

In Our Place Of Quarantine

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Barbary Shore

Pittsburgh

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San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

Published by Barbary Shore, Pittsburgh.
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Never allow anyone the luxury of assuming that because the dead and deadening scenery of the American city-of-the-dreadful-night is so utterly devoid of mystery, so thoroughly flat-footed, sterile and infantile... that it is entirely outside of the psycho-sexual domain... The eternal pagan psychodrama is escalated under the “modern” conditions precisely because sorcery is not what 20th century man can accept as real.

James Shelby Downard

ONE

Luce I met through a friend.

When I found out she was a photographer's model, I asked her if I could take her picture.

-Are you an artist, she asked?

No, but I promised I would make her look good.

The name Luce is Italian. It has something to do with Light – more specifically, it has religious connotations, Christ being the “morning star,” the “light of the world” and all that. She spoke a flat, accent-less English, in a manner that suggested that English was not her native language.

I told her about Centralia, in Eastern Pennsylvania, a coal seam beneath the city will burn for the next three hundred years. The city is a volcanic ghost town, and she makes me promise to take her there some day.

Art and Magic seem to come from a primitive part of the brain...

pre-rational, purely symbolic. If anything, it renders mere language surplus to requirements.

And in magic (beyond a set of techniques) we have the firm conviction that the universe can be experienced in a manner outside of the linear or the material. People who practice magic know that it communicates with a part of ourselves that we cannot understand — and therefore it has results that we cannot understand, that may seem miraculous or impossible, but are nonetheless as compelling as consensus reality. This is the condition to which art aspires.

My lack of objectivity, even when
unconscious, tended to provoke a predictable
lack of sincerity...

Jean-Luc Godard, *Masculin/Féminin*

...it took the war to touch it, that you were as
responsible for everything you saw as you
were for everything you did.

Michael Herr, *Dispatches*

You were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did. This isn't a guilt trip or self-flagellation, this is a key magical concept.

To the soul, or the psyche, or whatever, there is no passive or active; you are a verb and it is all information, growing, morphing, changing – cruel information like the approximate blast radius of 2.4

ounces of *plastique* or all the calculations necessary for a cheetah to pounce a gazelle, mercilessly, silently... the course is unknown but the information is out there. It is cruel. The mind is always active, transmitting and receiving. And one is altered by the information.

Information is most subversive when it slides in wordlessly, into the most primitive parts of the brain. It took a war for Michael Herr to understand what artists and mystics have always understood: that what seems real is merely artifice, just barely concealing confusion and chaos.

Mine eyes are terrible and strange
but thou knowest me.

Cameron, *Wormwood Star*

When I first saw Luce, I was a security guard at an art museum in Pittsburgh. At that time in my life I was engaged in some serious self-analysis. I questioned everybody's motives, especially my own.

Being a security guard brought me into contact with Art, probably for the first time in my life. When I first encountered Van Gogh, in an antiseptic gallery, instead of where it should have been – in a cave somewhere, perhaps subterranean Lascaux, seen only on propitious days, and then through the eyes of *amanita muscaria* – I felt a high, inexplicable sadness. I was struck by the notion that we will never again see days as mysterious, or evocative as those of the current era. And we have lost so much already! I had stumbled upon the power of Art – it connects us to our primitive psychology – and before it I trembled.

And that is where I first saw her. She studied me with these large eyes, painted kohl-black like a death mask. And though it seems too much to point out, she had a tattoo of a rose on her left shoulder.

The rose is important to note, only as much of this story will play out *sub rosa*, literally, “under the rose.” This means “to keep a secret,” but it can also signify that which occurs outside the realm of language itself. Or outside our sense of what is real. The esoteric meaning of the rose is spiritual growth, or the unfolding of the spirit. When superimposed on a cross, it represents the spirit overtaking the physical plain, and its life-death duality. The exoteric meaning of the rose is, of course, love; in one old story a listless, shrill, shrieking spirit (oh, he's an Irish spirit, of course) is silenced by the gift of a wild rose on the new moon.

Now I would like to offer a description of a classic Pittsburgh “shot and a beer” bar, not only as an aid to the reader who may be unfamiliar with the terrain, but as a historical record as well.

Dukes (no apostrophe) is a typical establishment of this type. The Duke, of course, is John Wayne* and the bar was named in his honor. The first thing one notices upon entering the establishment is that at some point the owner made a half-hearted attempt at a “country and western” motif. When this plan was abandoned, the various detritus of the bar business started to collect: posters of scantily-clad women, neon beer signs, sports memorabilia.

Dukes opens at 10 AM. Shortly after, the first wave of customers begins to filter in, and often you will find someone sitting on the steps or pacing the sidewalk waiting for the bar to open. These are always men, none of which appear to be under sixty-five or seventy years of age. They will watch TV (game shows in the morning, cop shows in the

* Who was also known as Marion.

afternoon) and pay for seventy-five cent Iron City drafts with exact change. The atmosphere is that same lonely, hollow air that one always finds at a pub in the daylight hours. The bartender may attempt to clean a little at this time, but it is generally considered not worth the effort.

After 2 PM the next wave of customers will enter: here we have the day term workers, who generally started work at 5:30 or 6 AM, contractors, city employees and the like. They may live in the neighborhood or they may have to pass through it on their way home. The tips start coming in for the bartender, and the jukebox makes its first appearance. By now you might see someone sleeping on the bar itself. It is the duty of the bartender to rouse him and send him home before the next bartender arrives.

Things generally slow down around dinner time. A few of the regular patrons might stay on for the night, but most will leave the bar for the younger crowd who start trickling in after 8 or so.

The bar, of course, cannot be discussed without some mention of the patrons themselves. I know from personal experience that when I spent any serious amount of time in a bar, I came off like a low-rent Tantalus: forever thinking that what I wanted was within my grasp, forever finding that what I wanted was just out of reach.

What did I want? I didn't know exactly; I had been raised by cable television and was certain that personal fulfillment would step into my life at any moment, if only I was positioned properly. Isn't this how fate makes its appearance on the TV sitcom? And in my world of possibilities, which extended no farther than the outskirts of the city in

which I was born, there were not too many better choices than a bar like Dukes: they served beer there, sometimes there would be pretty girls and no one posed what now seems like the obvious question: why would a healthy, reasonably intelligent young man choose to spend his time with so many middle-aged drunks?

At least when I was with the middle-aged drunks they didn't expect much from me and I didn't expect much in return. When I went out with my peers I was often hurt or disappointed. One Friday night, while I was watching *Death Wish II* on the TV above the bar, I half-listened to Scott, my friend from high school, as he slid comfortably into conversation with a young girl in a tight sweater. And I won't lie, a part of me was jealous: Scott could always talk to anybody, way too easily. Of course, the conversation was rather mundane: I couldn't believe how little imagination these two were exhibiting! I was either jealous of his social grace, or bored by the conversation, or perhaps both feelings were feeding off of each other. I don't know, exactly, but as time wore on and I became intoxicated, escape seemed to be the only alternative.

I excused myself with a cheerful: *—See you in Hell!*^{*} and moved out

* Before the “see you in hell!” another coincidence... I had written the bus schedule down on a bookmark; I had a book with me, Richard Ellman's *Yeats: The Man And The Masks*. Upon seeing it, the red-haired girl asked:

Is that W.B. Yeats?

No, I replied, it's the bus schedule.

Do you always walk around with poetry?

into the cool April evening. Freedom! It felt so good on the exposed skin of my face and neck.

And it wasn't bad at all, stalking the streets. To be out on a cool spring night is to know in some small way the joy that Kerouac and Cassady felt flitting between watering holes, to share in the impulse that sent Huck Finn out into the territories. But even on my best nights the feeling is never far off that this could all get very ugly – that freedom (if it is really to be called freedom) must contain a darker aspect, that real freedom requires an element of danger. To be free is to be Outside; as Colin Wilson puts it, it is to “leave the world of common daylight... the no-man's land between hell and heaven.”

And this, of course, is what the evening required... to abandon this part of town where the only freedom and menace existed at the bottom of a bottle of beer. So I took to walking. I left the bus stop, through an oppressive high-tech shopping district dead at night but for the big boutique signs. I crossed a bridge, once a solemn industrial thing and now the place where comfortable people take their Sunday afternoon bike rides. I watched as several barges were pushed silently beneath me, by a tug on autopilot. But to me, none of this meant anything.

Do you always walk around with poetry?

Ignoring the question, I bade my farewells and lit out into the evening. At the bus stop, I opened the book and started reading: “The rituals of the order also fascinated him. Each member was encouraged to meditate upon the central symbol of the rose... Yeats was entirely in his occult rights when, in the apostrophes or prayers – one knows not what to call them – to the rose in his second book of verse, *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics*, he made it a symbol of beauty, of transcendental love, of mystic rapture, of the inner reality, of divinity.”

I returned home exhausted, and mostly sober, at three in the morning. She was sitting on my front steps. The girl from the museum. Playing with her cell phone.

-Can I help you? I asked.

-No. Silence. Am I in your way?

-Yes, but that's fine. What is your name?

-Luce.

-I'm Joe. um. Do you like my stoop?

At that point, a very plain looking guy rounds the corner, swinging car keys. Luce apparently forgets that we were talking, and stands up, brushing herself off.

-Hey Luce, use my steps anytime.

-Sure, she laughs. Thanks.

And they cross the street and enter the house directly opposite mine.

I wish I could say that I went inside and directly to bed, but I didn't. I sat down at my desk and tried to find Luce on the internet.

When I awoke, I picked up the piece of paper that lay next to me on the bed. I remembered writing something the night before, when I was just-almost asleep:

You take camera angles only as crossroads.

No one knows why you're using certain techniques.

When I finally left the bed for good at two o'clock, it was raining. I often look to the church for entertainment on days like this, consulting *Daily Lives of the Saints* by Cardinal Spellman (imprimatur: June 1, 1955). Today was the feast of St. Anticetus, Pope and Martyr. Anticetus was something of a disappointment (according to the text we cannot be certain that Anticetus, who died in the year 161, was even a martyr, though Cardinal Spellman assures the reader that the saint had lived a

hard life).

As the afternoon turned to evening, it occurred to me that I might like to live a life entirely of the imagination. Maybe we all do anyways, but it sure doesn't feel that way most of the time. We can control our ideas, which are nothing, but not our emotions, which are everything.

Eventually I was bored and lonely and had given up on the idea of entertaining myself, so I finally left the house at about midnight.

FIELD NOTES

Jimmy's is a non-descript
wood paneled "shot-and-
beer" bar set out in an
uncomfortable oblong
shape. The lighting is far
too bright for my taste.

The bright light really
puts me off of my
drinking.

I wonder if self-
improvement, rigorous self-
analyses and poetry are
luxuries not permitted folk
in more dire
social/economic contexts?
(Maslow would suggest that
this is often the case.) Or if
there is a unique human
need to ask questions
beyond nature's predator-
prey continuum.

How many
poets are there in the slums
of Calcutta?

FIELD NOTES

A large party of Mexican men play pool at a table in the back. I have never seen any of their women, only the men, who work in bars and restaurants up and down the street.

Do they have wives?

Girlfriends?

More importantly, do they have sisters?

And where do these women hang out?

Besieged by the Aztecs he's come to conquer, Cortes instructs his friend, and so far imminence justifies him: "The Mexicans and their allies are now determined to kill us all. Let us then, with all our Indian allies, defend ourselves.

-Vollmann

I take a bar stool next to Scott, who is playing the video poker machine. He hands me a miniature beer bottle from the bucket resting on top. Eventually, things start to pick up: my relative level of intoxication (RLI) has risen to match the influx other young social creatures as they slowly filter in.

Being a depressive in nature, I simultaneously realize that, though I am enjoying the company of so many pretty young people, a part of me will see this all as evidence of my own inconsequentiality.

It's twelve o'clock, it's midnight – there must be someone to blame.

- Nicky Wire

FIELD NOTES

The subjects that really interest me are those of a martial, a sexual or a mystical nature... we're drawn to these things naturally, as human beings.

The quality of my interaction with fellow human beings often falls short of the experiences I have in my imagination.

Luce! Sitting by herself at the bar while that Plain Guy I saw her with before heads to the bathroom.

I finish my beer and run to the bar to take the seat next to her. It lay beneath a large photograph of a native, the former light-heavyweight champion of the world.

The metaphor of such enterprises was, of course, continuity – the past underwriting the present.
- Hughes

FIELD NOTES

Amazingly, miraculously,
Luce and I fall into a fast-
moving, easy conversation.
The other possibility – that
she was some kinda dolt, or
worse, that she was bright
enough but we had no
common point of
communication, woulda
been terrible.

At first,
I pretended
not to
remember her.

Those eyes, so green,
impossibly large – in a world
of plastic and solid state,
utopia or oblivion, is this
where the final mystery lay,
in eyes such as this?

FIELD NOTES

I am reminded of the Lupercalia, a pre-Roman ritual that was celebrated at Jajouka (a small village outside of Tangier) as recently as the 1960s. Imagine! A people as a living time capsule, with perceptions, beliefs – hell, with *powers* -- as old as man itself, soon to be erased by satellite television.

I myself have seen Canidia coming with her black dress girt up, feet bare and hair unbound, howling together with the elder Sagana. One shuddered to look at either of them, because of their pallor. They began to dig up the earth with their fingernails and tear apart a dark lamb with their teeth. The blood was poured into a pit, so that they could call forth from it ghosts from the underworld to give them answers... You could see snakes and underworld dogs wandering about and the moon blushing red and hiding behind the great tombs, lest she witness these things.

- Horace,

Satires

ca. 30 B.C.

FIELD NOTES

Engrossed in conversation, she doesn't notice – and I hardly notice – her friends, particularly the Plain Guy, stealing glances in our direction, clearly agitated.

What do we discuss?

- *No Country For Old Men* (hated it)
- punk rock
- Fernando Pessoa
- wage slavery
- Luce's nephew. He is very cute, apparently.
- what was on the television
- Spandex fetishists
- hypnotism
- *Ringo Starr*, by Alan Clayson
- *The Sheltering Sky*
- whether or not it's possible to keep up the charade that life is interesting, or mysterious, or at least pregnant with possibility in Pittsburgh, ca. 2008. (she said: yes—maybe, I said: probably not)

Accounts of the mechanics of sharpening, and especially of simple confidence tricks, often seem absurd because they fail to convey the psychological adroitness that is the real core of the business. What the sharp most hoped to see in his prey's face was not stupidity but loneliness.

-*The Victorian Underworld*

I asked for very little from life, and even this little was denied me. A nearby field, a ray of sunlight. A little bit of calm along with a bit of bread, not to feel oppressed by the knowledge that I exist, not to demand anything from others, and not to have others demand anything from me – this was denied me, like the spare change we might deny a beggar not because we're mean-hearted but because we don't feel like unbuttoning our coat.

- Pessoa

FIELD NOTES

By this time suitably
intoxicated, I struggle
a bit to follow the
fracas that has begun...
it seems to happen
on the other side
of plexiglass:

PLAIN GUY: Luce is —
—“drunk”
—“irresponsible”
—to blame for “all of [the
Plain Guy's] failure in life.”
—“inconsiderate”
—“ten pounds overweight”
—“a slut”

LUCE: Plain Guy is —
—“full of shit”
—an “insecure wreck”
—and “will sleep alone
tonight – and probably
forever”

Isn't it amazing how your
emotions may swing quickly
from one pole to the next?
Perhaps that is why men are
afraid of accessing their
emotions—once you reach
deep down, things become
unpredictable. Alcohol, of
course, plugs you into
emotions that normally lay
dormant, and probably for
good reason

FIELD NOTES

Luce grabs my arm and drags me to the door. I struggle to find the cash to pay for our drinks as Jimmy himself smiles and tells me to “have fun” from behind the bar.

We kiss, finally, leaning against the wall behind the building.

Then we run away, laughing hysterically.

Poetry should be made by many, not by one.

-

Lautreamont

I did it because I'm a dirty dog.

-Sid Vicious

Luce came over, she stayed the night but she couldn't stay long and her charm certainly didn't fade when she left the next morning. I let her out, gave her a kiss on the cheek and made sure that the dead-bolt locked behind her. -*I have to work this afternoon*, she said, and she put my last two beers in her handbag.

She left me excited, inspired. Sitting on my bed, my back to the wall in a semi-upright position, I put pen to paper.

First, a title —

She Could Have Been A Terrorist

Then, the epigraph —

Women mirror the injustice masculine society
has inflicted on them—they become
increasingly like commodities.

Adorno (on Veblen)

Then I began to write: The rain came down in large, slow drops. The sun was shining brightly as well, and that only made her all the more tense. The atmosphere had a surrealistic cast, and if there was anything she could not abide this morning, it was surrealism.*

Depression, danger, festivity, the predatory nature of men in general, calamity, armageddon, slapstick—she could handle all of this. She wanted to be held safe, whether in a blanket or if need be, in chains. But scary, empty, the freedom of a vacuum—this she could not accept.

Luce, it seems, named so optimistically by her mother after the Light in the East, would be our eternal child. She is a stripper, but she could have been a suicide bomber, had she not been raised secular humanist. Her anger—and she is just that angry—lay buried, the full extent of which remains unknown, even to herself.

Her car, a sports car of some sort, “liability red,” slid effortlessly down the parkway past the ghetto mall, where as a junior high school student she would beg cigarettes off of men who were much too old. This was when you could still wear stone-washed denim and smoke inside of public spaces. It was out here in the suburbs that she learned all the big lessons, occult secrets handed down from cable television and guys in trucks.

From the next hill over, the mall is a formless bunker in the middle of nothing; at least nothing to those who would drive forty miles for Eddie Bauer and Laura Ashley and Ding Dong Burger and Orange Julius. It is only as you got close that you realized the scope of it all:

*The wish for absolute freedom is one of the constants of intellectual life, and of all the art movements of our century the one most concerned with this essential quest was surrealism. (Hughes, *Shock Of The New*)

fifty-seven acres of concrete, asphalt and more beige paint than has ever existed before in nature.

Once inside, Luce set out for the video store. She had recently appeared in a low-budget horror feature, something about sexy vampires or space vampires or sexy space vampires. She was only marginally aware of the stares of disapproving parent-types as she stalked through the corridors, and this set her on edge. She settled on a couple ironic pornographic video titles (*A Clockwork Orgy* and *The XXXorcist*) as well as her own star turn.

After paying the bored teenager behind the cash register, she stopped to look at a display of cheap, tacky sunglasses. As she modeled a pair in the store window, she could feel the eyes of the cashier on her backside. She set the sunglasses on the top of her head and turned around, locking eyes with the startled young man behind the register. Like a snake, she stunned him—an eternity lasting just short of thirty seconds.

Luce walked out, with the sunglasses on her head. She knew he wouldn't stop her.

There is something highly unsettling about a person who would steal a pair of cheap sunglasses from a sex-starved boy, only to toss them into the trash once she left the store. And there is something particularly unsettling about someone who would use hypnosis to do so. Luce, however, would have used dynamite to unlock the trunk of her car, if she had any. But she didn't, so she pressed the button on her keychain. Then she threw the crap she bought into the back seat and drove to work.

TWO

People weren't wired to worry about world affairs, geopolitics, global crises. The village model, where two-hundred-fifty people or so live in huts in the woods, their lives in seclusion, their own language, their own songs: this is natural. With industrialization came the phenomenon of the “eternal adolescent” on a mass scale—every human being a dreamer, every human entitled.

Utopia, of course, means “nowhere.”

Luce and I spent whole days together in bed, and we would have stayed there forever if life hadn't drawn us out.

Luce took me to a party. I didn't know anyone there—and the crowd was too young. Too happy. They all looked like little models or actors, and at least some of them were. I fell in with a few drunks in the kitchen, though for some reason I wasn't drinking that night.

It didn't take much time for my mind to turn to mischief. I was in a house full of young, educated adult-types who owned cars and spoke

very expressively; they seemed to all be plugged into something larger than themselves, they shared a common language and sense of security and my first thought was: —*flush an M-80 down the toilet.*

I began to look for signs. I might have been giddy, for Luce and I was a new development, and not even this shit party could ruin that. I poked around upstairs, hoping to walk in on two or three people in the midst of some sort of deviant sexual union. Instead, I opened the door on a young man taking advantage of the relative chaos downstairs for a little Breaking And Entering. He was haggard, even compared to me, and was putting a laptop computer into a battered old backpack. I startled him, and could see a certain amount of helplessness in his eyes.

He probably expected trouble. I just sort of shrugged and said: —*for now on, it's a free party!* and closed the door behind me.

I could hear a helicopter. I went downstairs and the party had thinned considerably. It was late. Luce was standing there, ready to leave, talking to some pretty people.

It was a cool spring evening. That helicopter was hovering, with its floodlight sweeping an abandoned schoolyard. Down the street some sort of military vehicle sped past. The sky was matte black; and the bright halogen street lamps created pockets of intense white light, surrounded by dark, disorienting shadows. It was an almost perfect evening and I was glad to have someone to walk home.

We were still in bed when Luce received a telephone call. After she was done, Luce said: *-That was Maura. Her laptop was stolen last night.*

-You caught me. It's here!

I jerked the covers up over her head, exposing the naked young lady. Luce quickly pulled them back. She continued: — *And she said that someone took the digital camera from her desk and took a bunch of pictures of his ass.*

I laughed. I had forgotten I had done that. — *You should probably have a look at them,* I said. *Maybe you could identify the suspect.*

-She erased them.

The cafe is a place where one can ruin oneself,
run mad, or commit a crime.

Vincent Van Gogh

We went out for a late dinner. The place was a particular favorite of mine — no booths, no families; just a number of tables in a low-lit dining area, with a bar to the side.

As much as we talked, we knew very little about each other... I guess that I felt that people don't really *know* each other, anyways, so why bother? I was much more concerned with how her mind operated than the minutiae of her past. But I did gather that she was drawing from stores of energy much greater than mine, and this concerned me. Could lead to trouble down the road.

SCENE ————— *Joe and Luce at a table in a dimly lit cafe. But for the clientèle this could be the 1920s or the 1890s, some far off decade.*

Joe: I noticed you in the gallery, looking at the Van Gogh painting.

Luce: I don't remember.

Joe: I do. I saw that tattoo, you were wearing a tank top. I saw your eyes.

Luce: That painting. It's not that Van Gogh had a particular style—which he did—but that he was able to share somehow his own inner experience with us.

Joe: The man is ignored in his own lifetime,

marginalized, but his work becomes a hot commodity after he's dead.

Luce: What does that say about death? That it should matter so little, in the scheme of things – it is the end of life, but it doesn't negate life. His work now has a life of his own. Is death really the opposite, then, of life?

Joe: Don't know, really. Do opposites attract?

Luce: Are we opposites?

Joe: Probably not.

SCENE ———— *Outside now. Joseph and Luce are walking. It is late in the evening. They appear to be enjoying themselves.*

They walk past a digital billboard. A brilliant splash of color zooms out to reveal a still life; a flower morphs slowly into the AT&T logo. The AT&T logo dissolves into a brilliant paint stroke and the process begins again.

FADE TO BLACK.

The state or condition of being a security guard in an art museum is a particular hell reserved for senior citizens who worked hard for the same company for forty years, only to have their pensions stolen from them; the marginally mentally infirmed, subsidizing their social security checks; young kids who will soon be moving onto some possible bright future; and those of us who should be smart enough to know better.

I spent the day in a large, indoor courtyard ringed by reproductions of naked men from antiquity. The fig leaves bored me. The artificial lighting bored me. The inner-city school children with their stupid backpacks, bored me. I stood in the same spot for eight hours that day.

Luce told me that I should apply the logic of dreams to my waking life as well. We were at the supermarket and I bought one of those cheap mass market paperback “dream books” they have at the check out, next to the star sign scrolls and Nostradamus' prophecies. A statue, it is said, signifies estrangement from a loved one. To visit an art gallery predicts unfortunate unions in domestic circles.

MAGIC.

To dream of accomplishing any design by magic indicates pleasant surprises. To see others practicing this art, denotes profitable changes to all who have this dream. To dream of seeing a Magician, denotes much interesting travel... and profitable returns to the mercenary. Magic here should not be confounded with sorcery or spiritism... True magic is the study of the higher truths of nature.

Gustavus Hindman Miller, ca. 1900

Thinking about this, standing on granite, for eight hours, it occurred to me that I would need some serious magic to turn my life around. I had a vague list of grudges, but no real ambition. An enemies list. Who was I, Nixon? Didn't he once say that character is destiny? And what sort of dead end destiny is this, wearing security guard polyester on such a beautiful day? I was there by default. It was drift that brought me into this city, in to this job, and in to this room with its ill omens — the statues signifying estrangement from loved ones, the art gallery itself, predicting an unfortunate union.

After work, Luce and I took a walk. I began to unburden. I was vaguely aware that I had fucked up—that something I did, or did not do, left me ill at ease. That this feeling ebbs and it flows, but on the

whole it grows and that I am afraid that if I do not destroy it it will destroy me.

SCENE ————— *In bed, laying on the covers.
Talking.*

LUCE: Do you ever feel like
you're caught in between
worlds?

JOE: No, not really.

What do you mean?

LUCE: Like I'm playing a
role. Or I'm in someone
else's movie.

JOE: Sometimes, I guess. Is
this a bad thing, or...

LUCE: Not good. Let's watch
TV.

JOE: Oh, God, no. Not
tonight.

I love TV, but it gives me a
headache.

Luce turns on the TV. A lone chimpanzee, probably still a virgin, is being brutally beaten by several of his social betters.

JOE: When you're "caught between worlds," why do you think that is?

LUCE: Hmm... I don't know.

It's just different, I guess. Sad. 'Cos after that? How are you supposed to work when all you can think is, this is all so pointless?

JOE: That's tough. I dunno.

On the television, a woman in Papua New Guinea fells a tree to get at the pulp.

JOE: Why not just relax? Enjoy yourself?

LUCE: I suppose so.

JOE: Pol Pot said, "When there is rice, there is everything."

SCENE ————— *Scott, Joe's friend from high school, meets him at the bar.*

SCOTT: It's called *initiation*. Like foreshadowing, it's a popular literary device.

JOE: What is that?

SCOTT: This strange sense of futility you were talking about. It's a biochemical process. Has been the subject of many books and television shows over the years.

Some of us, it seems, are not meant to live like this, from bar-to-bar, from one dead end

job to the next. Some of us have suffered for as long as people have been telling us to vote. That's why we take drugs.

The magician does not necessarily want the burden of existence lifted from his shoulders; he wants to understand why he is carrying it and where.

Lon Milo DuQuette

SCENE ————— *Joe and Scott in a bar.
Scott's 18 year old Wiccan girlfriend has joined them.*

CIVET (dressed like Stevie Nicks): The point is not, "how do I become initiate?" The point is that to decide that you are. It's a magical act, meaning it's an act of the imagination, and it's really the definition of human. Or something.

Civet giggles.

**5-MEO-MIPT TRYPTAMINE, N-ISOPROPYL-5-METHOXY-N-METHYL;
INDOLE, 3-[2-(ISOPROPYLMETHYLAMINO)ETHYL]-5-METHOXY;
N-ISOPROPYL-5-METHOXY-N-METHYLTRYPTAMINE;
3-[2-(ISOPROPYLMETHYLAMINO)ETHYL]-5-METHOXYINDOLE**

DOSAGE : 4 - 6 mg, orally; 12 - 20 mg, smoked

DURATION : 4 - 6 hrs

QUALITATIVE COMMENTS : (with 4 mg, orally) "Up very fast, to a +2 in an hour. Absolutely no visuals, but over the next two hours an ease of interpretive fantasy, almost dream-like, and easy eroticism. Food tasted marvelous, but there was no appetite. Easy, normal sleep and good spirits in the AM."

(with 20 mg, smoked) "Most all of it was smoked in about three or four inhalations before I felt it coming on so strongly that I lay down. Within less than a minute after I lay down, with my eyes closed, my visual field was filled with brilliant geometric patterned lines of different colors that were slowly moving. There were several sets of parallel and curved lines superimposed upon in each other. Soon after that, probably within a minute or two, I became extremely disoriented from my normal sense of being a person in a body; I was lost in an undifferentiated mass of feeling and non-specific sensation. It was similar to the overwhelming feeling of 5-MeO-DMT in quality and, as with that material, the peak phase lasted less than 30 minutes.

"Then I began to think more coherently, but intense waves would return every 5 to 15 minutes. In between my perception and thinking would be fairly normal, but with the waves I would be swept up in imagery or memories heavily laden with emotional content. After two hours I was joined by my wife. We spent some very intimate time together, and I remember

asking her who she was and she replied, 'Your wife.' This was very powerful to me since I did not really know what it meant, except that it seemed to be the best combination of mother, lover and friend, and that it was an entirely new kind of relationship that we would be creating for the rest of our lives together.

"After three or four hours, the waves had virtually stopped, and I remained oriented to the present and my immediate surroundings. I stayed under a mild influence until I ate supper, around 7 hours. I felt tired, had trouble falling asleep, but awoke refreshed."

[source: Tryptamines I Have Known And Loved: The Chemistry Continues by Alexander and Ann Shulgin.]

SCENE ————— *Joe and Luce lay on top of the bed, talking.*

JOE: What should we call this stuff?

LUCE: It doesn't even have a name. Just a number and some letters.

JOE: This must be.

uh....

A conceptual
switch.

....words....

LUCE: You know what I mean, right?

JOE: I love you, if that helps.

LUCE: Not really. Maybe.

It's obvious, yeah.

JOE: I was just saying that,
whatever is natural is simple.

LUCE: And what is not is too
damn complex.

*Joe turns the TV on. A man is
talking very fast. He is
wearing a bow tie.*

JOE: This guy thinks he wants
to wear a bow tie, but he
doesn't.

LUCE: This is very easy, the
easiest. Next time we should
try smoking it.

JOE: Yeah, I didn't even
realize how fucked up I was.
It's like *Performance*.

SCENE ———— *The sex scene takes place in the dark. There are joyful sounds and passionate, soulful sounds. Silly-serious, warmwet, loud-quiet-LOUD.*

SCENE ———— *Joe and Luce lay on top of the bed.*

JOE: What is natural is simple. What isn't is complex. It becomes complex.

LUCE: Like, fucking is so simple... there is nothing more natural. All the laws, the posturing, the bullshit around sex and marriage—that's all confused and confusing.

JOE: I think that what is happening is, what is natural and right, we know is right—is in conflict with what we've learned to do.

THREE

TEN AM:

It is a genuine grey day, like the sky in Anton Corbijn's biopic... just enough rainfall that cars make long tearing and scratching sounds as they go past my window. I find warmth in a tiny Italian market down the street; it is not much more than a jumble of boxes and bags and bottles that haven't been sorted in twenty-plus years. The iconic 70-year-old proprietor with Kaiser Wilhelm's facial hair and his beat-up middle aged daughters (a villageful, it seems) were absolutely radiant, fussing over me as if their livelihood depended on it.

A part of me is insignificant, and this frightens me... not for what it represents, but for the terror it inspires, in my quiet moments.

TEN PM:

An ambulance flies past my window, the siren cuts through everything around. It is moving with considerable speed, but not so fast that I can't see inside... a brightly colored blanket decorated with what looks like race cars hangs off of something. I cannot help but think that this is a psych case.

One of these days will be Jack's birthday. I don't remember if it was yesterday or tomorrow, but probably it feels like tonight. I don't want to be bothered with remembering.

Depression is only a word? And perhaps it is not strong enough, or perhaps it is far too clinical. It may convey (somewhat) the intensity of one's affliction, but it addresses neither the style nor the substance. And there is a specific character to the depression survivor, the man who awakens everyday with this foul weight on his back.

Last year I lost some friends. Jack killed himself on purpose, on his birthday... Joan died in the culmination of some fucked up drugginess on Christmas Day. These were

kindred spirits—people I love and who I long
to touch again.

But I have survived longer than they, and that
must count for something.

Nature is simple... culture, complex.

Initiation, like foreshadowing, is a popular literary device.

Art can... become a direct organization of higher sensations... a matter of producing ourselves, and not things that enslave us¹.

...a rational derangement of all the senses².

I had reached a point where ideas, partially conceived notions on those subjects, art and nature, were as real to me as solid objects; much more real to me than electoral politics or workplace intrigue. When I had this conversation with Luce, she agreed: —*It's all so boring!* I knew what she meant: not the impatient boredom of a child, caught between amusements. There is a boredom that is so powerful, so pervasive, that neither the many distractions of the television class nor all the virtues of the empire that surround us will hold it at bay forever. This must be what they meant when they said that out of boredom will arise

1 Guy Debord, *Theses on Cultural Revolution*

2 Rimbaud, right?

revolution.

*The show is over. The audience get up to leave their seats. Time to collect their coats and go home. They turn around... no more coats and no more home*³.

Except, of course, that a revolution, should there ever be one, would be especially boring. I have met so-called revolutionaries. I have slept with a couple of them. They eventually become as bored of me as I have become of them. The very word *revolution* denotes an obsolete technology.

—*This feeling could be contagious*, I thought; and the responsible thing would be to quarantine myself. Luce liked this idea.

—*We have to get away from all culture!* She said. *Maybe in our place of quarantine we can eat, love, think, do other real things.*

But where should we go? “Back to nature” was not an option, it was a cliché. Besides, Luce was still wanted by the Rainbow Tribe, a sort of “hippie mafia” that were working to increase their iron grip on the state parks and national forests of Western Pennsylvania.

We eventually settled on the idea of a road trip. Luce would drive. I would serve as the DJ and we would both take turns as the Bad Ideas Department.

As we left Pittsburgh I became increasingly ill-at-ease. It is against my nature to leave the city, and I haven't done so in years. When I have in the past, it was only to fly to another city and back. I don't fuck around with trees, unless they are escaping a sidewalk or happily inhabiting a traffic island.

We seemed to just drift along the highway, hypnotically, for hours;

3 Vasily Romanov's definition of nihilism.

we occasionally encountered clusters of automobiles that did not communicate with one another. Sometimes someone drove aggressively, but you just pitied them. They must have had a rotten childhood.

At dusk, we found a motel just off the interstate. The cable television that it advertised consisted of five channels that bled into one another. In the bath, the hot water was warm and the cold water lukewarm.

The swimming pool was empty, so we sat next to it drinking beer. A middle-aged guy named Richard joined us. He had long gray hair and a trailing gray beard and mustache, which gave him an oriental look. Asked if we “smoked,” I assumed that he meant marijuana. —*No thanks*, I said.

While Richard and Luce shared a joint, our new friend lowered his voice to a whisper and said, —*The asylum is my temple*.

He said a lot of other fucked up shit that night, but nothing else as cryptic or in its own way poetic.

It took me about thirty seconds to decide that I hated this guy: this was a violent, irrational hatred which, in retrospect, could only have been essentially Jungian. I could relate to him because something in his character mirrored something in my own, something that I despised when forced to confront it. I could've strangled him. And I can't guarantee that I won't, if I ever see him again.

Richard was a child of the 1960s, of The Beatles and The Process Church. He had drifted far from these shores and his presence here

was little more than a faded note in a bottle, a letter of warning to anyone who might follow his path.

Of course, Luce and Richard hit it off, talking about dream journals and ley lines and shit. Richard related how he had once “had a long-time gig” as a movie theater usher, but lost it, he said, —*when the management caught wind of my work with the Feds.*

Supreme sincerity evokes resonance.

Taoist proverb.

The bearded Devil is forced to dwell

in the only place

where they don't sell

Burma-Shave.

American proverb.

To be perfectly honest, I spent much of the time sulking as the two clowns had their conversation. (It occurs to me that I may spend a lot for time sulking in this tale. But not without good reason: I was sick of crazy people! So many people had died, and I resented them for it. Completely fucking nuts, all my friends. I thought about Jack and I thought about Joan and I missed them terribly and I decided that from now on I would only spend time with normal people, if only I could find any.)

-*Come on*, Luce said to me. Richard was moving away at his zombie pace, dragging our beer in his backpack. -*Richard is gonna show us where*

the ghosts are.

We went out to the car. Richard directed Luce from the backseat. We traversed dirt roads on a moonless night. Every once in a while an empty housing development with a big sign announcing its imminent completion would come into frame. He directed us into a parking lot outside a big brick building, next to a township vehicle.

I had never been so thoroughly lost: and this in a literal sense. Now that Richard was navigating I was completely gone. The setting itself: rural Pennsylvania with its crickets and its dewy-damp spring nights, its moon somewhat waxing or waning. Everything seemed to be exactly as it was when I was a kid. A part of me suspected that it always would be.

We exited the car and Richard led us down a well-worn footpath. This lasted about a quarter of a mile, with the highway to our back, off in the distance. The path met up with some power lines, which we followed to our destination.

-We are now walking along the ley lines, Richard said, a little too dramatically. We are walking along one of those rare primordial locations where the rough-hewn cosmic energy ebbs and flows. Can you feel it? Can you hear it? When you have worked with it enough, you get sensitive to it.

-This guy is completely fucking nuts, I whispered. Luce punched me on the shoulder.

We approached a shopping center from its backside. There was a minimal amount of activity, the sort of shipping and stocking that goes on all night at those big box stores. Richard led us past this, to a broken

jumble of buildings and tall grass fenced in with “no trespassing” signs.

-This is my temple, Richard said. Before every last inch of America becomes a mall or overflow for the city sprawl, I will show you the Kali-Yuga.

The former grounds of the Eastern Ohio Psychiatric Hospital sit on two hundred acres of worthless real estate. It would cost more to develop the area than there is potential for profit, so the state is letting it all go to seed. The site is an anachronism, the last remnants of the age of electroshock and eugenics.

I really wanted to fuck Luce. And it didn't matter that we were now on the set of a horror film. But nothing was going to happen with this guy here. I thought about killing him, a thought inspired by my morbid sense of humor and this morbid locale, but it was never more than a thought. Resigned to my fate, I followed along.

The halls were wide and covered with trash. The brick walls were cool to the touch. Paperwork, graffiti, empty beer bottles and broken windows characterized the rooms we passed, most of which did not have doors. Luce seemed to delight in the absurdity of it all. Richard loved having an audience.

We entered a room at the end of a long hall. Despite Richard's flashlight, it was too dark to really see anything. Then he lit the candles.

We were in a conference room or classroom. Refuse had been swept into the corner, and an altar of some sort had been fashioned out of a card table. The table itself struggled under the weight of all the candles and crystals and such. In front of us, in front of the altar, taped to the chalk board was a large piece of orange construction paper.

Along the top, in red and blue refrigerator magnets, read:

KALI-YUGA.

Beneath this was the grotesque figure of a woman, a collage featuring the head of Lindsey Lohan, the torso from a *Playboy* centerfold, and some arms and legs from a medical journal; the skin was cut away, so you could see muscle and bone. This rough approximation of a Ralph Steadman work hummed with occult power: this was Richard's object of adoration.

Richard began to chant. His was a low voice, guttural, and the words he pronounced were almost not words at all. The sounds were archaic, and though we didn't know what they meant, they evoked strong emotions. Luce thought that this was all great fun. Richard pulled a ceremonial knife from his cloak and started waving it around. Bored, I went for a walk⁴.

We can now return to the questions of the conditions necessary for initiation... There are ignorant persons who imagine that one 'initiates' oneself, which is a contradiction in terms; forgetting, if they ever knew, that the word *initium* means 'entrance' or 'beginning'...

Rene Guenon, *Conditions for Initiation*

4 Though you may wonder if my leaving Luce alone with this madman is ethical (and I have been accused of a certain moral laziness in the past), I assure you that she could easily kick his ass—and my ass—if the situation called for it. Knife or no.

The building was full of traces of a primitive culture... a holding cell for lunatics, since ransacked by vandals and concurrently the sacred space of a madman, to be demolished someday by a company hoping to make serious money in the condominium business. Walking through the building was really no better than being outside. When a high wind sprang up, it merged with the barbarous names emanating from down the hall and the hairs on the back of my neck sprang up, as if in response to an unseen companion.

Stalking the halls, I felt an otherworldly presence over my shoulders, not quite Winston Churchill's "black dog," but certainly related. It was the product of my imagination, for sure, but in some sense every bit as real as the angelic spirits being evoked by Luce's madman. Compelled by some strange notion, I pressed on, into the dark.

When I had traveled so far that I could no longer see by the light of the madman's candles (which was not very far at all), I turned on the flashlight. We were in what I imagined was an infirmary; like the other rooms, this was cleaned out, but for some trash and some old furniture. In the center of the room was a large table. There were brackets and braces and places to attach straps, probably once connected to some poor lunatic.

I examined the graffiti on the wall. Usually, I could make out what people had written when practicing this illegal art form, but this particular graffiti guy was either Inspired or Schizoid. Or both. Lines intersected with strings of symbols, sometimes Arabic forms, sometimes nothing comprehensible at all. Sometimes it seemed to be written East-

West, sometimes North-South. On occasion the lines would intersect, leaving large glyphs that I recognized as consisting of the various symbols trailing behind it.

As I concentrated on these symbols, trying to divine a meaning, the chanting in the background grew. I could hear Luce participating, sometimes groaning, sometimes giggling, moving the sound further along... it seemed to ride in on the wind now, which in the meantime had grown significantly epic.

Onward I pressed, looking for more signs of alien life.

Richard, it occurred to me, was an Anglo, a WASP. Luce had a Mediterranean temperament, her people were from Sicily. And I am a Celt. H.P. Lovecraft, a known anti-Semite who may or may not have had some serious sexual hang-ups, used minorities in his stories the way that other writers used ghouls or the undead. This is a sad and twisted take on a very real possibility: that much of the horror of this world exists because human beings are horrible. In this primitive stage of evolution we are incapable of being anything *but* monsters, perhaps. An elitist such as Lovecraft will pretend that he is above all of this; this acts as a balm to his own inferior sense of self. But some of us know better.

It is in buildings such as this that we have a lasting testament to human cruelty, where it once masqueraded as the bleeding edge of technological advancement: electro-convulsive therapy, drug therapy, lobotomy.

I continued through the dark, feeling strangely compelled to do so. And the sense that I was being accompanied only grew. The Other,

whether an act of creation, on my part, or of reception, seemed neither benevolent nor malevolent, merely alien.

I stepped into a room with no windows when the wind pulled the door shut behind me. It took a moment or two for me to get my bearings and realize that the door would not swing outward. I was trapped.

Silence. No windows. No wind, just stale air. No chanting. Nothing but the alien Other over my shoulder, with its wide, dead weight.

I looked at my phone. It was 3:30 AM and there was no reception in this vault. I did not shout long—it could do no good, and it encouraged my feeling of helplessness. I would need to keep my strength; there was no telling how long it would be before the space cadets noticed I was missing.

On my cellphone, the battery was now dead. After searching the room thoroughly for a means of escape and finding none, I turned off the fading flashlight. And I waited.

Time, in an isolation tank, moves slow-fast. Consumed by every moment one fails to notice as stretches of time escape your grasp. The minutes drag and the hours jerk.

Soon enough – after what seemed like forever – I began to realize that my Alien Other was real. Richard had opened the door and something flew in. It was so close now that I could feel the radiation burns on the back of my head, where the base of the skull meets the neck, where there has always been a protrusion: Luce said it was an

alien implant, but it's only a harmless cyst.

I gave the door another hard jerk; the top opened quick, while the bottom remained jammed. I pushed it again and this time it flew open—Luce moved her foot aside, freeing the door at its base. Her face wore an evil, impish grin.

I thought I tasted blood in her mouth. The table held all of her weight, and some of mine as I pushed her into it. But I didn't care if it collapsed or not. It could take us with it.

At the head of the table were those brackets where straps once strapped. Over her head, coming in and out of frame with the wind, with our thrusts, were the alien runes, telegraph of someone's lost desire.

She struck her thigh and bit her finger...
'The drunkard and the thirsty shall
slap your cheek.'
The Descent Of Ishtar

Instead of some sort of bonding experience, traveling with Luce merely added a layer of noise to the signal. Back at the hotel, Richard went to his room and we went back to ours. The room was dingy and uncomfortable, I was irritable and we both continued to drink. When Luce passed out, I went out to the empty pool, where I watched the sun struggle up, as it does every morning. On this particular morning the sun won, it beat back the clouds. This was a good sign.

I was ready to give my heart to Luce, I had already decided that. But it seemed highly improbable. I was like a long distance runner who had made the decision to continue to Rome, but whose body lacked the strength to continue.

This was a maddening fascination, in Byron's phrase ("So strong thy

Magic—or so weak am I”).

In a strip club, time is marked by the song, by the drink. After a half dozen strawberry daiquiris I am so bored that when a girl asks me for the three-hundredth time if I would like a dance, I say *-Why not?*

I felt bad for her, she had spent the whole night being pursued by a man who was so obviously in love with her that it made us all squirm. He seemed to be about seventy years old, and he was built like a woman: skinny arms and legs, pronounced posterior, tiny waist, breasts all but eclipsed by a beer gut. But for the old man's head, you would think you were looking at somebody's grandmother. It was no surprise that a man like this would have to pay for companionship, but the girl didn't have the heart (or the stomach, perhaps) to carry out the cruel transaction.

Her name was Binah, one of those appellations, like “Appeal” or “Chastity Bono” that people have in the business. Binah was built like a twelve year old boy, but for nipples dark and inflamed—so swollen as to appear painful. As a child, I would read an illustrated children's Bible (almost always because I was being punished). In *The Good* (comic) Book it said that before the flood, rain had never fallen from the heavens: it seeped up from beneath the earth to populate the lakes and the rivers. Much the same, perspiration had come to appear on Binah's brow, and between her breasts. She smelled of the sickening sweet oil that the girls always seem to wear in these places.

We lingered for a moment after my time ran out, until a guy in a tight black t-shirt opened the camouflage netting that comprised the

“private room” and kicked us out. For some reason, when we made it back to the main room I was not surprised to see Luce on stage.

Binah said her name was Rose. Perfect.

I had known that if I were writing this story Luce would have to be a stripper, but when asked she would only say that she worked in the office of a landscaping company, that she would rather not talk about it. It isn't even that I cared what she did; but why would she lie?

I left the club feeling guilty.

As I write this, it occurs to me that there may be a downside to making a shared interest in alcohol, alchemy and obscure drugs the basis of a relationship. At first flush, booze was a prop, an excuse to be together. We might have just as easily bonded through gardening or anything else. When she left—and she would have to eventually—she would leave suddenly and in response to pressures both innate and environmental. But for a time she was my entire planet.

We lay out on her bed, stoned, listening to talk radio, for some reason.

-Do you want to watch Fame? I asked.

-Fame sucks. I hate musicals.

-No, it's fun, I explained helpfully. *It's camp.*

-No it isn't. Camp is self-aware.

I turned on the television, delighted to see Coco come onto the screen. She was my favorite. Luce glared at me.

-*That's Coco*, I said, trying to be helpful.

-*That's what it says on the screen.*

-*She takes her shirt off in the movie.*

A minute or two later, a song comes blasting out of the television set.

-*Jesus Christ!* Luce explodes. She reaches over and shuts the television off.

-*Fuck*, I said to Luce. *Do you have to be a bitch all the time?*

Outbursts such as this were not unprecedented, but until the final outburst I denied their importance. It is only in hindsight, of course—after love's first flush—that we even notice such things. But to be honest, Luce could always be difficult.

And this may say more about me than I wish to divulge, but I always felt that I wasn't as strong or energetic as she, and that she resented me for it. How could a bookworm such as myself (if at times a loud, drunken one), a sensitive artist-type, hope to contain such an explosion with his own bare hands?

So it was really no surprise to me that when I awoke she was gone. Or that she would be gone so completely, as unsatisfying as this fact might be from a literary standpoint. All I could do, once reality set in, was wonder if she was at work. Or perhaps she was checking her email, or checking her sites, or updating her blog. Or maybe she was sitting down at her (modular) Swedish computer desk, cursing me under her breath. Or looking up and taking notice of her apartment, all the things that she worked so hard for, everything in its proper place.

Luce held tightly onto the rock solid totems of her life, treating material objects like stepping stones, something to keep her from plunging into the murky depths of her subconscious. She had clothing, appliances, magazine subscriptions, a loft apartment. Holocaust, by the band Big Star, was her favorite song. And she listened to religious podcasts—they reminded her of a simpler time. Once she heard the preacher say: *-You shall know a kingdom from its resources.*

As for Luce, her resources were mostly consumer items. She had the perfect apartment, all the creature comforts, perfect security and yet, no bank account: she kept all her money in a shiny red metal toolbox beneath the bed. Her kingdom may have been a kingdom of fear: sooner or later, she would have to face that possibility. But for the time being, consumer confidence was at an all-time high.

But if Luce was safe for now, her departure was for me a signal that things were about to get very strange indeed.

After completing Zarathustra in 1885, when he was forty, Nietzsche never again sustained an impression for so long. It could be said in adopting so many voices and styles he was flirting with madness, but it could equally well be argued that without the voices he could not have held madness at bay for so long.

Ronald Hayman, *Nietzsche*.

The next night I dreamt that I was in a conference room, sitting at a table with: Rev. Dr. Shem Lambeth (a *film noir* preacher in a ratty black overcoat and alligator shoes), Arthur Rimbaud (roughly sixteen years of age), a nineteenth century Viennese psychologist named Schöenfeld, and Dateline: NBC's Chris Hansen. Seated immediately to my right was Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche, understood in the context of the dream to be my primary caregiver. Behind our group, bouncing off the walls, was Rock'N'Rollen, a dude in a rainbow clown wig. He is holding a sign that reads: *JOHN 3:16*.

CHRIS HANSEN

In the end, the Outsider is one who makes decisions that others cannot understand, for reasons that make sense to no one else. He is...

In an exaggerated gesture, Chris Hansen turns his attention to me:

CHRIS HANSEN (cont'd)

... he is compelled to do things, knowing that, to the wider world they are indefensible. He may seem... crazy ...to others, but he is making a rational decision.

ELIZABETH FÖRSTER-NIETZSCHE

As my brother wrote, *the goal of humanity cannot be located in its end but in its finest specimens.*

SCHÖENFELD

Who is to say what are these "finest specimens," Frau Nietzsche?

REV. LAMBETH.

It is *Jay-zus!*

ROCK'N'ROLLEN

It's all in The Good Book!

The clown then starts dancing around the periphery of the room, in his Rainbow Wig, doing the A-OK, twisting his handlebar mustache, doing backflips...

It is at this point that I pointed out: *-Nietzsche was no fan of Christianity.*

ELIZABETH FÖRSTER-NIETZSCHE

The Jew is correct.

CHRIS HANSEN

Relativity has placed reality *Beyond
Good And Evil*

Monsieur Rimbaud has been sleeping this whole time. He lifts his head up off the table. His hair is a mess, and he looks a lot like Dee Dee Ramone. He rubs his eyes like an infant, with two closed fists. Then, thinking better of his decision to join this mess he

puts his head back on the table and goes to sleep.

REV. DR. LAMBETH

The Lord, he tells me what is good and evil. He has moved me. He placed the bomb in the so-called "clinic," where they murder the babies. I was but a vessel!

ROCK'N'ROLLEN

Woooo-hee! Heeee-ha!

Rimbaud snores. Schönfeld gestures towards the Reverend Doctor Lambeth.

SCHOENFELD

This man... and what do you do exactly, Herr Dr. Lambeth?

REV. DR. LAMBETH

With my campus crusade and online ministry, the Baby Liberation Organization, I am seeking out those who might wish to persecute me for my faith and my unwavering resistance to

the Unborn Baby Holocausttm.

SCHÖENFELD

You, with this Baby Club of yours,
this is the definition of *slavmoral*.

ELIZABETH FÖRSTER-NIETZSCHE

Please explain.

SCHÖENFELD

The subconscious seeks a higher purpose, but the conscious mind is afraid of what it will find. So it invents a God. This voice is the voice of your shadow, pushing you into unspeakable anti-social acts. You are a slave because you refuse to act, you choose only to react.

"Reverend," how did it feel when you saw the bomb destroy the clinic?

REV. DR. LAMBETH

Colors were brighter, sounds somehow much more... resonant? Randy Travis has never sounded better, not to anybody on this planet, ever...

I didn't think nothing. It just happened, like I was watching a movie.

CHRIS HANSEN

He tells the truth! One need not lie when he is so... twisted...

FOUR TRANSGRESSIONS

I'LL SIDE WITH THE VANDALS.

Sasha was a security guard at the art museum. A couple of times a week, Sasha and I would grab a beer after work. He was exceedingly average in some respects: twenty-six years of age, roughly 5'8", dishwater-blonde hair. He lived with his girlfriend, who was pregnant. And Sasha was exotic in some ways: he moved to America at thirteen, spoke a heavily accented English, had Russian features. The way he carried himself, his body might have been made to soak up tension. He spoke very little about his life, and his infrequent flashes of extreme rage made me wonder if he wasn't spiritual cousins with Gary Gilmore.

The job really can make one batty. Imagine standing up straight in an airtight room, twelve feet square, for days on end. The tedium can have a violent impact on one's mood.

It was a slow day and I welcomed the distraction when rumors began to circulate that management was conducting an "investigation." It took someone a few days to parse the hundreds of hours of security camera footage. They didn't know exactly what they were looking for

until they saw it.

The DVD shows Sasha at his post. Ruminating perhaps, with nothing to occupy his time but his frustration, his fears and that damned, mocking painting: a plain black canvas with white specks signifying, I suppose, the night sky as seen some place with low levels of light pollution. Sasha stares down the painting, his opponent, with his back to the viewer. On the video he is perfectly positioned, as if this were all for the benefit of the camera. He looks to the left. He looks to the right. He hasn't much thought this through, for he is a man of action. And this job, with its stillness and confinement, is driving him mad.

Sasha looks to the left. He looks to the right. He lunges forward, with a nail or or a pen, or a key, or a screwdriver and takes a huge slice out of the painting. And then he walks away.

A minute later he is back, examining his work. He too is an artist. He has shown the overpaid prats who run this place the true meaning of the word “interactive.”

Instead of the stultifying boredom of the Groundhog Days, he rides out the rest of his shift on a wave of adrenaline. Adrenaline, of course, is the true motivation of most petty vandals.

And me, I'll side with the vandals.

I walked home the day they arrested Sasha. He was charged with institutional vandalism, which is apparently a very big deal. The police

detective spirited him away quietly, in handcuffs, through the loading dock. On the walk home I thought about freedom, and about handcuffs. I thought about the tyranny of cash, credit and commerce, and about how few options there were for a vegetarian meal in my neighborhood. When I saw a large, tacky storefront display, something that only existed to sell six hundred dollar handbags, I was struck by the urge to put a brick through the window of Coach.

I remembered Sasha's response when they asked why he had attacked the painting.

-I can't stand it, he said. I don't like that painting.

CHERRY BLOSSOM TREES.

I heard the gunshot. I hardly even noticed it. I was on my way to the Korean grocer across the street for some flavored water. As I approached, I saw a cop car, an ambulance, and a man on the ground, hands cuffed, eyes wide open. Clearly this man had been killed. The intersection was silent and empty. It was an ominous cinematic silence, an empty church silence. It was a sacred moment, to drink from a beer can, even one in a paper bag, would have been obscene. I stared at the guy—did he look familiar? His eyes were wide open, he was handcuffed, and he was dead.

My landlord was in front of the house, she had seen the whole thing: the Korean grocer was attacked by this little man with a meat cleaver. A cop appeared from nowhere and shot him. The whole thing happened rather too quickly to make any sense. By this time, helicopters began to hover overhead.

It was another twenty minutes or so before reality re-asserted itself. Cop cars appeared, plain clothes guys with tacky sunglasses and badges

on chains around their necks, swearing and some chewing gum. The chief of police and even the mayor arrived in their business suits. Concentric rings of police tape rippled out from the body, keeping the passerby and television cameras a safe distance from the crime scene. A few of my neighbors were taken downtown in police cars to make statements. I was glad to be left out of it.

When I heard the gunshot, I was riding my bicycle the wrong way up a one way street. I was moving slowly: an ambulance and a police car had the intersection blocked off. I recognized the body, a neighborhood fixture, a schizophrenic that people generally tried to avoid.

I gave the body a good, long look. I guess I had to pay my respects. As I stared, time seemed to *slow way-the-fuck down*. I became very afraid. This fear was tangible, the same presence I felt when in New Orleans shortly after Hurricane Katrina: where the water and the air itself were poison. It was like being in the jungle, perhaps: the tangible fog of life and death permeated everything. It is far too unsettling for Americans to confront the basic reality of death, and doing so put me in a trance.

When I left the house that morning, I had noticed the cherry blossom trees. But they had done little to prepare me for this.

BABY HUEY AND THE AIR RIFLE.

There is a place past “fun,” and past “reckless” that is all too easy to reach once you have been drinking for a good eight hours or so and alcohol is all you have to stave off boredom and panic attacks and to eventually let you sleep.

I wasn't a witty drunk or a bold drunk: in fact, alcohol wasn't good to me for any of the reasons that most people end up getting sucked into it. But bars did give me a place to hang, and people to hang with. And for some reason people were always buying me drinks; I guess that drinking with me was better than drinking alone.

Wednesday night was import night at the Panther Hollow Inn. Groups of fresh-faced college-types came in early to drain the place of Guinness Stout and Bass Ale and Red Stripe. Shaun Ryder sang on the jukebox: “I got to pick out what's in those pockets/so I can pick those pockets clean.” And then, later, “the living dead don't get a holiday.”

I was sat at the bar with some guy from Washington DC. We

slowly nursed our last beers, as we were out of money. It was too horrible to contemplate that soon the beer would be done and we would have to leave, to face the world alone. Salvation appeared, suddenly and mercifully, in the form of a guy with a fat Irish face and exaggerated features. He called my friend Baby Huey, probably because he had a large middle section and a little head, an effect that was exaggerated by the fact that he was wearing baggy yellow shorts and a tiny yellow baseball cap.

The Fat Faced Irishman kept peeling fifty dollar bills off of his bankroll, and kept buying us drinks and kept giving random young girls money for the jukebox.

Sometimes, when I stopped to think for a minute, I felt a particular tug at my heart. It was connected to a hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach, and a dull pressure behind my temples. This pressure was always with me in those days, it seems, and it was usually rather faint. But tonight, where all the girls reminded me of Luce, and the music too, the pressure had grown so dense that not all the beer in the world would smother it. I couldn't stand it, sometimes.

Luce had left a buck knife at my apartment, a big ugly hunting thing. I was real clumsy with it, had to be very careful when I closed it. If anybody could cut himself closing a knife, it was me.

-Where are you guys going? The Fat Faced Man asked.

-Going shooting, replied Baby Huey.

-Is Dimwit going too?

-I thought maybe you were Dimwit, I replied. I am very clever when I

drink.

It was two in the morning and we told the Fat Faced Man that we were going to go into the hollow to play with the pellet gun. He could join us if he wanted to, and he should get a six pack first.

Once in the hollow, we settled on those long concrete steps that are characteristic of this city: a city of steep hills, having seen its heyday before the suburbs and before public transportation. I sat on one of the middle steps, aware that they continued on a good fifty feet or so behind me. Baby Huey and the Fat Faced Man were sitting side-by-side, a few feet down, shooting the pellet gun at nothing in particular. It was all *click* and *psst!* and occasionally the hollow *clink* of a pellet falling into a tin can.

What was it about Luce? I wondered. She was hot, of course, and too smart for her own good. She was warped. I scanned the far side of the hollow with a pair of binoculars. There were no lights in the windows of the couple houses that were scattered here and there, and no activity on the cobblestones below. Baby Huey and the Fat Faced Man were talking about guns or pussy or something, but I wasn't convinced. They seemed to be acting.

It occurred to me just then that perhaps Luce had represented some possibility for change, contrasting the circle of no-hope-types that I usually travel with. When she left, she took hope with her.

And the knife? She loved knives. This part of her personality did not interest me at all. But for some reason I carried it around with me. After watching the Fat Faced Man throw money around all night, Baby

Huey said: —*What we really need to do is, follow him out to his car and take his wallet.* The plan took an absurd turn when it became apparent that the Fat Faced Man was trying to pick one (or both) of us up. Sex turns men into idiots, as we all know. And to actually have our victim buy us beer and follow us into the woods with a gun? I mean, it was only a pellet gun, but still... I wondered what Baby Huey had in mind. Maybe he'd press the barrel of the weapon to the fat man's eye socket.

Looking back on this experience what amazes me is not that I am capable of behaving so terribly: everybody is, I believe, should they lack the proper kind of grace. What impressed me the most was that the violent conclusion, the desire to go through with this, was one I had arrived at using the most childlike reasoning: I had resolved to put a knife into a man, if need be, because he had something that I wanted. And I do not mean the money: I am talking about the line between what I perceived to be a spent, pointless life and a new life entirely. To become the person who could put a knife into a man for fifty dollars, or a hundred dollars or two hundred dollars would be to permanently separate myself from those who loved me, and those whom I loved.

And if Luce didn't love me then there was nothing left anyways.

Strangely, it was this realization—which came off quite suddenly, with the force of those caissons that brought to Nietzsche his Will To Power—that caused the storm to lift. The dark mood that had left me unable to think clearly for so long had passed. Because there was not really freedom there, and what I truly desired was freedom.

I put the knife away and left the Fat Faced Man, and Baby Huey and the air rifle. They seemed to be getting on well enough without me. The sun would soon rise again and I hoped that this feeling, that this freedom, would last.

ART FOR ART'S SAKE.

I had been quite depressed for a while, and learned a lesson or two as a result. Depression is a self-fulfilling prophecy, a demon engine, a black hole. When Oppenheimer, Einstein, Feynman, Carter, et. al. were tasked with the creation of the nuclear bomb, it was calculated that this infernal device could quite possibly ignite the nitrogen of the Earth's atmosphere itself—all of it!—causing the destruction of the entire planet. At odds of three in a million, this was considered an acceptable risk. Depression, it may be said, ignites nitrogen. But once it has been spent, there is something that remains. Perhaps all sorrows are but as shadows, as someone once wrote. Shadows fade as the morning comes.

The city has its rhythms, and those in the city have their rhythms, but when the shadow envelopes you, you have a rhythm all of your own. You no longer *resonate*. Everybody is heading out when you are going to bed, or you arrive at a cafe' just as everyone has left. It can be as if you're living in a dead city when it is simply that you are no longer on the same channel as everyone else, the same planet. Depression had

placed me on another planet. But I returned.

The city was alive that night, the night of my rebirth, and I also felt alive. Everything I saw I understood to be a sign, a signifier, a signal of some sort. I learned to cross the street without looking—I would just cross, because I *felt* that there was no vehicle there to hit me, no moving truck or camouflaged deuce-and-a-half headed back to the armory. I never questioned, and I never was hurt. This was not a trick or a blessing, I was convinced: this was evidence that I possessed a different kind of sight.

I began to live on alcohol and cigarettes. I didn't have to eat, not really: who had the time? I was always on the move, always in a hurry; but for what, I had no idea.

After a few nights of this I started seeing the same girl everywhere that I went: outside of the coffee shop, perhaps; or in a hipster watering hole on a quiet night. She might have been a girl I used to know: *-Are you Deirdre? You look like her.*

-I am not.

-That's probably for the best! I made her laugh.

This girl was interesting, she had something of the presence that had attracted me to Luce. She was skinny, not sick-skinny but naturally athletic, with a high, stately forehead and a sensual mouth and a nose that could have been broken once; I imagine that she had had some sort of accident while training with the crew team at her New England prep school. I didn't stay to talk, because I knew that I would soon see her again.

Being out and meeting people, I began to realize how foreign and counter-intuitive my obsession with Luce had been. She had populated my thoughts, to the point where I couldn't imagine a sentence where she was not the subject.

In Timothy Leary's last interview, filmed the day before he passed, he gave us this message:

We are the light, we are the light-bearers. Our purpose is to shine the light on others. I have sought the light to use, the light to be in space. Light is the language of the sun and the stars, where we will meet again.

As his brain slowly shut down, circuit-by-circuit, this brilliant man had to make due with one word, *light*; it was a stand-in for any number of concepts that he no longer had the time or the energy or the capacity to name individually. Hearing Uncle Tim talk about The Light, I was reminded of my parish priest who, after suffering a stroke, referred to everybody as Bob. You could see that your name was in his eyes, but that it would never make it to his lips. I didn't know how to feel about this.

Likewise, Luce had stood for so much, represented so much, that when I lost her it felt as if I had lost everything. But I soon learned that I had gained the world back.

One Saturday night I found myself at a party in an old mill building that had recently been overrun by art students. I could drink for free, and this interested me very much. The crowd consisted mostly of people I recognized, but didn't know well enough to feel burdened by. Sitting by herself, on a couch, was the girl I had seen earlier this week (the girl who was not Deirdre). I felt drawn to her as if we were connected either by impulse or inevitability. I was in a position to trust not only my instincts, but any wild idea that came into my head.

This girl wasn't built like the other girls at all. And that was great, 'cos I am not built like other men. Most girls I met seemed to conform to a certain style: a coiffure, a manner of dress, some makeup or accessory that signaled to the others: *I am like you!* Even when they couldn't conform completely due to their own individual biology, they were defined not by their uniqueness but by their sad attempts at conformity. I appreciated anyone who opposed this manner of being, because I opposed it myself. When this girl stepped outside, through the glass doors and onto the third story patio, I counted to ten slowly, and then I followed.

I might as well tell you now about how it eventually ends up between us. We never do fall in love (I know what you're thinking!), losing touch shortly after the conclusion of this book. It will not be until my (failed) bid for PA State Assembly several years hence that we meet again at some sort of celebrity fundraiser.

After the event, we will go back to her condo. She will have long since traded her bohemian affectations for a certain bourgeois

respectability. The only traces of her former life will be a couple of her paintings, tastefully displayed in the study. I will spend the night with her on sheets with an extremely high thread count. She will poke fun at her old self.

The next morning she will take a shower before work. I will soon get bored with the good-natured minor champagne hangover I will be nursing and poke around her house. In a spare bedroom I will find—I am not making this up!—an entire span of one bookshelf devoted to eugenics. Who knew that there were so many books about eugenics? This will be a terrific detail, one that belongs in a book. I will also spot, elsewhere in her room, a copy of *Crime and Punishment*. I'll take this book and quietly let myself out.

Calling Scott once I get outside, I will tell him the story. *-Dostoevsky was writing about eugenics.* He'll say.

-What are you talking about?

-He was writing about the superman, a man who had the will and the courage to put his Great Idea into action.

On the patio, the night sky was amazing, unreal: deep blue, almost but not quite black, a product of light pollution and a high ozone count. Fantastic. The wind started picking up, a cool wind... there was lightning seen and thunder heard, but no rain; not yet. I probably should have realized that she was making a joke when the girl (who was not Deirdre) introduced herself as Kate Thirtyeight, but I had long since surrendered mere logic to my own strange momentum.

-So, what do you do? I asked.

-I am an art forger.

-No shit! How about a fence? What could you do with stolen artwork?

-I could probably unload some stuff for you. What do you got? Renoir? Matisse?

-Van Gogh.

-Oh yes, sure. He's easy.

It was overwhelming, the sounds of the party and the street below, the rain falling in its lazy, drunken manner. I felt as if my feet were being held in place by large magnets. I might have had tunnel vision. I would have been embarrassed, but Kate seemed to be as drunk as I was.

-Are you here with anybody? I asked.

-No, I live downstairs.

-Me too!

-Really?

-No.

Silence. Excessively. Awkward. Silence.

-Who lives here? I asked.

-That guy, she said, pointing out a bald guy in paint-splattered overalls. I knew this, but I asked her anyways.

-Is everyone in this building an artist? I had a million stupid questions.

-No. That guy's a pornographer.

-Really?

-No.

-Oh.

-You seemed, she said, warily, *a little too excited by that.*

-Well, I'm hoping to break into the business.

-What do you do now?

-I am fabulously wealthy. So I pretty much do nothing.

She seems pretty impressed by this.

Kate continues: *-How is this for character development?*

-It'll do for now. Do you want to get out of here?

-Definitely. What did you have in mind?

I thought about it for a second. *-The Greeks.*

-What's that?

-Some place in a Hubert Selby book. I'm starving.

-And very, very drunk. Me too. Let's go downstairs.

Kate Thirtyeight's studio was one of those “live/work” affairs with everything in the same room and no walls, which is fine if you live by yourself anyways. The bathtub was on a cement slab in the middle of the room and you could see the whole apartment while you were using the toilet. Canvas all over the place, including a half-finished *Sunflowers* as once painted by Van Gogh.

-This is great! I said, gesturing to the painting.

-Yuppies love this shit. Upper-middle-class-types with more money than taste. I do Van Gogh, Picasso, and a pretty good Edward Hopper... but Van Gogh is my favorite.

On one of the finished paintings, a card: JAZZ ART REPRODUCTIONS.

It sure was nice to talk to someone new. And not only because I didn't have to worry about repeating myself. A new friend is an affirmation. It was great to learn all the things about Kate, things that

would probably bore me with repetition: she was a Pisces, when she was a small child she cried for a week because her mother wouldn't buy her a pet monkey. And in the eighth grade, she was elected “most likely to be tall.”

Early in the morning, Kate told me that she had to pass out—that she had had a long day. When I finally realized that she wasn't inviting me to stay, I excused myself. Instead of rejoining the party, I went home but I couldn't sleep, buzzing on the meeting and the new possibilities this friendship might contain. With increased energy and lack of sleep, I began to see my life in increasingly abstract terms: How will this story play out? And how will it move the plot along? And how will it support the main thesis of this novel? Is there a thesis?*

It is funny how one's fortunes can change, how things can get better or worse with nothing more than the introduction of a new woman into your life.

That afternoon I tracked Kate down at a café that I knew she frequented. To my relief, she was pleased to see me.

-Where are you off to? I asked.

-Gotta buy some paint, some art supplies. Are you coming?

-Sure.

I must have looked like hell, but she didn't mind. I felt like hell, but she was beautiful. She showed me her truck: a Ford something, it seemed to be from the late 1980s, with a cassette deck and no air conditioning and a bench seat that she adjusted by sticking her hand

* The reader may be excused for wondering the same thing.

underneath and scooting us both forward, not without some difficulty. The back of the seat stuck out a little, and it wasn't locked in place for the tools and old clothes and a length of two-by-four back there.

After picking up some paint and canvas we headed to a shopping center in a residential area outside of the city. It strikes me, as I write this, how many people's days involve being a consumer. As if that is the point of all of this! I say as much, to which Kate responds: *-But I guess it's all a compromise. Life is a compromise. I don't know how it could be anything but.*

The tone of this word, *compromise*, escaped her mouth like a curse. It saddened me a little.

-You don't like to compromise?

-No, I do not.

The heat of the truck made me drowsy, and I would have liked to take a nap.

But how could this be true, that life was a compromise? It had to be true, but I couldn't accept it. I thought: maybe it's like crossing the street without looking.

-What do you mean? Kate asked, crossing the street with your eyes closed?

-I feel like, if you're on the right frequency, things will begin to—they'll just move for you.

-I can't believe you, Joe.

When we arrived at the shopping center, she showed me her compromise: in a kiosk, the owner worked on a portrait in charcoal, reproducing an antique photograph of a child dressed as a cowboy.

-That kid has to be long dead by now, Kate said to the man. He just smiled and continued working. Kate placed her purchases behind the counter, put the receipt in the cash register, took out some cash and joined me as I scanned the perimeter of the kiosk.

These two art forgers were quite brazen! On the one wall were several of Kate's forgeries: Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, Edvard Munch's *Vampire*, any number of the perennial college dorm room favorites. In the lower right hand corner of each painting, where the artist's signature should be, was a calling card.

-I can't believe that you have these right out in the open.

-And Interpol doesn't suspect a thing! Kate laughed.

Kate's building was situated on a concrete lot, cracked and without shade. To one side was an overgrown area fit for little more than dumping chemical waste; to the other was a six-lane highway. My imagination shuddered at what might be happening in the corrugated-steel storage spaces down the road. It seemed to me that one would have to be strong to find their purpose in an environment such this, that it would be so easy to get swallowed up by it all. This was an environment that gave nothing. But it asked nothing, which must be how the occasional artist or musician finds his way here among the chemicals and the rust.

We were on her bed, the only place she had to entertain visitors. The bed was extraordinarily large, and we used it like a picnic blanket: sitting up, facing each other. There was stuff spread out all over the bed spread: cds, videocassettes, books, a set of car keys. On the bedside

table was a bottle of wine and two glasses. It was all very civilized.

Like a kid, Kate grabbed my bag and started poking around in it. Notebook, magazine, pen, some gum, my work ID on a retractable lanyard, a pack of Tarot cards.

-Where did you get these?

-I found them on the bus.

-How do you make 'em work?

-I dunno.

She spread the cards out onto the blanket. *-Let's figure it out.*

I picked up a card and handed it to her: *-This is you.*

*-Let me see... **XXI: The Universe.***

Kate, thoughtfully: *-It says that I am naked. Except for a scarf.*

That sounded pretty good to me.

Kate continue: *-Crowned, holding two magic wands, it says that I am the Bride of Apocalypse.*

-That doesn't sound so good.

-But it is, 'cos... have you ever read the Book of Revelations?

-Not really.

-What people don't remember is, it has a happy ending.

-OK, I say. You're crazy but I'll take your word for it. I hand her another card. *This one's me... **XV: The Devil.***

-Well, Joe. It says that you're a three-eyed goat, trampling these people underfoot.

-Give me that...

-You're a beast, an animal.

-Yes, but see that light shining forth from the heavens? That means something.

-I don't think these cards are shuffled very well.

-Wee timorous beasty...

-What are we gonna do now? Kate asked, suddenly. I parsed the deck until I found a card that I liked and handed it to her.

XI: Lust: a naked woman rides a beast with several heads. In one hand she holds the reigns, in the other a chalice of fire.

-I think that this is me, too, Kate said. *She's drunk. She's powerful.*

-Or at least pushy.

-She's spilling her wine...

Her mouth, opened, finds itself on top of mine. Wet with wine. She pushes me down onto the blanket. I push her back:

Glory unto the Scarlet Woman, Babalon the
Mother of Abominations, that rideth upon
the Beast, for She hath spilt their blood in
every corner on the earth, and lo! She hath
mingled it in the cup of her Whoredom...
With the breath of her kisses hath she
fermented it.

Aleister Crowley, *The Vision And The Voice*.

-Are you an artist? I asked Kate. My finger followed a long, white scar down the small of her back.

-That's from when I wiped out on my motorcycle.

-Do you still have it?

-No, that was the last time I rode it. And the first time. What did you ask me?

-Are you an artist?

-Well, I paint all the time, but reproductions don't count. I wish I had more time for my art.

-What is art?

Kate yawns. *-I don't know. It has to be ambitious. It has to defy expectation. It can't be obvious.*

I tried not to move around too much as Kate slept, and even drifted off into a brief, uneasy sleep myself, for what seemed to be a few moments. Eventually, I got restless just laying there. I didn't bother to wake her up before I left.

I put the cards down on the bedside table. But before I left I took one that I liked: **XIV: Art.**

Kate could make a claim for this card, just as she had for all the others. She was lovely and she was ambitious, and she defied all of my expectations. By her own definition then, she was a work of art.

FIVE

Numerous mad people's memoirs have claimed that there is (in Perceval's phrase) 'reasonableness in lunacy', that their thoughts are coherent and ought to be heeded. What trust, however, may be vested in the testimony of such crazy people[a]nd whom do we believe when we are faced with contested versions of reality?

Roy Porter, *Madness: A Brief History*.

Later they would be called the fast times. Or the mania. Days spent dreaming and being awake and being asleep simultaneously.

I walked past a bombed-out pizza restaurant with neon beer signs in the windows. A black guy named Lenny was standing in the doorway.

-Buy me a forty, Lenny said.

-What?

-Buy me a forty.

-Why should I buy you a forty?

-'Cos I can't.

-How's come? I was teasing him now, a little.

-They kicked me out.

-Then maybe you shouldn't be drinking. This gets a rise out of the guy.

-Fuck you, man. You ain't gonna tell me what to do.

Lenny looked to be about fifty, in hard years. He wore a red satin baseball jacket and a pair of jeans. He was frightfully skinny.

-I got money, he said.

-Then what do you want?

-You gotta buy it for me 'cos they say I try to rob the place. Found my damn footprint on the counter.

-How do they know it was yours?

-Shit man. What don't they know? CSI? They dusted my shoeprint off the counter?

-So it was you.

-I didn't say that.

-You said your shoe was on the counter.

-How do they know, though, how it got up there?

-How did it get on the counter?

A fierce anger arose in his eyes as a beautiful young girl walks through the doorway, picking up a bit of the conversation: *-Don't you dare question me in front of my woman!*

-Yeah, whatever. No problem.

Silence, for a few seconds.

-I like Pittsburgh, he said.

-Me too.

Quiet for a few more seconds.

-In Japan, he continues, where I am going tonight, I can't even go shopping

or walk the street without being recognized.

-Is that so?

-Yeah. It's good to be back here though. And do normal things.

-I don't know, I replied, truthfully. I don't know how to do normal things.

-Then how about that beer?

-I don't think so, not tonight.

-Shit.

At this point a couple walked past, brushing Lenny off as he asks them for money.

A military truck rolls past: *-How do you feel about that?* I ask.

-I like it, he says. It means strength.

A police car drives past, the lone occupant vaguely illuminated by the laptop computer hovering between the two front seats, where you usually see a shotgun. The police officer is talking on his cellphone.

-Probably talking to his woman, Lenny said.

-What woman?

-Shit.

-That woman? I asked, pointing to the young girl who had passed by a minute ago. She was standing across the street now, talking on her cellphone.

-No, that ain't his woman. Lenny seemed to be humoring me, because I was obviously a moron. *That ain't his woman. She only goes with artists.*

-I see.

-What are you doing tonight.

-Going to P-Town. Do you know what that is?

-What's that? I ain't ever heard of no P-Town. Lenny kind of sings it.

-You don't wanna know.

-I want to know.

-P-Town is a bar where men take off their clothes and dance for money.

-Naked? Whoah! Now I don't wanna know! Lenny laughs. *You gonna buy me that beer now?*

-Yeah, Sure. OK.

I went inside and bought Lenny a forty ounce bottle of malt liquor and bought a twenty-four ounce can of Miller Light for myself. The girl behind the counter was rather mannish, like an unfortunate college athlete, and spoke with a loud, sharp voice. *-Did he talk to you?* she accused, nodding towards Lenny. I assured her that I had never spoken to him in my life. She looked at me dubiously, but put our drinks in separate brown bags anyways.

Outside, I gave Lenny his bottle: *-Where are you heading?* I asked him.

-Off into the darkness, he said. *Japan.*

I walked to the art museum and sat on the curb across the street. The night watchman was making his rounds, and I couldn't remember his name. I hadn't been to work in over a week at this point. I wondered if I still had a job. I wished that I could remember how to check my voicemail.

I thought about going home but the thought made me extremely uneasy. When had I ever felt comfortable there?

Crossing a yellow bridge, I found the path that once led me to the staircase where I imagined Baby Huey might be, shooting his pellet gun

or drinking beer or maybe even sucking face with that Fat Faced Man. The image was as amusing as it was nauseating.

I followed a path to the cement pond where crusty punk rockers were digging through a garbage can. One of them shouted: *-Taco Bell!* and devoured the burrito he had found in the trash. I thought that he was risking hepatitis, and then I wondered if thinking like this meant I was getting old. I had that knife, in case I had to use it.

A couple were fucking in a truck parked in a lot at the end of a secluded road. Have I ever really loved anyone like that? I wondered. I couldn't remember. I left without really listening.

Under the bridge near the boiler plant a couple guys lay sleeping on the ground. I wasn't afraid, I noticed, and this surprised me—I used to be afraid of everything. The remains of a fire lay between them, looking to consist chiefly of wet cardboard. Black smoke hung lifelessly above them.

I sat on the sloped earth where the ravine meets the underside of the bridge and watched the two guys. One of the men was about my age, and one couldn't have been much younger than fifty. As they slept they seemed to be content. At least I hoped that they were. I knew how hard it was to cast aside the heartache while you were awake. This is life's great injustice, this dull ache.

Luce was standing in the shadows beneath a living tree. She was a part of it, like the branches, like the leaves. I knew all about Rose, I said, and I had felt powerful, because I knew something about her that she didn't know.

-I could follow you forever, Luce said. I could take off my shoes, and I could take out my piercings. I could take off my shirt, I could take off my bra. I could shave my hair off, all of it. Then I could follow you forever. And where would I be then? I would be left with nothing.

I don't know how long I sat there, until eventually the sun began to rise. I could hear mechanized infantry passing overhead and I thought, *-Wouldn't it be a damn if the bridge chose this moment to collapse?*

As light began to filter in, I saw the discarded beer cans, the odd piece of clothing, a used condom, and etc. among the weeds. A word in Coptic, which I couldn't read but which I knew to be a talisman, a symbol of protection, someone had spray-painted onto the concrete structure off to my side.

The older guy started to slowly awaken. It seemed to take an awful long time for my presence to register with him, and what was the hurry anyways?

I began to cry.

The old man looked at me like I was utterly pathetic.

I stood up and silently walked away.

The shopping center unlocked its doors at ten am. Even so, many of the shops were not yet open and many more still were out of business. And many of the stores that remained were thoroughly picked over. I saw quite a few signs that said: GOING OUT OF BUSINESS or more to the point: EVERYTHING MUST GO.

I made my way to JAZZ ART REPRODUCTIONS. I was hoping that I might see Kate, that I might get a kiss before executing my mission (didn't I deserve as much?) but the only person there was the owner and proprietor, who was working on a coal pencil sketch of Ted Williams. He tried to sell me a *Sunflowers* for eighty-nine dollars (special price!), but I held out for *Field Near Auvers*.

Luce, I thought, could no longer love me because I had failed to behave correctly, in a spiritual sense. I had failed to find the light when I knew that my purpose was to shine the light on others. Light is the language of the sun and the stars.

You can call me 'Little Sunshine!'

Aleister Crowley

The bus ride home took me to the East, through the Hill District. In my lap was a huge framed oil painting—my counterfeit *Field Near Auvers*. No one seemed to notice. I put on my headphones, and pressed play on Ghetto Defendant by The Clash. It sounded phoney, in the same way that some music just seems inappropriate when you are on LSD. Luce, if she was the point of all this, she might have been Ishtar. Or she might not have been. Perhaps fooling around with her meant that I was meddling with... Goetia? I didn't know what the word meant, but I was sure that it was right.

This painting of course, this landscape by Vincent Van Gogh, was what Luce was examining the first time I examined her. Did you know that in the right hands a lock of hair, a snippet of a dress and some toenail clippings could capture you the heart of even the most stubborn maiden? And those wild animals painted on the walls deep beneath Lascaux, they created success for the bands of proto-human hunter-gatherers who existed, indeed, not only to hunt and to gather, but to dream.

I am insight through feeling, not through mind.

Vincent Van Gogh

These were soulless, dreamless days for man. I could see as much on the faces, the plastic faces, the sad masks that seemed to obscure the true character of the men and women as they made their ways to work or etc. I couldn't think of one piece of contemporary art that I had seen while performing my duties as a professional in the security of cultural property that hadn't been done before, and better, by an ad agency. But those days were over for me, days of steady paychecks and sad masks for myself.

Do what you will this life's a fiction
And is made up of contradiction
William Blake

The bus let me off in front of the art museum. I stopped for a moment and looked into a mirrored window. Tokoloshe looked back at me, a small child with the head of an old man. I put a pebble in my mouth and I no longer had a reflection. I no longer had a reflection and I tried to let go of my fear. The fear had been great, but it was no longer.

How does it feel to be invisible? I could see as I walked into the museum and past its guards that to be invisible felt like nothing special, like nothing at all. It was the same feeling that you get when you are on a crowded sidewalk and no one takes any notice of you. You think that you are carrying a large painting and that someone should say something, but people could care less. I suppose that the painting was invisible, too.

But the most important assumption... is that
the Outsider's chief desire *is to cease to be an
Outsider... to go forward.*

Colin Wilson

Backs were turned to me when I stepped into the gallery. The room was empty when I approached the painting. My hands trembled when I saw the coarse paint that Van Gogh had gobbled onto the canvas. Probably some of it had been in his mouth. Dare I taste it? The frame was heavier than I had expected. The original plan had been to lift the painting off of the wall and replace it with the counterfeit, but the frame seemed to be anchored or weighed down somehow. *-Damn it,* I muttered under my breath, and then thought: *-What the hell?* I plunged my knife into the canvas, as close to the frame as I could. As I dragged the knife around the edges of the canvas, a loud tearing sound.

I folded the canvas into a square and put it under my jacket. I left the counterfeit on the ground and walked quickly out the front of the gallery and outside onto the street. A bus was waiting for me at the intersection of Forbes and Craig, just as I had planned. I stepped onto the bus and took a seat towards the back.

SCENE ————— *Public transportation. Joe tries to sit inconspicuously towards the back of the bus. Unaware of the chaos: the police cars and confusion outside: the bus driver pulls into traffic once the light turns green.*

Lenny boards the bus at the next stop. He looks a bit worse for the wear, like he has been sleeping in this outfit for some time now. In this bus full of forward-thinking professional-types, Lenny and Joe are brothers.

JOE: Shit man. I thought you were going to Japan.

LENNY: I just been back.

JOE: No shit? How was it?

LENNY: There's no place like
home. You know?

JOE: I do.

-*Where are you going now?* I asked Lenny.

-*I am headed into the Light,* Lenny said.

-*So am I, Lenny,* I said.

And I was.

SIX

[W]oe to him whom Ishtar had honoured! The fickle goddess treated her passing lovers cruelly, and the unhappy wretches usually paid dearly for the favours heaped on them. Animals, enslaved by love, lost their native vigour; they fell into traps laid by men or were domesticated by them. 'Thou has loved the lion, mighty in strength', says the hero Gilgamesh to Ishtar, 'and thou hast dug for him seven and seven pits! Thou hast loved the steed, proud in battle, and destined him for the halter, the goad and the whip.'

Felix Guirand, "Assyro-Babylonian Mythology," (*New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*).

The earth itself is on fire, and the heat is a precious gift. At night I sleep beneath the willow tree. To reach it, I follow South Troutwine Street past a sign that says:

WARNING — DANGER

Underground Mine Fire.

It is easy enough to keep clear of the half-dozen people who still live here. On the weekend I might see a few tourists, but mostly people stay indoors. I am struck by the calm of this place, the silence.

I am hungry, but there is nobody left to care. The air here smells like a chemistry set, the result of some industrial process. I wander past the cemetery named for St. Ignatius, where several metal vents live in the mud. After a few minutes spent staring at the sky I feel pretty lightheaded but at least the hunger has left the forefront of my awareness. The stars also seem to be quite close the earth here. I feel as if I can now track their movements.

On the evening of the full moon I wander back out to the highway. I move through a patch of dead trees and dead brush, where the smoke clings to the ground like cotton candy. I see white birch and maple trees that have been rendered the color of a new penny. In ten thousand years people will wonder what caused the inhabitants of this settlement to flee so quickly and so completely, having left no trace but the ancient fissures of Route 61.

NO SLOW NEWS DAY IN PITTSBURGH

Terror Bombing Art Heist and Severe Flooding Top Local News

This article is by John Mellor, Jeffrey Hyman and John Simon Richie.

PITTSBURGH—Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell declared a state of emergency this morning as law enforcement from local, state and federal agencies investigate an alleged terrorist bombing at the University of Pittsburgh. Sources close to the investigation say that a right wing militia group known as the Baby Liberation Organization (BLO) may be responsible, though the group has yet to claim responsibility. At press time there have been no reported fatalities, while several bystanders have been treated for minor injuries.

Simultaneously at the Museum of Art, which is only a few hundred feet from the scene of the blast, a man that officials describe as a disgruntled employee walked off the job with Vincent Van Gogh's *Field Near Auvers*. Museum officials have not disclosed the value of the painting, but experts say that it is worth several million dollars. The two crimes are not believed to be related.

Meanwhile, record rainfall has led to flooding in the City of Pittsburgh and surrounding Allegheny County with damage to

Continued Page 18

I talk to Luce in a dream. I have one last thing to tell her: *-It was only naked that Ishtar could enter Eternity.* I am quite proud of myself, that I have figured this out. I know that finally I am ready for the kingdom of Heaven.

-That's your tough shit, Luce replies. I don't mind. No one can hurt me. I know this now.

Luce continues: *-You just stay there, wherever the hell you are, 'cos insanity is contagious and you don't need to be going around, infecting people.*

When I am awake I feel airy and light. Even though the sky is black as pitch and I haven't eaten and the only sound is the hiss of the rain, evaporating as it hits the asphalt, I feel good.

No one can touch me, not here. I will lurk in the tall grass near the highway, and watch the cars and trucks and the tanks as they roll past, and I will know that I am safe.

On blue evenings I shall go down the paths, getting pricked by the corn, crushing the short grass: in a dream I shall feel its coolness on my feet. I shall let the wind bathe my bare head.

I shall not speak, I shall think about nothing: but endless love will mount in my soul, and I shall travel far, very far, like a gypsy, through the countryside—as happy as if I were with a woman.

Arthur Rimbaud, March 1870.

A NOTE ON SOURCES.

The free and easy manner in which reality is handled in this book (by the author as well as the story's participants) facilitated a somewhat casual approach to in-text citations and sources. This is a novel, after all. Still, it is important to note that several lines of dialog were stolen and used wholly without attribution in the text, and I would like to take the time now to give those sources proper credit.

(page 11): “[T]hat what seems real is merely artifice, just barely concealing confusion and chaos.” The actual quote is: “Built by design and artifice, it fell apart in confusion and chaos.” (John Gray, *False Dawn: The Delusions of Global Capitalism*).

(page 20): “We can control our ideas, which are nothing, but not our emotions, which are everything.” This line is lifted directly from the film *Masculin/Féminin* by Jean-Luc Godard.

(page 60): “Maybe in our place of quarantine we can eat, love, think, do other real things.” The original line, as it appeared in *La Commune*, a film by Peter Watkins, reads: “Maybe after the revolution we can eat, love, think, do other real things.” *Quarantine (In My Place Of)* is a short film by the Welsh Poet Patrick Jones.

(page 68): “The minutes drag and the hours jerk.” From *The Magnificent Seven*, by The Clash.

(page 99): “Perhaps all sorrows are but as shadows, as someone once wrote.” This is from a beautiful line in *The Book Of The Law* (second chapter):

Remember all ye that existence is pure joy; that all
the sorrows are but as shadows; they pass & are
done; but there is that which remains.

(page 130): “White birch and maple trees have been rendered the color of a new penny.” From an article by Jason Zasky called “The Unforgettable Fire,” *Failure Magazine*, January, 2001. Available from the website at www.failuremag.com



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(from the Time Magazine review of Barbary Shore by Norman Mailer)*

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Deek Magazine lived for a few years in the midst of the “roaring 2000's.” This was a tumultuous decade, even for sleepy Pittsburgh. A needless war, an imploding worldwide economy, disasters both natural and man-made, and the return of that early-80s phenomenon “punk-funk” were on everybody's mind. And for a time, Matt Stroud and his gang were plugged into the zeitgeist. Each issue of Deek Magazine revolved around a specific “incident.” War, Madness, Sex and The Future were among the topics explored, dissected and just plain ridiculed.

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Trade paperback. 126 pages.

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