

Configurations

Charles M. Staniforth

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

May 1996

© Charles M. Staniforth, 1996



National Library
of Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services Branch

Direction des acquisitions et
des services bibliographiques

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa Ontario
K1A 0N4

395 rue Wellington
Ottawa (Ontario)
K1A 0N4

Your file - votre référence

Our file - notre référence

The author has granted an irrevocable non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of his/her thesis by any means and in any form or format, making this thesis available to interested persons.

L'auteur a accordé une licence irrévocable et non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de sa thèse de quelque manière et sous quelque forme que ce soit pour mettre des exemplaires de cette thèse à la disposition des personnes intéressées.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in his/her thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without his/her permission.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège sa thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

ISBN 0-612-18445-5

Canada

ABSTRACT

Configurations

Charles M. Staniforth

This work creates a series of short fictions whose primary concerns are formal. The emphasis is on exploring the possibility of alternate structures. In general this involves the foregrounding of structural elements and the subjugation of more usual fictive devices to produce a progressive dynamic of defamiliarization. It seeks to produce narrative that exists as a field, rather than a plotted line; narrative that proceeds not by way of *beginning, middle* and *end* but rather through a collage or patchwork of coexistent moments; that proceeds, that is, through *entry, interior* and *exit*. This is employed to create prose 'pieces' that are primarily concerned with the idea of 'moment', the experientiality of specifically textual moments within a structure of movement that frees narrative to navigate its own geography.

Table of Contents

Foreword	v
Us	1
Configuration	10
Anticipation.....	24
Enzone.....	32
Confession	42
The Bob and Betty Fugue.....	54
Arthur's Yarn.....	60
The Pointed Sky.....	75
Bear Nightmare.....	82

Foreword

This collection of short fictions is meant to be fun. It is intended to have something for everyone, or at least, to present several levels of varying interpretive complexity accessible to a range of potential readers. The work could be called postmodernist, but this is a broad and dangerously open designation. More importantly the collection is post-Derrida and post-Nietzsche. Signification is an endless chain. Meaning is madness. Life is literature. Accordingly these prose *pieces* are primarily about themselves as textual entities. They operate under the premise that the only thing about which they can truly inform is themselves.

Each piece in the collection presents a different exploration in alternate structure. Each is designed to achieve a preset nonlinear—indeed anti-linear—pattern. “Us” is a circle; “Confession” a möbius strip; “Enzone” a drug trip. The “Bob and Betty” is a fugue for four narrative voices in eight movements with variations in style, rhythm, tone and temporality. “Bear Nightmare” deconstructs its own narrative skeleton and journeys around the double möbius strip. Each piece exploits a *story*, a conventional plotting. “Anticipation” is just a suicide yarn; “Us” a thriller; or, “Arthur’s Yarn” a fairy tale. Plot

is presented as 'given', as tokenized cliché, and employed as a gameboard for structural play. These stories do not journey along their plot. They travel through structure.

Here character is in symbiosis with structure, not with story. Characters are positioned outside their conventional plots. They are totally aware of the *story* and their role in it. Their real action is relative to their recognition of self and narrative positioning. In "Anticipation" Marlz's situation in the future social order exactly mirrors his position as a fictional character and his action is consciously that of a 'character' who seeks to escape from narrative itself. "Bear Nightmare", "Us", and "Confession" all employ narrator protagonists whose primary traits are revealed through their action of storytelling. In "Configuration" the characters all have different awareness, ranging from the level of the textual moment toward the authorial level. These characters act not *in* but relative to the plot. They operate in the underweave, in the real story, in the exploration of the real narrative geography.

These pieces form a cohesive collection, one built of similar units with consistency in format, language, style and setting; with shared themes, and with related explorations into character and structure. They are aimed to the needs of changing literacy. They are all short (the ten minute read) and potentially *light*. Language, in general, employs basic vocabulary. Wordplay however abounds. The style is often catchy or jargonistic with sporadic droppings of nonsense and neologism. This style is closely tied into structural, thematic and character revelation. The work is intended to be both oral and written, to be playful, intellectually rewarding, poetically obvious and FUN, in both the intellectual and populist presentations. Traditional textual motivators: sex, violence, guns, nudity,

mystery, conflict, psychodrama, action. . . ; are tokenized and exploited in exactly the same way as are conventional plottings. Future settings, with a minor sci-fi'ish bent, help to undermine any apparent temporal normality.

This is all intended to be playful in the extreme—to be fun. Hopefully these pieces employ a level of language and structural innovation that makes them compelling as entertainment snatchettes. They are very much about themselves in our world and are obsessed with attacking suburbanitism (BobandBettyism) in all its various manifestations. This is particularly obvious in “Enzone” where psychedelic verbiage confronts the symbols of the established corporate order. Structural antilinearity exactly mirrors thematic orientation. Suburbanitism is seen to encompass all the evils of our current ‘unsustainable’ age, and these in turn are understood to be inevitable outgrowths of the enforced dominance of the linear myth, through history, thought and narrative.

Us

Of course he made me dig the fucking grave. And it wasn't easy. There were all these rocks and roots and things so that after an hour I'd barely scratched the surface. In the end I only managed to hack out this sort of twisted pit with a really deep hole at one end—where I'd had to hollow out under a huge root—and nothing at the other where this giant rock lived. And I mean *lived*. It was like part of the mountain or something. Anyway, so then we had to roll him and wedge him into this pit thing, and of course he wouldn't fit. The only way he could be sorta squeezed in was with his head on the rock kinda leaning to one side and both his hands shoved into his crotch. He had this really cockeyed grin and he really did look like he'd just jerked-off in a whirlpool. But I got all weirded-out when Dichard said so.

I dunno. I mean, I've done a shitload of thinking about the whole thing and I've been getting to understand it a lot more. At the time I couldn't really figure why I was so angry. It was a typical Dichard remark. But there really was a lot of tension in the air and

when he laughed it all, like, exploded right at me. I guess it was just the laughter that bothered me. At the time it was totally important for me to prove that the whole fuck-up was his fault for wanting to dig there in the first place. But he didn't see it as a fuck-up at all, he saw it as a huge joke, and he had the gun. So there was nothing to do but fill it in as it was. I was pretty brutal about it, really pissed-off, and with Dichard standing well outa the way with the gun, howling at me, making me more weirded-out. And I'm just building this stupid mound thing that looked exactly like what it was. The more I packed the stones and gravel and roots and shit on it the more Dichard laughed and he kept barfing out these nasty one-liners until I wasn't mad anymore, I was snickering, and then I was laughing my guts out right along with him.

Dichard was always like that. He howled at anything. I mean, I've seen him do a lot of really nasty violent things—but always somehow funny too. And he could always get me laughing with him in the end. Right from the first time I met him. We met at the start of grade four after school. I was a new kid and he was alone in this creek behind the school blowing up frogs with firecrackers. I'd just found this cute little garter snake and he came over and stole my snake and blew it up with like three firecrackers. Man! It's hard to describe but it really was totally funny. We've been best friends ever since. Best friends, but it was a DICHARD and bruce type of friendship, if you know what I mean.

So, that Friday, when he called me up he knew I was up to nothin', just waitin' for him. I mean, I do work. I've had the same job ever since I quit school—working at Kraft loading skids from this conveyer belt. Dichard and I started there together like five years

ago and he only stuck it out for like about a week. But it's okay. I mean I've got my own place and my truck and everything and Dichard's still livin' with his old man and sleepin' in the same bed he had when we met in grade four.. So anyway, if I'm not at work and I'm not with Dichard I'm at home waiting for him to show up or call. He's pretty bossy and I guess he does use me a lot but he's a real good friend.

I know it sounds weird but that Friday I was gettin' really bored and lonely. Work had been hellish all day and we'd had to hang around two extra hours clearin' out the backlog. I was really scared I'd missed Dichard's call and was headin' for the big Friday night all alone. He didn't call till around midnight and then he just goes: "Hey Brucey you're home. Great! Swing round and snag me up. And hurry! Okay?" It wasn't really important for me to say anything. I just grabbed the truck and went round to get Dichard.

Something really heavy was comin' down at Dichard's Dad's place. The old man was really pissed and really pissed-off. He was in the doorway and just screamin' at Dichard out on the lawn. He was drunk enough that he had to stay in the doorway for support like or he'd have fallen down and I couldn't make out what he was shoutin' at all. But Dichard had a look on his face that I knew really well and it meant he was definitely wrong and his old man was right and whatever was goin' on Dichard was fuckin' up for sure.

I rolled up and Dichard hopped into the truck like before it had even stopped movin' and he was really angry and sweaty and he snapped: "Let's get the fuck outa here!" While I'm like trying to say hello to Mr Simpson and stuff and the old man was

sorta lurching and sorta stumblin' but definitely charging at the truck shoutin' whatever and Dichard grabbed me really hard on the arm and shouted: "Get out of here Brucey! Now!" And I clued in and clomped the pedal down hard.

Things were really weird in the truck. Dichard was wearing his Dad's old army coat and he was sitting all slouched down, with the collar up and his hands stuffed into the pockets so that it looked like the coat was sittin' there by itself alone. He looked kinda mad and glum and pouty and he kept muttering "Fuckin' old fart" and "Asshole" and "Clue in" and stuff like that. I just drove and waited for Dichard to be more like himself—for him to laugh. I knew we were going to the quarry so I headed that way, waitin', like I said. Then, about half way out there, Dichard sorta shrugged and came up out the coat. He snickered a little and said: "Remember the snake?" It was the usual icebreaker when things were like tense between us. We both laughed, like we were supposed to, but there was something really wrong with his. Even I could tell that he wasn't really laughing. He was makin' himself laugh, and it sounded sorta tinny.

So, I'm drivin' and laughin' about the snake, and every other funny thing I could remember, just to keep the howlin' goin'. I was scared of what would happen if it stopped, but I couldn't keep it up without Dichard, and so the silence took over again, kinda gloopy in the air, if you know what I mean. Then Dichard started pullin' all these guns outa his coat. "Think they'll be anything out there?" he said, "I got the .32," and he did this like gunslinger spin with it, "And the .38," which he put to his fucking lips and kissed and I was just turnin' into the lane out at the quarry and he goes: "And check this

sucker out!" He put the guns back and he pulled this huge wooden gun thing out of his coat.

I stopped the truck just when he started to laugh. He was stroking this wooden box thing like it was some woman's leg or something and he was laughing really loud and really weird. I didn't like the laugh. It was like nothin' I'd ever heard before. He clicked open the end of the box and he carefully slid out this really nasty lookin' gun. He was smiling and sort of chucklin'. "This," he said, "is the Mauser!"

It was a really, really wicked looking gun, like sorta carved out of the coldest, hardest, meanest steel available. You could tell right away it was a genuine Nazi prize. Fuckin' nasty! Like for sure Hitler slept with that gun under his pillow. I didn't like it at all. And I really didn't like the way Richard was cuddling it. He looked like a girl with a doll for christsake. I got out and walked away a little. He stayed in the truck, with the dome light on, chuckling and whispering to the gun as if I wasn't there at all. So I had to go back and sorta remind him that I was.

"Check this out," he said and he clicked the wooden holster thing onto the back of the handle to make it into this little minirifle sorta thing. Then he whipped open his door and jumped down outa the truck firing off into the dark. It made a really neat sound: a super clean bang, really loud, with this hissing and meshin' of metal parts inside, and it went off real fast, like a machine gun almost. Ten seconds and it was empty. Richard was laughing and he sorta danced over to me goin': "Whaddaya think? Whaddaya think?" and reloading the clip from the top. And I said, and I don't know why I said it, I said: "What

was goin' on with your old man; that was really weird?" Dichard turned really cold and I thought he was gonna hit me, but he got all pouty again instead and he said: "Aw, he's just a drunken old fart." He went over to the edge and fired singles down into the pit, sorta evenly, waitin' for each one to hit something down there before he fired the next. The last shot hit something metal and there were about five nice echoes and even after all of them Dichard was still standing over there looking down into the dark seeming pretty fuckin' unhappy.

Then you could tell he'd, like, snapped out of it. He walked really quickly back to the truck, all cold and serious. He clicked the wooden holster off the gun and threw it into the truck and slammed the door. He was a lot smaller than me but I'd always been sorta scared of him. He came over really rough and tough and he grabbed me hard and shoved me up against the truck and he shouted right into my face: "You know Brucey, you can be a real asshole sometimes!" Then he banged me into the truck and started loading the clip again. "You wanna watch that," he said, "A lot of people don't like it."

Things were feeling pretty weird, not 'cause Dichard slammed me into the truck but, like, 'cause there was no laughing goin' down. I sorta chuckled and brushed myself down and said, "Aw gee, sorry, man. I just thought that . . . you know?"

He had his back to me and he said: "Brucey, don't think. You know you're not very good at it." He started walkin' the other way, off toward the mountain, "Come on," he said, "Let's go find that watchman."

There were no lights on in the watchman's shed. About halfway there Dichard

turned around so suddenly that I almost walked into him 'cause I was walkin' lookin' down at the ground. He had to put his arm up to stop me and he stood there with his straightarm between us and the gun hanging limp in his other hand and he said, all quiet like, "What would you do without me, Brucey? Like if I were gone?" As soon as he said it he let go and started walkin' again in his Dad's old army coat with the Mauser gun at the end of his arm.

I felt totally weird after that. I dunno how to say it but it was like he'd already gone, like I was already all alone. Dichard wasn't only my best friend. He was my only friend. He was the only person who'd ever been nice to me at all . Ever. I'd really never ever done anything that I hadn't done with Dichard, if you know what I mean. He started walkin' really fast when we got closer to the watchman's shed. Faster and faster, then he let loose with the Mauser, firing into the wood and the windows and the door and everything. He kept goin' all the time and when the gun was empty he was at the door which he kicked open really nasty and hard and loud in the night. But there was no one there.

Dichard just kept going. He stomped right through the shack, kicked open the back door and he started reloading the gun, but he still kept goin'.

About halfway up the mountain he finally stopped and waited for me. He was cuddling the stupid gun again. He was waitin' for me but he didn't care a shit. When I came up he said: "The old lady came back tonight, Brucey—five fucking years! Jesus! Why couldn't she just stay away?" I didn't say anything. It was extra weird. He wasn't

really even talkin' to me. He was talkin' to the fuckin' gun! "It's a bad scene, man," he said, "really, really bad—the worst! I can't go back there, can't show up in town, gotta be hittin' the long road, man, gotta be cuttin' out."

"Why?" I said and I was shittin' scared, "she won't stay long, for sure!"

He looked up at me and for the first time that night he really was lookin' at me. His eyes were kinda yellow 'cause I was used to the darkness and all and he said, and for the first time that night he was really talking to me, and he said, really sincere like: "I killed the bitch, Brucey—shot her five fuckin' times." But that's not when he started laughing. He fired the gun five times into the air and then he pushed me really suddenly so that I fell right down on my ass. When I was gettin' up he was looking down at me shaking his head. "You're a total idiot," he said, "you know that don't you, Brucey? You are, without a doubt, the stupidest person anybody's ever met." That's when he started laughing and he laughed really, really loud into the night and he laughed and he laughed and he laughed. And for the first time in all the time I'd known him he was laughing at me.

It was weird what came over me and I really freaked-out. I was on my knees and I grabbed him so hard by the leg that I bounced him off the ground. I jumped up and I kicked him and kicked him and kept kickin' him. But he wouldn't stop laughing. Then I saw the gun where it was lying and I snagged it up but he was laughing too hard to even notice me. I grabbed it by the trigger and it fired five fast shots into Richard where he lay. It fuckin' loved it! I mean it. It kicked like to almost break my hand right off the end of

my arm but after each kick it levelled itself o'ff, aimed itself back at Dichard and fired again. Five times! Then for a minute all the shots and the laughin' still howled into the night. After that the silence came, real nasty and dark and everything. It was like five minutes before I even bothered to breathe or anything again. It was sorta like being inside a huge gasp. I wasn't really scared—I was just scared, if you know what I mean; but mostly I didn't know what to do.

That's when Dichard showed up outa nowhere, slappin' me on the back and showing me where to dig the grave.

Configuration

“This is insane.”

“Relax. He’s coming.”

In the corner an old bible rusts diligently away and there’s a Tiffany dragonfly atop the frayed ikeaaware at frumpy bedside. The place stinks of anticipation. In it there must be two men. One is bald, flabby, nervous and sweaty. The other ineluctably swarthy, muscled, confident and sauna-clean. But where is Dr. Strange?

“Relax? This is my package, man.”

“So, hang in. It’ll all be over soon enough.”

The short man haunts the left periphery of the darkened window. He’s pressed in between the curtain and the grungy wall watching the lampglow street scene two floors down. The rain has stopped and the wet patches glisten like dark holes in the two-dimensional fabric of his sweaty stare. He feeds himself another cigarette, then turns to the other man and the yellow room to light it.

"You figure Strange might be running away right now?"

"Why, Sid? He's got nothing to fear."

Sid wears shaggy tights, flap shoes and a plumber's sleeveless undershirt. He also wears green leather gloves and has a hunting knife duct-taped to his calf. Since he got out he has thought of nothing but his package. The tall man wears absolutely nothing. He doesn't need to or have to. His body is clothed in itself. In his nakedness he dazzles like a god.

"Maybe he thinks I'm deranged."

"Sid, believe me, he's coming."

Sid snorts. He stretches back, tickles the curtains apart and sleazes a last, over-the-shoulder checkie down on the street scene. The tall man is lying across a leather armchair, opposite the bedside securely behind the door. Sid goes over and sits on the bed. He takes the fat frog ashtray into his lap and gazes down at the carpet. There's a triangle of droplet stains across at his feet. He finds them immediately compelling. They dangle above the lesser stains and filth like freshly-spilt coffee or forgotten blood. Their image automatically floats. Sid isn't sure how long he should stare at them. He wants to achieve progression. Time is still seething aimlessly. It's still just a charged void, as if his stasis hasn't really ended.

"What if I *am* deranged, McGregor? I could be. I've had more than enough cause."

"Sid. You're *not* crazy."

Sid looks up carefully, eyes bulging. He is repulsed by the tall man's swim of smug affluence; his flashy, designer genes and select-structured perfection. He knows McGregor expects to kill or be killed. It isn't Sid's sort of thing but his hatred readies him. It swills inside him like latent nausea: a sheltered lust that only insane action will ever satisfy. He looks back to the spots. Nothing can happen without preamble.

"All I want is my package."

"Sure, Sid."

To the curb below, through the arc swath of its mist-zested highbeams, arrives an immaculate 1952 Cadillac. It has mock wheels, with broad white-walled tires, but its propulsion is ultramodern. The whole car is gold electroplate, with gold mirrored glass. It hums and glows at curbside. The horn toots, then triple honks. Sid is instantly to the window, seeing the Caddie down through the edge glimpse.

"It's gold! It's gotta be the Doctor."

"Or his agents."

Nothing happens at the Caddie. It just hums and glows and waits. So does McGregor. Sid stays at the window, expecting more. There is now a series of honks and a loud, impatient huff-hum from the car.

"He expects us to go down."

"Yeah. Well don't be forgetting who *he* is."

Sid has known John Strange since grade three. He's got a lifetime of memories, many of them very ugly: a long trail of nasties, all with accompanying laughter. Strange is strange, different, but no worse than McGregor. Neither can be trusted. Together they

violated Sid's package. Together they destroyed his life. It's foggy, horrible baggage, like nitro on the brain. Sid shudders. The Caddie is the next progression. He's eager to just go down. He slouches into displayed ineffectuality and crosses carefully to the door. McGregor rises behind him.

"Sid. Trust me; hate me; kill me—whatever. But realize that I am on your side. I went along with putting you in stasis. But I, alone, got you out."

"You were damn quick about it too."

"Sid, believe me, I've been on it all these years. It took exactly what it took."

Sid turns over-the-shoulder to face McGregor. Their eyes meet only for a telltale nanosecond glitch before Sid must dart wolfishly away, staggered by a sear of psychotic hatred. His spine inexplicably mainlines adrenaline. He squashes the doorknob to the point of unlatch and clutches for focus on the printed regulations. Dizziness pounds behind his eyes. His rage is insane, and it's totally apart from anything that's actually come down. It's as if McGregor were wearing some sort of insidious mind warping perfume. Something synthetic in his perfection demands barehanded beheading, as if his sole purpose was to be victim to Sid's vengeance. Sid lurches for the hallway, for safety, so he can breath.

"I want my package, McGregor. That's all."

McGregor has three dark spots, three mesmerising imperfections against the continuous slope of his smoothness. They descends mildewed concrete stairs. The light is incandescent, yellowing upon McGregor's descending flank and his obnoxious *Alexis*

Model 57 genitalia. Sid is absolutely empowered by imploding rage but does not feel it. What he feels is dancey fever. He's pure electric air-filled, seeing the spots as splotches, dazzled by his own embaggaged memory and surfing sensations of all the old hurts. He grapples the handrail and yanks himself downward with intense, white-knuckled clutches. He is much too focused to have ordinary awareness. His feet have lost the ground. He really is inside the triangle of spots, floating against an imaginary towline. He knows it's pure dementia and he loves it. It's easy joyous. He's strapped to righteousness and towed by vision, kiting like a steel balloon down a dank spiral. His left arm starts to throb. It has become a surrealistic power—prime to squantch McGregor. Everything is onomatopoetic *thrill*. All he is is power. McGregor is a naked nobody. Sid can toss him at any time, without a flex, effortlessly—clean. It won't matter, won't affect either of them in any way: just a quick, unfriendly slap on the back. It is clearly the thing to do. Sid stalks like an eagle; swerving, diving, swooping; all electric and inflated.

Then, in the dull flash of a burnt-out landing, the tail of the handrail breaks off jagged steel into his psychopathic grasp. Suddenly everything is tactile. Now he feels. feels himself a younger man with a shock of flame-red hair and great power in his thighs and triceps. He feels all his ripoff and anger and hatred and dementia rage up into the great, gnarled muscles of his arm; feels the surge of satisfaction at the release to action; feels the explosion of contact with McGregor snapping inexplicably back against the thrust; feels the grinding stab of justification, twisting inch by inch through flesh and bone and gore, and the surprise, laughy slip of bursting clean through; feels with infinite delight the pissed-off thrust-off flick of wrist that sends McGregor, twisting to parting

backglance, all gore-enshrouded, tumbled and torn to pieces bouncing down the pointy spiral.

McGregor lies sprawled in slippery blood across the second next landing. His eyes bulge starring upward into a strangely extra-wattage bulb. Sid skips kidlike over the mess, without conscience. It was effortless and spontaneous, totally unSidlike, triumphantly amoral fun fun fun. And it was absolutely experiential, a sensory extravaganza—a brainstem surge with hormonal self-appeasement. He strolls into the lobby assured that it was the easiest resolution, ultimately the only real, final and safe resolution, and probably the greatest moment ever in his entire life.

The night is soft and warm with fleshy mist in reams everywhere. Waiting at the Caddie's open door is the single most amazing woman Sid has ever seen, then or now. It is, and clearly is not, Elaine. She is much more perfect, with modern purchased perfection but she is exact enough to the original to be clone or reconstruction or even renovation.

"Easy, Sid," comes a chuckle from the driver's seat. "That's my daughter, Chancey."

Chancey wears crosses on both her nipples; one up, one down; and a plaid, pleated greenskirt. She has luxuriant golden hair, lush upon her back and belly, and thick and long under her arms. It flows in sweeps not curls, down all around her thighs and calves and out onto huge feet. Her toes are slender, splayed and webbed. Her breath is husky and supersweet and close around Sid in the mist. Her tan is immaculate, her nose stunningly borderline-ugly, her muscle hard, her surface soft. Her eyes blaze with consciousness.

She opens the backdoor, all smile, way too close, and slides into the plush canyon beside Sid. Everything is deep and low in the Caddie. It sways away from the curb.

"Is that really you up there, Strange?"

"Sure, Sid—Baby. It's me."

"Oh yeah. And are you perfect like everybody else?"

"No, Sid. I'm grossly fat. I'm fucking obese, Sid Baby—I'm a blubber balloon."

His fatman's laughter explodes into the car; deep, rich, rolling; immense in the confined steel.

"Oh, Siddhartha. It's good to have you back. But where's McGregor, eh, ya murdering bastard? Down some inky stairwell?"

Sid perks up his ears. The possibilities are endless—none of them good. "That's a suspiciously accurate guess, Doctor," he says, flatly.

"Is it?" Strange laughs it off. "I just figure—he ain't here, where else could he be?"

Dr. Strange drives fast and hard and laughs harder. His laughter is slippery, fluid and forced. Sid is quietly heartened. He knows he isn't the only one anxious. The Caddie swoops low over obscure roads, rolling with the fake, fat laughter. Sid recognizes the route. Strange is taking him back for the rendez vous he missed before. The night before last to Sid: twenty-seven years ago. The night they didn't wait for him, couldn't wait, all christmas-kiddylike, to scan all three futures—and steal his. And good old Dr. Strange, acting lickety-split to slam him in stasis and steal his widowed bride. Sid is bubbly anxious for his moment with the Doctor. He can sense with thrill the speed of its approach: a

swarming exhilaration of forward progression—an ongoing expectant gasp. He rides in quiet, assured joy.

Strange is having trouble holding up his laughter against the silence. His brain is churning away between chuckles—scheming. Sid can smell it goin' down. Chancey is all-athrill, like Sid. He can feel her intensity sparkling away beside him and her gaze craving hard at the side of his face.

“She thinks she’s in love with you, Sid.”

Cued, Chancey snuggles in. Sid is instinctively drawn round into the close smell of her breath. Her stare is undiluted adoration; dark crystal blue-steel-blue and radiant with scary love love love. He is caught shocked, whiplashed away—but snagged involuntarily captivated. This isn’t a dazed puppylove stare. It offers no submission, just a bold, gut reality. Sid has seen it exactly before, in an earlier backseat, with an earlier Dr. Strange scheming away behind the wheel.

“No kiddin’, Sid. She’s got it bad for you and she even knows exactly who you are. She knows everything about you. Your story is like a bible to her. Pictures of you line her bedroom like a shrine. And she’s kept herself for you, Sid. She’d never met you or had any proof that you’d ever get out.—How about that, eh?”

Sid moves her condescendingly away. It doesn’t seem to faze her. “You must have brainwashed her,” he sneers.

Strange’s laughter rings comfortably real. “I didn’t,” he chuckles. “Her mother did. But not to love you. No, Baby: to kill you. Vengeance, if you managed to kill me. But that’s all behind us now. She’s dead Sid. Just yesterday. And now you’re free, eh?”

The realization pierces Sid's chest in a long, hard gasp. He knew Elaine was dead. He had no idea it connected to his release.

The old picnic ground hasn't changed even a mousehole in the last twenty-seven years. It is a narrow spit of sand, tables and pines laid out between the town road and the river. It is all very still and crunchy silent with sliver moonset and euphoric summer air. Chancey politely takes herself out of the picture. She discards her skirt and niplots, strides, dives, and swims. The Doctor is some time adjusting himself free of the car, then some time more in lumbering over to the nearest picnic table. Sid goes around to a convenient tree, stretches up against it, and waits for the fat man to cross. Dr. Strange, whatever he may have once been, is a slabbed mountain of flesh, decked resplendent in a sweatsoaked hawaiian, pink panties, and wellingtons. He plunks himself down atop the table and pulls forth stuff, seemingly from out his belly, weaponry first, of course, a *Snuff-All Eliminator*, in pistol form, which he places on the table and pats lovingly for Sid. Then, in quick, easy-arc tosses, he throws Sid a beer, a joint, a flask and a lighter. While Sid juggles and catches Strange takes out a single thick black sillycard which he holds ransom for Sid to see.

Sid throws the flask back, cracks the beer, sparks the dobbie and eyes his package. Just seeing it is a joy of progression that he'd never really considered possible. Out of the archive, into Strange's lockup, and now here; real: reachable.

"Okay, Sid. Don't get all salivatey on me now. It's here. It ain't quite yours yet. There are problems, as I'm sure you've guessed. Scared the golden shit right outa us,

Baby—I can tell ya.”

“Scared? That’s a frail excuse for stealing another man’s life, Doctor.”

“Now, Sid. We all stole ‘em together. We all stole out our own. We just happened to scan yours. We had to, Sid. We were freaked. We’d seen ours.”

Sid is deadly electric calm. He downs half the beer and tosses the can aside. His anger, for now, is just a thing of bitter speech. “You asshole! You closed me down. That’s worse than dead, Doctor. I been wandering comatose all these years, bouncing off of fucking walls! Eating, shitting, bouncing, jerking around like a wind-up clown!”

“Come on, Sid. You didn’t know what hit you. You didn’t know a damn thing until yesterday.”

“That doesn’t matter shit, Doctor. You put me there. Period. You. Not McGregor. You threw that switch. Only you could have.”

“You don’t understand. We had to close you down. It was in your package. We didn’t change anything, Sid. Stasis was your future. It was part of all our configurations.”

Sid arches hard against the tree, whipsnaps his neck and smacks his head back. It cracks loud into the crispy silence. “Fuck! We stole them to be free, Doctor! Didn’t we? Isn’t that what it was all about?”

“We stole ‘em to know!”

“You’re a fuckin’ asshole. To know?! So what do you know? What happens next?”

Sid flicks the roach aside and takes a sudden, careful step closer to Strange. The Doctor tosses down the package and scoops up the gun. "That you can find out for yourself," he says, "if you want to. I brought you a better ending, Sid—a happy ending: the woman of anyone's dreams and," he tosses down another fat card, a gold one, "self-renewal. You can take it or leave it. I'm getting back into that Caddie and cruisin' on outa here. That's the way it's gotta be."

Strange leans to shift his blubber free of the table. Sid steps up, slaps the Doctor's fat cheek, and easily wrenches the gun away.

"Okay! What else, fatman? What fuckin' else?!"

"Nothing, Sid. I swear it. I didn't scan your life. I couldn't. It was too weird, Baby—I swear."

"You're a lying fuckin' coward!"

"No. I swear, Sid. I scanned the incident. That's all."

"Oh come on, Strange! You've had my disc for twenty-seven fucking years."

"We only had the neuro pods that night, Sid. And I swear I couldn't watch. I was shaking. It was them. It was McGregor and Elaine. They scanned everything, over and over again."

"Elaine?! You son of a spayed bitch! Elaine?"

"She was no good, Sid. *She* told me your future. She droned it into me. She used our futures—yours and mine—to torture me for years."

Sid steers with the gun, walking Strange clear of the table. He scoops up both cards and the car keys, and circles back to the Caddie side of Strange. "You snuffed me

to have her," he spits, "pure and fucking simple. Why lie? You're dying either way. You might as well start telling the fucking truth."

"It is the truth. I swear. She was McGregor's all along. You and I she just wanted to hurt. She married me, then rode every cock from here to neverland. Mostly McGregor."

"So, just how bad did you hate him, Johnnie?"

"How bad do you hate the father of your daughter, Sid?"

"I'd say killing bad. Somebody killed him. And it wasn't me. I did the deed, but I didn't do the killing. It's in my package." He waves the black card. "I know. I lived it. But I didn't do it. Someone wrote it into me. *You*, Doctor. You rewrote my fuckin' life!" Sid steps up and threatens the Doctor with an enraged fist. Strange stares back with hard, level eyes. Sid snorts and steps back, straightarming the Snuff-All.

"I didn't tamper with your configuration, Sid. I swear it! If I'd wanted to kill McGregor I'd have killed him here—with you—the way it was supposed to be. And I had the opportunity. But I didn't kill anyone. Did I? I just tried to offer you freedom."

"Your credibility is fuckin' frail, Doctor," sneers Sid. Chancey comes up beside him, steamy from her swim. He lowers the Snuff-All into a more relaxed aim. "Someone conceived what I did in that stairwell," he barks. "It wasn't me. And I doubt if it was McGregor. Which just leaves you."

"Elaine," says Strange, definitively. "It's exactly her style, Baby, believe me."

"Like shit! Like fuckin' shit, Doctor," snaps back Sid. Righteousness fuels his rage. He cranks the Snuff-All up to full charge.

"Ask Chancey!" Strange points in desperation. "Ask her. She knows. She had a new *uncle* every visit for chrissake. Ask her. Ask her about her mother. She knows everything. Elaine made a special point of hammering it all into her. Ask her!"

Sid glances quickly at Chancey. She has her arms folded across her breasts, squared repugnant at Dr. Strange. Her eyes are sparkling fire and she has a deep, sleazed smile for Sid. He shakes his head at the Doctor and hardens up his aim.

"Elaine tried to abort her, Sid. Chancey barely survived. The day she came home Elaine smothered her half-dead in her crib. It's true. Ask her. Elaine couldn't kill her so she had her brainwashed. Look at her, Sid. She'll kill you instantly if you kill me. That's what you meant to Elaine. That's all anything meant to that bitch! But don't believe me. Ask Chancey. Ask *her* about her mother!"

Sid looks to Chancey. She turns to him with sour lips and honest eyes. "Yeah," she says thickly, "it's true." She rolls her lips over into a lush smile. "That's why I'm for you, Sid," she says. "I love you. The hypnosis was bullshit. Nothing could make me kill you." She turns to glare at Doctor Strange. "But I'll kill *for* you in a flash."

"No," smiles Sid. "He's mine."

"Come on, Sid," patronizes Strange. "You're not a killer. You're just not the type."

"I am now. You made me a killer, Johnnie. But I bet you had no idea how much I'd enjoy it. Or how much I'm gonna fuckin' enjoy this!"

One touch of the trigger deconstitutes Dr. Strange and about half the picnic ground. There's a great crashing of disassembled tree parts, settling of sand: silence. Sid

looks to Chancey. She relaxes with a happy laugh and smiles.

“Those Snuff-All’s are single-shot, Sid.”

They wheel around. McGregor is sitting on the front fender of the Cadillac. He has weaponry, in pistol form. This is quite a different McGregor. This one is recognizably real, even old, and totally unclonelike. Sid understands but compulsively tries his gun before casting it aside. He laughs and stands with his palms clearly open.

“Elaine reconfigured you, Sid,” says McGregor. “She hated you—hated all of us. And everything she did, from that night on, she did for hatred. She was the consummate bitch. She wanted an ending where we were all dead. She tampered with your package, Sid. She carried it for years trying to rewrite it. Only the stairwell worked. But it was somehow supposed to. It wasn’t originally in your package, but the clone decoy was in mine. And I bet everything Elaine did was in hers. These configurations are beautiful, Sid. They’re absolutely tight. There’s no escaping them.”

“So. You gonna kill me, Asshole?”

McGregor laughs long and hard. “No, Sid,” he smiles. “Your package is yours. I leave the two of you here.”

Anticipation

The eskimo terrorist kept floating shifty glances at Marlz. Each look cruised the distance between them on its own textured wave and on arrival felt like the flickerama tongue of an irate sparrow. The attention tickled, but it also probed and was, for Marlz, a little too reminiscent of those old-time sensor systems. He poised himself in actively avoiding any perceptible unnerve. The cargo, of course, was safe.

“Hey!—Marlz!”

The words oiled through the autumn air and settled with exactly the bite they were intended to possess: eskimo-terrorist-omnipotent-FRIEND. Marlz did not allow himself to become properly enlightened. He turned normally to watch eleven or so intensely fashionable children who were playing adultly amongst the arches of the Znort Tower. The afternoon was luxurious with lazy, slanted sunlight drifting into a hearthside illumination. Long shadows set bars across the grounds leaving the intermediate, functioning space soft with the comforting illusion of the cozy glow. Deeper shadow was, however, stacked like slab concrete around the external peripheries. There the shiverish

taste of autumnal downslide waited contentedly. Change notwithstanding everything floated with the serene aroma of neatness and order.

“The cargo is no longer safe, Marlz.”

Marlz lingered over various potential responses long enough to make reply redundant. His silence had already said enough. The eskimo took a chunk of seal blubber from his brushed-aluminum carcass carrier and proceeded to tear off toss-sized tidbits for the pigeons. He looked neuroreceptive but not thoughtful and his distracted presence broadcast a sense of suspended complaisance. Marlz worked at watching the performed antics of the children. The eskimo gave off feeding the birds, stood up, and lofted the remainder slab of blubber lightly around with the flat of his right hand, seeming to weigh its areodynamics. Then he fastballed this chunk at one of the numerous, tasteful “*NO ANYTHING*” signs, to which it adhered with a noticeable splat. He came over and stood before Marlz.

“So be it,” he declared avuncularly. “That which can only be, will be.” Then he slowly dematerialized.

Marlz missed the rounded cryptic. His attention had been suddenly, irreparably, drawn to a small splat of sparrow vomit on the bench seat beside him. It had a mystifying harmony within the varnished wood as if it had been deposited inside the rings of the living tree and glorified, as anomaly, by every stage of finishing production. Marlz could not dimensionalize his perception. The whitegreen of the stain floated willfully through the layered construction of the wood: contained behind the dark bars of grain which its own truth as reality, as bird barf, obscured. The vomit was undoubtedly small sister to the seal

blubber and Marlz didn't need to look at the sign to know that its words and surface stain would interchange with the same floating pulse. It was however the sign that he stared at, distanced in the same spiralled perception as the bench had been and equally humiliating in that he still did not own a single thought to contrast the vision.

The cargo had to be safe. What could eskimo terrorists or sparrow vomit know about it anyway? They couldn't possibly know. Marlz had escaped the matrix. He was now a participating member of the underweave, free of implants, free from perfect order: a true wolf—uncaged. But still his inbred paranoia nibbled at his sense of undirected selfdom; the endless summer days of shortpanted exploration through uncharted meadows, the tailor-fitted bandaids precisely prepared and waiting for his kneescraped return. Prediction was too perfect to be effected without contrivance. The object must have floated against his stable perception. He looked again to the sparrow vomit. It was as it should be. The seal blubber too stayed external on the sign.

One of the children unleashed a series of controlled shrieks which blended ideally into the inescapable fragrance of constructed neatness. It seemed incongruous that trees and stone and grass should smell so faintly and purely of themselves. The aroma was not sterile. It was constant, even its deviations, constant to always stay what it was most apt to stay, always in the range of unperfumed clean and always possessing somewhere the elusive, wispy taste of Mom's suburban kitchen, with adults lingering over coffee and cookies cooling from the oven. Marlz turned in response to the child's gleeful shouts. He turned uneasily, not because movement was alien but rather because he did not move at all. His head pivoted like an apparatus while the remainder of his body, caged within

itself, stayed fixed in its potential for movement. The children were playing, just as before, a game which showed no meaning. The thick glowglare of the setting sun and the lengthening, strengthening shadows had now framed a second Zmort Tower along the ground and a third, dimensionally, in the sculptured air between the other two. Each tower preserved the structure of arches, ribs and vaults from the original and the children seemed to play within the stone, light and shadow boundaries of the three-fold casting. Benevolence smiled too securely upon them, too precognitively. It squashed the power of their innocence as surely as it locked their giggled shrieks in cushioned air.

When Marlz turned from the children—turned to move, to get up, to run barekneed into his own distant meadow—the eskimo was beside him sitting exactly where the bird barf should have been.

“See what I mean?” he didn’t say, and Marlz reached instinctively to the fresh, beak-shaped scar at the hairline behind his left ear. He did not find it without a moment’s panic. “Is the cargo safe, Marlz? Can it ever be?”

Marlz wanted to reply “Then can it even exit?” but he didn’t know this until after he had already, antagonistically blurted: “What do you want from me!?”

“I wholeheartedly want you somehow to win.”

Somehow to win? Marlz’s father, the sheep with newborn, wolfish offspring had voiced this selfsame wolfish want. Surely the glow was now exactly the same? Surely that original, here reinforced, had been true underweave, born in the first scream of Marlz’s genetic being before his variability had even become known? Surely the patriarchal sheep’s knee had merely given it unto life in words?

The scream rose again within him, like the blubber smear from out of the metallic recess of the sign's structure, to the forefront, to obscure the words. He turned it against the eskimo, in words, in patted knee, in the purple vomit of an escaped bird. "But you cannot *want!*" he spewed in disbelief.

"Then the cargo can exist, can't it?" replied the eskimo. He looked shaky at best. He stood on uncertain knees and carried himself back to a facing point of distance. His look spiralled ineffectively at Marlz. "But you yourself are its peril," he said, "All else is security."

It was generally assumed that the matrix was complete but this was not at all the case. There were quite a number of diverse things which had either escaped categorization or had been deemed irrelevant to the actual unfolding of the totality. Among this group there were still even some humans, very very few, yet they did exist. To a certain extent their potential to effect the totality of guaranteed randomness had been generated as a continuing factor within the variability of the matrix itself. A great deal of theoretical dispute had long centered on this point because the security of the pure matrix was paradoxically hinged within and without its externalization. It could not, of course, externalize to facilitate, or seek facilitation of, the remaining underweave—or, more truly, extraweave—elements. It could not, either, fail to do so given that its externalization was a generated realization of the predictive totality itself. Maximum randomness had provided perfect order for 117 years, 61 days, nine hours and six minutes before Marlz, age eleven hours, had been categorized and his component variability entered into the

whole. Only then was it finally known that the theoretical anomaly would actually exist. The matrix had, therefore, peaked and begun to decay at that very second. Ultimately it could only be reconstituted as its own antithesis.

Those extremely rare humans who were functionally external to global totality were more elusive than a sasquatch. Not that they had ever been sought but rather that they persistently alienated themselves from even the possibility that seeking might occur. They lived in the most obscure backwater pockets and here encounters had occurred, but never interaction of any kind and always within the expectations of the precise unfolding of the predictive matrix. Marlz's situation was completely different. His was the situation where the external world would actually effect the internal, and since the effecting variables were not known the effect could not be predicted. Everything had been left to chance, even against the interventionist pleadings of some noted theorists, and chance had performed exactly as expected: up to and including the malfunctioning of the eskimo terrorist.

Marlz persistent pressure to possess his own will was redundant. It was antithetical to the very idea of will, and he knew it, had always known it. Individual will was the single basis of the entire system, chance was will, without it the matrix could not function. He actually admitted it aloud to himself as he drove: "I am caged only by my obsession with cages." He stressed the words with a definitive thump of the tiller but they did not take root in the bile of his obsession. They were swept back with the glassy chunks of darkness and the fleshy wisps of mist, pounded through the reassuring throb of

the three-inch jets as the Puschnar gobbled up the archaic backcountry road. "If my life is a story then I myself am just its pawn!" he exclaimed defiantly to the glass shroud of the cockpit and to the external mass beyond. "Its pawn! Its pawn!" he shouted to that mass, to the nonmeadow of gnarled mutant alders that enveloped the road. "I want to be its hero," he thought silently, guardedly, afraid that a tailored bandaid would await this presumptive wound. But what he really wanted, needed to be was narrator.

Marlz is over-cruising the Puschnar, hyperhovering at plusmach up the abandoned 321—away from the conduit, free of guidance; just a dancin' the hairpins on the treelined antique asphalt. He is driving, not thinking, and is really in tune. The sensors are being processed directly by his brain. He is, of course, way overdriving their capacity. He is expecting anything else that might be out there to be on its own side and, at very least, have old-style sensors. He is not at all counting on Joe Yahoo coming round that dandy 'S'curve in his ancient gasoline truck, piss drunk and driving okay indeed without even headlights.

Joe was, in fact, seeing a bit better than Marlz. Joe had at least managed to see the moose, which is how, and all of why, he happened to be in Marlz's lane at the critical blind spot of the curve.

The fireball was so shortlived that only Slim had a chance to see the massive glare approaching through the forest before he and his brother, Plim, were snuffed out. They were half a mile away so neither of them had even a faint hope of living long enough to

hear the explosion. All of ten round acres of mutant alders heard it though, dying slowly, incinerated in a perfect gyre of aerial art. It certainly gave Marlz a glimpse of hesitated memory when he came to. He knew he'd been reconstructed and he knew he no longer understood his self. The cargo was on display in the lobby.

Enzone

I sit suspiciously in the pubic park, swucking back a fragmentation lozenge, a licorice *enzone*. Enzones are the drug of choice for the twenties youth and for old droggles like me, still looking to reach over the edge.

The sun is sultry. The leaves are fleshy, like shimmering lizards. Over in the sandstorm the children are colonizing with plastic trucks. The rest of the kid's sextant; the swings, the carrousel, the junglegym—the stuff of steel and structure—is abandoned. Just the mothers out in the shade exchanging strays.

A whole lozenge is always too much. I rewarped what's left and stuff it into my polecat for later. Enzones were originally enveloped for speech therapy. They enhance wernickeal activity, but among hallucinogenic effects, like an *acid* electric wench between thought and thinking. It's already coming on. The word twangles are just the burgeoning.

I realize that I'm being stared at from bedtime and turn slowly, over my smolder, dizzy, leaned into the first real lathe of rushes. There are two young wolvers right aghast from me, staring from behind the plankton. One giggles bashful when I turn. The other

just keeps smiling, beautiful as a coddess. She gifts up. I jerk back to looking at the chilblains. She swirls around and enscrolls herself directly in front of my gauze.

"May I join you?" she asks, all seashells.

"Sure, if you like," I humble. I look up and in a louder vortex confess: "But, honestly; I've just gastrated a drug that fucks up my acclivity to think and squeak. I doubt if I can say a complete sentience without at least one wry word."

She sits instantly aspire me. "I knew it!" she chirps. "You're on enzones!"

"Yup."

"Oh wow! I love zones. Got one for me?"

It's too temping. She's about twenty with rose-twisted hair and laughing green mice. She has a killer smile, curled from lascivious lips, and she carries herself with the easy grace of a wolfrap. I like her. I want to trip with her. I reach into my picnic and profile my half-spent loose-end. She smiles, unwraps it, and pops it into her mother. We exchange insider gazelles. In minutes neither of us will be able to speak at owl. I pull myself fandangle. "We gotta move on," I mango to spay.

"Oh yeah, totally!" she wafts. "And I know exactly what we're gonna do!" She juts up, all excited, clicking the college around in her keys. "We're gonna do something absolutely and totally amazing—we're gonna rob a bank!"

"Sure."

"No. I'm serious." She dismembers her friend and ducks back down. "Let's do it," she winkles in my ear. "It's amazing. It's perfect. And we'll score a whack of cash."

"We'd get coughed."

"No way. Come on. Come on!" Her breath is swat and sashay in my eel. "Just say 'yes'. It'll be amazing, and totally easy. We'll be tripping. We won't know what we're doing. And then it'll be done."

"No. Let's just dowel something infesting speech."

"I'll take that for a yes." She dubs her hands together. "Right on," she announces, "it's agreed." She swandives the look of her lozenge. "No more, eh?"

"Not ragglely."

"Okay. I've got to ditch Suzy, and borrow her gun. We'll need thatch." She's cliquing through her words with her tinker tapping at her leaf. "I'll be right back," she sails. She runs dangling over to her fern. They excrete briefly and hug. She shoes kipling back, a little eight of breath. "Okay," she says. "I got it. Let's go."

"Sure." I strangle up. I'm not pointy to rob any bank. I'm just toying to get toying. I'm deep in rush city. Big rime! I have to get pulling snow-ware, anyweave—just to get owing. My pony chance is to go skipping off wiltshire out of the crumbling parch. I'm with her like a fart.

The sun is white and smelting hot. The green is lust as thick ovenware. My vista and peace, even my piece to myself, inside my branflake, is fucked. I'm last in neuterland, everything is snuft and vibrant, even the transvestite under my feast. I jig along swilling at everyone, talking to leashed gods and babies, swirling and dancing, all jiffy through the sidewalk corrals. As soon as I'm molting I don't feel as stoned and she's

leeching. I feel found and waif to prolix. I crotch up to her and steady her, all woozily, with my horns on her wombats.

“Name?” I clasp out.

“Alex,” she says. “Yours?”

“Zedbudgy,” I say; “Teddler—Tedridgie!”

We're very clothes. She trowels her arts around me and blitzes me all-out. I don't know howl long it basks but I can blithely stodge afterwards. “Come on.” She snipes away. “This is cowlng to be totally wicked.” She turns plaque up ahead and gives me a gaggle of turf, nudgy headjerks to the loft. I'm having troutwire negotiating the exploding trainstation of the post-kiss wolf and barely see her aburst. Then I stylewise that it's a bank. Then she disappears. I sash forward, parsniped, crashtest that I've claused her, but she is rife there and grapples knee and yanks me into the goalie behind the bowel. She's all glossed and laughy. We go runic drown to fluid some blackboard steps. She's looking wilely hampered. She kisses me again. Songster. The lust is tabasco. It's slogidly mutual and on the enzones it's rottwieler. She gasps away. “After,” she soars.

“Badger? Badger what?”

“The boink, Tedridge,” she sniggles, all ploy. “You're not groining to back out, are you?”

“You're swaggie. I'm not enough to verb a blot.”

“Why not?”

“I doubt even troy you.”

"Rubbish! I bet you'd fluff me in a second."

"That's tradeseecret."

"No way. We're tangley amazing together. We can do anything. We can slim down the snazziest prank ever."

"This is paisley. And I don't want to augment anything paisley. It'll just seadog my tome."

"So let's jest do it."

"Quark? The bank tingle?"

"Yeah. Of corpse."

"You're sonorous?"

She tuck and dancey, alarmclocked, like a birthday gimbal. "Come on," she plebes. "Sleaze money. We'll make a forfeit in seconds. I know we can do this fling. I know it. We've got the poison. Totally. We can do this, Tedridge. Psyche. I know we can."

"You're tracey. We wouldn't stare a glance."

"We're both crazy, Wedster. Slitheal crazy. That's what gives us the ebb. We'll be swim and out like nothing. Instarich. Here, hold tits." She hands me the come. I look at it and bask. It's cheap, demonic laughter, smite a wagging pirate. At best I can uncle it down to huge daughters. The world penguins into lactating triangles, shimmering monarchically into colours and plumtrees and more laughter and thrushes and around again. Rushes surge up ziederzee like bears into a buffoon. And still roar laughter and still boar hallucinations.

“Get it enabler, Tedridge! Come on.”

I hear her and ignite sneer. I don't wharf it together. I waft things more deranged. Hutch it's no good, she's teapotty coughed me down.

“Here, put sneeze over your heed. And graft me your shocks.” She's squabbling me her panties. She has undone the bottle of her schooldesk and gerbiled the flaps up into the pickets. All her pillowed chair is exposed. I'm oddly distrusted be the gun.

“Hey,” I say, “this is a toy.”

“Douse curry about that,” she says. “Puff these on your head and gimbal those sharks. Coif on! Get with it! We've got hooping to loose and friskloads of heart-thumping thrill to gobble. Period. Okay?”

Flowerpots you just have to trust and fireant and hope that everything is pointy to hydrate just fine. I take off my snowtires. The gesture feels amazing; the postman on my balls, the polyture and urban moral chandler, the hedgehog truth of her thick labia, and the pitch by pinch thrill and gigantic garage of my sudden erection. WOW! I know I can dowel tanglefoot.

“Oh man! We are hone-frieze,” she says and she tugs her waggies down over my head. I feel like I scream eight-inch plies. She spawns one larva of my sparks as a hood. The weasel she pats over her seminary. She tastes back the glyph. I haven't moved. I arm my incubation. She kisses me a thick snaz and stands flat. She locus straight and ominous, with eyes like a golfwarden. “I'm only zoning to say this ounce,” she says, “'cause the affront to be straight is a ream drag on my stone. But surely you toll that.” She cocks her head and dogbones my snare. “I mean, you're an oil back, you know the

pontiff of all this—of enzones and neverthing? It's is to get passed the edge: to eastward the big float and dangle the easy cruise. Why? 'Cause it's bare to do. There's no other razor to be here. So, come on. Let's do it."

Shared rushes serge up over us obstreperating tissuetown. We laugh into peach anther, rhomboid each other up. I know I hatch to go with her, swindler she goes, whatever she fuses. And, though I don't want to adscript it, I swank to poodle the fleece. I've always singently wanted to. I want inbred fee money. Prime time. And I'm caddy the chasm. I have to dance something real in unreality and I hero dance it now—ranch away! I'm antsyantsy dragon that we can pull it off. I torch off my wineglasses and piglet the sodden pizzle of imploding hallucinations, fighting to obese function and obese it even fluid and suave. I snakearm mine out abreast hers. I'm closing all reality scary fast. "Let's do it!" I spire, snagging but still sourly syntactic.

"Blight on, Wedgewiggie! Let's growl!"

My laughter unravels. I can't geese it down belfry hard randoms. "We don't need a plan or jewellery?" Hype snicker and laugh and hambone out.

"Naw. Weedless fuckin' do it!"

It's a vole bank, with drowned technician blinds and cork swimming-glass doors to the smoltz. We meathook through the twist door and giggle wadingpool in the foyer. She grieves me the 'shhhh' sign and yarbles open the insect flower. I playdoh her swagger in. The piano is standlamp, basil and deserted. It's grooming. The emergency lights meow. The potlatch is empty. So is the money smooch in the barn crater. Its yap-open gate

smirks intercity in the parsley. Everybody is all happy flute in wog shit, out in the buckle coating flashlights around a bald, white-collar lung on a slop ladder. He's motelling with phone spottings up in the squirrel tundra. Alexi, with my santa on her hutch and her pubis exhorted and the glance in her wand, sidevaults the railway schnauzer. And TV's them all.

"Hunks up!" She futons with the cake a couple of tripes. They flagon elm tree noticed her. "Hands off!" she yells, fraying migraine with the grotto. They all clean their emulsions at her and then drop them impresario. Whippet flushes burn singeing all through my McReady latched perspection. I highwire that they're prosthesis her cartire. All icecream in the snazzle snatch snerf of concentric triangles is the bickering adjacency of the licketyplat-lit money couch decor. I vest running sweater the vantage toward it. I'm stappling lift-off from abysmal silly heaven rushes, trick the floor shaving and tweezering away tangle moose teats, and every trickster in sight or sambo percolating witch and warlock at me. I'm laughing spasm jerk. It's a slow-mo gobbler, out of bassethound, gaining the money cradle like a lounge hutch. I'm all bassooned against the church post, gasping to get my dangling tour down to a sprinkler. Then, locust spree, I chew into the reindeer posture of the unhooked phone, angling forgotten at the ember of its cord, sideshow and silent—dead? I squirt it up, bustline its deafness, pity all its dead lies.

"Hey!—Their folks indeed!"

"Bob on! Horseradish the alarm too."

“Goncho.”

I spurt planktoning around, opening clones and horrors and claptrap. Swimmingpool I look blares more money: worsted, stacked, bilged, pickled—crated in brainflue blunders! The warning see, the more I chimney and teacosy and laugh, laugh, laugh. It's a peach gurgling tiger, antarctic, scaring the bitch out of the bank spiders. Their fear, across the blowfish, is laplander feedback for my rushes, hallucinations and laughter. I'm in subcutaneous simulcast, walloping bag after bingo with wreath bundles of knives, twenties, flichies, and haliburtons from the deep steel zebras. My heroes are moving by ten elves. I'm closet laughing instant colours. Heatingvent strangles into colours and wolfing money answers up swirl, swingset and swanglefoot. Rushes chintz over—sashwindow—rushes and laughter and teutonic, money-slurping field mice, all ezeziel in laughing colour with moneyburst snazzles. I keep snarking miserly money into bananas. I can't wildebeest soap I'm doing. All iced tea is colours. My laughter encodes inside the birth. My gulf is crinkled with twice-giggly rushes. I snarl till I've spanked four bags full, then bingomatically japeth them. Alicia is twelving the dachshund when I kiosk. I run sparrow her into the voyage. She ducks in behind, ungarbling the shorebirds from her head.

I'm through the eaglet of my piece. I zamboni the plastics from my head. I'm already breakfasting to come down.

“Coil on!” she wags. We go running and laughing, round the corner and into the skanky. Up past the dumpster she collapses into a toque of stifled giraffes. “My placebo!” she blurts and she pingpongs with a flailed, dead arm. There's sirens out up the

scream. "The perch!" she chortles. "Wire we wagstaffed!"

"Your place?"

She gnomes.

"Thatch one?" I point. She is pentacle with rushes. I have to cuttle her. But it is a short, easy walk.

Confession

The horizon is close and snarly succulent. The air is globular, with a stench of clinging lethargy. It is insanely, baking hot. Hatred and fear square off across the table but none of the other café patrons seems to notice.

“It’s already out of your control, Geoffrey.”

Her eyes sizzle sharp and blue. They’re wound cold-spring tight, spitting out a chill even in the obese heat. Geoff shies away from them. He doodles aimless patterns in the beaded dew along his beer glass. She looks thin, drawn, leathery, like she’s been living harsh exposure. Her loose white sundress hangs disparate, like a spurious statistic upon her hardened body. She stabs his bare thigh with the muzzle of her Glock. He doesn’t flinch. She gouges the gun up hard inside his shorts. Her voice is thick and moist: “You really can’t control it, you know.”

One-handed she takes off his long ago gift Rolex and studies the inscription. She dangles it like a dead mouse, taunting before him, then lays it gently down into the spilt beer and slams it with the ashtray, screwing and grinding, into the table.

Geoff just smirks at her. She eases the gun back out of his shorts. "What if I get up and walk away?" he asks. "You really gonna shoot me, Gabbo, here, in the crowd?"

She changes over like a splash and hammers him a snap wip to the kneecap with the gun. It is enough for sizzling but not permanent pain. Geoff doubles over to grab his knee. She draws back, both hands into her lap and loudly click-cocks the little automatic.

"Bastard! You call me 'Gabbo'—ever! and I swear I'll pump you right here."

"Okay. Okay. Easy. Okay."

"You just don't get it, do you?" Her toes are tapping. "You still think you can twist it round to your will." She shakes her head, smiles, and starts to nod. "But you are *so* wrong. Oh yeah—it's its own thing."

Geoff stays hunched over rubbing his knee, wondering, remembering all the bad scenes and weirdness. "Okay," he smiles, "I believe you, okay?"

She flips a small black package over to his side of the table. "Here," she says, "pocket this."

Geoff straightens up. "Why? What is it?"

Her lips are full and luscious and flat. "It's your bomb, Asshole," she says, hissed and haggly and under her breath, "put it in your fucking pocket."

"And if I don't?"

Her face is a blast of gasped intensity, her glare a quivery shake. "Just do it," she barks. Geoff picks up the package. It is thick and heavy with hidden wiring taped down into its form. He knows he should turf it aside to nowhere out across the street. Her weird-out stare and the wavering electric sensation of the gun between his legs scare him

back. He slips it, whatever it is, cautiously in under his thigh.

She smirks and shakes her head, takes up her purse and trades the Glock for a small, single-button remote. She's still smirking and shaking her head. She puts her thumb over the button and looks him snakey in the eye. "Nice try, Asshole," she sneers. "Now put it *in* your fucking pocket—or ride it to nowhere right now."

Geoff flicks his gaze around. The patio is about half-full at widely-scattered tables. No one's taken even the slightest notice. They're all lost in the heat. He looks sourly back at her. Her enthusiasm is scary dangerous. He decides to put the package into his deep shorts pocket.

"Good boy. Now let's get going." She sproings up, bouncy and gleeful, jiggling with the detonator under her thumb. Geoff wriggles his chair back and lingers. He somehow knows that it really is a bomb. He taps the corners of the table with the flats of his hands and pushes himself up.

"So where are we going—Gabrielle?"

She spits reflexively into his face. She's gone all rigid with her lips aquiver and the detonator thrust out under her itchy thumb. Geoff takes up a napkin, wipes his face, tosses it aside. He turns his palms toward her and shrugs. She's flinching at the button like it's a struggle not to blow it off. "Right." he smiles. "So where we going?"

"We're going wherever we end up, Asshole. And you're getting what you deserve."

"Sounds good to me. Let's go."

They walk alone on scorched and abandoned streets. It's a sauna world, with the sidewalk like a slab of molten sizzle. Everything floats and flickers in the haze. She seems impervious, as if psychosis protects her from the glare. She walks behind, watching the ground, off lost somewhere. Geoff limps in beside her. She's humming tunelessly and jerkjagging her head every now and again. He slips a half-step back. The button is pinched damn loose in her hand. He reaches slowly toward it. She spontaneously jerkyheads and wheels around, swung low with bared fangs, snarling. He cringes and she pops up all happy-smiley. Her head is cocked at a bizarre, birdy angle towards him. With her tufty brush cut she looks like a new-born eaglet waiting for food. Geoff remembers exactly how weird she can be. He keeps walking.

"So, where we goin'?"

"You really don't know, do you?"

"Nope. Haven't a clue."

She puts her hand, with the button, into the patch pocket of her sundress and walks beside him, her head still perky weird. "Really?"

"Why would I lie?"

She walks along nodding sharp little checkmarks with her skewed head. Then she suddenly sproings around, slapping her thighs and dancey highstepping along backwards. "We're going to the old alley!" she proclaims. "Remember?" It is clearly a huge, happy deal.

"Right. Where's that?"

She comes around, close beside him. "You know," she coos, "*our* alley—back of Carson's."

It takes him a minute. "In Ottawa?"

She's only a little taken aback. "Yeah." She takes a step or two. "Ottawa," he says, slow and careful, then smiles. "Yeah. But it's just down here." She points with the button, takes his hand and skips toward the near corner.

Geoff goes with it and skips a few steps, about half-way to the corner. Then he abruptly stops and grabs her wrist and yanks her like a ragdoll toward him. "Enough!" he says. He knocks her arm hard away, rips the package from his pocket and heaves it with the full force of his hatred and anger. It is momentarily final. They both stand and watch it arch across to nowhere, dissolving in the haze like a rainbow. Geoff regrets it immediately. He has an eerie sense of stupidity and loss, like he has thrown something important away.

Crank comes her gnarly knee—flashflare up: WHAMP! crushing Geoff's balls. He goes down in instant crumble, coughing and gasping and struggling to crawl away. She's kicking at him in drill boots, fighting with her purse, throwing it aside in temper swipe, but getting the Glock out and at his head. "Get up!" She's jabbing hard into his skull with the muzzle. "Get up Asshole!" she shrieks. "Get up!" Geoff stumbles to half-hunched, staggering and tripping sideswangled with her flailing whacks at his head with the gun. There's no one anywhere to fucking notice. She gets him round the corner, gets herself half-simmered control, and punches him, full swing with the gun.

Geoff chooses to go down and stay down, even when she checks his eyes, even when she starts to drag him off, presumably to *the* alley. He knows he has to get himself together; to get some sort of focus, or strength, or motor control. She's dragging him through rocks and garbage and smashed bottles; chattering to him and to no one and to herself: "You called my fucking sister and told her I was crazy. You asshole! They locked me up. Did you know that? *I've* been locked up! I've been on medication for fucksake. Do you know what that means?" She kicks him once with each foot. "Do you!? It means for sure that you're all in it together. You got them all in! And now I got you." She flips him like a styrofoam doll and kicks him. "You asshole! You're dying bad!" She spits on him. "Oh yeah. It's taken three years to get here but fucking right, Asshole, cause it's going to be fucking wicked fucking fun! You hear me, Geoffrey? It's you and me, Asshole." She drags him several silent steps then drops him and stands away. He can almost hear her sobbing. He listens till he is sure, then rolls slowly over onto his back. She's just standing there staring crazy at him. "We had something really special," she says. "Didn't we? Didn't we!?" She stands right over his head and spits on him and spits and spits until her mouth is more than dry. "We were something really special and you spit the fuck all over it." She steps back against the alley wall. Geoff twists and spasms up onto his knees. He wipes the blood from around his mouth and checks his head for more.

"It's been three years," he says. "And anything between you and me has been over for five."

She gives him a loud shniff. "You know that isn't true."

Geoff rocks back to sit against the dumpster. He swaps with flippery hands at smoothing himself out. "Oh yeah," he says, "it's true. It's totally true. There's nothing between us. Okay!? I don't give a shit what you do. Kill me—fine: I'll be dead. But I don't give a shit about you. You're nothing."

It doesn't faze her one bit. In fact, she's right away bouncy, littlekidish again. She comes over to him, swinging the gun like a toy mouse. "You just don't get it." She leans in face to face, the skirts away. "Do you? You think I'm crazy—but I'm not. I'm really not." She steps back and leans into a long sucked sigh. "Maybe I just still love you, Geoffrey," she says. She steps a bit closer, leans in. "I didn't know—I wasn't sure—until just now. But now I know. Now I'm sure. Oh yeah! It's you!" She's nodding sharp nods and stepping around swinging the Glock like she's forgotten it's there. It is firm, but unknown, in her hand. Geoff gets up into a squat. Dying doesn't really bother him. But letting her kill him isn't in the cards. Dying is one thing. Dying 'cause he once loved someone from looneyland is quite another. He's already paid huge, in every conceivable way, for loving her.

She's strutting and jerking her skewed head about and babbling, but she's somehow still got her eye on him. "You know," she says, "I could have killed a lot of different people. I've had lots of chances—wicked chances!—lots!! Oh yeah. I've come close, really, really close. But I couldn't do it, you know. And do you know why I couldn't? You know why, Geoffrey?" She swoops in close, face to face. "Because it wasn't you," she coos and she leans back out before he can react at her. "It wasn't you," she snorts.

"Oh yeah. I had this guy down once. Just like you. Exactly. I beat him and spit on him. I peed on him! I shot his foot off. I shot his fucking foot off! Oh God! I've never felt anything as good. Ever! You don't know what this will do." She waves the Glock. "It blew his fucking foot to nowhere! And there's greasy smoke and smell and blood and fucking shit everywhere. Oh Yeah!" She squats opposite him. "And do you know what it felt like? Do you have any idea?" She shakes her head. Her eyes gleam in the dazzle of the haze and Geoff's delirium. "It felt like I had a cock! I mean it, Geoffrey. I had this fucking huge wad of power down in my balls!" She grabs her crotch for him. "I'm serious. I felt like I could control anything."

Geoff balances forward onto his toes. His thighs are desperate and ready. His arms are flopped light, loose and tense-charged in the rubble at his side, his right pinkie inching a chunk of brick into his grasp. He is ticking slowly through the long gasp of danger. She's rewatching the long-ago splash of an exploded foot. He sproings towards her, snarling unconsciously, latch-toothed with every hatred he has ever felt. It is nearly enough. He is able to slug her, hard, with the brick. She gets her knee flashjerked up but it is nothing. He lunges frantically back at her, directly into her desperate gunswing punch. He jacks his left arm up to block it. "KER-RACK!" The report is sharp and loud and metallic, crisp, even in the thatched heat. Geoff mistakes it for a gunshot. His hand drops like a rubber band from his broken arm. The pain is instant and intense. His eyes bulge inside erupted tears. He swings blindly with the brick. She is close enough to knee him, wapped all-out like a sledge. It's still nothing; a whimper inside the wank charge from his arm. He staggers backwards into the dumpster hard enough to whiplash-smack

his skull. He doesn't go down. He cannot see but manages to drape his dangling left hand across the cradle of his right. She is huge in the blur of his vision.

"Go ahead. Oh yeah. Oh yeah: you're making it better. Oh yeah! You are. Which foot do you want, asshole?" she spits. "Which foot!?" He is starting to see again. "The right? Okay!"

This time it is the gunshot: sharper, louder, and much more metallic. Geoff drops automatically, full-fetal into the noxious smear of urban gunge. The pain is far away. If anything it feeds back clarity and focus and dissolves the surging intensity of his arm. He is able to take a calm look. The bullet has exactly pierced his foot.

"Last time it was much better."

Geoff chuckles. The small, dark hole in his foot seems to wink almost happily at him. She's a joke. He's gonna somehow get out of this.

"Oh yeah," she says, deflated. "Last time it just fucking exploded; like a puked slushie or something—all over the fucking place." She looks at the Glock like she might throw it away in disgust. "Oh yeah," she says again, "this is totally different." She sounds almost apologetic. She looks at him, at the gun, at his foot. She starts to nod, then smiles. "I probably have to hold it closer," she bubbles, sneering, "Eh, Geoffrey? You fucking asshole! You figure that's it?"

"You're right," he says, "There's never been anyone like you."

She glitches and swings the gun down into his face. "You bastard!" she scoffs.

"No!—You and me, we had something. We did. Something really special."

"You're lying," she sneers. "You don't remember."

Geoff is able to shift up into a one-legged squat. "I always knew we'd end up here," he says, "together, in the old alley. I always knew it."

She lowers the gun. "Oh yeah? How? How could you know? How could you possibly know, Geoffrey?"

Geoff shifts to ease out of his immediate terror. "My instincts told me," he confesses.

She squats opposite, the gun idle across her thigh. "I'm not a malicious person," she says, "I'm just trying to make sense of everything."

"What's everything? We're here. It's now. What else is there?"

"Strange things. I know I've done some. We all have—but all these things are happening to *me*, Geoffrey." She stands up again. "And I know what was going on. It's still going on! It won't stop until you do."

"There's nothing going on. There never was."

She starts pacing, head down, speaking at the swinging Glock. She's breathing hard between clenched teeth. "You think I still don't know, don't you?! But I do. Oh yeah! I know all about it. And I know you know." She turns and looks at him. Her eyes are bright and blank. "Up or down it's the same yoyo," she says: "It's you. Oh yeah. If you really weren't involved why did you just confuse the issue? That's what I don't understand."

"Is that why you're doing this?"

“You just don’t get it, do you? Why doesn’t matter. Why is nothing. Why is you, Geoffrey, all twisted and snakey.” She salutes with the Glock. “This is how. Only how and what matter.”

Geoff is floating in the swirl of his pain, with a dead foot and holding one arm together in the other. He knows he doesn’t have any hope of *doing* anything. But she’s a looney flake. And the heat is still bright and safe. He’s got to be able to talk his way out. He gets himself a little more upright. “I thought you still loved me?” he says.

She stands above him, dries gun and gun hand, and takes a firm grip aimed at his head. “Oh yeah,” she laughs, “And you know it. That’s how the set-up works. I don’t know what it is. I don’t know what’s going on exactly. Exactly what I’ve done is—I don’t know—I don’t know—I don’t know what the hell I’m supposed to do, Geoffrey. But I know it has to stop.”

She’s flexing at the trigger, jerking the Glock at his head, but she’s hesitant, on the verge of something else. She steps up and kicks him a greedy nudge with her boot on his broken arm. First a test slam, then, when he starts to cringe up, a good solid wap. She swings around and whamps her foot down between his legs, grinding in for traction. Geoff’s not moving at all. She punches at his right leg with her free foot. It just flops out perfectly, right under the gun. It’s a thrill just looking at it, down, under the gun. She feels bulgy, all power, all up her splayed, pumped thighs, all thirsty and in control. He’s all drooly and splattered, down in the shit with his eyes all lost in his head. But he’s still thinking he’s going to weasel out again. He’s not screaming ‘No!’. He’s not screaming ‘I still love you, Gabbo’. NO! He’s still calling me crazy!

That's when I blasted the knee. "Splang splat!" There were lots of echoes, friendly-soft in the thick heat, with a wide glossy smear and sprayed chunks whipped hard against my bare legs. He was just panting—huff, huff, huff—like an asshole, with his thick snarl, still all pissed off. That was the best part: his petty piss-off with his eyes all rolled round in his head. Oh yeah, it proved it wouldn't stop until he stopped. I poked the gun up into his shoulder. "Asshole!" I jabbed him a couple of times, until he jerked. "Asshole," I spat, "telling everyone that there was no set-up, that I was doing it all, that I was setting myself up—that I was a nutcase, Geoffrey, you fucker!" I shot his shoulder and spat into the hole. "Well, Asshole," I said, really calm: "Here's a few minor facts. First; I am not a malicious person. Two; I know that it won't stop until you do. And don't try to follow me 'cause I won't have a phone. Three, or whatever number we're at; if it's really not you—then—well I apologize in advance and if you don't understand it you never were a friend to begin with. Fourth; I'm not sorry for anything I've done. Not one blessed thing. Have a good day. Bye. Goodbye." Then I shot the rest of the Glock into his head.

The Bob 'n Betty Fugue

The phone is ringing and Bic pens are coming in from all over the temporal weave. Cadwick calibrates in dislocated chronotopia through inverse frapazoidation. Leroy reaches a Gitanes; plain, but still lights it backwards. The figures are alarming but the option lingers.

“Look! There’s another one of those dandy black trees.” Walter twitched the exclamation at Maria with brisk movement of his stubby whiskers.

“Aw!—the sweet tarry bark is paper-thin,” bitched Maria. This was very close to the human. She didn’t like it. At all. “After that it just tastes like birch.”

Which should have been insignificant but did taste awful and was snuffed immediately. The swimming however continued, focused in Walter’s blackbound determination, with the phone still ringing; though having not yet been rung. Cadwick checks again, slickly uncertain of his prearranged concern. For him, as for Walter,

adaptive mutation is the only natural grounding; but not for Maria, not in suburbia, wherever and whatever that might be. For her the grounded Gitanes smells of deviation, bound in trestled loops of rose bark and telephone wire, as is the shattered plastic of Leroy's phone.

Lazy absence elongates his droopy, blind reach. This is not the same suburbanite restraint that afflicts the interior other. This is its solitary cousin, more like the crew itself than like the Titanic. Plastic itself, colour and consistency, had been overlooked in the initial computations, like a slow drift against a myopic swimmer. Yet only she can true the course—restraint, affliction, and subservience to that which would be restrained, like Leroy's groping hand and Cadwick's excreted data. All are lies, lingering inversions against the placid lake: papered tree, papered herb, papered symbol. The onus is on the discursive smoulder, not the smoker or the swimmer; though it is the swimmer who must survive, even if the separate systems do form a continuity.

Walter created a poem for Maria once. It wasn't a paper poem like the numbers Cadwick had so neatly affixed to his immigrant pens, nor symbolic symbol designation, nor even a tonal vocality, since Walter knew not speech. It had just been a moment, but one still contained in both their myopic memories, a glitch like the telltale fluctuation in Cadwick's otherwise consistent frapamatrization. Walter had created the poem and that

was fundamentally that. Even without representation it could still adorn the lodge wall, perhaps better than could the notations that cluttered Cadwick's electroprocessing study. Now, crossing the lake with the flaying call of the unattended telephone before them, Walter thought the poem again to Maria, but could not pierce her intuitive scepticism. He slowed and swam nearer to her. "Alright, Maria," he twitched, in a manner much more argumentative than he had intended, "What's wrong with the tree!?"

She can confront but not admit, and snaps: "Nothing!" As does the meaninglessness of Cadwick's objectivised discourse. Data by any other name would seem closed, but it must share the openness of Maria's bitched response to Walter's misintended confrontationalism. All are now bound to unnecessary, unflinching resolves.

Double-papered is the tree for it is Leroy's tree, not Walter's, and this somehow Maria knows. Leroy guards his tree in the shroud of its augmentation that its survival might become his. But it is already cringed, clipped, surrounded, because Leroy had the dismantled weave of the disbanded local telephone company at his ready grasp. Paper, alone of this wire, could not have bound the tree, no matter how thickly tarred. Paper is the tree, even in the perception of Maria and were this tree in the backyard of the lodge she would share Walter's enticement. Leroy's motivation however, his private, unopposed war, goes beyond the safety-papered birch and the lackadaisical, but obedient response to the night-calling phone. It is not even victory which he must impose. It is gardening.

The Bic pens come not from Cadwick's garden. They, in fact, predate Cadwick's garden. His is a deft garden that coughs up digits, numbers that then bloom into structure, which is inevitably organic. Bic pens aren't, not because they are stamped instead of grown, but because they have never before been present in Cadwick's historical frame. The temporal escarpment is abrupt but not unassailable. And, in fact, today has been quite the notable day: the first frapazoid, for time travel, has been perfected—by Natan Cadwick himself, a simple numbers man. He has tested it now in ten time frames across an antique country. He expects a lot of glory for the discovery and engagements to speak ridiculous stuff like: "Time is like a garden flower. . ." but all he really has is the fistful bouquet of Bic pens. Nothing has yet been sustained, though he has had enough time in every glitch to snag a pen; and, in a minute, will snag Leroy's extension phone. The frapazoid is unstable. Cadwick has double-checked, twice. When engaged and the phone snagged the snagging will have catastrophically jammed the frapazoid and both phones will have begun to ring. This will, of course, link all discordant and adjacent time.

Maria felt the temporal anomaly sparked by Cadwick's regression. She didn't know she was feeling it, for her there was just a pause, a known moment in memory not unlike Walter's poem. This probably would not have stayed with her except for the simultaneous commencement of the phone's howl. And it was these together which

enhanced her aversion to Walter's selected tree. She sees everything about the human as suspect and even though the black tree and the phone have obviously always been natural they are too close to the human to not somehow be his. Leroy accepts the clothed tree as natural, but not so the phone and he knows for certain that the unprecedented population of beavers is unnatural. He knows that nature is most secure in the leaf-strewn randomness atop his Wolmanized wharf with its framing brace of tarpaper-wrapped birch trees. It is at the end of this wharf that Maria last tries to deter Walter. She must however accept that for Walter the easy and tasty road is always best: the gardened beach, the carpeted approach, the thick black icing on the tree; the unseen, humane, vertical-spring trap.

Leroy finally answered the phone. Cadwick stared aghast at that in his hands. He shook it violently to jar it back into life, to make it scream to him again. Cadwick inadvertently answered the phone.

"Hello—Is this a prank of some sort?—Hello—Hello—Okay; fuck-off!"

"No. Wait. Please."

"Lucy? Hey, Lucy, you got a cold or something?"

"No. No. Please talk to me—please; it's very, very important."

"Do I know who this is?"

"No—look; I know this sounds ridiculous—but listen, please. Today, where I am, it's March 15, 2307—I know you're in a different time—I just want to know when—"

Please?"

"Listen, Buddy, I'm goin' to tell you to fuck-off, but before I do I'm going to strongly recommend that you seek some help—"

"No wait! Please. Everything I say is true. I can't prove it but, wait; please wait—what will a few ridiculous questions hurt you?"

"Gerry? It's you, isn't it? I know your voice, Buddy."

"Can you just tell me the date? Please?!"

"Oh, sure, Gerry. Just tel me your date again."

"March fif—"

"Holy jumpin' shit! I think I just caught a beaver in my trap."

"You still have beavers?"

"Right. And you don't have the little bastards over there?!"

"No. The only species here is us."

Arthur's Yarn

—It was such an excellent sword.

—It was gold, Dirk, too soft to kill anyone.

—You're an idiot, Arthur. Steel is for killing. I still have steel.

The captain clasped his sword hand to the hilt in a manner intended to be menacing.

—Whuzzgumble! Whuzz—whoops! Ha Ha Ha.

—Damn you, savage! Get off of me!

—Guz zaam, ekk grumble blah blah blah.

—What's he babbling, Earl?

—Arthur understands it, Dirk, not me.

—Says he's sorry, Dirk. Says he thought he heard the sky speak.

—Damn savage! Damn asshole idiot savage!

—Come on, Dirk. Mellow out!

—Out of my way, Arthur. I've had enough!

The jester managed, without any help from the priest, to defuse the captain.

—Whuzzgumble! Whuzzgumble! Eek blah. Rant! Rant!

—Arthur. Shut him up—or I will!

The Captain clutched at his steely sword. The jester tippleslaped the token savage.

—Eeek blah blah! Rant! Blah blah.

—Great jumpin' Grod! Get him in line! Okay, Arthur? Or *I* will. And I'm serious. I will.

The captain huffed heavily, scooped up the wine jug and leaned exasperated against a half fallen log. The savage suddenly pricked up his ears, stood, screamed, and stomped, screeching and laughing, on up the trail.

—Get him, Arthur, I want him caught.

—Don't worry, Capt'n. I'll run him to ground.

—Damn pagan pranks. By Grod, Earl. Shouldn't you be converting him, or something?

—We don't understand each other, Dirk.

—You sure that's it? You sure you're not just afraid of them.

—Not at all. My energies are for believers, for the pastures of Grod's flock, not for the woods beyond.

—Believers are few, Earl. Far, far fewer indeed than those who've never even heard of Grod.

—You don't need to remind me of your doubts, Dirk.

—Doubts be damned! My concern is the mission. My worry is your fearfulness. Damn it, Earl! The enemies of the king are once again also the enemies of Grod.

—Not us, Dirk. We're not the enemies of Grod.

—Dammit, Arthur! Did you sneak up behind us?

—No. We came from the front through the open. Honestly, Dirk, I find it hard to believe that you could be chosen for command, any command, ever.

—Will you please can the Groddamn sarcasm, Arthur! Or, by Grod—I'll —

The savage finally saw the voice he had been hearing. He alone saw it. He saw it and was absorbed into it, struggling and ranting and screaming: "Whuzzgumble! Whuzzgumble!" The priest almost noticed.

—Wow! You see that, Art?

—No, Earl, what?

—Thought I saw a flash. Must have been nothing. Hey! Where's Frankle?

—He was right behind me.

—Frankle!

—Frankle. Ik Frankle! Funtime blahblah? Frankle! Blither ha ha!

—Shut up, Arthur. Get back here, savage! Now! SAVAGE!

The captain, muttering like a madman, marched off up the path. The jester laughed, nodded knowingly to the priest and stretched out in the lounge-chair bowl of a pathside boulder.

—HOLY FUCKING GROD!

—Easy, Earl; you're a priest.

—Didn't you hear that voice?

—No. Hey, Capt'n. Now Earl's hearin' things.

—Wait right there.

—Don't panic, Dirk. We're only ten feet away.

—Enough. Okay, Arthur?

—You guys really didn't hear it?

—I think Dirk's still too firey mad about the lost sword, dear and loved as it was.

Right, Dirk?

—Enough, Arthur! Enough, by Grod! Enough!

The captain clenched his mail-gauntleted fist at the jester. The jester winked at the captain. Only the priest heard the voice. Only the priest saw the shadow in the woods.

—Look out! There it is!

The jester sprang valiantly to his feet. He and the captain flashed forth their swords and squared, back to back, confronting the exterior, empty forest. The priest cowered between them and pointed randomly out from under his cloak.

—There! There! There!

—There's nothing there, Earl.

—Get it together, Earl. For Grodsake. You're hallucinating.

—I am not!

—Okay. You're not.

—Look. I am *not* hallucinating.

—You know, Arthur, I'm sure this is somehow your fault.

The captain swung aside to his wine jug again, slurping and lurchspilling and wiping his maw with his paw.

—There! Come on. That you both saw. Come on. I know damn well you did!

—I think you've got a priest problem, Capt'n.

—You sure it's not just a shitdisturber problem, Arthur?

—Listen to me! For Grod sake. I refuse to be ignored.

—Honestly, Dirk. I am not responsible for Earl wiggling out.

—You know, Arthur, if I thought you could be, I'd know you were.

—Dirk? You looked right at it. You must have seen something.

—All I see is you wierding out. You see anything, Arthur?

—Not a thing, Dirk. Not hide nor head nor golden sword.

—You're a Groddamn delight, Arthur, You know that?

—Dirk!? I saw what I saw. You've got to believe me.

—I just aim to please, Dirk.

—Then why don't you put that tongue to use. You're the storyteller. Tell us a damn story.

—What? Here?

—Consider it an order.

—Sure, Cap'n. Want some cake?

—Listen to me. I must be seeing what Frankle saw. And now he's gone.

—This is amazing cake, Arthur.

—Baked by the princess.

—No way. No one gets near the princess.

—Come on! For Grodsake, It's already got Frankle. It's gonna get us all!

—Naw. I know Frankle. He's probably out pranking in the woods. Frankle is probably exactly what you saw.

—In the name of Grod, Arthur! What I saw was not Frankle!

—Once upon a time, not so very long ago, there was a king—

—Arthur! This is not the time.

—Sure it is. Anyway, the king—actually a king regent and in cahoots with an evil elite of rich piggie tycoons—

—Dirk. This is our enemy. You must confront it. I demand that you listen to me!

—Drop it, Earl. Eat your damn cake.

—He was a lavish and despotic king who he ruled his dead wife's lands and commanded a liberal and enlightened, albeit captive, court—

The captain relaxed. He ignored the priest but listened to the jester's story without hearing. He helped himself to a third, excessively larger, piece of cake and, taking the winejug to himself, stretched out in the dry hollow of a sunbleached log. The priest dropped instantly to his knees. He cringed down, looking over his shoulder at the sky and then at the captain, then at the sky, then at the captain. He fell upon the captain's jug-hand and pointed—first to the sky; then, suddenly, to the woods.

—For Grodsake, Dirk. It's talking about you! There it is. Right there! See it?

—And he had a daughter, the apple of his oppressor's, and right heir to his crown,
'cause they were matrilineal and all—

—You saw it, Dirk? Come on, you saw it?

The captain and the jester exchanged insider grins.

—There it is again!

—There's nothing there, Earl.

—It's black and white, Dirk, like a mirror. It's evil, Dirk, Arthur—pure evil!

The priest's lips quivered into blubbing. He scuttled crablike backwards, kneeling and praying and clutching at his satchel, from which he pulled icons and rattles and ritual pipes. The captain had to grab him, raise him up, and shake him back to sensibility.

—Damn it, Earl! Get it together! There's nothing out there.

—It's everywhere now. Everywhere! Oh mighty Grod have mercy!

—But the princess was under an enchantment, a strange, weird and peculiar curse
that made her—and she was staggeringly beautiful—

The priest fell to his knees and tugged beseechingly at the skirt of the captain's tunic. He jerked spasmodically. Heavy lunges rocked his body. "It's the Igrod," he screamed: "the Negation!" The captain grabbed him up by the neck of his cloak and slapped him a mighty whack across the face.

—Get it together, Earl! Or I swear I'll be telling the king about those pageboys."

—She was cursed to appear hideous to all who saw her. Her skin seemed to pulsate pus and blisters, her teeth appeared to grow around her lips like rotting corkscrews, and her hips looked as stout and wide as a carthorse—

—That's not very original, Arthur. Sounds just like our princess.

—Earl's lookin' a lot calmer.

—Yeah, but his sandals are covered in dogshit.

—I don't think that's *dogshit*, Dirk.

The priest cowered silently, prayed soundlessly and stared out from the huddle of his rough silk cloak.

—The curse was not truly upon the princess. She was locked up in the tower anyway. No, the curse was on the king and his cohorts. There were seven of them, all brothers, all with one son. The princess was to marry one of the sons. This had long been agreed. It was, in fact, why the queen had been murdered. But none of the suitors, and all seven had tried, none could endure to even look at her—

—Not even one, Arthur?

—Yeah. The blind one. There was great hope in the elite for the blind one. But then he could not bear to touch her cancerous skin—

The priest stiffened in terror and shrivelled into a smaller and more prostrate cringe. The captain slurped wine and tried to follow the other's darting glances out into the forest.

—You suppose he really sees anything out there?

—No. Do you?

—No. I guess not.

—The princess was a rare and beautiful person. She was a free thinker, bent on destroying her father and his evil cohorts. They had to get her married and murdered. They knew the curse was part of a conspiracy against that, and against them. In response they inflicted mightier and mightier anguish upon the people of the realm. The people rejoiced in the curse and in their love and hope for the princess and the ranks of the underground swelled—

The priest wavered and wavered and faded away into the other reality. "Spare me, Oh God!" he screamed. "I, at least, can see!" The captain and the jester did not hear.

—You'd better be keeping this just a story. Okay, Arthur?

—Oh, really.

—Just keep it straight. Okay?

—And if I don't?

—I can kill you if I bloody want to, Art. It is my right.

—Oh, it's *Art* now, is it?

—I'm asking you as a friend, Arthur. For your own good.

—Actually, Dirk, you were threatening me as a friend. In fact, you know what your problem is? Your problem is you don't have any friends.

—That's bloody rubbish! I have friends.

—No, Dirk. Just cronies.

—I'm a friend of the king for Grodsake.

—You're his crony, Dirk. And he's a crony himself.

—The king is NOT a crony.

—Come on, Dirk. Clue in. The king is crony to the Seven.

—What about you? You're a crony.

—Yeah, Dirk. I'm crony to the king. Sort of. But I also have friends: friends among the enlightened at court; friends among the folk, and the students and the artists—and they're real friends too, friends I trust with my real thoughts and opinions: excellent people! People, I might add, that you beat up routinely—in the king's name—for the Seven.

—I have friends at court.

—No way. Sorry. Those with no need to fear you, don't trust you.

—Earl's my friend. Grod! Earl's gone!

—Yup. You're right. He is.

—There must be something out there.

—Rubbish. Sit down. Earl's a servant of superstition who makes too many burnt offerings. For sure it's another spiritual weird-out. He's probably running through the forest right now, throwing off his clothes. He's done it before.

—Yeah. True. But then, what about the savage?

—He's a savage.

—Kinda says it all.

—Yup.

—You know, Arthur, I'd kinda thought *you* were my friend.

—Well, I am. In a manner. And what I said I meant, more or less, as a friend.

But, anyway: there lived at this time, in a remote corner of the kingdom, an ageless woman, a widowed hag of great imagined power who, it was said, was mistress of all the black arts and who did a flourishing trade in charms and enchantments. Many claimed to have been saved by her and many, many more claimed to have been cursed. Eventually the whole kingdom came to believe that the old woman was responsible for the curse—

—I feel really weak and tired, Arthur. I know I should be heading out, finding Earl and the damn savage and pressing on and all, but I just don't bloody care. I'm really missing my damn sword and wishing I had friends.

—I put a little something in your wine, Dirk.

—You bastard traitor!!

—Ease up that sword, Dirk—you're fine! I just sprinkled in a little humanization, to make you more friendly and mellow.

—What's going on, Arthur?

—Nothing. I just wanted you to fit in the story.

—Our story?

—More or less.

—Shhhh! Arthur, look. There's something over beside that tree.

—Nonsense. Where?

—I don't want to have to point. It's very small. But dancey. And it does run about. It must be what got Earl.

—So, anyway; the king had the widow captured and tortured. Poor woman, she lived almost three weeks on your rack before she broke down—

—It's growing! See?

—She broke down but she told them a pack of lies about the underground and the dark recesses of the paper forest—

—There! See it run. It's behind that rock, just over there.

—But the king believed her. He jumped right up and chose four volunteers to go out into the paper forest: a captive savage, who just happened to be chained at hand—

—It's definitely there.

—And the high priest, and the captain of the guard, and the court jester, who was also the king's painter and storyteller and the secret leader of the underground—

—It's there, Arthur. You're lying if you try to deny it.

—And the king ordered offerings to be burnt aplenty and wine to flow and the whole court exploded into enforced fanfare partying—

—I can hear it too. Not really a voice, just a mumble in the trees.

—So the four of them started at the streak of dawn—

—It's exactly what Earl described!

—And by mid-afternoon, with all the breaks and lunch and the sword lost in the swamp and everything, they'd only gone about a mile into the forest—

The captain had completely lost listening to the jester's story. He concentrated intensely on his distant stare, rising slowly to his feet and carefully drawing his sword.

—By Grod, Arthur! It's your voice

The captain skirted off into the forest and circled around behind where he thought the shadow was. The shadow however was behind him all the way.

—It's too simple, Arthur. I know exactly what you're up to. And it won't work.

The captain, narrow-minded soldier that he was, stabbed repeatedly at the shadow, seeking to skewer its heart and clinging dogmatically to his belief that all things do have hearts to skewer; that all adversaries can be successfully confronted with armed courage and violence. But he himself had begun to waver and fade into the other reality.

—That's all fine and Groddamn dandy, Arthur, but I'm not doing it. No way.

—Be that as it may, Dirk. It will always be what you did.

The Pointed Sky

I keep my eyes on the wagglenothing in the alginate suit. He leads me through the first door. Which is wicked since in the blusterama windswirl outside I'm totally devoid of grounding. It's a howler. The door flies off like a twitch of paper, all balloony and up over the roof. I've got a nasty hunch Suzy isn't going to show.

Whoever Suzy might be. And I, having only met her briefly and intimately in the park, can really only claim to know her erogenously. Or so I now choose to believe. Even the name Suzy is uncertain, except that in some convoluted, cross-temporal notation it is she, late after arrival, who has brought me here. Here apparently being into this cross-hatched white, all eager and expectant and potential. The guy in the alginate suit has weaseled himself over to the snack bar. He's gobbling, crunching and stocking up, stuffing his pockets all chunky and angular with candy in garish packagings.

I decide to follow him. But I can't advance toward him any more than I can make Suzy suddenly appear. My first step lands me elsewhere; on huge, hard marble lofted round and round in a forest of swirled bronze pillars and laughing echoes of my footsteps.

I wheel around. Backwards is forwards. The view everywhere is exactly the same, like video loop of some autocratic hall. A temple perhaps, or a bank, with no end in sight.

I walk slowly forward, onward, inward. All around. in the pillared shadows, intensely innocent nudists dart hitherthither. I catch glimpses of them, slipping from post to gleaming post, stinking of flesh and exposure: a stench of deep reality, husky and organic with snarly pheromonic tickle back in the nostrils. It's misty, like poison gas. I feel infected, all thighs and pelvis, all phallic and droolish and swangly. I feel that I could start to grunt at any moment and thereafter produce only grunts and hump spasmodically always like a hypersexed mutt in a spring park.

I quicken my pace but neither time nor motion earn me advance. The ineffectuality is exasperating. I feel exposed and scrutinized like a confused maze-mouse. The illusory expanse is cluttered and confining and suffocating. I've got electric gut panic. I swirlyjerk around and around trying to break free. En masse the scattered nudists start melodiously laughing. Then they burst into soprano song like a boys' choir "Simple. Simple. Simple!" they sing. "Just throw yourself at the ground and miss. And miss. And miss. And miss." They twitter and chirp like laughing angels, over and over again.

The ground is hard and close. I'm tempted and taunted and deranged. I want to obey. I want to throw myself in a surge at nowhere. I've got a good hunch I might miss. I just can't quite let myself toss for it. It should be easy. I'm running now, I simply have to stretch out, like superman, and swoop away to whatever. I'm certain it's the next step but it's a step I'm terrified to take. I don't want to leave reality behind. I keep running, swirling, clutching for breath, hemmed in on all sides by unquenchable odours, ar'nal

humanosities and poisonous unreality. Fate intervenes, trips me and tosses me into the most incredible hang time. I glitch: half a second's unrepentant nonthought and WOW!—easy on the illusion, 'cause wow, holy wow!—I'm flying! Instantly I'm up ten feet. I don't dare let myself think. I just void-out and soar.

The air is full of pollen and supersweet butterfly semen. It stings like a sugary fog, concealing the obvious matrix, and I cruise automatically upward, like a paper plane, glancing here and there off weird, nonsensical structure. Everything's built of widges and waggles and cables and springs and plastic flowers and blown-glass squirrels and plumbing fittings and the like. There isn't a straight beam anywhere in the place, nothing that could possibly support the roof. In fact, there's a huge gap, like a spacey alpine meadow, with acres and acres of straight fluffy air separating the diddly, nowhere structure from the wispy, silk-tapestry roof. It's held fixed out in nowhere by living representations of gleeful ancient demons and morose gods. Then I see it—huge, stories high and woven into the flimsy silk miles above my head: block capitals: "SUZY WAS HERE". It's simple. It's to the point. Right away I'm not flying any more. I'm crashing like a splat of eagle shit straight down toward the Suzy sign.

As I plummet I grow heavier. I become strangely weighted with respect and understanding and intention. I hit the "WAS" full out, hard and straight and through, the fabric fluttering wrapped all around me. I still screeching nowheresbound. I twist to wiggle free of the sign and Ka-snap!: I'm caught, grabbed and apparently saved, dangling head-down into deep nowhere with an all-powerful hand vice-locked at my ankle.

"Well swanger my swizzle stick!"

It's the pink latex alginate dude. I'm baby Achilles, ankle snatched in his grasp. Candy packaging falls everywhere.

"Just hang in a toodley dank."

He yanks me, drops me, catches me—yanks me, drops me and catches me again. His grip is useless, and slippery upon my big toe. I go flailing off like a snapped branch in a tornado. Up and down go completely apeshit and I all melted with my skin a shaggy bag. My heart is thumping out a tantrum and my blood is screaming pure negation, my veins cardboard and full of angry, scurrying mice. My eyes are thick angora gone huge. My brain an idiotic batter. I blast through sizzling blackness and out into a slithery smash of light. Thoughts, in sentence structure, swim everywhere as snakes. All of them begin "Suzy". Suzy this and Suzy that and Suzy whatever. As soon as I touch one they all change. So I touch many, searching for a magic key, and they all line up against me—

Suzy dazzled like fool's gold in the fountain, with the mist rising and the bobandbettys pretending to avert their eyes. It was stormy November everywhere but around her. The suburbanities stood aside in a broad cluster with umbrellas and unleashed dogs. They were all clone-cast replicas of each other, unisex in pink latex, animated in mundane smalltalk, and wearing tasteless commercial autumn wear. Their dogs covered the full gamut of breeds, mongrels and inappropriate names. No one was actually *looking* at the nudity in the fountain.

Wade McMan was a farm boy from Alberta, a twenty-something virgin from a repressive, fundamentalist community who just happened to be idly downgazing past the fountain. He was a total believer in order and purpose and alpha and omega. He should, therefore, have known with certainty that it was fate which then directed him to look up and see the bobandbettys. He stopped, staggered, as if he'd never seen uniformity or plasticized mediocrity before. He stared with his hands dangling. All the dogs frolicked over and he greeted them with unconscious flap pats. He could not take his eyes off the clones. Their twerky sideglancing confused and captivated him. Their gazes were literally dancing and their lips wagging, mumbling outrage, exchanging words like *slut* and *whore* and *bitch*. It took Wade a full slack-jawed minute to realize and follow and find Suzy.

He saw Suzy but he did not see. His mind framed her in a ring of fire and knew she was demonic. He instinctively shielded himself behind his hands, but his body yearned for her and his feet independently shuffled toward her. She held out her hand from on high. "I am your goddess, Wade," she said.

Wade shook his head. "You are a temptress!" he retorted, mumbling and low and with emphasis on the suffix.

She came over to the edge. She oozed over, sashaying through the shallow pool, undulating; up close enough for him to taste the sweetness of her breath. "Maybe your god is an *ess*," she laughed, "Eh, Wade?" and she reached for the zipper of his yellow rainjacket.

Wade didn't try to stop her. For some reason it didn't seem important. He looked around, saw her, and saw through her. The fire was illusion, just a trick of clichéd

lighting. Her thighs were a bit thick. Her breasts a touch sagged. "You're not a goddess!" he exclaimed, pushing her arms away. "You have pimples and hairy armpits! You're beautiful," he laughs triumphantly, "but you're imperfect. You can't possibly be a goddess."

She stepped back and modelled herself for him. "Perfection is a tricky thing," she said, "and blemish is an essential element."

Wade suddenly knew that she was perfect in the spiral of energy she set off in him: a harpoon through the eye by which he was hauled in metaphysically as he stared. Only by a desperate enforcement of will was he able to subdue himself. "You are a slave to impossibilities," she laughed and she turned again for him. "Get off the fucking line, Wade. It's here. I'm now. What more can there be?"

"No!" he stammered, slamming his foot down. "You are the devil's whore!"

"Holy shit." She shook her head and sat down, straddling the lip of the fountain. "You're carrying some horrible, heavy baggage, Wade. You have to accept enlightenment."

"Enlightenment?" snapped Wade. "Into what? Debauchery?"

"Clue in!" she snorted. "Time is just moments. And this is your big one. You wanted epiphany. This is it." She stood up and spiralled into ecstatic, sensual light. Two seconds. Then she sat back down. The suburbanites perked up and started sneaking timidly forward, like man-eating elves out of a forest.

Wade wavered but stood firm. "You are a temptress with a twisted tongue," he mumbled. "I am not fooled by cheap lighting."

Suzy got up. "There was no alpha, Wade," she said. "There's no omega coming." Wade felt totally exposed. The bobandbettys loosened back to discuss. There was some disagreement. "I want only to save you," said Suzy. "Truly. Honestly, I do."

Now Wade sat down and the suburbanites openly followed the proceedings. "Time is of the moment," said Suzy. "You're here. You're gone. Before consciousness and after consciousness are identical." The clones chattered and nodded. Wade stood up. He could not let himself be saved. Nor could he walk away. He stood there, back to the fountain, and waited. Suzy went over and pressed tight behind him. "Only in wordlessness can there be meaning," she said, "only in climactic chaos can you find true enlightenment." She peeled back, stripping away his rain jacket. "Come on, Wade." She started to unbutton his thick, flannel shirt. "Give it up. In reality there are only circles. It is here. I am now. She pulled his shirt away. He turned. The bobandbettys were united, cheering him on. Their dogs howled in a pack. The wind swept up like a Kansas twister. Wade was sucked forward and tossed like a frisbee into the pointed sky. Then he saw the alginate dude waiting by the first door.

Bear Nightmare

There are partyers at Aunt Minnie's. There is now a small-scale clearcutter with son and mail-order wife. I end up at the clearcutter's at dusk, at noon and in the night. His captured grizzly takes to hating me. It escapes. I drop the TV on it and run in panic under the village to join Aunt Minnie's partyers.

Aunt Minnie's supplies alpha and omega. It is also the central and accessible element, indeed, the hometown seed of universal suburbanitism and, in that as well, an end that permeates its own beginning. It is, of course, Aunt Minnie's, not home but *a* home nonetheless, a refuge in lost pastness and solid essential memories, of chipmunks and marshmallows and veranda afternoons, of temper-tantrums and adult partying and board games long into the night, or cards or jigsaw puzzles. It is always a summer thing, a hometown place removed from Grandma's, running loosely through the very best of child

summers. Aunt Minnie rockerbound and veranda-perched with her binoculars and her vantage view. She spews high-verbisage backstabbing and laughs herself to tears. Everybody laughs even victims. It's an easy afternoon thing, a conversational roll of vindictive one-liners, moral assassination and laughter. The laughter is always. It is in the beyond after bedtime and into the crickety night.

The partyers are more *sense* than *image*, an any-party, any-moment, always-reality. It is partyers, not party. Individuals power-dancing up a storm, swirling up a vortex of uninhibited social solidarity. All the family is here, by invite and general free crashing but it is an event catalysed of others, outsiders—bigger, zamer, more fiery and intense, more pertinently fluid. The ecstasy is ongoing, at all points of its cyclicity. It's a permanently evolving organism, spawned out of routine veranda afternoons and spontaneous potlucking. Exactly everyone who should show up does—to visit, labour, gossip, devour, dessert, or just party till dawn in the traditional manner.

Against this everything about the clearcutter is an intrusion. The transition is glitchy with the *now* promptly referential. It is the touchstone against which all temporalities are revealed. *Now* cannot be of the same truth. It is only empowered by the absolute purity of its otherness. The catchwater, the snag created in the assumed spontaneity of the exposition, singles out the essential randomness of the sudden sidestep. This family, this whole scene, is not of the temporal or geographic reality in either here or then Rootsville. Instead it is a jarring window for some sort of elsewhere perspective but

with an inversion of the standard ripvanwinkle entrance. Not that concurrence is all it's cracked up to be, just that it is there, in elsewhere, as is the family, complicating an already convoluted unreality.

The essence of the clearcutter is at once the image of the cut and can, at best, be only minorly mitigated by its being *small-scale*. Indeed the very presence of the qualifier spotlights its necessity, and the ironic acknowledgement inadvertently accents the despicable reality of the crime. The crime, of course, being ignorance, ignorance exploited by absentee greed and eagerly promoted by corporate evil. Especially here, near Rootsville, where mixed forest goes down for pulp: cut clean and square along the lot lines, rimmed tight and hard against the angry hush of surviving forest consciousness—murdered maples, ash and beech shuffled in amongst the softwood, lost to overfed fart-belching mills. But this, this exceptional *this* is small-scale, its crime conveniently nestled in with its need; as is the clearcutter himself, a redneck to be sure, but more so the homey independent, a little outside the mold with his imported spouse, a little lost and pitiable and preindustrial and even noble, despite the crass impermanence of his ineluctable house-trailer *home*.

Dusk? Noon? Night? Whatever. *Clearly* it is a passage into increased temporal ambiguity. Here I begins and with I—action, at least of a terminal sort. 'I' ends up here, and at the clearcutter's, though he has been neither with the partyers nor at Aunt Minnie's. And in this simple act of ending up I crosses into specific interiority where self-definition

labours behind every felled tree. He has already acquired gender. Ultimately he can not escape me-ness.

The clearcutter's trailer describes itself. It will be a centerpiece among the tangled sidekills, visible from anywhere along the severed edge of the forest, down across the denuded, ironically sunwashed valley of the cut. It is ramshackle and corroded with window-vented stovepipe and greasy smear of smoke. Scattered tools clutter the yard; winches, axes, saws, pullies, cant hooks—sistersharing the modern task with truck, tractor, chainsaw, and unnecessarily-leased garrote, backhoe or Bobcat. The trailer, though not fixed to the ground, though road-ready and merely hitch-supported, is contained, curtailed—established—with packing crate porch and sheds hemming it in all round. There is more at stake here than the scant months' presence and the denuded ground. There's a still shot postcardy calender frame, easily rendered into sympathetic oils and fancifully reproduced for kitchen *October*.

Can it be; could it be; would it be? Despite the stern reality of its deep dark interiority? There is a world of outside lived inside the overheated aluminum shell, inside the overcrowding of wardrobe and appliance and knickknack—a Zellers collection of credit purchasing: *SleazCo* TV, mattress, and clock radio. The *SleazCo* coffeemaker labours on in the background, wheezing and burping through its age-prolonged function, gurgling up a glutinous muck of questionable water and discounted *Yucko* coffee. But she is friendly and sincere and delighted with my surprise appearance. As is the son, perhaps caught unaware that there were others; other people, other ideas, other styles outside the

shelter of their own stumpy valley. They back up, silently drawing me in. We all know that outside somewhere, coming, is a master for whom outsiders can only raise a point of tension. Their glassy eyes reflect the time-fluidity prezap of when he will thrust open the door. And my *I* is hopelessly dual-focused, confused between perspective and presence. Which will he see in me? Adult and threat; or, *I* in relative timidity: my child's glimpse of adult tyrant and social guilt? In either case I know he's bringing the bear. The grizzly is the real thing, lumbering along captive against a chain that in itself would be too large and heavy for my child dream strength. And for sure the bear hates me intrinsically, before I can even begin to focus his(?) ridiculous fictionality. He is truly scary. His characterization must star in the spotlight. The clearcutter himself is merely a presence. The grizzly is the active and interpersonal foil. It is against him that I will ultimately complete the climactic act. During dinner he sits and plays pretend human for everybody else, eating with knife, fork and raised pinky, but for me, in secret asides, he turns bearlike and sucks great growls of food up from his plate, flashing teeth and ten-inch claws. I sit next to him and pick at my food. I'm confused by the big questions of how *I* got to be so clearly *me*, and how we advanced to dinner. I'm child-me certainly, very nervous about food quality, socially subconscious and wanting the nice neurosis of Mom's sanitized kitchen. We're eating bear, a great, gluey stew garnished with a thick float of fat.

The grizzly is prime for hating me but he has no need to escape. All he could escape from is the SleazCo lazychair where he sits the night up drinking cheap scotch and eyeing me unpleasantly. For him to do otherwise would be unfamiliar. He would be just a

bear. He cannot escape personification and therefore cannot escape the lazyboy. He watches TV, a flickerama of satellite availability from dancing claws upon the remote, catching every beat of every video plot. All the while he throws back shots, in what might now double as the redneck role, exactly as a more theatrical being might snatch jellybeans or peanuts. All I can do is an endless mild cringe. Time moves too linearly for me to enjoy interpersonal movement of my own, or bother trying, or even relax in simple inaction. I cannot possibly display any credible response because I know with certainty that I'll be dropping the SleazCo 14 inch on the bear and I'm secretly guaranteed that I'll no longer be a child at the drop. I have already more or less completed the chiasmus. I'll be slamming it down with full adult strength and, like any adult, I'll be cartoon legwheeling out of there at maximum panic speed.

My feet must churn as swirls of a wheel so that they may run impossibly underground, like sidewinder augers that gouge and suck a tunnel through which I, unscathed, may pass. The underground must therefore have fluidity. It must also have thematic essence; a single, much-embaggaged basement, but like a bottomless, swampy lake. I whirl directly, shallowly across it, at the level of the present past, through across furnaces and propaganda and noxious fuels; with everything else omnisciently superimposed, not just lawnmowers, storm windows and misinformation, but also sensuality, violence, framed art and 78's. Everything surplus-human is here: a mile high slab of deceptive historicity. Even here, in Rootsville, there is far too much to name, or be divisible and less thickly hierarchical. It's implied linearity has potential only

metaphorically. It is absolutely self-signifying only as the murky glue of fermented morality. I spin onward at Aunt Minnie's in hopeless desperation. The moral tale is, as always, secretly anti-authorial.

I am, then, positioned to arrive at prime party, perhaps a little summer wet, as if I'd cool conditioned the hot evening with a quick swim in my clothes. Both prodigal and initiate must always arrive at prime party, when the general accumulation of intoxicants has made everyone into true christians, and happy, friendly, vselfrighteous—unchristian—christians at that; christians who don't need to give a fuck about christ. Then for me, warm-dunked and dripping after adrenaline panicking: an open arms enveloping into what can only be unquestioned familiarity and well being. And an escape from everything that has gone before, except perhaps what may be lumbering toward Aunt Minnie's to mean otherwise.