put him into bed and prepared his wheelchair for morning, he leaned into the pillow, preparing for an outpour, but the tearducts just plain wouldn't. This amounted to a breach of his insular life, flaws in the wall. Now, too, Joe was bound to him--another rat through the leaks. Gordon wondered what daddy would have said, while shaking his head, what hardcore tongue-lashings he would have suffered. Gordon remembered daddy with malice running high.

His father trained him for isolation, glorified it--told Gordon not to worry too much about love, that was an expenditure not worth it. "After what happened with your mother," was all father would ever say when young Gordon pulled at a question. To start the process Chatterton Senior took Gordon with him into the forest, usually by canoe to some island on a lake where mist fretted down on them. Something swirled in the father's eyes as well. They set up camp for weeks. Every day the father would fade away into the brush wearing his distraction and quiet as if dressed in the local geography. The forest took that body lock and stock and all. Gordon learned to visualize whole occupations for himself out there--friends and enemies. He made a populace out of sticks. The whisper of a branch would represent thousands of kids. The scrabble of moss on wet rocks was a playground. But he knew the fog, knew without doubt the loneliness was complete, without the murmur of a doubt. Father returned late to light a fire and spread the iron frying pan to a sizzle with backbacon. By now, unknown to Gordon, his father was drunk and filled with the hate his love of Gordon and his wife brought him--the wife he couldn't bear not to miss.

The whole tutorial ended with a final exam. There was a small island beside the highway and, one late afternoon, Gordon and his father went out to it in a small aluminum with an outboard. They were going to study sky that night, subvert the position of stars into mythological shapes or something impossible like that. Gordon's dad brought a field guide to astronomy. They'd been up since early that morning and Gordon was tired enough to sleep

years. When they arrived on the island it was the time nearest the exact divide between dark and day. Gordon's father and he pulled gear from the boat and spread sleeping bags on some sawgrass. Above them there might have been enough stars to form parameters, stellar bodies. They ate and lay down to watch. Gordon noticed his father was silent past the usual rule. Though the manual of stars was open on his chest, father looked up at the sky without a solitary word. The waves whispered like skirts dragged across the old sea floor, like worlds of worry that lull you to sleep. Gordon let each eyelid droop to a close.

He woke to the sound of an offshore motor, to gulls floating just off the island with shrieks piercing as distress. There was only a handful's worth of warmth where the back of father's head had been on the pillow. Gordon jumped up and ran to the islet's edge, screaming for his father, screaming. Gulls rose from the water, splashing brine and pushing night aside with their wings. The motor receded into the distance. Gordon fumbled for a minute, calling in a despair near enough to tears for his father. But it was a hard call, the sound of disqualification--you're out boy, out in the game. He finally stripped off all his clothes and pushed out into the sea, barnacles ripping skin from his feet. It was thirty feet of swimming through a mass of seaweed and bumping his knees on underwater outcroppings before he realized this water was too cold for him. The water went at his skin icecold and iceblue towards the marrow. By the time he got back to the island his teeth were clacketing. Gordon hurriedly dressed, but no weave of fabric could warm his sea encrusted body. He lit a fire with pages from astronomy, later just chucking in the whole book. He threw in whatever wood was on the island. When the flames were a pyre he took anger from the heat. When the chill left he was mad enough to pile his father's belongings on the fire--all of them--the sleeping bag and pillow, articles of clothing, utensils. He deliberated whether to throw the photo of his mother that he always carried on himself into the flames. In the end he couldn't destroy her, but before he fell asleep he dropped the snapshot at the fire's edge where it charred and smouldered.

In the morning his father was sitting by the fire's remains, smiling. Gordon woke with no enthusiasms, as he had every waking day before. His father was so thrilled. His son had passed the test into emotional autonomy. He was so thrilled, in fact, until he noticed the signed photo he'd made Gordon promise to keep--as if cancellation of this promise was one centimetre over the exact thousand miles he wanted to be kept from Gordon's heart. Gordon never again spoke voluntarily to his father. Afterwards, the space between them when they walked down the street was not to any reductive scale, but was a ratio expressed in the interstellar, in spaces between stars.

But Gordon needed a new orbit, as all objects in space do. Around this time he was granted an allowance and he started to devise projects in the public eye.

Six months later, after returning from a trip to England, dad was dead.

The morning's sun was heavy with the humid evaporation of dew. Max felt a superficial stirring in his skin. Not a health care in the world, he closed his eyes and tilted fully into sunshine. There was already a slight scorched feeling spreading. Should he go home? Why? It was just a place he rented, a place where he received installations of nightmare. It was alright but it was no cemetery, that was for sure. There was nowhere in that garage where he could recover anything. The sun was a pain, while he felt inoffensive, which wasn't a way he liked to feel.

He walked across the street to the forest but paused on the yellow streak. It was a line, broken into short measurements here. The road traced splintered routes. His skin blistered. His body was still on European time. There was nothing in his shack for him. The wine was gone as of last night and the refrigerator bare. Okay, I'm tired, thought Max and walked into the forest until he reached the pole line. There was a large fern bush--a herringbone pattern of shade and light underneath it. Just enough shadow, he thought, and curled up underneath it on the stones and soil to fall unconscious. Above him the high tension wires hummed like a jew's harp.

He dreamed of the train. The train had crashed and the furnace doors opened to a red hot bubbly. The engine room was on its front, stove head first into the earth. The furnace doors opened a manhole to fire beneath him. He could no longer see his past, present and future images coalescing in the furnace. He dangled above fire, necktie caught in the metal door that had clanged shut when the train flew over the bridge. There was no strangled feeling. He was just held above the furnace by one slender necktie that showed no strain, not one snapped acrylic thread. Thank God for artificial fabrics, he thought in dream consciousness. The bones lay shattered all around, broken in half, broken to bits, in fragmentation. Outside the window the countryside was messy with bones as well. He

couldn't see an intact skeleton anywhere. The train had stopped chugging though the furnace still boiled. The whole countryside was littered with bones and he, who'd seen all the skeletons a million times before and been able to name and recognize them when whole, couldn't match two bones. The bones were synonymous with each other. It was as if that which held them together was a now truant personality and the bones could be canes and plates for all they were, or was it the other way around? Was it because they could be identified that they were apprehended as personalities, as having some kind of sentimental and melancholy attachment? But when scattered they were nothing but trash underfoot. Maybe he'd valued the skeletons because he could place them, but looking out the window now he felt void. The train glistened inside, black and steam. He dangled from a necktie above flame with no idea when the door above would open. He dreamt of the train.

When he awoke the sky drooped black due to storm clouds, but late and lamented thunder wasn't coming soon to anyplace near him. The sky was gone to menopause, gone from virility. Two beetles were on his chest and the rest of him was covered with grasshoppers that sprang in every direction when he twitched. One side of his body sopped, the rest was only wet. The fern dripped. He was so hungry that his stomach and intestines tried to feed on themselves. He rose. The morning sun had dimmed then quickly clouded over. Black clouds rained so hard he felt drowned, waterlogged. He breathed out the mouth. His chin hung with a rainbeard of droplets. When he walked a bully of wind thrust him forward so hard he sometimes had to rotate his arms for balance. A turmoil of raindrops clashed against his eyes until everything looked asymmetrical, seen through bifocals half of water, half of clear glass. That wind was nothing but a bitch, in the classic sense.

He walked off the pole line onto a dirt road, the same dirt road he'd walked along to the cemetery the other night. There were nothing but sardine can tenements on either side. Bulrushes waved along the roadside. Leaves and paper were both underfoot and overhead like spindrift. Max trudged below the waterline—a steamer, an amphibious train.

He was starved but penniless and home's cupboards were bare. And home wasn't exactly the safest locale--Mrs. Patterson had probably gone to the cops. He knew now what he was going to do about the graveyard, what had to be done, but first he wanted to eat something, not that nourishment was in his top ten. He thought of Claire and something flooded a swollen river inside of him. But she was a vague irritation now, not the way he'd felt about her before going to sleep. Everything was underwater, slow. Where was he getting his oxygen? His insanity was a pair of gills, a weird submarine for this weather. The *Tombtrain* thoughts were indispensable as an aqualung.

There was a house inside him. No home had foundations in his head except the one he'd been orphaned from and that was childhood--a chamber of horrors so discouraging. Finally, there was fishing by the stream with father, mother buried beside a childhood three piece suit that happened to be him. One of the slings they used to let mom's coffin down was red. He couldn't remember the other color, the other color that had become the hole in his childhood reserved for mother. He went fishing with father until the old man's lungs folded up like two whoopee cushions. The one person his life was generally wholesome with was Claire.

He was going to the graveyard tonight, but first he was going to surrender, abandon memory. There was a bizarre house inside him like an aquarium inside a fish--the home he belonged in, wanted refuge in, but couldn't because that house was his mind, his heart, his self. And the self is one home impossible to return to--it's under quarantine, boarded up, inaccessible. The self is a residence that never welcomes, a sanctuary that never rescinds its lockout--a home that is childhood, then young adulthood, then becomes middleage, until it's a whole life looked back on, off limits. Say goodbye.

Just over an hour and he was there. He'd walked through the dirt, through the street, through hounds of dusk, dusk that growled. The forest along the road was a gothic hat and jacket rack. The forest was ownerless and empty except for the few artifacts left by transitory occupants.

He walked through night and night filled in the spaces. He walked up the road, dirt and dishevel, mind and eyes jumping, imagining a train into every shadow, round every corner. He stumbled on stones. Eyes pulsed in eyesockets like cardiac time, like bugeyes in a 3-d movie. He couldn't look at houses because their life made no sensory impact. But there were stones, dirt, dust, fallen yellow petals. Boredom rolled off him like wind and rain. Broken shoelaces waved. One footsole flapped like a puppet mouth as his feet squelched through puddles. The day's last crows flew to rookeries--just black kites pulled out of rain. He knelt, cupped his hands, drank piously out of a mud puddle, spat out the gravel, sand between molars. He entered the cemetery's forest like a thrift store--a lousy two dollar bill in his wallet. Entered the forest, walked through it 'til he came to the edge and saw the cemetery lanterns.

Okay, the dream told him that the bones had to be scattered and then made unidentifiable. The former had been accomplished for him by Gordon--who'd dug up old Oxbow cemetery and strewn its bones like a meddlesome tomcat in a vegetable patch. Gordon had gone and scattered them already. Now, all that was left to do was have the bones so nobody could patch them back together. He didn't like the Graveyard Game but hadn't liked the previous Oxbow Cemetery either. There was a way to negate both possibilities for the graveyard, nightmare had divulged that. But had he been looking, in the dream, at the scattered scene from back of or past the grave? The way the game worked was that someone had to erect a perfectly intact skeleton. Gordon checked all bones himself. Only he knew the correct arrangements--each one marked down in the book. Max had heard, the papers and newsmedia full of it, that Gordon had only one copy of the *Skeleton Key*, the graveyard's contents between one set of covers. If Max could get hold of the *Skeleton Key* he could destroy it and they would never reconstruct the graves. There'd be no way to make identifications--hopeless to refashion the graveyard into original mode. There'd be no way to determine the identity of each skeleton. The bone dump would have to be landfilled. Oxbow Cemetery would lose the one quirk that made it a tourist trap, a fad spot. He had to get ahold

of that book somehow and find a way to destroy it. It would require stakeout, a twenty four hour graveyard watchpost.

There was no more need to think of Claire or his childhood. He'd determined that this was what the past represented. He'd discovered the course and its fulfilment. Only the fulfilment interested him now. The past had been examined enough for instructions. He knew what it required and, so, wouldn't have to examine it again.

The shotgun on him was, in fact, the past--the right to do what had to be done. The past, the gun, enfranchised him to carry on. He'd been chosen for the follow through. The gun was a diploma.

There were trees to climb from which he'd notice all that went on inside. It was too risky to try and burglarize the caretaker's place for the *Skeleton Key*. It may be in a safe. Max hadn't ears for tumblers and cogs, couldn't calculate lock combination numbers. He needed a situation of surprise and speed, where he could grab the *Skeleton Key* then dash. Breaking in took too much time and there were probably police alarms. He'd have to be away before cops arrived. Max needed a situation where the *Skeleton Key* was free for him to snag. He'd wait until Gordon appeared with the book. Then he'd move. It was just a process of time until he saw Gordon. The book, the *Skeleton Key*, was what he'd wait for, wait for in distant lampglow.

Once in a while the exmayor saw through hooch bubbles and boozy stars that circulated dizzy nausea through his head. Mainly he watched television. His right hand became cramped around a bottle to the point where it wouldn't unbend from the position and the left hand had to be used to slide Jack Daniels or Johnny Walker into the right hand's bracket. He placed the easy chair in front of television to watch whatever was on. He moved strictly at night, sometimes only far as the couch, sometimes all the way to the bedroom. The exmayor slept in his clothes. The first two weeks his wife watched his cranium's backside from the kitchen as if it was a dog's head below a fifteen foot wave--the crest beginning to tumble. He was far out. She waited for alcohol's undertow to drag him down, but he stayed afloat. Years of temperance had built up his constitution to a phenomenal reserve. He coasted on temporary health like a skateboard down one hill and on its way up another--sooner or later there'd be no more momentum and he'd better know how to drive himself backwards.

When he began to puke the wife packed off to her daughter's place. They kept a weekly scan on him, but he'd piled furniture in front of the door during intoxicated rages. How he'd gotten the piano there was unknowable. Once they found his business suits, pinstripes in political blues and greys, with holes all over them, outside one window. It looked like someone had beaten the fabric of each with a sledgehammer. He sat totally blotto in front of the television. Oxbow newspapers piled up and deteriorated to a pulp in the rainfall.

Sometime soon he turned off the teevee for good and went back to the easy chair with sister's portrait. He wanted to peel back the photographic skin. After all the glasses broke, he'd put two ice cubes in his mouth, tilt his head back and let the J.D. percolate through zero celsius into his throat. He slept in the chair and woke up to sister's portrait on his lap.

Shanghaied by a drunkard's necessity, he'd take what money he had, what credit cards still forgave him, to the liquor store. His purchases grew bigger and bigger especially when

he feared the loss of his *Mastercard's* draw. The bottles stood at his feet like taxidermied gophers. Sometimes he thought he heard them chitter, but it was, he knew, just their clinks when he shifted his feet, just airconditioning blowing harp across their tops. Pop an ice cube against cold teeth and sprinkle with whisky. The photograph winked coyly from his lap.

When Josephine arrived outside the home there was no aroma. The windows were closed, though screens hung by corners, some fallen. She left footprints in letters and newspapers softened to alphabet porridge when she walked up the front steps to ring the doorbell. The doorbell rang twice to no return. She knew he was in there. Where else would he be? Josephine circled to the porch, climbed the steps, looked in the window while the venetian blinds tapped out threats she felt protected against. Josephine went to the porch's sliding doors and put the flats of her palms against the glass to push. The doors were locked. Down on her knees she cupped hands round her head and peered inside. Josephine saw someone sitting in the easy chair with a bottle lifted to lips and a cheroot smoking between knuckles. She rapped on the glass to him--no move.

He heard knocks but let them pass. It's probably just the wife again. He wanted to open the house, but the idea of breaking lethargy hurt, so he tried not to notice. The rap was a light hammer against cold teeth, an ache not worth attention. He put another ice cube into his mouth. Whisky dribbled. The sea beyond windows is blue, I know that. Blue as skin on ice. Skin that thaws, he thought. He shook his head desperately. Something in his mind recoiled from the image. The annoyance remained--tap, tap, knock, knock. Screen and knuckles interplayed. He felt he had to make a choice between the two. But what the Hell, he still had half an ice cube. Let the alcohol rule. He'd long ago mastered the art of opening his throat so he wouldn't have to swallow--juice just ran straight down. Afterwards, he hung down his head and stared at sister's picture. The knocks stopped. Wind slapped the blinds against the window. The venetians had the fidgets.

It was no use. He isn't going to answer, Josephine thought. She turned and went around to the housefront to pick up the linen wrapped bundle she'd carried, hoist the pack over her shoulder, grab an apple sized stone from the driveway's gutter and go back again to the porch. She unwrapped the memorial and set it down with the inscription's face towards the living room.

The stonethrow punched a neat hole in the sliding door's glass, a hole cracks radiated an asterisk from. Josephine then stood back behind the tombstone and put one hand on her hip. She'd ambushed him with the unexpected.

The stone rolled upside his foot. It's shape wasn't lost on him, but the sound of the window breaking took sweet time to register. The bottle swung from his hand as his head clicked ninety degrees to face the source of the stone's flight.

He rose. *Ah sister.* He stood. *Sister.* Photograph glided off his lap into a flowerpot. He saw the tombstone.

Sliding door opened. Cracked glass fell to pieces on the floor. On your knees with arms encircling the icon. Put a cheek to engraved letters. Put it there pally. There's a geology of words in your throat--mine that motherlode. *Oh sister.* Someone stands behind the memorial.

His lips moved, not in song but articulating devotions. His tongue was in speak--the tongue a gangway for prayer. He didn't see a tombstone--that's not what his arms clasped. He touched a letter gently, touched an eyelid. He pressed cheek against slate, pressed cheek against a cold forehead. The exmayor didn't want to turn the tombstone over, didn't want to look behind it at the lacerations and lesions, at sister's buttcheeks scorched black by the blowtorch. That wasn't what he wanted to look at. *Requiescat in peace.* He brushed whisky furred lips against the inscription and it was like sister's full but chapped lips, like sister's frostbitten body in the arms of the north. He knew sister like nobody.

They notified him as next of kin after putting her wallet on the stove to defrost it and check the i.d. He caught the first flight to Alaska and from there a transport to the village nearest her accident. He was to cargo the body south where an autopsy would be performed. She was in the bag, a plank of rigor mortis on slab. He'd arranged for the truck to fetch her and there were two tickets for the next flight out--one business class and another marked "special." When the police finished paperwork, checked his passport, took his signature by the dozen, they left him cold and lonely. He unzipped the bodybag and touched sister's bare skin. When was the last time I saw her alive, he'd thought then.

A few days after the last Halloween she'd ridden in on a Harley fresh from Californian motorcycle parades. She still had dolphin humour in her hair, salt crystals in crows feet, but her broad shoulders were serious as retribution, as the motorized code she lived. She came into his house and stayed the night. Tomorrow she was going away from summer into arctic winter, past tundra flowers into twentyfourhour twilights, along the axis, along magnetic lines of migration. She never said why. Maybe she never had a reason. Sister just sang movement like a gumshoe though her song was anything but bland routine. His daughter had racked up the Halloween treats and, as usual, a few things she'd never eat. Peanuts, raisins, crabapples--all the nutritious stuff parents lost on kids, which usually rotted at last in sacks and were composted. His daughter gave her aunt a bag of crabapples on her next morning's way out the door. They were sister's favourite and though his daughter disposed of undesireables, rather than displaying good heart, sister accepted them anyway. She already had crab apple in mouth when she howled out on the Harley. Sister went north with goblins grasped onto her skirt, torn along, bouncing in the dust behind her--that's what he'd thought when she'd left that morning. Even if she laughed, even if her crows's feet wrinkled when she spoke, there was something about that trip she took to the north that was like a planned miscarriage. He'd been drinking years bygone, but it was the kind of steady immolation that still let him function the way a car with the wrong type of gas still ran in fits and spurts. He was always impaired

so nobody but wife and goodnight kissed daughter ever really noticed.

The night before she left for the north, sister and he'd sat up late with a winejug and spoken of nothing particular. They'd spoken about her travels, their childhood, his failing political career, comparisons between performance and price of various models of Harley Davidsons. And during that session of drinking he'd sensed something on sister's mind. She'd always been brave, carefree, but now it was like she either dragged something behind herself unwillingly, or carried it like a birthmark. Her breasts sagged from the weight of birthdays. His liver wasn't babyfaced anymore either.

When she left the next day he saw goblins hung to her skirts, or imagined that. But it wasn't so at all. She was covered in birthmarks like some macabre pigmentation. That's what it was, that's what he saw on her up north when he opened the body bag. There was a trace of life upon her. Each vein was a route travelled how many times? The blood flows like this, becomes depleted here, comes back to the heart. She'd travelled north, getting closer and closer to the azure, as reflected in her skin. She'd come north to die--back to the heart. Death was the one friend, happy, sad, or just scared, who always arrived at last--no detours. The best sister could do was meet it halfway. He didn't reveal, now, with his lips and eyes and neck pressed against stone, what Josephine had interpreted from his daily graveyard monologues, but he didn't have to, not for her sake.

No matter what was mirage, what was the mind's creation, there was always the road and road's end, the mind's end. He knew he could deny death as much as he liked, but he'd still be killed--whether by age, suicide, murder, or accident. That was the road. Along the way there was plenty of time to think, plenty of time to invent mirages against the snow, plenty of time to construct even contradictory mirages. And they could fall in on each other and be desperate by choice, by choice. But mirages of your making were subjective and had no effect on the road's constancy, on constant north, on constant you. There was you on the road, but the you that you were wasn't by choice.

She'd made the best of herself. She'd made the best of the road, the true north her body couldn't deny--that, finally, was what sister had known. And who could say, maybe it satisfied her. In the end she'd moved, enjoying each kilometre's click on the speedometer like one idea to another. She hadn't let death come while she deliberated, scared to look at one thing for another. And the true north gathered her into its seamless heart.

He was there that day. He'd brought ounces of whisky, purchased at the duty free shop when he landed in Alaska. He opened the first bottle when he opened her body bag, looked at her birthmarks and drank. He unzipped the bag completely and lowered either side under sister's shoulders like a sexy cocktail dress.

The storm, a blizzard, moved in that night. The only notion he took was to try and conserve the whisky and turn up the thermostat. The blizzard was still there next morning. It stayed for six months. Winter was beginning. He walked in a suit jacket to the nearest neighbour, used their telephone. Cops told him there was nothing they could do for him until snow cleared. They advised him to put the body outside to preserve it from thaw. Ice does wonders for neanderthals and mammoths so it would have served her too. As the storm moved in, powerlines went. His neighbours supplied him with food.

The whisky was gone before two weeks. The police agreed to phone his wife. At times he almost cursed sister for dying so far from everything hot, but he always pinched his tongue between molars, kept it to himself. He was sober within a day after the whisky ran out and the shakes and delirium tremens were so bad he used to sit on his hands with a leather belt between his teeth, like an eerie, miniature totem.

He didn't take sister's corpse out to the subzero. He let it melt, lifted it out of the bag, laid it on the couch. There was no television in the place, no radio, so his entertainment was decomposition. He watched the skin tighten, the hair thin like an old man's. The fingers began to shrivel. When he finally noticed blood flecks and scabs on her mouth, he pushed a handful of fingers between her lips, pried the jaw open. The oral cavity was full of blood and

pieces of apple. A cut began midway down the throat and ended in something spongy. He put two fingers down and tried to pull the impediment out. Something sliced his fingertips. They began to bleed but he worked it out. In his palm was a bite of crabapple impaled on a rusty razor blade. Halloween candy, of course! The crabapples his daughter had given sister from the Halloween sack were laced with razors--the murder weapon. Indirectly, he'd killed sister, slit the inside of her throat, made her lose control on the frictionless highway.

Once the smell really went rank he wasn't in any shape to notice. He was absorbed in the backdrop, in a black velvet Elvis Presley on the wall. At this point the blizzard cleared enough for him to leave, but he wasn't in mental shape for travel. It must have been in one of his deliriums when he finally had sense enough to put the body back into the bag and lug it outdoors. He didn't remember exactly how it happened, but the next thing was him bedridden and one of the neighbours nursing him. Maybe it was the neighbours who'd put the body outside, but he preferred to blame himself. It was one night after some bouts of recuperation that the neighbours told him wolves had gotten to the body. They'd heard howls of a nearby pack. When they came to check on him the next morning, they found the bag ripped open. What was left of her flesh had been gnawed at. Half of the right arm missing.

The day they informed him of the wolves he asked them to leave, thanked them for kind assistance, but politely said he'd prefer solitude. He went outside, gathered sister's scattered bones into a garbage bag he brought inside.

He wasn't going anywhere now. He spent a week cleaning each bone off carefully. What was left of her flesh was taken outside and buried in a snowpit. He spent almost four months with the bones, examining each one and putting the skeleton together until he was sure everything was in the right place. Then he took it apart, examined the bones and reconstructed them again until it came as naturally as combing hair. If he'd been obsessed with sister before then now she became him. Her skeleton became a scaffolding he could work renovations from. At the end of three months he could put her together blindfolded,

knew the shape of each bone by feel. He treated her remains like a model airplane. As he put her together he always thought to himself: what am I?

Sister had been all he'd ever aspired to--confident, enigmatic, captivating. Now that she was dead what role model could he pick for himself? There was a fear inside him that was only fear. He chose where he put the fright, what he made himself afraid of. He'd been afraid of having to succeed so he'd made himself a failure--failure as husband, failure as father, failure as son. He'd been defeated because those positions had been taken on as externals. At one time he was father, at another husband, just as he'd been the "son" his father had wanted him to be. But not once, not once had he felt like anything other than an impersonator. It was the chameleon's reality. The problem was taking on the roles' responsibilities. So he acted when he could and the rest of the time he drank.

Sister, on the other hand, had only ever been herself. A Hell's Angel was all she'd ever been. He'd looked up to her until that winter in Alaska when he realized that she'd never had any responsibilities, not one. He realized that all she'd had was bravery--bravery to ride with wildmen, to escape, face death--but she'd never channelled that bravery into publicworks, into anything but herself. So when he took her bones and made a skeleton out of them he was trying to make himself over like an undertaker cosmetician. What he finally made himself into was Mayor. His sister had no fear. She'd even faced death down. He had to emulate that.

So began the long lesson. He chose his first role--that of Mayor. Until then all he'd been was an inebriate MLA. He'd thought his problem had been trying to take on too many roles so he succumbed to the bottle. Handling sister's framework finally gave him courage to choose an absolute. If he could only concentrate on one persona, that persona would succeed for him. He'd tried to take on all fears at once. Now he'd just do one at a time--starting with the job. He chose Mayor, gave up on all the rest, and hoped whatever courage remained in sister's bones would help at least this once, help him to accept one responsibility.

That winter he gave up both drink and family. After his return he was never once husband, never once father. He went to work as Mayor, came home, ate, watched television, went to bed and on the way to work became Mayor again. It was a mistake, the grim notion came to him as he hugged the tombstone beneath Josephine's shadow. He knew that a role was no substitute for the self. The self had to carry the role because the role was all charade. One role or many roles--it was all ineffectual. And no populace, no voting statistics, was a replacement, no matter how unanimous the consent, for character. The polls shifted too easily. Over the years he'd again started to play minor roles whenever he feared, the exmayor realized, grabbing that pitiful tombstone, that the roles never actually conquered that fear, just repressed it, were shaped by it.

If sister now meant anything to him it wasn't as a symbol of bravery, but a symbol of perseverance. Maybe she'd been afraid of death. Maybe as she tried to cough the crabapple's razor blade out it was fear that made her lose control. Maybe she was scared, but she went on anyways. She went on with nothing but what she was, what she'd done. And if she died doing it then she was dead. There were no recourses to fighting fear, other than to just crawl on. When he resigned, it was back to the bottle. What else was there to do? He was only himself and his self was so incapable it could only be nothing. He came back to old nothing and reached as he should have for a bottle of Jack Daniels. He'd killed his sister, then killed his self to become Mayor. When the political office failed he came back to a self he was powerless to restore, because it had never been properly established to start. So reach for alcohol and go off to bed.

Josephine's shadow fell over him. He remembered sister and childhood.

She watched the man babble like a foreign language lesson on fortyfive. She heard sister mentioned a couple of times and watched the face slobber saliva, salutations, tears.

Josephine had just about had enough when the drunk sat back from tombstone and stared at

it, then got up, picked the tombstone up in his arms and pitched it over the hedge into the bushes.

Josephine bent down and looked at the man who'd gone back through the broken glass door, scrambled over rolling bottles to the living room's armchair. Josephine watched him sit down, then walked over glass fragments and bottles to where the man sat.

"We have to go to the graveyard. You have to make it right." He heard her words, knew she was spooked, but how could he go? Who was he to go to Oxbow cemetery and, "make it right." "I brought the tombstone for you. Don't you think your sister deserves better?"

And that was a thought that had only occurred once before--when he'd resigned, given up life as Mayor out of public interest, because that life endangered the cemetery's welfare. Now he was being asked for backbone again and Josephine wasn't applying to his introversion, but to civic duty. Maybe this was a way towards exit. Maybe the problem all along wasn't that he didn't have self but that he'd been so introspective, combed through his personality so much, there wasn't anything left. Maybe the problem had always been that he let things around him affect his self, rather than using himself to affect those things around him. And, finally, wasn't sister that article? She'd gone cheerfully into those fields of ice destined for paradise, whereas all he'd experienced was an awful whiteness that he'd let kill him and substitute dummies for him. He'd allowed it to fool his senses, let it fool him to death. Instead of burying sister and coming back to the family he hadn't come back as anything but a doppeleganger, changing with the dictates of each landscape, changing with each fresh fear he'd provided the landscape with. He'd admired sister for her bravery when all along what he'd really wanted to be was foolhardy, with enough guts to careen down a black ice highway at one hundred fifty miles an hour on a Harley Davidson. He'd set a mythic standard whose one rule was never to feel fear. And, so, Mister Fear had become his personal enemy. Except fear was necessary--it kept him out of danger. As long as he was afraid of real danger, danger best kept away from, then fear was his best friend.

Before Josephine spoke again he'd bowed his head and let an "alright" pass almost unheard. Then he looked up at her. "But first I'll need some coffee." Josephine jumped into the kitchen, trying to avoid stale b.o. and vomit smells that strangled. She got the coffee beans and grinder, plugged it all in with a smile while he showered with all the desire he'd ever had, but with a headache and not even the first idea.

Two hours later Josephine and the exmayor stepped from a checkered cab among the variety of cabs that took contestants to and from the Graveyard Game. The lineup to get in was long as lifetime. Josephine and he walked up to the ticket booth. The bouncers had begun to lose their hair, develop cromagnon foreheads and trainingbra breasts from all the anabolic steroids they'd injected. Sometimes they neighed and desired barley. Sometimes their wives rode them like ponies.

What would a confrontation with Chatterton accomplish?, the exmayor thought. He didn't have any political power any more. It was doubtful that Chatterton would even recognize him outside of business suits--in asscrack jeans, checkered shirt, baseball cap.

All the way over to the cemetery he'd been evaluating initiatives, what he should have done all along but exchanged for procrastination. When he was the mayor, the other ways of shutting Gordon down had failed. Could he still remember? He'd been drinking this last month to induce a forgetting but his fingers knew every curve, every point, every hollow. His mind knew the fittings like a master craftsman. And the reason he hadn't wanted to repeat the act was obvious. He didn't want to relive what he'd gone through up north. The consequences of that six month hiatus had lasted too many years. He'd been afraid that sister's bones would send him spiralling down with constant examples of Alaska. In a way, it felt like he'd failed sister's memory once already by becoming the mayor, by donning persona. What if taking up the bones just caused him to retreat into another clone? The mayor hadn't wanted to touch bones because he thought they might ruin his political career. When he lost the career he lived with the chill that bones might give it back. But now he knew that only Josephine's perspective mattered. He wasn't on a selfservicing endeavour. This was sister's last chance and Oxbow Cemetery's vindication.

The line had begun to move steadily. It was dinnertime turnover. As people left new

contestants were allowed to enter. "Why, I think I'm going to play." He spoke to Josephine who obviously understood and approved. And even though he was hung badly and sweat came out of him, dripping methanol, he still managed sarcasm's smile. He poked her on the shoulder, pulled out a couple of bills from his wallet. "Here. Get me some food." Josephine shook her head, "Get it yourself. I've got a job to do. I'm already late. I'll come and check on you once in a while. If you need help you know where to look." The line moved forward.

He examined his hands. The thumbs trembled with frostbitten memories, anticipation.

That night he was squatting on haunches with a face lined by dust and dirt. He tapped a bone in one hand against his other wrist. "Found one, I think." He wedged a slice of oily pizza into his mouth. He finished with the food, burnt his tongue on two cups of coffee, stuck the bone in his belt and wiped his hands. He reached into the pocket of his grimy bluejeans and went to a locker--reserved it for two nights. He picked up a complimentary plastic satchel, a lot like the one's newspaper couriers use, at the entrance--picked it up out of the dirt and dropped the bone into it. Then the exmayor began to scour forty acres for the remainder.

He ran into zombies--those out for days--into fanatics who'd try their hand at Gordon's challenge under the most blameworthy weather. Some of them had glazed eyes and backs so cramped they were shuffling invalids. He met one guy who'd spent ten hours a day, two weeks straight, comparing joints and other fits, in the graveyard. His beard grew in patches. He had with himself a sheet of paper which marked off bones and showed assemblages. The late afternoon was a scorcher. They stood under sun's direct blaze to speak of Chatterton and the exmayor received warnings from a raconteur who'd seen depths. This player had been up to see Chatterton twice with two completed skeletons. The first time, Gordon tapped into the computer for two minutes, then knocked the skeleton over with a swipe and wheeled away. The second time, Chatterton just looked at the misfitted piecework and laughed: "What do you think this is? A cemetery for abnormals?" The gapeyed veteran said that Chatterton

knew every bone in this place, could put them all back together without any book or computer at all. The *Skeleton Key* was a ruse. The exmayor turned away from the veteran.

Sometimes he'd reach for a bone. The moment he touched it there was a sound like a car alarm. He thought, at first, that it came from the tibia or fibula or furculum or whatever reached for when it was actually one of the amateurs, one of the sunday dabblers as the veterans jargon went, who insisted she'd seen it first and made him give. The sunday dabblers' skeletons slid apart like stacks of comic books. They didn't know a thing and the Graveyard Game's oldtimers hated and mocked them with openfaced honesty. Sometimes there were black eyes. Sometimes bones flew back and forth in some ballistic event--skulls heaved with the range of shotput. He'd duck and keep selecting the necessary bones. The veterans liked him immediately because they could tell that he knew what he was doing. The amateurs went by fittings--if the bone looked right then it was utilized. But veterans all operated on a sensibility close to Zen (though not called that; they referred to it as "the feel")--fondle the bone, be the bone and now imagine the other bones that you're intimate with. Imagine the framework you'd form. The veterans mistook his careful choices, his shuteye and strict, tactile identification (smooth a finger along the surface, use a thumb for edges), for some kind of transcendental system. But there was nothing transcendental about his choices--he remembered her bones more by touch than sight. So the exmayor closed his eyes and let the bone feel right. If they felt otherwise he'd drop them and search on. Sight was like an approximate guess. He went for the general outline with eyes but fingers were the true validation. Zonedout like a diviner, his was an intense concentration, a data scan across memory. Once in a while a thrown skull would conk him on the head and he'd loose the sensory impression and have to sit to regain that fingertip zero in before the start over. The veterans fell in love with him immediately, put him on the club list. He was careful not to get too close to them, not to let any of his personal history slip. If anyone found out exactly how things had been with sister they might accuse him of being a cheat. He moved around like

insider information on Wall Street, trying to defraud himself at each step by occasionally looking like he couldn't make a decision between two bones and putting them both into his bag. But that was just an attempt at charity, to save the veterans some insecurity, because each selection he made was always exact. He was primadonna in this element. The extras, the false positives, could be sorted out later, when the game closed for the day and he could transfer the good bones to a rented locker.

The first night came along and he went home, arriving to the sliding door's shards. He unhooked the broken glass panel and fastened a sheet to the frame. The summer's and the evening breeze was warm. The room hadn't nearly aired out and the smell was strong as an abattoir--coffee grounds mixed with puke, piss and alcohol. But he was still tired, still recovering from last month's long haul. He scrambled over the mess, got a t-shirt over his head, fell asleep on the bed. That night he dreamt sister's blessing. She soaked him in water that felt of solace, then stepped into a dumbwaiter that was rosy and was gone. He awoke to a night cooled round him, turned over and went back to sleep.

It was six in the morning, dawn, when Josephine shook him awake. He whispered something straight out of a monastery alcove which she didn't understand--probably some morning prayer. He pushed Josephine away and bashfully dropped his legs over the bedside to pull on his pants. The crinkled t-shirt was still dusty when it was put on. The sleep in his eyes crumbled to touch. Skin was rough as burlap. His wife's face in its bedside frame brought him the weasel's pride. He hadn't really accomplished anything yet. He had nothing to present to his wife. The kitchen and the living room stank like stripjoint toilets. The dry taste of skeletons covered his fingers. There was nothing to present. He looked out the window while Josephine went through his wife's closet, holding choice outfits and accessories up to herself. He kept on what he'd worn yesterday and walked into the parlour. Its smell hit him like a garbage launch, reminding him of Oxbow's last sanitation strike--when streetcats and rats both babyboomed and the dogs muzzled cans all night to a tin rattle, when rusty

nails, spumoni, last night's chow mein and junk mail plugged up gutters, flapped in every lane, slobbering mice everywhere. Yes, the house reminded him of Oxbow's last sanitation strike. But cleaning up this mess was smaller politics. Or, considering his wife, maybe it was higher priority politics.

He grabbed a cloth, bucket of hot soapy water and handed a broom to Josephine. "Before we go anywhere we get the stink out." Josephine wrinkled a nose, watched him rub at the carpet's stains. She went and got a white plastic bottle of vinegar--that usually worked best on puke and piss. Josephine, if only to hurry things up, swept up the coffee grounds that she, after all, had spilled in the first place. They were reduced to janitors and neither really enjoyed it. They gave up after the superficals. The deeper filth could hold for a steam clean.

At ten a.m. they stepped up to the graveyard. He still felt fruitless and knew he would until sister had her complete skeleton back.

The exmayor stood in line, which moved quickly today. Before he had time to fill his bladder he was already in the cemetery and could piss at leisure. The veterans dredged bones out of the dust that had an icing of hard mud on the surface from dew. He felt like he was in a madhouse, the kooks and the obsessive/compulsives filing erratically around him. With these people it always took at least until noon before the sun's heat warmed up their blood so they could work at acceptable pace--these reptilians. He went to his locker, twirled the combination and took out his bag of bones. He set them out, concentrated, pushed away the extras he'd collected yesterday like a blackjack player pushes an overdrawn hand away from himself. He had the thing done up to the hips already, plus there were a few genuine ribs in there too. It shocked him how quickly he'd collected the first third of sister's remains. Looking out over the graveyard he wondered how anyone could possibly sort through that calcified junkpile, even if they, like him, knew another set of bones more intimately than their own. Ah, but the pickings are good, he told himself. It was a lot like searching for valuables on the beach--if you had the eye it was easy to just scan over the worthless odds and ends. If

you had the good eye then the right bones called out to your vision even when mixed with all the undesirable. Everyone here stooped over like jellied apes--eyes to the detritus, eyes to the bones until the reflection of sun off ivories drove their eyeballs pale as vapour. Day after day was the same futile errand. Only once in a while would you see someone look skywards, unkink their backs, disentangle knotted muscles from spines. The cemetery band played lethargic dirges that browbeat with monotony--heavy music that sat on shoulders like pig iron wings. The sound went on. Everyone was quiet in the morning. Noon brought energy to the participants and then began gripes, prayers, grandiloquence. Everyone had skeleton stories to share. Others told you how great they were and gave you pointers though they didn't have any idea themselves. He tried to stay away from them all as much as possible. Sun came on and beach wear appeared from beneath shirts and trackpants--cut offs, jams, muscle shirts, even a bikini here and there. Girls suntanned on blankets while their sunblock smeared musclemen boyfriends tried to win them an inheritance. On went black wayfarers, tortoiseshells, RayBans. Some of them smiled. Some of them frowned. A squint appeared here and there.

The exmayor hunched over, picked something up, dropped eyelids, ran fingers along the inside, let it fall, moved on. He bought hotdogs for lunch and popcorn for dinner, then checked his wallet and knew that he was running out of cash. He'd better produce soon or he could join welfare's paper brigade. His credit cards were maxed out to the medicine men on B.C.'s liquor branch, those eightyproof shaman.

The hardest part was the rib cage, slow work. Despite a good night's snooze he still felt a bit hungover, a feeling that increased with heat. His glands began to secrete toxins they'd distilled out of bourbon. He sweated moonshine and was careful not to let mirrors or wristwatches reflect on him or he'd inflame like a molotov cocktail. By nightfall the whole ribcage was pieced out. He rented one of those miniature hanging trees that the skeleton could be strung out on. Before the cemetery was closed the exmayor managed to piece what

had been gathered of sister's framework on wires hung from the crosstree. He strung up bones the way avant garde composers score minimal soundtracks--by placing notes at random on sheet music's five taut wires. One and a half arms plus skull were missing. By tomorrow afternoon he hoped to finish clean.

No one had ever even come close to winning the Graveyard Game. Was this how he was going to take Chatterton down? If he put that skeleton together it would be miraculous, probably worth at least a blessed posting on the sainthood status board. The days walked around him, then walked on away. He always welcomed the next.

He slept well that night, seeing neither sister nor dumbwaiter but a motorbike's roar and flurry of sparks passed between ears and eyes the whole subconscious night. When he awoke the next morning he found himself seated in the armchair. The bottles that they'd collected the day before were broken all around. One of his hands was stained strawberry, a scarlet patch on the rug below--the gash in his thumb an inch long. The shard of glass sticking out of his skin was so short he used teeth as tweezers to pull it out, careful of gums and tongue. The bleeding started all over gain. There were no bandaids in the medicine cabinet so he used a kleenex and electrician's tape to smother the cut.

He looked at the broken glass and remembered that his wife used to stop him from sleepwalking in times of distress. There's very little time left, he thought. That skeleton had to be completed today or he'd be soon doing himself in. He'd swept the floor clean of glass and was vacuuming when Josephine made her wakeup appointment.

This time he changed his clothes, put on a pair of slacks whose waist fit neatly under his beer belly. He looked at the potato, drinker's nose on his face and frowned at the gin blossoms. His face was dormant as an evening flowerbed in full unbloom. There was a polo shirt he'd received a few years' birthdays ago--took it out of plastic and put it on. It smelled like factory dye. He shaved his face and rubbed talcum powder on his feet--slipped into a pair of heavily polished chestnut brogues.

Josephine and he set off for the graveyard, waited in line, were let in. Today would be the hardest, not because of the bones left to find but because today he'd face the pushbutton, car radio leer of sister's teeth. He wasn't sure how that would be and he left the skull for last. The first thing he did was swallow black java. It oiled down his throat and shook something loose from his heart on the way down, as he knew it would. His sister had been taken apart and put together again how many times? Six hundred, two thousand, ten thousand? Each time he'd taken her apart he'd gouged a small white scar into his heart until it was scarred as a plastic surgery screwup. The exact count was there--if not accessible to his mind then accessible to his soul. He could feel those days' weight topped up like dishes. Today he'd let them drop from his heart.

Even when he'd come to visit sister before it had been debilitating. He'd dissect the relevance of her death and while examining it examine his own failures, adding to his sense of malpractice, his many deceptions both self and social. Today he was going to put her together for the last time and when she was complete as could be he was going to forget her--put sister's life into a casket and leave it there. Never would he draw strength from her bones again. He'd draw what he could from himself and if he fell, and couldn't get up again, then he'd take rest like something earned. He dropped numbers from his heart. Setting to work, he carved a road behind him and finally overruled the cul-de-sacs.

Getting the arms was no problem. Three hours later the last finger was found. It was time to find the skull. Funny, he thought, I've been avoiding skulls all along and now I can't find any. Everywhere he looked all that came to view were clavicles and collarbones, sternums and ribs, ossicles and vertebrae. The skulls had sunken or degraded to dust. He tramped like the homeless but found only one and it had nothing on sister's. He turned to one of the veterans and asked him where all the skulls had gone. "Everyone grabs a skull right off the bat, man. Either you get here early in the morning or wait until closing." He turned and swore. He'd counted on that skull, expected it today, but now it looked like

tomorrow. He went and told Josephine who shrugged her shoulders. "How much money do you have?" "None," he answered. "Too bad," Josephine told him, "because you could have bought it off somebody." He pushed one brogue under the dust and pouted at the air. "Of course," he said to her, "I could steal it. And all you'd have to do is distract." Josephine looked at him. "I can see why you couldn't make it as the mayor." He picked up the only skull he'd been able to find that day. "We'll just switch them over and no one will be wiser." He explained to Josephine that, either way, if someone had their skull the configuration of their skeleton would be imperfect anyway. He told her that even though chances were slim, their switching skulls would be benign work, possibly planting just the right bone into an otherwise flawless set up. The trees around the graveyard shimmered in heat waves. "Besides," he told Josephine, "the cause is important," and smiled like a backwoods Machiavelli. "You sure you'll recognize the skull that goes with this skeleton?" "Yes." "Then either way we're doing a favour?" "That's right." Josephine nodded at him. He stepped forward. "When I give the signal." She nodded again.

It didn't take him long to find what he searched for. There was a little pile of bones beside a portable water cooler. A local group from the extended care unit were making a day of the Graveyard Game. The ladies walked with canes. He looked at them from afar and wondered why they didn't try handing one of themselves in--they were so wrinkle and bone already. But the skull was there, between portable water cooler and the sack of pills, beside the grandpappy on the lawnchair knitting baby clothes and guarding the stash.

He signalled to Josephine who went over to the old man. She stood there with sun glancing off her right temple. She gave the old man a grandstand glare, the encore smile, a bit of a tribute. The grandpappy screwed one eye shut and took a look at her with the other. "Somethin' I could do for you, girl?" "You could give me that skull of yours." The old man looked back at the skull just as the exmayor circled around. Grandpappy missed the exmayor's intent but there was no way the exmayor was going to get at that skull now. Damn

it, Josephine, he thought, this is no time for honesty. The old man looked at her. "Well, I reckon I can't, girl." "Why not?," Josephine asked him. "Well. . ." The grandpappy hadn't been expecting that question. "Because we got it first, I guess. You can find your own." Josephine strummed her violin slowly. "I hate to ask you. But there's a man here. Essentially a good man. Except, well, he lost his job. Y'see, his sister died a long time ago and he never got over it. So he lost his job a few weeks back and hit the bottle. And his wife left him. Not that you can blame her, of course. And he's come here. I think he's trying to put his sister back together. I think it's the only way he can hope to get himself back on his feet. And, well, won't you please trade your skull for his?"

Grandpappy opened both eyes and blinked at Josephine. He looked down into her shadow and muttered, "Well . . . ," in a voice like a cement mixer. He looked behind him at the exmayor. "You come here, boy." The exmayor walked forward shamefaced--a daydreamer called before the blackboard to solve some applearithmetic equation. "You want this here skull, son?" He looked down into beige dust. "Yes." "What do you say?" "Yes, sir!" "That's better. You got anything else to trade me, seein' as how my skull's presumably better'n yours?" "Anything else? Like what?" "Like how 'bout a horny toad? You got a horny toad in your pocket? Lessee those pockets, son." Horny toad? Jesus, this coot's completely senile, he thought, turning out the whites of his pockets. "Don't look like you got too much, does it son?" "No sir, it don't." It don't? When had he ever talked like that? "Well you just come here son," Grandpappy motioned him to bend down and listen close. "You just give me that there skull, son. And when you win, you remember your Grandpappy, ya hear? Will you do that? Say remember me for ten percent?" "I sure will. . . Grandpappy," he said. The old man winked at him and they exchanged skulls. As he walked away, the old man called to him one more time, raising an eyebrow in admonishment. "And no more drinkin'. You hear me boy?" "Right," the exmayor whispered without turning round. He stepped on Josephine's foot, hard.

He didn't look at the skull until they got back to the rest of the skeleton. He took it in his

hand and held it up to light like a vintner. He was surprised. The skull was spotless. Sensitized fingers ran along it with no sting of memory. There was nothing for all the years, all the times, he'd visited the grave. After all the time he'd spent with it up north the skull had nothing to say. And there wasn't a single thing for the ventriloquist. The exmayor had no materiel to put in its mouth. Sister was gone. There was nothing her bones could offer him that her barenaked memory couldn't. He was himself. He couldn't rebuild sister's bravery with bones. He wired the skull to the rest of the skeleton. "Okay," he whispered to Josephine though he was looking at the ramshackle skeleton. "Now I go and meet Gordon Chatterton." There was a kind of rapture in the breezy skeleton's shivering.

Max decided if he'd have to spend another day in the forest then he'd go completely crazy, except he'd already gone completely crazy. He'd been filling up old dried up puddle holes with red piss. He tried to stay in shadow, but shadow was cracked enough to let sunlight through and blisters formed on his face's exposed patches. The blisters turned to sores, but he still galloped through forest, branches smacking and popping them. His shirt was ripped at the elbows, pantlegs had the knees torn to holes--places where the wind might have skittled in and out of and run up his body to count ribs, holes where a breeze might have run if there'd been any wind in the forest at all, but there was just heat and Max sat in crannies. Sometimes he had enough desire to move and then he raised binoculars and gazed at the cemetery. They all moved around like working parts down there, but he didn't see Gordon.

He'd had nothing but roots to chew like handouts of bubblegum. His throat felt like there'd been a tracheotomy. But there was a field of bones out there which needed him. Sometimes he whistled and it sounded plaintive as a single violin string that a bow dragged sweet high b flats from. It was a song for the longest year. Already it was late August and Max felt bedraggled with a thousand of birthdays.

The first day passed with no sign of Gordon. The year stretched on like a runover snake

goes on and on. His diet had been nothing but stomach acid for two days running. Sleep never materialized. Dark didn't mollify. All the hours moped by, while he waited for the cemetery to open and Gordon to appear with the *Skeleton Key*. Max sat through purgatory without a thought for anyone or anything. The past had been cancelled--all those tired old scenes with Claire, John, and Father. The fishing trips were forgotten. It was as if by recalling all those old occurrences he'd hoped for something to fall out of them that would contradict their part in the *Tombtrain* genealogy, that singular prophecy built around him for fulfilment and from which there was still some part of him that wanted escape. He paced back and forth in the forest, a cavalry. Sometimes he fell. His father had led him to this through those fishing trips--that's when the train had initially come to him. Everything from that point on, even Claire's condescension, had been a process of falling away from the world until there was only the *Tombtrain Express*--the one thing in his life that was still with him. Max stripped his past for something else that was still his, but there was nothing. Of course it never occurred to him that there'd been things he'd pushed away from himself--like Claire, like life. But it was too late for him to think of the *Tombtrain Express* as infestation.

It was in the middle of the third day, a few ticktocks past noon, that he saw the wire and paper, pinata form of Gordon slide down the newly built ramp of the caretaker's place in his wheelchair. The book he held and opened on his lap was bigger than his head. *Skeleton Closet's* music sounded ragtime at this distance. There were two figures in front of Gordon. One of them, Max guessed rightly, was nothing but a sieve of a skeleton, a wacky dirtstrainer of a ribcage that wouldn't even keep out autumn's red and orange leaves. He lifted, loaded the gun, and stepped into heat haze, to run toward the graveyard.

The exmayor had gone into the headquarters' office. There was a secretary beyond the front desk. He tapped the small stud on the front counter's bell. Betsy looked up from her desk, where she was intent on some legal documents, and looked at him. "I'm ready to present," he

said. "Alright." She smiled and pressed a button on the desktop intercom. It took a few minutes before there was a rasp from the other side, rough but gentle as a lady's nail file. "Yes." Betsy told the intercom that there was a contestant ready to present skeleton. Again, it took a long time for the voice to answer but breathing, harsh and abstract, was obvious. There was some shuffling. "All right. Give me a minute."

He had waited almost fifteen minutes when the mobile chair's wheels touched down on the ramp. Gordon looked coquettish, almost, in his shawl and from the way his chest had caved in, his face rounded with a kind of bloat. The viscosity of his large eyes. He looked like a crumpled and unfolded Winston Churchill. His left hand still held the cane. Gordon's head still supported the tophat. The cigar in his mouth was fragrant as a tobacconist's though it wasn't tobacco, but some herbal potpourri, a remedy for sick lungs. A little boy with a blue glass ashtray, dressed in bobby socks and dovetailed coat, stood beside him to catch the ash. On his lap was the *Skeleton Key*, which seemed to have grown larger than life to Gordon, heavier. On top of the book was a small flat keyboard and screen. Powercords ran off behind him into the headquarters.

On the cover of the book sat a legal form and a pen. Gordon had the ennui eyes of a libertine bored with hedonism. The game was something he was sick of. He wished these people would stop bothering him with their pointless and hopeless attempts. "Cough!" "Cough!" God, he was fed up with malady. The death pallor was waiting all around him with its whitewash of a lifetime.

He glided down beside the construction. The skeleton missed its left arm. That was a first. Everyone up to this point had brought in only the complete ensemble. It never occurred to the others that not all bodies were intact when they went subsurface.

well, well, well, this boy represents a whole new wave of Graveyard Game Intellectuals, maybe this one's an innovator that'll revolutionize the way contestants look at bones

Gordon felt faint. His cells were busted up, circulating and multiplying out of control. Raddled lungs sloshed around inside him. He took a closer look at the contestant. "Christ!" This boy was the exmayor.

"I knew we'd meet again, Mister Mayor." The exmayor grunted and lowered the visor of his baseball cap so the shade covered even the round ball of his potato nose. "But I never imagined it would be under these circumstances." Gordon was so congenial in his way. The exmayor gave no returns. "Okaaaayyyy. . . ."

Gordon explained the rules of the "ultimate checkpoint," as he called this section of the game. The primary contestant, in this case the exmayor, had to sign a legal agreement that he'd obeyed game rules (no special devices or counterfeit bones smuggled in) and that he agreed the bones be scattered if they failed to pass inspection. On his part, Chatterton agreed to hand over all assets and finances of *Chatterton Enterprises*, in toto, if the skeleton passed inspection. "It's all for the legal books. A formality. Shall we sign and begin?" They both signed their designated blanks and Betsy lofted in a countersignature.

There was a reporter permanently stationed at the cemetery just in case someone ever cracked *Chatterton Enterprises'* codes. The reporter sidled up with his cameraman as Gordon opened the computer's files. Before he grabbed the first bone to examine the markings, Gordon glanced overhead and saw three crows circling with perfect aerobatics, perfect manoeuvres, in a dark and handsome triumvirate.

He took the first bone and after ten minutes of cross referencing found the correct skeleton. Well, I'll be . . . he thought to himself. This skeleton is missing half its left arm as well. Coincidence? Some think not.

From here on up, the gossamer of frail calcium reawakened Gordon's death phobia to a full blast. The exmayor had sat down on the steps to pick his nails, an upstart certain of finesse. Gordon glanced over at him as the fourth bone accurately fit the schematics. Gordon

went to the fifth and his heart beat against thin walls like a paper valentine. When the sixth bone was shown to be a club member's the crows squawked round him. Gordon hadn't noticed the crows lately, so sure he was in the plan, but they were there, ringing the graveyard, perched on the rotating billboard, dancing between electrical signals on telephone wires--danse macabre. Their beaks were two pincers that snapped at wheat and weed. Their beaks were truly impartial. It was Gordon's delusion that found their beaks malevolent. Seventh bone clicked off, also chartered, chartered in the computer, which was the club register. Isn't there an end to all this? Isn't there just one foolproof way of beating death? "Cough!" "Cough!" There was something beating against the inside of Gordon's ribcage, with a gnaw and a nibble. Bone number eight was a fair contender. What else could it be? The exmayor is so sure of himself. Say you nail a crow to your door, thought Gordon, verifying bone number nine with eyes closed. Eventually it rots off or the nail rusts or the crows just stop being scared, stop being frightened. The crows cawed like saints from the pages of doctrine. Gordon's life wasn't the kind they really liked to take away. Even the crows would have enjoyed giving Gordon some more time. They were charitable birds after all, even though, or maybe no wonder, they were black in the habit. Pious as well, crows ate only garbage. Most people didn't see the extent of their virtues. Ten, eleven and twelve. Oh mercy!, thought Gordon. Please just let one bone be incorrect. He glanced down where the carbon paper fluttered on his lap and at his sheet of a legal document. Damn it! I was so sure of myself I already gave him his copy of the contract. A pink slip jutted from the exmayor's breast pocket. The exmayor still picked his nails with those humdrum, debutante eyelids. And, oh, the hackneyed crows warbled a recordloop that's been played for centuries now. They're swooping dangerously close, thought Gordon. Rapacious, they want my eyes. When it comes to humans they only eat delicacies and let the rest go to waste. Gordon was wrong about them again. The rest of the bones fell into place. The skeleton's integrity had been predictable. The crows wheeled overhead in black like clergymen, friends of neither

Heaven nor Hell but perfect dupes. They moved in a parody of Pentecost, dropping down towards Gordon's head but tattering up at the last inch. The rest of the bones completed the skeletal set. The omission of the left forearm and hand was astute.

Gordon finished with the last finger while the reporter beside him acted like he'd gotten the Pulitzer scoop. "It looks like the impossible has finally happened out here at Oxbow Cemetery, folks." He spoke so fast and excitedly that a lisp confiscated each s and r.

Gordon pulled backwards on his wheelchair's joystick and without a word the spokes spun counterclockwise. Very quickly he was gone into headquarters. Gordon had a hunch and was gone to check on it. That boy wasn't going to get his lucky charms, his graveyard, easily as that. The exmayor rose from his dawdling position too late to either catch or get a word out of Gordon and, so, hung uncertainly outside the door Gordon had disappeared into. The reporter was busy with wideangle and birdseye perspectives on the winning skeleton.

Within a minute or three Betsy came out with a burlap sack. "Put the bones in this and then come inside. Mister Chatterton wants to see you." He quickly pried and unbent the wire fittings, placed each bone gently in burlap. They rattled like a halfassed maracas when the exmayor put them over his shoulder. Dust flurried from his clothes like snow from under zambonis, like *Old Testament* locusts. He entered the caretaker's place. Betsy led them through a private door. Gordon sat in front of the table with the *Skeleton Key* open in front of him. His hookmouth was replaced by a grin, but it was a sham smile, nothing more than tinfoil backing on a mirror, no deeper or no more confident than that. He had his legal form and Gordon's ruse to keep the cemetery *his* cemetery was a popsiclestick house.

"Nice reconstruction of sis, Mayor." He croaked in a froggy voice filled with the hint of soap bubbles under the brim of throat. "Nothing wrong with that is there?," the exmayor said, prying out the legal form and holding it up to the light to look for fine script, invisible lemon juice clauses to the contrary. There was nothing of that sort. Damn it all, thought Gordon. This boy won't fall. "It doesn't specify what you have to put together here." "You don't think

that knowledge of your relatives in an incestuous way, right down to the bones I mean, is maybe using special technology?" "No I don't. And I don't think a jury would either. You said I could put together any skeleton I liked and I used no special device other than the brain." Gordon felt like he'd pooped his pants at a friend's birthday party. He gulped litres of air. "Then, maybe to avoid all the problems you'd be willing to settle out of court."

Clamour rose outside the door and a reporter headlonged into the chamber, picked himself up and pulled the cameraman after him by the electrical chord which bound them siamese. Betsy appeared at the door apologetically. "Sorry. I couldn't keep them out." Gordon tried to rise from his wheelchair, bowled up but fell back again, clutching his chest. He develcroed a pocket beside the chair and took out a vial of painkillers and began to pop them by the twos and threes. He then pulled out a mask from the other side of the chair and tumbed on the valve for an oxygen chaser. Bouncers arrived soon enough and manhandled the reporters routinely as riffraff.

They'd just thrown the reporters out when the exmayor went to Gordon, put bones in front of the beaten maestro and said: "There's my deed of ownership. The only deal I want is the one I signed up for." He held the contract in front of Gordon's painfully disfigured face. Gordon looked at his humpty dumpty stomach under the silk monogrammed shirt and with wet eyes reached for the tophat.

A groan was building in Gordon when Max broke through the door with bombast, battery and a death shaped shotgun. On the other side of the door were two bouncers, two reporters and Betsy, lined up against the wall in that order. Max had threatened his way past the lineup outside, past the voucher dispensary (who by now had pressed the silent alarm that rang bright in the police station miles away) and made it to the headquarters. "Hello Gordon, tip-my-hat. I need these, please." He reached for the bag, spun the shotgun's whistling mouth at chest level. He put both books into the burlap sack, lifted the sack onto his shoulder, flipped the gun from left to right hand like a sample juggle. "So easy to get what you want. Good

things come to those who wait. Ain't that right, Gordon?" "How far before the cops get here is a better logistical contention," Gordon muttered. "Perhaps," said Max and backed out the door. Gordon wheeled around. Should've killed him when I could. He got his own handgun from a cupboard, but by the time his wheelchair had whirred outside, Max had pushed past spectators, made exit by the ticket booth turnstile and dissolved into the forest behind the cemetery, towards Valentine Mountain. On the other side of that mountain that thumbed up behind Oxbow Cemetery was a valley. At valley bottom was the pulp mill.

Max began the hot, dry, dirty climb. Police sirens sounded now, but distantly. The cast and crew stood stunned around headquarters. Weakened, Gordon could no longer hold the revolver. It fell from hand to dust like high velocity, dum dum silverware.

Sometimes shadows from crows overhead eclipsed his face and he'd remember night. But it was only milliseconds worth of memory and soon there was, again, nothing but hallucination--skin grated by sunlight--nothing but one heat haze distortion of landscape. The skeleton and the *Skeleton Key* teetered heavily on his shoulder. A deer vanished into forest. Its fawn paused to watch him trip and scabble up rocky slope. The grade was incredible, at least sixty percent. Every time he fell his free hand went out like a mad but leashed in crab for handholds. His face was scraped, hands bruised, fingernails torn, mind in civil war. The sack grew heavier. The sun pulled life out of him. He wondered how much longer he could endure the heart's inconstant beat, the way it continued making him function--the mercilessly erratic heart which jumped from one extreme to the next on the cardiogram.

He could hear policemen down in the forest. The shotgun had been dropped about ten metres back. He couldn't both hold it and climb. He needed to piss badly, but couldn't take the time. Clods of dirt and gravel crumbled and scattered off rock faces behind him in scattershot. A clutch of grasses, branches, exposed roots, were in one hand while the other held the sack. Somewhere over the hill there was a deep crack in the world. He slipped. Something opened his cheek. Dirt mixed into the gash--the hillside now in his bloodstream, him inside the hill, moving up, against it.

What had Claire always said to him? *You'll always find a way to excuse yourself from living.* Who was Claire? She was the last loose peg, the last to bow out, the last to fall in *Tombtrain's* onrush. Now, like the rest. Claire was one of the disappeared. He knew that the only reason *Tombtrain* had given her to him was so he wouldn't act rashly, prematurely. She'd been around to restrain him until the appointed hour. When the time came, *Tombtrain* dropped her from the strategy.

Who was Claire? Max couldn't remember. She was one of the fallen.

Down in the graveyard there was mayhem. The reporters arrived almost on line with the cops. Camera and microphone chords played out tripwires. The Graveyard Game's contestants had either gone home or been cordoned off outside the cemetery. Since then, fresh crowds had arrived and riot murmurs moved electric across the mob. It seemed as if some seasoned protestors had shown up. There was even a picket sign raised now and again. The dust raised by camera crews almost rose in a mushroom cloud to refract the sun's heat and light. Police cruisers were parked outside the cemetery. Just about all of Oxbow's RCMP detachment was either chasing Max along the slope, standing around the graveyard or trying to relax the crowd.

A helicopter in the parking lot, its pilot quietly sucking on a chocolate bar, stood by. There were firetrucks too, for some reason. It was dinner time and stomachs were shrunken and empty, but not many noticed.

He'd been interviewed, interrogated, even insulted, on camera since Max's armed robbery three quarters of an hour ago. Now most questions were over except for a reporter from the local paper. The dark haired woman asked him: "So. Now that you're the graveyard's new owner, what are your plans?" He shrugged. Shoulders dropped back into place at different speeds--lopsymmetry. He noticed two buttons had popped off the belly of his sweat stained shirt. Some skin and hair showed through the crack. He tucked the two shirt ends across each other to cover up his gut and readjusted the hair cut.

It hadn't taken long for the story to spread. Reporters had interviewed him, Gordon, Betsy, Josephine and the two bouncers. They'd found out about his success, his sister's completed skeleton, the argument with Gordon. They found out about Max. And, despite Gordon's oncamera threat of legal action and investigation, everyone accepted that the exmayor was the new proprietor of Oxbow Cemetery and legal heir to the Chatterton fortune. Even if he didn't have the skeleton, enough people had seen it verified to make his claim. Plus, he still had a copy of the agreement. He pushed some fingers along the surface of his

slick black hair, looked at the reporter.

There was a graveyard dustbunny in his windpipe. He'd had enough of it, enough of death, enough of the deceased sister's death he'd lived with all the years. He thought of Gordon. What was Gordon going to do now? Gordon--who didn't know the first thing about death. He groped into the dust. It ran through his fingers to trill in the hot wind like youth. He looked around for Josephine, but couldn't see her.

Crows above him seemed to fly one airway. There was death and the million attempts to supersede it. It's a fascination. Face it as yourself, he thought. Let it come and go. Move to one side or another, he thought.

"Excuse me, Mister Mayor" The reporter spoke impatiently. "Bill. The name is Bill. Bill Blake." He put his jacket on. "And I'm going home to my wife." He took one step forward, then another and soon passed beyond the cemetery. Soon he was off camera. His footprints were as sure of the earth as the sky of the globe.

There were gunshots eventually, but Max felt that they weren't aimed bullets. Police shot only as part of the spectacle, part of giving the taxpayers what they thought was owed them or they shot to wound. Things should be the other way around, thought Max. They should shoot to kill. But they only kill as a last resort because they really want everyone to share the pain of being alive. That's why capital punishment was abolished--because they discovered it was far less humane, far more painful, to live an ugly natural lifespan behind bars. Well, we're all sentenced to life, he thought. Except it's the one jail you got out of sooner on bad behaviour. Everyone gets to share the pain of being alive. *You've got to share, Max.* How appropriate that that was Mom's first lesson.

Blisters rose epidermal--fried bubbles filled with soup. A garter snake sunworshipping on a granite chunk hissed at Max coming past. Max turned. He could see the faintest sparkle of sun off the police chief's binoculars at the forest's edge. Another warning shot whistled by

his ear. He kept moving.

Gordon had been monosyllabic ever since the reporters showed up. He answered their questions like a dental patient in progress does. He wasn't an interesting conversationalist so they moved on from him. The sun glanced off the wheelchair's chrome into soft folds of crumpled tophat. He'd hardly any strength left and he breathed a waterpump of air. Paparazzi twirled round him like moths by an empty light socket. He reached into his pocket and barely managed to flip open a pair of sunglasses. There was nothing in his mind now that resembled hope. The upper reach had been ceded to crows.

Josephine came up to him. She saw her twin reflections in his glasses, but her eyes were fine in the sun, fine at night. Her eyes were like bifocals for solar and lunar illuminations--two pupils on each eyeball, one in front and one at back. She rotated her eyes twice a day, at dawn and dusk, to find sight's proper mode. During the interlunar phase she tip tap tapped her way along the earth. She was comfortable with a vision at day, vision at night.

She'd been gathering ripe blackberries on her break, crushing them into pulp with teeth. Josephine hated decaf and had to find some alternative to drinking the black caffeine on the band's break. The hunt and peck for blackberries kept her nerves short of shrill. She hadn't even realized that the exmayor had reached completion of the bonerack. All she could feel now was helplessness. Josephine tossed a twisted vine of blackberry thorns into Gordon's lap--ripe blackberries still attached. Gordon put a berry absentmindedly into his mouth as if to test the fit. "Max is a night flower," she said to Gordon. "What's so special about night?" He put thumb and forefinger up to the shades, tracing the arm to his earlobe. "They. . . he has no choice."

Gordon sat looking at her, thinking:

this country has predetermined shifts, no pension, no RRSP, no rest home, not a set of

personalized dentures, it's the ultimate repo man, gives what you get

Gordon had barely heard her words. What sound did she expect him to make? His throat was steep as a skyscraper--the voice in the shaft had so much way to make, hoisting those words for her. And the answer to her question was less relevant than what he wanted to say. He let want, the need, guide its chosen vocabulary by the hand, out of the pit's comfort into the sun's microwaves. "I came to a place where it wasn't night or day. Just some forever sort of unbloom."

Finally, the last thing about death is that here is no last thing. It goes on. "Why don't you just leave this thing. This cemetery. Take what you've got and go?" "It's too late anyway Josephine. I am leaving it."

Gordon sucked on a blackberry still attached to the vine--juice like a safely screened blood transfusion. Josephine bent down to him and pulled the crown away. A thorn tore open Gordon's upper lip, but she didn't notice. "The only difference between you and Max is you know when you're going to die." Gordon nodded at her and pressed a finger to his split lip. "No one's going to come near me," he said smiling. Then, reconsidered, he said: "No. Max knows too."

Behind them helicopter blades thumped and rethumped like muzzled wings. Josephine bent forward and kissed Gordon on the lips, taking blood away on her tongue. She left him with the blackberries. "I'm going up in the helicopter. I'm going to try and save Max." Too tired to nod, Gordon's head was hoodwinked under the tophat. "Save Max," his lips fluctuated.

The last thing Josephine saw of Gordon was a wheelchair whirring past graveyard gates along the pitted and potholed road towards the highway--a man along neverending, unmapped geographies.

The wheelchair wheeled along as best it could. Dirty hubcaps lay in a field where Ernie's cars used to be. Blood pored from his nose. The wheelchair rotated inches per hour, moving like an aluminum rowboat down a rocky hill. Heaviness crushed his chest and sores sprouted on his torso, legs, arms. The first thing about death was deterioration. The wheelchair moved over potholes with aching tires. Every leaf was covered in dust. This dry season muted the forest's colours. And overhead perched and glided crows. Always overhead--the crows. Spokes fell from the wheelchair's wheels. It wasn't meant for this terrain. He was so tired, so weak. He turned to look behind himself and saw the sign he'd spent hundreds of thousands on. Millions of dollars--stage two was the realization that cash and credit cards, limousines and mansions, didn't mean piss all. One crow flew a loop and another flew through it, threading the needle. The black birds sat on treetops. He felt enmeshed in claw and feather. A thin red tongue slithered across an ebony beak. Gordon imagined them licking their lips. Stage three--fear. Fear is the accessible and common art, and the most individual--everyone sculpts their own, everyone shapes their own. Meanwhile, the crows licked their lips. They'll go for the eyes first. They can have my eyes. They see only what's in front of me and are completely useless in the dark. There was a last stage, one more episode. What was it? *You come through all the stages of death to hope, and then hope carries you through.* Had father told him that? He watched as dirty fingernails reached up to his face, taking part in an inquiry.

Max had gone up hillside. Doctor June could see a helicopter, with Josephine in it, a lazy pilgrimage across the sky. Cops, reporters, contestants and curious crowds were everywhere. But she couldn't care less about the graveyard, or the inquisitive reporters or Max and his hold on the priceless *Skeleton Key*. Minus Gordon, all the rest was outside of her retrospective sense of guilt. All the rest had as little interest to her as nothing. She'd come to talk to Gordon, hoping it wasn't too late, looking forward to the conversation like a final showdown with an adversary. The past tackled her down with its faces of Gordon's father, with the

weight of nembusal, with the lowgrade ethics she'd mustered in defense of his suicide. She'd wheedled her way into Gordon's life, become his physician--ushered herself in like another infirmity. Only Gordon was unaware of her reasons, but she'd promised herself to tell him and this was the last chance. No reneging now.

All along the roadway the broom cast bushels of yellow around his wheelchair, clotting the spokes. He felt something cinnamon sharp in his nose, something sharp as crow mischief. The dust crept up his forearms with a fungoid thickening from the wheels of his chair. He felt very sickened. Where were his lungs, his blood?--spume at the mouth. The bones inside his skin were just flotsam and jetsam. He'd become an ocean for crows to peck at, a blue sea of a human wafted over by a tang of pollen both from broom and bluebells, dandelions and rosehips. This was roadside botany. Flowers stuffed him full of microscopic seeds, that went to course each artery, each tight and tapering blood vessel. And what was that in the road in front of him except an apparition dressed in formal whites? He'd hoped that even the apparitions to welcome him as he died would wear the black of mourning. White at this point was unnecessary, a luxury that disgusted him.

Doctor June had on her doctor's dress and gown. She'd come straight from the hospital. Someone had pointed her down the road, in the direction of the wheelchair's last sighting. Two thin tracks allowed to her to trace its travel. She'd come upon him guiding the electric seat in circles, just off the main road, into patches of shrubbery. His face was all cutup. A jagged hairlock licked around one of his cheekbones as if to say this is my hair, thicker and tighter than a rastafarian's, sharp as stilettos.

Could she get through to him at this point? It was obvious how much pain he was in. An imitation of death throes resulted from the jerks and bolts of the electric chair trying to achieve forward thrust in its around the clock twirls. She walked up to the chair, but had to dodge and retreat when the chair went into reverse suddenly and came at her in full zoom. She stepped to the chair and knocked Gordon's hand off the joystick. The chair sputtered

down and came to rest at the edge of the dirt road. Gordon lifted his sweat soaked head and glanced at her. "Oh good." His mutter was almost muted against the rasp of wind tossed shrubbery, the herbal essence and cacophony. "I'm glad I'm still at the tangible end." Not for long, she thought. "What?," he gasped, still amazed that he had business to transact. "Your father," she said. Gordon tilted his head back into his tophat. "My father was," he mused into dust, "a martyr so alone they should print his bio on a one sided page. I tried, I did, but didn't have the strength to follow. So much desire. . . I. . . wanted. No strength for his solution." Gordon let his hand trail to the control stick. This was the shape of fable, grown from the contradictions of his father's "martyrdom." This the filial response, the failure that confronted Gordon when he considered his father's legacy and his subsequent incompetence in reaching solitude through suicide, to accommodate that necessary gesture, to follow what father had coached him towards. But it was too late for Gordon now, too late to provide alternatives to his father's example, she thought. Gordon had been conditioned for a kind of solitude he could only strive for and never achieve. She pulled a vial of liquid Nirvana from her pocket and syringed it into him. She'd hoped to come up with some posthumous advice from dad that would pacify and console Gordon, but there was none. Gordon's eyes looked, lost in glaze, at her as he shifted his hand down on the control. The wheelchair ambled forward. "My father," were the last words she heard. The wheelchair led the waltz and waltzed him well into the delicate shades of painkiller. The horizon did its level best to clamp out Heaven.

He walked backwards to see the police chief. She'd moved up to the middle of the hill. Her binoculars were turned up at the sky like a starstruck Galileo except that it was daytime and the sky was fathoms on fathoms of blue. The air pulsated in the distance with sound, with a series of implosions. A helicopter twirled a slow baton in front of a cloud parade. Clouds are constant strangers.

Something flashed in front of Max's eyes and the clouds went hardedged, thin and black like rails on gravel. The sky turned a resinous, creosote texture, and his feet rumbled like bad thrash guitar. Nausea attacked his stomach. There was a series of steam whistles and distant glare of alkaloid headlight. Then his eyes snapped back to blue sky and helicopter, the bones chattering in burlap. A slight breeze shifted and strained dust through the sack so it looked like Max carried a leaky duffebag filled with smoke or steam. He ducked behind a rock, sat in the shade for a second to cool his blistered, burnt, wax drooped face--let the helicopter whiz by in search.

He closed his eyes and small geometric globes and stars splashed in the black water behind the eyelids. Max had learned to hate those lights as best he could. As a child, though, fascinated by the kaleidoscope, he'd rubbed his eyelids to produce the special effects. Now he ignored the pesky dance to concentrate on cool bone black darkness there instead. A shroud, the boulder's shadow rested and seemed to heave slightly in front of him. Death is God's greatest gift, thought Max. If there is a God. One thing I can't stand about suicides, he thought, is that suicides are greedy. And suicides are sentenced to Hell. Of course, if I was to do it, on Judgement Day I'd just stand up and say, "Sorry God I just couldn't wait to see you." "Hellfire and tamation, son," He'll say, "I burned you enough when you were alive. It just wouldn't be right to put you back there now. Instead, how does four hundred and fifty three billion years in Purgatory sound?" If God existed, thought Max. Do the souls of sadomasochists enjoy Hell?, he thought. Yes they do. Hell is made for thrillseekers, daredevils and the happygolucky. Meanwhile, there was the train and a sack on his back with colossal weight and import.

He got up. I can't be late at the station. Mister conductor, first class please--right over by that cute little filly with the deep ribcage over there. Send her this champagne glass full of dust, tell her it's from tall, dark, blisterface. Jingle jangle--Max imagined a mountain of shiny train tokens as he climbed the hill. He thought of Josephine's washboard ballads, bluegrass

dirges, Gregorian rap and elegies played to the last rite's recitation. The helicopter blades were like a cowboy with a platinum lariat leaning against the blue, twirling a knotted loop over his head. The helicopter came closer to the ground behind him, sending up a gravel spray of sharpness. He was almost over the rise. Now he began to scramble. The bullets came closer, a rush of speed past his ear.

The clouds filamented into the gorge--thread twisted through a needle's eye. Pines grew up and down the rocky and jagged walls of the incline with roots dripping over rocks and moss. Dark pines and firs stood like spires. He'd come over the rise and everything was trainstation. The ground wasn't rocks, moss, dirt, but old stained and cracked planking, hollow underneath. The clouds that led into the gorge were train tracks. The sound of the helicopter behind him was the click clack cadence.

Josephine twisted strands of hair around her finger until they caught on her ring and she had to yank it free. Down below, on the hill, policemen led by the police chief converged on Max's trail. Bullets were now being aimed and fired, though Max, just over the rise, wasn't nearly a bead. Max's legs dangled over the gorge. He sat on the precipice unknotting a sack.

She adjusted the mouthpiece on the headset, told the pilot to land. "Are you crazy?! I'm not going to get caught in crossfire!" She shouted into the mouthpiece to get her close as he could. "And tell them to hold their trigger fingers. If they keep shooting he's just going to jump and we'll never get the book back." The weary pilot thumbed up but behind his aviator's glasses his eyeballs rolled along the ceiling. He adjusted the headset, set the helicopter's arc and told the police to back off. The helicopter's skids hovered inches over sand, then softly sank to earth.

Josephine ripped off the headset, jumped out of the helicopter. Head pulled down, she ran out of the blades' range. Scrub and broom blocked her all around--and small pine trees to overstep, dry stumps and branches among the sand and stones. Max saw her come closer

to him, inching forward on the edge. "Come here. Don't jump," she said. "What time is it, conductor?," he asked. Conductor? She wondered . . . oh no, another attack. "Two o five, mister." "Thanks. I'm the new owner of the *Tombtrain Express*. You might have heard of it. Bound for places unknown." Josephine pushed wires of hair behind her ear. "Do you want to hand me the sack, Max?" He held the burlap bag straight out over the gorge. "This? It's a magic keychain is what it is?" "Max I don't see any train." "Can't you hear it thundering down those tracks?" He pointed behind her and she turned in the direction of long trails of cloud, a polished sun. The clouds dipped into the gorge. The helicopter pilot levitated in the air. She tried to motion him away, but he maintained. Centrifugal shock and sound waves reverberated. "Max. You're hallucinating." "The eyes of the man in the engine room. I'm the fuel. My life is the whole hog. The train's mobility depends on me. My future is its future." "Max, you've had too much sun. Put the bag down and come over to me."

Max pulled the bag back. What was Josephine, that bandmaster, doing in the conductor's uniform? A mask passed from the lips and nose of the conductor's face with easy breeze and underneath was the strained tranquillity of Josephine's features. Her lips moved like a bad Chinese overdub--words that didn't coincide with movement. But now the two, voice and articulation, seemed to be converging. What was going on? Now the bright red sash, striped lapels, seemed to pass away or metamorphose into. . . a gingham dress? The sound he'd heard all along wasn't a click clack was it? It was the whooping sound of rough metal circulations. On the back of his hand blisters and heat rash started hurdling pain along nerves to the brain. He'd been out in sun awhile--sometime since any meal. The last few week's diet had been more like famine, like a stomachful of famine. The doctor's advice had always been to watch those stomach contents, to regulate his appetite's preferences, but never once did he listen and his piss got redder and redder. Brains are merciless- they contain everything and work against the person, the body, and, ultimately, themselves. It was in their power to compose any reality they wanted, but they invariably chose aging, decay and

death with insanity and senility thrown in as perverse treats. Well, if this is really a woman, he thought, then I better level. "They'll lock me up in Jail, Josephine." He pointed to the sack on the ground beside him, before his eyes changed focal point again. "But my deed of ownership is nonrefundable, Mister Conductor. If I leave the train now I'll never get my money back."

Josephine's dress billowed around her tight, freckled thighs. Once in a while he caught glimpses of frilly lace panties. She put her hands down by the sides to keep the billows below knees. The sun came ravenous at the horizon. Redness dreamt itself into a sky. "No one gets their money back. Ever. Come here, Max."

Max had gotten up, balanced on the precipice with arms stretched to either side and the burlap sack in front of his shoes. Now, instead of Josephine, instead of even the conductor, he saw only the beckoning skeletal, used train salesman. Josephine reached for the sack. The salesman's hand extended a shiny brochure advertising latest deals forward to Max. The used train salesman's mohair overcoat had a coffee stain on its lapel and the tie around his neck was modelled with a pattern after a field of sunflowers. His skeletal face had stubble painted on it to complete the stereotypical picture. He pushed the brochure towards Max and said something inaudible above the clickety clack roar of the oncoming train. Max spread his arms to politely refuse the offer. "Sorry," Max replied. "I've already got one train. That's enough for me."

Josephine looked at him, winked both eyes twice. What did he say? Max seemed to have trouble standing. He was a bag of blistered skin. Josephine looked much prettier--hair golden and curly from wind and lack of combing, twisted and touselled from underneath her cowboy hat, a red dress with miniature white horses moving in unison with the rippling wind, cherry red cowboy boots, lowwheeled, scuffed by rocks and branches. Her fingernails were long, painted and unbroken even though she'd spent the afternoon, while the exmayor was in the headquarters, plucking on blackberry vines. Her left fingertips had six string calluses from

tapping down the wires. There wasn't a blemish to be seen on the woman except for the scuff marks on her boots. It was a good thing she wasn't wearing nylons today or else they would have had runs, but nothing a little nail polish couldn't fix. The mountain air opened redness in her cheeks. But appearance was Josephine's principal concern at that moment.

Max looked at the used train salesman and wondered why he didn't step closer to hand him the brochure. Maybe, Max thought, it's because he's too close to the platform's edge and he suffers from vertigo. The salesman turned closer to Max and extended the brochure a couple inches more.

Josephine put out her hand, wondering if it was safe to bother him further. He's hallucinating. He might jump over the cliff if I come any closer. "Max. Why don't you come back from the edge. Hand me the bag." If there's anything I can't stand, thought Max, it's a pushy salesman who can't tell when someone's not interested. "Listen. I've got a fucking train!" he yelled. "Stay back or I'll cram that fucking brochure up your ass." He picked up a stone and threw it at Josephine who raised her hand to hex it off. "This is your last warning, Max," she said. "Last chance to pick up on a great deal. Drop your money down now!" Pushy bastard, he thought. Max picked up the bag.

When Max's face opened to hallucination, Josephine, not tranquil anymore, gritted her teeth. Josephine moved feebly to Max who twitched his head in assessment. Something black coasted out of each eye. He ran his hand along contours of something hot, metallic, invisible, in front of him. He stood like binary code. She stepped forward. He looked at her, acquiesced, handed the burlap sack over. . . .

And over the gorge, squealing high register into the station, the train arrived. Skeletons danced on lounge tables. They flicked coins in the air, called them, caught 'em midspin in their eye sockets. They traded gold teeth, compared calcium deposits, fractures, jointure deformities. The girlie skeletons, the ones who had been girls anyway, walked with backs

arched, trying to look like they still had breasts. But everyone might as well have been a eunuch here. Sex was a matter of minute sexual differences. A conductor appeared again, stepping slowly forward from the platform behind Max and lifting his hat to wipe forehead with a brown oily cloth. Dust leaked like perspiration from the conductor's bonepores. Sharp fingerends reached forward for his ticket, fingerends that looked like they'd been put into a pencil sharpener so they could carve holes. I've got nothing except the huge key, thought Max, maybe that's what the conductor wants. He handed it over and the conductor smiled like everything was fine. Everyone had tickets except for hobo skeletons in cattle cars and the great depression migrant workers on roofs. The engine workers shovelled dead beetles and cockroaches into the furnace, but the furnace, as before, writhed with molten metal images from Max's past. Sometime soon, he understood, they'd scrape out the furnace and use that alloy to make another train, a train for someone else. This train was built from bullets that were lodged in skeletons from World War Two and carried into the grave. The train idled like a nuclear powered hearse--well oiled, powerfully kinetic. Engineers' uniforms were made from old pirate ship skull and crossbone flags and underneath, part of their macabre eroticism, they wore nothing. The carpet along the corridors was old stuff from decadent nineteenth century bordellos and flophouses, but all well fumigated--no silverfish or scabies here. Click clack, jingle jangle. Yes indeed it's a well oiled machine. The skeletal passengers waved to Max from windows with pieces of winding sheet, bodybag, silk coffin lining, linen and tar paper. They held out drinks--crystal brandy snifters big as his head. Death beckoned. Black tinted lightbulbs in the corridors were soft, dim enough to stare at without damaging the retina. Steam rose from underneath the train and platform, curled round Max's feet like a litter of bone china kittens. He'd finally given Josephine the sack. She'd gone, metamorphosed, from salesman back to conductor again--transitions in the flux of Max's delirium. Josephine screamed, but it was only the skeletons celebrating wildly! Josephine yelled, but it was only the brakes being released. The bell rang and a tongueless mouth yelled, ALL ABOARD! Max

stepped up the stairs, pulled on the sticky doorhandle and closed the glass door stained with cigar smoke and petroleum lipstick behind him. Max joined the party.

Josephine watched Max's body fall. It smacked against a tree, convulsed and followed the track of clouds to gorge's end. He ricocheted from tree to tree, tumbled over rock, contorted in the air. In short, he did the chicken all the way down. When he'd passed from sight, fallen into a crack or through leaves and needles, Josephine scrutinized the burlap sack he'd handed her with a business class aura. She could still read the writing on the side--West Coast Grain and Feed. That's the bag, she thought, the whole bag and it didn't weigh much. Max's body had looked weightless, almost antigrav, as it drifted down. Police waited far from the precipice, out of mind. Josephine watched the chickenshit helicopter pilot. He looked at Josephine. He waited. It was her call. Bark went papyrus around a nearby arbutus tree, wind scaling it like a fish.

Josephine looked down after Max. Here's the bag--everything Max and Gordon had fought, obsessed and gone insane over. Over her shoulder at the bottom of the rise they stood by. Down in the cemetery they watched for her. And when she brought down the bag, what then? The whole thing would start over again, probably. *Skeleton Closet* needed the work, too. Or maybe she'd been in a perfect setup for too long, or maybe it wasn't perfect at all. *Skeleton Closet* had been an escape for her. There was improvisation and there were the traditional structures, but one thing she'd never tried to do was write her own. The way Max and Gordon and Mayor had composed and reworked things over and over, leaving everything unfinished and spontaneous in the end. Had she failed in coming back to the graveyard to put a stop to all of it? Was this the kind the reconciliation she'd hoped for? Was she going to reinstate the old desecrations?

Josephine's arm held the burlap over the gorge. Inside it were both the *Skeleton Key* and sister's skeleton. She felt ghosts rally down the hill. The cemetery's bones hubbubed an

afterworlds telethon--a million contributors from beyond the grave and her the only operator. It was her play. She was simply svelte, hands out in front, one hip cocked ajar. Max and Gordon never got home. Nobody can go home, Josephine thought. Autobiographies have to be written by someone else, she sermonized within. We've gotta build homes into each other.

Now, with the sack in hand, what was the most reasonable course? Something between extremes. Something to stitch disparate edges. Could she, through their efforts and actions, find a path for herself to take instead of always this periphery, these mediations. Josephine nodded. Yes, that was it. On the precipice Josephine's muscles angled for an idea, waiting for the sack's contents to push a decision through her motor nerves.

EPILOGUE

Let's topple up in a reconstituted camera, in a flight pattern newly learnt and perfected. Say, let's rise high, pan across and zoom in on certain key shots. Let's descend from the gorge, where a sister's bones, along with a *Skeleton Key*, hang over the chasm in a burlap bag like cliffhangers, that wait like a sequel. Past Josephine shapely against sky as an old iron keyhole. Let's segue from mountains with malevolent faces, tooth and claw, like giant beasts from some tyrannosaurus fairytale, past the paparazzi impatient in the graveyard, past the spot on the road where a wheelchair overturns and there's a man with an open mouth serenaded by crows who've taken his eyes for iron pyrite. Mortality is only heavy as a bag of bones, you know, and it's all in the carrying, in the load and step, in the double heelclick, in the endurance and the obstinacy, the refusal to drop the weight, the weight that is teeth, eyeballs, guts, nerves, intestines, and, of course, the heart. How far can you drag the heart, heaviest of them all? Let's thank Gordon for a stellar show. Let's move past that, past Mrs. Patterson's field where a symposium of crows, drunk on electric jello they scoffed from a garbage bag, rip forth rotten tonsils like any old garage band. One of them has passed away and they call the announcement out again and again in a singing obituary that's a good eight point five on the Richter Scale. Move past them. Let's hit the road. Let's turn back once and maybe turn back again. The world is senseless and debilitating enough for a devil to forget its business in. But this is no time to linger so, finally, let's travel past the end, past any chance for catharsis, on through the roll of credits.