



# GET OFF THAT ALLIGATOR

Richard Denner

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## PREFACE

Richard Denner is a writer with such a multi-faceted array of talents that a reader can never know quite what to expect. Whether he is creating exquisite books of poetry, autobiography, or flash fiction, Denner is one to experiment with form and style, the result of which is work that never ceases to entertain while it challenges. Denner's fiction dances between reality and an imagined world where his characters, part tangible, part elusive, parry with life's subtle nuances, at once inspiring and mystifying the reader. The art of flash fiction is a surprisingly difficult one, with challenges that the reader, should the flash fiction be doing its job, should be completely unaware of. Denner succeeds in creating stories that read so naturally, and with such ease, that it is possible to get lost in them, without stopping to consider the amount of time and skill such writing necessitates. As a writer, I am forever on the lookout for work that both inspires me and reminds me to think outside of the stylistic boundaries I am forever placing around myself. Richard Denner has managed, through the placement of words and perhaps slight of hand, to once again remind me that the only limits that exist in creating fiction are those fabricated by my own mind.

—Gianna De Persiis Vona

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## **PART ONE:**

### **MURDER IN THE BOHEMIAN GROVE**

## MURDER IN THE BOHEMIAN GROVE

### Chapter 1

When he reached the coast, Jubal learned that a recommendation from Hung Chow was the kiss of death. Jubal's luck had been tainted merely by mentioning the man. He would need to tend to his garden. Do some Qigong to regain balance. The last time he had...but what did it matter? What was done was done. History. End of story.

A fresh gym suit, a run along the beach, and a brisk dip in the ocean. He ran below the high cliffs near Aptos, past the remains of the cement ship built by Kaiser during World War II. Although the sea air, the spray, the slap of his feet on the sand was invigorating, he kept looking at the horizon, watching his castle crumbling. He needed to take a leak. He looked up and down the beach. In the distance, he could see a man throwing a stick into the surf for his dog. So, he pissed in the surf. Better feeling, powerful, like filling up the sea with his pee.

A wave cut in from behind him and got his legs wet. "God," he prayed, "thank you for not making this the last frame." The film might still be a go, no matter that Hung Chow was responsible for this fuck-up with the moneymen. Who in their right mind would bankroll a film about the life of Hyronimus Bosch called *A Garden of Earthly Delights*?" Good question, but Hung Chow had got Jubal an invite to the Iraqi's.

Catered party by a swimming pool, casual conversation. The host's name was Ardavan—Ardy, for short—and he was second generation American, whose grandparents were from Iran, not Iraq. When Jubal mentioned Hung Chow, the guy coughed and spit his canapé into his gin and tonic. "That greed head," Ardy said, "if there was a hole big enough to bury that fat bastard, I'd dump his lard ass into it." Tears were welling in his eyes.

Jubal thought it best to change the subject. "What is not is not," he stuttered, not sure exactly what he was saying. The lady next to him asked if she could freshen his drink, but he declined. Murmured, "I cry a lot more now, myself."

Ardy regained his composure and took Jubal across the patio and into his study through a set of French doors. There was a large, elaborate glass sculpture in the room. The fingers of glass seemed to lick the shadows like flames. "It's a Chahuli," he said. "Hung Chow brokered the deal. Ten grand. A good price, but Hung Chow forgot to pay the artist, and I'm being sued."

Jubal looked at the sculpture. "A beautiful piece of work."

"Yes, it is," said Ardy, "and a beautiful mess, so you can see why don't want to get into this Garden thing on the recommendation of Hung Chow."

The sculpture started to sag. Jubal felt a void. He could see a man shaving, cutting himself with his razor, bumping his head on the cabinet door, knocking his glasses into the sink, one of the lenses falling out, the man sitting back on the toilet seat to fix his glasses, getting his butt stuck, pulling the toilet off the floor, staggering out the front door of his house, being chased by a dog. "The same old shit," said Jubal, "but I can make this film without Hung Chow."

Jubal caught up with his roommate, Brent, in a local coffeehouse. Brent was working on his film script, *Cannibals*. He and Jubal had plans to drive into the Sierras and look for a small mining town as a setting for the story. "It's all working out," said Brent. "The story will center on the survivors of the Donner Party telling their stories to the townspeople when they return from their ordeal. Flashbacks. Different reactions. People horrified or fascinated or just curious. Macabre retellings of the original stories. A certain heroic cast to their survival. One very empirical-type character wants to know the minutest details, right down to the last, black cold cut. Sure, I'll need some historical stuff, but I've focused more on the psychological drama. Who was the first to die? Who first suggested cutting flesh from a body."

"Grizzly," said Jubal.

"Sure. But what I see is this: their experience is like a crucible. Different for each survivor, a rite of passage into a strange land, an experience that is understandable under the circumstances but an experience that breaks the survivors apart from the rest of society."

"I've got something to tell you."

"Yeah, what's that?" asked Brent.

"I can't go with you to look for the town. I've been hired to work in the Bohemian Grove."

## Chapter 2

The black Model A coup pulled to a halt in front of Jubal. The window on the passenger side was open, and a man in overalls asked, "Need a ride?"

It was a warm, and Jubal needed to get to Monte Rio that day.

"Thanks," said Jubal, and opened the door. It had been a long time since he had ridden in an antique car. Come to think of it, he had never been in a car this old that moved. He remembered playing in an abandoned Ford of this vintage when he was a kid. He shuddered at the memory

and was interrupted by the man in the driver's seat.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Jubal."

"My name is Maurice. Got a destination?"

"As far as Monte Rio." Jubal had signed a non-disclosure statement and didn't want to let on too much.

"Kind of busy in that neck of the woods, this time of year," Maurice stated, flatly.

"I suppose so," replied Jubal, not sure where this was going.

Maurice asked, "Do you live around there?"

"No, I've got a job." Still closed mouth.

"Might you be heading for the Bohemian Grove, to the gathering?"

Had he guessed? Jubal wondered. "If I'm right, this is a Model A. What year is it?"

"It's a '28. There's going to be an eclectic crowd there this year."

"I'm sorry, I'm not supposed to talk about this."

"I know. I know." Maurice was conciliatory. "But I work there, too."

"You do?" Jubal was surprised.

"I work there every summer. What will you be doing?"

"I've hired on as a valet," said Jubal, relaxing a bit. "What do you do there?"

"Well, I kind of do my own thing, but right now, I'm the stage manager of The Cremation of Care," Maurice replied with a touch of pride.

"And that's tomorrow night, right?" asked Jubal, "That's the opening ceremony."

"Right. There's not that much to it, really. There's a bonfire beneath a giant statue of an owl that symbolizes the release of care, and the Bohos will be welcomed and some of the staff introduced."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah, but the fire has to be laid, and the podium set up, and the P.A. system checked out. That's where I've been. Replacing a speaker that's out of commission."

"I like your car," Jubal said.

"Not completely restored, but close. Gets me to town and back."

"You live here?" Jubal asked.

"Over in Graton. I own a bookstore and coffee-house, but I subsidize my income doing odd jobs. Like working at the Grove."

"What's the name of your bookstore?"

"It's called Lost Coast."

"I've been in there. You've got a great collection of used sci-fi. I hope this job doesn't turn out to be like bad science fiction."

"Well, you never know, said Maurice, "From year to year the alchemy changes. This year William F. Buckley, some Grateful Dead band mates and the vintner Robert Mondavi are all scheduled to attend. Not all in the same camp, but with all the wine Mondavi donated, this midsummer encampment, as they call it, should be pretty mellow."

Jubal smiled. "I'm sure some of these high rollers will still manage to get down to business."

"Actually," Maurice continued, "very little business takes place in the Bohemian Grove."

"I thought all these captains of industry and government discuss business in secret there."

Maurice clarified his statement. "Oh, I'm sure some deals are cut, but the focus of the affair is for everyone to relax from their worldly concerns. Get away from the pressure. Commiserate with each other over bad press. Originally, the club was formed in 1872 with the goal of connecting gentlemen to the pursuit of the arts, music, literature, that sort of thing. And that's still what it's about. The members wear togas, drink alcohol, smoke cigars, play some cards, and fraternize. Illicit drugs are forbidden, but there's always a little pot smoking. There is a motto: 'Weaving spiders come not here.'"

"I've heard other stories," said Jubal. "I've heard it's a sinister meeting place for the rich and powerful, and I've heard it called a silly summer camp for grown men."

"Well, you might say it's some of both and a lot more in between," exclaimed Maurice.

They rattled along in Maurice's old car. Out the front window they could see the Russian River. Jubal noticed a mix of madrona and redwood trees along the highway, and he calculated the sun was approaching the two o'clock position. Maurice kept one eye on the rear view mirror because he was driving a little under the speed limit, wary lest faster cars tail gate him.

"What have you been doing before this?" asked Maurice.

"Lately, I've been working as an extra in films. But before that I was in Alaska. I logged a little in the Tongass National Forest and did some geological work up in Fairbanks. Finally, I had enough of hard physical work, and I moved back to Nova Scotia. I have relatives in Halifax, and I decided



to study Divinity there. I worked as a night watchman at an Inuit School, but I got into a relationship that didn't work out. Now, I'm here."

"I see," said Maurice. "Which camp are you working at?"

"Mandalay."

"They'll keep you busy, there. That's the traditional seat of power in the grove. I think this year George Schultz and Colin Powell will be there."

"The Secretary of State?"

"Right, the present one and the former one. I even heard that former president, Ronald Reagan appears on the list, despite the fact that he died last month. You never know, in the grove he might still make an appearance. Things can be spooky in there, even though at night lights illuminate all the camps."

"What are the camps like?" asked Jubal.

"Oh, they vary. There are nine camps with fire rings. Some have a patio for lounging and listening to music. The more modern camps are like homes, with bars, kitchens, bathrooms, sleeping quarters. And others are more rustic. In the older camps, people sleep under canvas tents on wooden platforms."

"I've heard the place is like a city unto itself," said Jubal.

"You could say that. There are open-air trucks that shuttle people around twenty-four hours a day. There's a library, a camp store, a museum, a barbershop, an emergency health clinic, even a fire station. My favorite building is still the old clubhouse designed by Maybeck."

"Whose Maybeck?"

"Bernard Maybeck is legendary. He's an architect who made very distinctive houses around the Bay Area after the Great Earthquake. A real craftsman. Made great use of materials. He's been called 'a Gothic man in the 20th century.' In the early days, people like John Muir, who helped found the Sierra Club, and others, a lot of University of California faculty, who worshiped nature, would summer at the Bohemian Grove and write poetry extolling the life unspoiled by too much civilization. Maybeck loved the theatrical performances they staged in the grove. And these still go on. There are the Low Jinks and the High Jinks. Pretty wild stuff, some of it. Anyway, the clubhouse has a single floor and is about 20 feet off the ground on one side. The outside is shingled in big chunks of redwood bark, and the inside is paneled with redwood boards, so the overall effect is that you are on the inside of a redwood tree. You're on a ridge, and the building sort of floats in the air like a tree house."

"How big is the place?" Jubal scratched his head.

“The Grove covers about 3,000 acres and a couple thousand souls will be there this year. Another important camp is called the Hill Billies. Donald Rumsfeld and former president George Bush are members of the Hill Billies, but I’m not sure if they’ll attend this year. Not all the men who attend are rich and famous. Most are rich, but there are some guys that are just ordinary. On the other hand, some of the people working there are sort of famous. There’s a porn star, Chad Savage. He’s working there this year, as a valet.”

“What’s with the Grateful Dead showing up at an event like this?”

“I don’t know. Mickey Hart lives nearby, in Occidental. He and Bob Weir are supposed to make the scene. They’ll contribute a different vibe. Can you picture Micky Hart and Henry Kissenger rubbing shoulders?”

“Wierd,” said Jubal.

The old car was starting to overheat, and Maurice pulled into a turnout to let the engine cool. “Can’t keep pushing her like I have been,” he said. “Hard for her to keep to the speed limit on this road.”

Jubal got out, and stretched and gazed at the car. Lovely paint job. He looked closer. Nice pin striping, subtle. Maurice got out on his side, bringing a thermos with him. “Let’s have a cup of tea in the shade. They moved off the gravel and sat on the ground in the shade under the branches of a big redwood. Maurice poured some tea into two cups. “Darjeeling with milk, that ok?”

They sipped their tea and relaxed in the buttery light of the afternoon. Finally, Maurice said, “None of my business, but you seem kind of stressed. Am I right?”

“I need some space; that’s for sure,” said Jubal.

“Problem with a woman?”

“Wow, you’re psychic.”

“Maybe. Probably not. Just seemed likely, somehow,” said Maurice.

“Oh, yeah? Well, it’s true. I had an affair with a married woman. But it’s not like I stole anything.”

“I’m not accusing you of anything,” said Maurice, “but you must admit you did steal another man’s wife.”

“I suppose so, in a manner of speaking, but he had it coming. She was in agony living with that swine, and, besides, he fucks around, too,” Jubal said in a self-congratulatory way, as though everyone had benefited from his licentiousness.

“I see,” said Maurice, quietly.

“Like I said, I needed to get away. Her husband tried to kill me. He’s a mean son-of-bitch.”

“I see,” said Maurice, softer still, and smiled. “What’s her name?”

“Laura,” said Jubal. “We met on the beach. At a party. She’s the wife of a psychology professor, who is a disciple of B.F. Skinner, you know, the behaviorist, and she had split from him because he wanted to raise their kid in a Skinner box.”

“What exactly is that?”

“It’s a totally controlled environment, temperature, humidity, rounded corners. He told her it was just an experiment for the first few formative months, but she would have none of it. And she split.” Jubal looked into his cup for respite. “We started seeing one another. She liked dangerous sex.” Jubal looked at Maurice. “Why am I telling you this?”

Maurice looked his most inscrutable and said, “Go on. Dangerous sex, you were saying.”

“You know, not so much kinky, as risky. We had sex in the bushes at a park with people walking by. We had sex in an elevator between floors, and we both got off without anybody getting on, if you know what I mean.”

Maurice smiled. “And where did this lead?” he asked.

“She went back to her old man because he promised not to warp their kid in the box. I should’ve let things be, but, no, I hooked up with her again. She was teaching a healing workshop with fire rituals. And I jumped back into the fire.”

Maurice chuckled and misquoted Shakespeare, “Give me excess, so that I might burn up my appetite.”

### Chapter 3

The stars and moon reflect perfect order and fill the night with peace. Sure there are black holes and death stars galore. Phenomena are impersonal, ordained, universal. Could be twenty dimensions in this universe, and five versions of each dimension. And in each version, there is at least one realm where humans are in anguish.

Jubal views the horizon and is blinded by the broad sun. He stands amazed, remembering how often he has been rejected in love and routed in business. He has a strong desire to rekindle his life’s flame but is confounded by a sea of fire, a confusion of love and pain. He takes a swim, and a filmy vapor arises. This is good for his eyes, better than the infinite power of the sun. The rainbow is a truer symbol of his achievements, now clear, now dissolving into mist.

“Let my anguished soul fuse with the eternal regulations of nature,” prays Jubal.

In the Court of The Bohemian Grove, precedence is the one serious subject in the lives of the Bohos, and it is the source of much grief and distress. The command Weaving Spiders Come Not Here may be posted at the entrance, but, regardless, the establishment is beset with intrigue. Not to be seen in The Bohemian Grove is to be condemned to obscurity. Not to be invited is to suffer ridicule and mimicry. It's a feudal scene.

Around the fire rings, any and all subjects are discussed. Jubal overhears a discussion among doctors that ranges from the newest techniques in nuclear medicine to whether or not a comet presages disease. The risks of biological attack are hotly debated. There is laughter about a purgative soup which has worked on Rumsfield ten times in as many hours.

Jubal listens to a discussion of the tax code, which reveals the present code to have been designed to ensure the most favor for the rich and the least return to the government and its poorer citizens. He needs backing if he is to make his film. He intends to keep his mind open and his ears perked. He had caught the pun about the poor being miserable because they are the base of the social pyramid—well, he'd see about that.

For now, he's reassessing what he needs in a producer. With Hung Chow he knows both too much and too little to know the whole man. Half the time Hung Chow seems to be a pompous blunderer, a selfish man with little talent, and yet, he can rise to an occasion and be both confident and competent. Maybe he's just an actor, thinks Jubal. Hung Chow had gotten him the invite to The Iraqi's and now this job at the Bohemian Grove. This time, he would not mention Hung Chow's name.

While at work, Jubal's mind is elsewhere. He reflects, "Usually, when I'm confused, it's because my ideas are not based on personal experience, which, in turn, are not based on sense impressions and my reflection of those impressions. It's like I get disconnected from time and space and causality. I can't find any resemblance of my ideas to reality. Only from past experience can I guess what will come next, that the sun will rise tomorrow. I don't know this as a fact, but experience would suggest it might happen with some probability. But at best it's just a probability. Experience of the past is no proof of future events, for seemingly similar causes may in reality be different. What a fucking mess."

Jubal washes the wineglasses and gazes at the light filtering through the redwoods. He is thinking, "Just because I'm spiritual doesn't mean I not superstitious. Best to carry some protection if you're going into the afterlife. I believe in magic and mystery as well as logic. I know the attributes of the gods are extensions of my own consciousness, while I hope the prayers that I send into ten directions make my friend's path easier. I heard people say, 'Those yogis, what are they good for, sitting on their asses?' Well, a butt is a good thing. Good for attracting the opposite sex, good for defecating, good for resting on a chair, but whether you're standing,

walking, sitting or lying down, a butt is usually not thought of as a spiritual tool. I melt snow. This is my spiritual exercise. Freeze my ass off to make Spring come a little sooner.”

Jubal puts the glasses away. “What is reality? These dudes seem to understand. Look at how they live. They have every material comfort. There was a time when I lived in a world with no confusion. When people said something, I took it at face value. As a kid I learned to understand the world by imitating adults. But now that I’m an adult, I wonder what’s going on. It seems the world is entirely different from the words used to describe it. I hear these people talking to one another, and they seem to agree that the names they use to describe what they are talking about are attached to these things in such a way that the words do not change. It also seems that it is assumed that the object a word names is the meaning of the object, or at least it is the meaning of the mental image corresponding to the object perceived. And, finally, it is assumed that the meaning of a state of affairs corresponds to the relationship of the words in a sentence used to describe that state of affairs. And now there are terms like *homeland security*, *information highway*, *collateral damage*? Everything seems to be in flux. I wish I could put it all behind me. I walk around. I hardly recognize people I know. Everything seems erased from my memory. Given my distress about the situation in the world, I don’t know whom to blame. The terrorists? The politicians? The human condition? Information highway, how am I going to integrate this with my particular situation? Language like this is effective in conveying meaning only insofar as the language facilitates an understanding of the purposes implicit in the social context wherein it arises, to follow Wittgenstein’s line of thinking. Although some of the words may be an image named by those words, to really understand what is going on, I must look to the use of the language rather than the meaning. So, part of my confused state of mind is due to my use of language.”

Jubal has been in The Bohemian Grove for a week. Maurice has shown him the ropes. Although the sun is shining, Jubal shivers in an eternally cold shadow, which he believes to be given off by the souls here. He has heard that the Indians never lived under these trees. He keeps notes. “No point in placing blame on these heads. My dilemma is a problem of this moment and cannot be circumvented by a hypothetical rerouting of the sequence of events that led me to this dilemma. I came here thinking I might make a contact that would help me finance my movie, but it is as though I’m invisible, a non-entity, or, at most, a first name on a nametag. I understand this all too well.”

Jubal can see that it will require more than an analysis of the multifarious uses of language and its relationship to his Self to discover the support of who he is and to get what he wants. He can see the seams in the furniture cracking open. There are stains on the enamel that bleach will not remove. The foundations of the buildings are disintegrating. There is a fine dust that seems to

erode everything. And this is true for his Self, too. He finds no help or support. He is free to be what he will be, and he recognizes himself in the freedom of his choices, but like a headless chicken, he finds his choices are absurd. "I just feel funny," he says. "My consciousness alternates between pain and a feeling of being drugged. I shut my eyes. I fall asleep. I awake, and I experience an alarming widening of the world."

It's quite. The camp seems deserted. Some of the men have gone to a fly-casting demonstration. George Schultz and Colin Powell are shooting skeet. A couple of Secret Service guys are keeping their ears erect for the slightest noise in the underbrush.

Jubal looks at the program. This year the Lakeside Talks include: "The Landscape of American Politics," by David Brooks, a columnist for the New York Times; "College Athletics: Serious Business or Toy Department?" by Ted Leland, Stanford University's athletic director; "Flight," by Chuck Yeager; "The Long War of the 20th Century," by James Woolsey, a former CIA director; "The Coming Virtual Soldier," by Roger McCarthy, principal and engineer of Exponent Inc.; and "Bohemia," by author Herman Wouk. Jubal is interested in what Wouk has to say. It's past 4:30, the time when the talks begin, but his work is done and he is free until dinner, so he walks down the path leading to the artificial lake where the Cremation of Care ceremony was held. Men in robes are seated on logs, listening to the white-haired novelist talk about Robert Louis Stevenson.

He's telling about how Stevenson had sat in the Bohemian Club in San Francisco in his velvet coat, chain-smoking and reading. He was broke and unemployed and suffering from tuberculosis, when he met Fanny Osbourne. They fell head-over-heels and got married and settled, in 1883, near Mount Saint Helena, living rent-free in an abandoned mining shack, while he wrote *The Silverado Squatters*.

Fanny Osbourne had married her demon lover. Stevenson could write undisturbed by any commotion. Fanny would check on him many times during the day. She made him dinners that went untouched. She might knock on the door to his room and no one answer. She knew he was there because she was sure she could hear him whispering and coughing and sometimes laughing. She found him magical, and he told her that the highest aesthetic was enchantment.

The light glistened on the lake. Jubal wished he had a demon lover, and as he turned back from the lake to look at the speaker, he noticed one of the waitresses. She was bent over, retrieving some wineglasses. "Now, there is backside that would melt some snow," he thought, and he began to feel a little lightheaded. "A lewd thought," he thought. "The magic of romance is in the intention. To ensnare this maid, I'll need to be polite, be a friend, be a poet, even though poet is a four-letter word. I'll need cunning, but I'll need to keep decorum."

He asked her name, and she said, "It's Fanny."

He smiled at the thought that he knew her name right when he saw her.

"All the women on my mother's side, as far back as the 18th century, are named Fanny, she continued."

"It's like that in my family on my father's side," said Jubal.

"What kind of name is Jubal?"

"It's Biblical. It was my father's and my grandfather's name. I'm told he was one of the last of the Old West gunfighters."

"What are you doing here?" asked Fanny.

"I've lived in a lot of places. I went to school in Berkeley. How about you?"

"Born and raised in Camp Meeker. I'm a dryad."

"What's a dryad?"

"A tree nymph."

"I see." Jubal looked closely for fins or horns. She had wonderfully innocent eyes and a knowing smile.

"I can't talk now. I'm supposed to be in the kitchen doing prep. I'll be in the library tonight, after work." She smiled her Cheshire smile.

"Ok, later," he said.

As she walked away, he noticed she was quite bronze. A full-born beauty, a lady bright. "Jubal and Fanny." He said this over a few times after she'd gone. "Jubal and Fanny. Jubal and Fanny." Jubal hurried to the library. There'd been cocktails, and he had served. Dinner invitations had been posted, and Mandalay was busier than usual. There is still summer light in the redwoods. His cares have evaporated. In the shadows he see Maurice sitting on a stump and he averts his eyes. Maurice has proved to be a trusty guide, but tonight he is inspired by the spirit of folly. Maurice is his Apollonian sage, a rational mind he's sure he can trust, but tonight there has been a transformation of his values. "Now, I'm a stupid fool whose fallen in love. So much for truth. Give me beauty. Sensuous beauty. Let me be damned," he says to himself. He's been taken over by her charms. He willing to make the sacrifice of his freewill and solitude. Going insane, throwing cold philosophy out the window.

"What are you reading?" he asked her. She was sitting with her back to him, deep into a big

book.

*"The Words of my Perfect Teacher."*

"How is it?"

"It's the sound of one hand clapping." She smiled.

"What?"

"It's a Buddhist text on the foundational practices in Vajrayana."

"Tibetan Buddhism?"

"Yes, the secret mantra tradition."

Jubal knew he was revealing rough edges, but he plunged on. "Well, the thing is, I've done emptiness meditation, and I've contemplated the noble truths. I've even had a Green Tara empowerment, and I've read a lot about Tibetan Buddhism. So, here I am in the 21st century trying to do some fact checks and make sure the assumptions I have in my head have any foundation. I think I am Christian mystic who does some Tibetan practices, and I just want to make sure I have it straight. I have no goal to become a Buddha. Zip. Actually, I think I'm going to have to extrapolate for myself that certain concepts that go from New Age to Hindu to Tibetan to Spiritualism are probably equivalencies: Devas are ascended Bodhisatvas; angels in Christianity, nature spirits in shamanism are ascended Bodhisatvas; if they somehow ascend enough they become devas or deities, such as the demigod, Pan. Pan probably just has a different name in Tibetan and Sanskrit. I think that the matrix of the uncreated is the same as the silence beneath the background static of your TV, which was created in the first 2 milliseconds of the Big Bang. I think this is the same as the void or emptiness that I tune into in meditation, and it is the light or spiritual truth that New Age people seek. It is spiritual and outside of time and matter. Call it emptiness if you wish. I do think that Tibetan Buddhism has a bit of bulk and heaviness and rigidity, such as the Catholic church had after twelve or thirteen centuries of theocracy. It's complex and high falutin' and a bit high sauce. However, like the Catholic Church, all that can be overlooked and the essence of the thing is what counts, if people don't get irritated and say oh fuck the whole attempt."

Fanny likes his way with words. "You're right, why differentiate between Buddhahood, Christ-consciousness, Union with the Divine, Tao, Atman-Brahman, and so forth? There's room for all. Sure, there are differences, but the terms point to the same kind of awareness. The major difference between Buddhism and Christianity is in the Christian belief in a Creator god, something that philosophers drive themselves to the brink trying to prove. In the main, Buddhists



just don't bother with metaphysics. They cut to the chase by addressing suffering, and through meditation they try to discover their true face, or, if you can get around the idea of an individuated soul, finally, one's Buddha nature or one's soul is what it is, and it's not a matter of debate, only a matter of realization. This is what enlightenment means. Then, you get on with the day to day stuff. Nothing changes, really, only your view. I think it is easier to be a Buddhist and a Christian than it is to be a Christian and a Buddhist. The problem of the personal savior and no other god but the one is not so important in Buddhism. In Tantra, there's a great deal of focus on the guru as a bringer of light."

Jubal, agrees, "This is exactly my point, that there is no need to differentiate. I think it's a matter of semantics and lump/label that in different religions the same entities and concepts have different names. I think the reason for me to be a Christian who does Buddhist practices and goes on with his day rather than a Buddhist who is a Christian who goes on with his day is this: as the Dalai Lama has stated, he does not encourage people to drop their current faith and embrace Tibetan Buddhism. He believes that there is a truth which is at the core of all faiths. I have a basic loyalty to Christ and don't dump an old friend when I've found an interesting new friend. The savior thing—yes, I suppose, but as a mystic Christian I live completely under grace. I have an ongoing connection with Christ consciousness through the Holy Spirit and don't really have any worries or concerns about sin or the hereafter. I don't really find it at all difficult."

"It shouldn't be," said Fanny. "They aren't in competition. Christ is with you when you do Tantric practice and when you're in a drum circle and when you call on the nature spirits. He should easily slide over from the driver's seat for Green Tara and sit in the back without complaint. He groks the whole Mother Goddess thing."

Jubal relaxed. "I'm looking closer at Tibetan Buddhism not because I'm a seeker per se, but because I've already found it and it's been great and very helpful. And, I must say, you're being very helpful."

"It's my pleasure," said Fanny, "and I would love to talk more, but I've got more to do in the kitchen. Go with?"

Jubal helps her with her coat, and they walk along the path toward the kitchen. It's much darker, now, and he can't see if Maurice is still in the shadows or not. Fanny and Jubal don't talk. Their hands brush together, not much, but just enough.

Jubal is aware of a growing passion for Fanny. He knows he needs to relax, find some calm, be of a sportive mind, but he is intense and absorbed and catches himself craving to hear her sweet voice. He knows, from experience, he will soon be wasted to a shade. This is a woman of substance and presence, and she has something to impart other than the uniqueness of her cunt. This seems contradictory to his desire. He fears he will be tempted to commit some act that may be possible for a god but impossible for a man. This is the lesson of the serpent in the garden. Jubal knows he needs to temper his passion with knowledge of mortal limits, if his love is to reach fruition and be meaningful in his life. Fat chance. At the moment, he feels his life bubbling like a lava lamp.

Fanny and Jubal meet again the next night. They walk hand in hand from the library down to the lake. This time, it is Fanny who has all the questions.

“Do you do any art?”

“Sure,” replied Jubal, “I paint with junk.”

“You what?”

“Paint with junk.”

“How do you do that?” she asks.

“From early on I’ve enjoyed collecting things on my walks, down alley ways, along roadsides, in fields, on the beach. I read once in an anthropology text that early man collected small stones, which is, perhaps, the foundation of aesthetic choice. Some collections by Paleolithic hunters are much more interesting than others. I came to live in Aptos, and it was my first contact with serious artists, artists who ate, drank, and slept art. I started putting odd pieces into boxes, junk collage, assemblage, combines, as they are variously called. My friends have surrealist and abstract expressionist leanings, and I originally felt inspired by Picasso, Miró, Matisse, Max Ernst, Tapies, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Larry Rivers, and most importantly, Robert Rauschenberg. Later, I met Lu Garcia, and as he did fine papier collés, which is a pure form of collage, just using paper, I followed his lead, finding that collage has many similarities to poetry, the ability to grasp a single image out of the blue and paste it down on the page. Immediate gratification.

It’s very satisfying to have an artwork fly together in short period of time, as compared to the time it takes to do an oil painting. When I lived on a cattle ranch in Ellensburg, Washington, I found an old junkyard and proceeded to cover an outbuilding with junk. Then, I started making individual works and entering them into shows, and I won some awards and my confidence grew. It’s an inexpensive medium to work in, and the scale can be adapted to wherever you are. At present, I’m doing boxed constructions á la Joseph Cornell.

“Do you find it difficult to title your pieces?”

“Sometimes there’s an object that dominates the piece, like in the case of this one I call Desert Deco. There was the cow skull and pieces of art deco red glass, so the title came from the objects, sort of straight-forward. In the case of one called Constellation, the reference is more obscure and the source more oblique. I was invited to do an installation at the Sonoma Museum of Visual Arts, and this piece, hitherto untitled, came to mind, as a sketch for this larger project. The piece is in a private collection, on a fence in a garden in Ellensburg. It’s a piece that has been outside for several years, and much of the collaging, due to being exposed in the elements, had disintegrated and faded. The piece was originally nailed to a cupboard door but had fallen off. By itself, it was a twisted and rusted piece of tin with nails poking through, but later, when I hung what I had salvaged from the first assemblage on the fence, it seemed to need a piece d’resistance, so after a night’s sleep I took some yarn that I’d found on the sidewalk and strung it around the nails. Much later, thinking about my installation, I thought to use stickpins on the wall and stretch colored string and bits of cloth in patterns to make constellations.”

“How do you proceed, as a rule?” asked Fanny.

“I move objects around until things sort of fall into place. I like there to be a fit, and I try to interlock the shapes of the objects to give structure to the piece. You might call it architecture of mind. I try to keep nails, glue, wire, staples, screws, welding to a minimum. I like to mix desperate objects together, eggshell Styrofoam, curtain lace, blurry photos, and plastic water pipe, for example. The piece I just finished has a broken sheet of glass between two sheets of unbroken glass, and it’s in an elaborate, inlaid frame of curly maple with the space behind the glass filled in with Cherrios. I call this piece *The Bride’s Breakfast*, after the famous glass by Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Laid Bare by Her Bachelors*, which broke on route to New York from Paris, about which Duchamp commented, ‘a most fortunate accident.’”

“Ok,” said Fanny, “how do you respond if you’re asked whether your work has a meaning?”

“As to what the pieces mean, this is the hard one. Most artists respond to this question with a shrug, and say ‘Art is art,’ especially as concerns much of modern art, where the medium is the message, and process trumps product. The interpretation, the meaning, is left to the viewer. The energies of the artist are revealed. The fusion of form and content, the placement of the object in its environment and the visual tensions thereby created—this is what interests me. Meaning that, on the one hand, the pieces need to be understood (if that’s the word, maybe experienced would be better) in the context of their history and the evolution of art as a whole, and, on the other hand, individual pieces can be labeled and valued by individual viewers, who bring their own tastes and biases to the table.”

“Yes,” said Fanny, “when the same question is asked of the organic world, there is no answer.

What is the meaning of a tree? One can only understand a tree in relationship to the ecosystem, although you might have a favorite tree to sit under or one that has just the right branch for a swing. Did you take art classes?"

No, I'm not a trained artist. I did take one class in printmaking and one in life drawing from Terrance Choy at the University of Alaska. Mostly, I have hung out with artists and watched them work, argued esthetics over tea, walked the streets talking, gone to museums and galleries. I was 19 when I went to my first art show at the San Francisco Modern Museum of Art. I saw a Robert Motherwell exhibit of his blue collages of Gualois cigarette wrappers mixed with paint. After that, I saw an exhibit of Brancusi and Giacometti sculpture, and a retrospective of Kandinsky. All of these shows strongly affected me, the tearingness of collage in the work of Motherwell, the solid presence of the Brancusis, the organic economy of the Giacomettis, the ethereal precision of the Kandinskys. Since then, other famous and not so famous artists have influenced me. Luis Garcia's collages revealed to me that materials are everywhere, and there is a quality of alignment I feel in his work that I still strive for. When I first met Lu, he took a lot of meth, and I noticed he had cut some of the lining out of his coat in the process of making a collage on the bus. I knew I was in the presence of an artist."

"So, the art of collage and junk painting are relatively new, I gather."

"Yes, pretty much the 20th century, although there are examples of combining found objects and using pasted paper in the folk art of the 19th century. Picasso made some combines, but it's really Kurt Switters, a German artist of the 1920s, who is considered the father of collage and assemblage. He created what are known as *mertz*. The term came from a scrap of newspaper Switters found in the street. 'Mertz' was torn from the word *commertz* and the idea that this lowly fragment of commerce could recycle into the economy intrigued him—that which is rejected, ignored, cast aside, is still a part of the system, the poet-artist threading it back into the fabric of civilization. This kind of art was considered decadent in The Third Reich, and Switters' work was burned. I'm told he read his poetry on stage and spit at a photograph of Hitler. The brown shirts were after him, so he fled to America.

I love the work of the Spanish artist, Tapies. The effects he creates with paint that seem like natural color, shape, texture, and I admire the paintings of Rothko, Johns and Pollack—the energy, the ecstasy, the agony—but I know I am really a carpenter, a plumber, a printer—trades which have given me the skills to fix things. This is work I trust and enjoy and use to make my artworks. Measure, measure, and re-measure, remembering that the best carpenter is the one who knows how to fix his errors, so they don't show, or make them work to his advantage. In collage and assemblage, I like the crustiness, the broken, bent, wrinkled, burnt, twistedness of the materials, the wire, the thread, and the nails, the seams in the cut paper. Perhaps, I'm using this kind of art as a release from the uptight, rigid, formal way I do things in other departments

of my life, letting it all hang out, having it be my way. But I think it goes deeper than just a psychic-emotional release. There's the application of esthetic principles at work, some of which overlap with poetry, like William Carlos Williams' concept that there are *no ideas but in things* and that poems are made solely of air. So, finally, it comes down to what medium do I feel comfortable with. I love the feel of paper and wood and plastic and metal, and I gravitate toward handling these discarded objects, this trash, testing the toughness and the fragility, the resistance, the flexibility, trying to fuse opposites and reconcile contradictions, exploring space to reveal all sorts of overlooked beauty by painting with junk."

## Chapter 5

The next time they met, Jubal asked Fanny to tell him about some decision she had made that had changed her life. She reflected for a moment.

"I know what it is to make a momentous decision that will effect your whole life. I've struggled all my life with making decisions. Last week I went to San Francisco to the California Institute of Integral Studies to hear Anne Kline speak on Tibetan Buddhist practice. She is the author of *Meeting The Great Bliss Queen*. She pointed out that in America the need to know what you are going to be when you grow up and who you are as an individual are the major questions facing a young person. In traditional cultures, a man followed his father's profession or entered the military or church. A woman married. Now, a woman must choose a profession, and the price she pays is that she must compete with men for jobs. It's difficult for a person to find their true nature. Confusion arises. I think we know what we don't want. We don't want a stifling job. We know that if our work is not inspiring, we feel sick.

Look around. It's an extravagant vista before us. No shame in waiting a moment to take in the elaborate detail, to appreciate the iridescent dust motes of the future. We can change our minds. The practical approach is to look at careers that combine our personal interests with a means to make a comfortable living. Another way is surrendering to our destiny in order to find joy and the causes of joy—not necessarily the rush for fame and fortune, but possibly the acquisition of boundless inner peace. This requires trust. We might make any number of decisions. The herringbone of life is woven from failed experiments and perfect accomplishments. When I loose in any endeavor, I gain wisdom. The main thing is to keep the balance on your credit card paid.

After graduating from high school in Occidental, I went to Cal Poly, an agriculture and engineering school. I studied philosophy, which was part of the math department, and I studied drama, which was part of the speech department. I produced a feminist version of *Waiting for*

*Godot* in the campus theater. I guess I was doing too much. Everything seemed to be falling apart in my life. I was trying to direct and act a part in the play, and I had lost control. I'd cast an enormous black woman in the part of Potso and given her a whip. I'd put this skinny girl, named Gigi, in a body harness as Lucky. I was playing Didi, and my roommate played Gogo. We used a tree branch in a toilet bowl as our set, and it seemed like everything was going down the toilet.

I mean, there was tension on the set. There was tension because of my inexperience at directing and because I was not getting along with my roommate. Cindy was the only other Afro-American in the school besides the girl that was playing Potso in the play. Cindy was the daughter of a dentist in Mill Valley, and she was during an identity crisis. And my preaching feminism and black power didn't help. We began a series of murals on the walls of our cabin. A black Adam and a black Eve being cast from the Garden by a towering white Angel. A black Adam being tempted by a white Serpent. A black Adam and a white Eve. A black Eve touching figures with a black God. After Cindy and I gave up the cabin, two Muslim students moved in and painted over the whole thing."

"Didn't you find it a little uptight at Cal Poly?" asked Jubal. "Isn't it a conservative school, what with Ag. majors and all?"

"Actually, I got along at Cal Poly because I grew up with horses," said Fanny. "My dad owned a quarter horse mare named Kitty Barrett who won lots of blue ribbons for conformation, and Dad drug me around to state fairs. Also, I can ride like a Lakota, so I can hold my own around cowboys.

It was at this time that I met Chela. A chela is a student, a disciple. The word is from the Sanskrit. But Chela was more than a student. She was a Dakini, a wild, wise woman. Chela had been raised by theosophists, and she lived in a house built in the shape of a star that had a different fruit tree outside the window of each room. She had three kids, two boys and a girl, and her husband, Frank, was on pilgrimage to Mt. Cuchama, a sacred mountain near San Diego. This mountain was owned by Evans-Wentz, the man who had introduced *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* to the English speaking world. Frank had moved to the mountain to build a stupa, which is a kind of reliquary, and Chela was left to fend for herself.

She introduced me to the Occult—to Tarot and Astrology. She took me and the kids and an older woman, named Charity, and an Indian man by the name of Raven in her Volkswagen bus to the beach on picnics and into the hills on hikes. We read Guidjeff to one another and had séances. She was always finding another baggie of homegrown weed that her husband had stashed in hidey-hole like treasures."

"Sounds idyllic," said Jubal.

"Well, she helped me get my shit together, and then I had this dream. Dreams are a form of

communication, but usually it's hard to put a dream into words. Just as you start to describe one thing, some other part disappears. It's frustrating."

"I know what you're saying," said Jubal, "You think you have it figured out, and then your mind goes blank."

"Exactly. Only this time, I knew where I was and what was going on. It was very specific. I was in the Berkeley Rose Garden, and I was talking to a man I know is dead. I was sitting in the Rose Garden, but Bouvard Pécuchet was in the Grove here. When I looked in front of me, there were roses, but when I looked at Dr. Pécuchet there were redwood trees behind him. He was talking to me, but when I looked closely, his lips were not moving. All the same, I heard his voice. At first, it seemed like he was tearing everything down, God, government, the good life, but I could tell what he was really after was the corruption, the superficiality, the mindlessness of our culture and the flatness of our souls. He was telling me directly that he saw the Divine in me, but that he could see me hiding from my true nature. He said I was not living from my heart, and then he offered me a peach."

## Chapter 6

"The rush of murder...", she said.

"What about murder?" he asked.

"Did you know there is an unsolved murder in the Grove?"

Jubal remained silent.

She went on, "In the 70s. A man was found murdered near one of the fire circles, and the whole thing was hushed up."

Jubal was silent.

"His name was Pécuchet, and he was a scientist of sorts, an archeoastronomer."

Jubal said, "I know what that is. It's the study of how the stars were aligned in ancient times."

"That's right. He is supposed to have found something in the Grove that indicated the local indigenous peoples had astronomical knowledge."

"Why would anyone kill him for that?"

"It would seem strange, except for the way he was killed?"

“Ritual sacrifice?”

“No, he had an arrow in his heart.”

“What kind of an arrow?”

“That’s the funny thing. It was an Indian arrow. And not one that was made recently. In fact, it had some writing on it that revealed it was the property of the Kroeber Library at the University in Berkeley and that it had been made by Ishi.”

“The Indian they found at the beginning of the last century that was the last Indian to live fully in the traditional way?”

“That’s right. Ishi died in captivity, but he taught the anthropologists of that era a lot about the day to day life of an aboriginal native. And one of things he taught them was how he made arrows. And the arrow that was in the heart of the murdered man was one of the arrows that Ishi had made for Professor Kroeber.”

“Wow. Go figure,” said Jubal.

“Murder has always fascinated me,” said Fanny, “especially unsolved ones. You haven’t murdered anyone have you, Jubal?”

“Goodness, no, I’ve had the urge a few times. I was in a position where the temptation was very strong. Plus, I’ve almost been murdered once, and once, while I was hunting, I was intentionally shot at, but I think they missed on purpose, shot at me just to get my attention and scare me. Still, the adrenaline was flowing. When I was a kid, I was at a Y.M.C.A. summer camp, and I got into a fight with another kid, and I had him in a strangle hold, and I knew it wouldn’t take much to break his neck. I freaked out at the thought, and I jumped up and ran and hid in the camp chapel, which was in the open air among some big cedars. Climbed inside a hollowed-out tree and prayed for forgiveness. I was very emotional, and I felt that an angel came to me. Probably just the way the light played among the trees. Still, the feeling of being forgiven was very strong. The other time, the time when I was almost murdered in my sleep, I had another religious experience, although this time it was more connected to Buddhism.”

“How so?” Fanny gripped his hand tighter.

“I used to drink. I was often drunk and rowdy. And, at this time, I was involved with a married woman. One evening, I went to a friend’s birthday party, a mutual friend, and this lady, Laura, and her husband were there. I was drinking red wine in the kitchen with a couple of my buddies, and her husband, who was aware of what was going on, caught us flirting. He confronted me, and tried to rough me up, and it turned into a wrestling match on the kitchen floor. Some guys pulled us apart, and in the process, my shirt was ripped, and I had this tremendous feeling of



embarrassment, standing there among my friends, soaked in wine, and my life in shreds. I felt like a real sot.”

Fanny moved a little closer. “And then?”

“I left the party and made my way home to a ramshackle house that slanted in every direction from the center. I’d hung an old army blanket over the window in my bedroom to keep out the light from a streetlamp, and with the door shut, the room was pitch black.

This is an important aspect of the experience that follows. I’d been reading about a female yogi who spent many years in dark retreat. Sealed off from sunlight, she’d experienced the clear light, which, as I’m sure you know, is not only the ability to see in the dark but is the clarity and lucidity of pure space, of emptiness, the direct, intuitive understanding of events.

I really don’t know what awakened me. I only know that I stretched out my hand to stop a blow from an ax handle that was descending. I think it was the second time I was being hit. I noticed later there was a big dent in the bedstead, and maybe what originally woke me from my sleep was a glancing blow. Anyhow, I put up my hand up in the pitch darkness and thwarted a blow that would have crushed my skull. The ax handle cracked from end to end, and I could feel the reverberation from the soles of my feet to my very soul.”

“Whoa! That’s extreme,” exclaimed Fanny.

“The guy dropped the ax handle and ran from the house, and I laid back on the bed and fell asleep until dawn. Maybe I was in a coma. More likely, I was just drunk. Finally, I got up and dressed and picked up the ax handle, which I found on the bedroom floor, and began to search for my assailant.”

There was a long silence. Then, Jubal continued. “The streets were deserted, as I walked uptown,” he said. “However, when I passed this one alleyway, I saw Jerry—that’s her husband—on the next block, so I hurried up the street to the next alley and hid behind a telephone pole. As he skulked past, I tapped him on the shoulder. Man, did he jump. I told him that we could go on playing tag like this forever, but it would be better for both of us to ‘bury the ax’ and move on. I was aware of something in Jerry that was suffering, and this evoked my own pain. I also understood in a flash that I could not go back to the way I had been living to the anger and drunkenness and confusion and turmoil I had been creating and perpetuating. I wanted calm and health and clear understanding. And the result was almost instantaneous. I felt the relief that comes from no longer feeling the pain I had been inflicting on myself. I was awake in a way I had never been before, and I realized this precious condition is a continual process rather than a final accomplishment. Not everyone is going to be hit on the head. This is for hard cases. But everyone is going to awaken at some point, if not in this lifetime, in another.”

Fanny said, "True enough. I think it's because it requires such a great deal of effort, and it is hard to come up with the energy to accomplish this and have a sense that the effort will be worthwhile. Hard to get an "if" to become an "it," to have an idea of what the success will be like until you have a taste of it."

"I agree," said Jubal. "I looked at my faults and realized I didn't trust myself. I couldn't be calm or give and receive love or trust life or find the right way to live. I was stuck because I thought I couldn't change."

"Exactly, Jubal, if you think something is wrong, and you feel you deserve the blame because you are flawed or at fault, you need an entirely new perspective to get out of this thought loop. Bertrand Russell pointed out that if you begin with a false premise, anything can be proved to be true. This means a chain of ideas can lead you into despair. If you begin with the thought of being flawed, you will prove this to yourself over and over. There's no way to dial 1-800-Buddhas and receive enlightenment. The trick is to see that at your source you are indestructible lovingkindness and that you must be your own infallible guide along the path of self-discovery."

"It's no easy task," said Jubal, "Maintaining a calm state and having confidence in this push and shove life we live in is a lot of work."

"Full time," said Fanny, "but back to murder. I think for some murderers, it's the only way they can feel anything. They're shut down emotionally, and they get a rush in murdering somebody. But this murder in the Grove did not seem to be a murder of passion. The arrow. That was premeditated and seems, I don't know, symbolic, somehow."

"Sounds deadly, to me," said Jubal.

**PART TWO:**

**FLASH FICTION**

## **BULWER'S NOVELS**

A book is a thing among things, a volume lost among the volumes that populate the indifferent universe, until it meets its reader, the person destined for its symbols. What then occurs is that singular emotion called beauty, that lovely mystery which neither psychology nor criticism can describe. –Jorge Luis Borges

Most books and their authors are forgotten. Literary obscurity is to be consigned to oblivion. What we see is light. But sometimes the darkness becomes visible.

My name is Jampel Dorje. I am a monk in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. I am not Tibetan. I am an American, and my profession before I took up my present vocation was as a bookseller. A good friend of mine, Brom, asked me to appraise his library. He was selling his house near Telluride, a resort town in the Colorado Rockies, and he was unsure of what to do with a large collection of books that had been in his family for many years.

I assumed the collection would be like many I had encountered over the years, containing run-of-the-mill novels with, perhaps, an occasional first edition of a noteworthy work, along with the usual covey of old books having more of an “antique” value than any real worth as rare editions. I was in for a surprise.

I was reluctant to make the trip, but when Brom said he was hosting some Geluk monks that were traveling across the country giving empowerments and creating sand mandalas I was persuaded to go. Being inexperienced in the ways of monastic life, this would be an opportunity to experience something of how monks live and behave, even if it was to take place in a setting like Telluride.

Brom picked me up from Tara Mandala Retreat Center, near Pagosa Springs, on a Friday morning, and in a few hours we arrived at Crestview, on the outskirts of Telluride. We stopped in front of an imposing wood-frame house in a wooded residential neighborhood. We pulled into a three-car garage, and while Brom was unloading some bags of groceries, I took a peak under a tarp in

the next stall—a red Maserati, gleaming like a wish-fulfilling jewel.

We entered the home through the garage and were greeted by five monks preparing to eat a meal in the kitchen. One of the monks, like myself, was an American. Brom introduced me to John, and John introduced me to Lama Norbu, Geshe Kalsang, Yeshe, Tenzin, and Phuntsok.

In modern times, at the insistence of the Dalai Lama and in the spirit of non-sectarianism, the traditional rivalry between Nyingmapas and Gelukpas has, at least at formal gatherings. Still, there is a strict hierarchy in monastic behavior. It may have been that I was the eldest combined with being a friend of their host, or perhaps I was a curiosity, but I was given the honor of being served after the lama.

After lunch, we all settled in front of the TV to watch the Olympics. Although the news from Tibet was grim—many demonstrators had been jailed following protests against the Olympic torch being carried through Tibet—all the monks in the big house among the snowcapped mountains in Telluride watched with avid enthusiasm the athletes performing in China.

The swimmers were breaking records, and the gymnasts astounded us with their feats. And so it went, until we had to leave for the evening's presentation at a yoga studio. We drove a short way to the public transit which is a high-wire chairlift with small, covered cars that took us high above the valley floor. I rode alone with Lama Norbu and shot video of him for the incredulous audience that awaited him back home, in Lhasa.

The following day, the monks went off to paint a sand mandala at the Community Hall, and I began my researches on the library. Brom showed me to the basement where there were cardboard boxes full of books and more books in stacks on the floor. My eyes beheld a wonder.

This was not your average collection. Here were treasures I had only dreamed of—first editions of Charles Dickens and Lewis Carroll in Moroccan leather bindings with the original covers sewn into the endpapers. Full sets of Balzac, of Stevenson, of Browning, of Kipling, of Defoe, also in fine bindings. There were folios of colored lithographs of birds and plants, large volumes of engravings of 18th century German artists, works in philosophy, history, and literature.

I went to work carting armloads of books from the basement to a room with more light, something I imagined other monks had done in monasteries in times past. The other monks were curious about what I was doing, and when it was explained their admiration for me increased. Lama Norbu smiled and let me be first in line at meals, so I could get back to my task.

Once this kind of work was done with catalogs of auction records; now, it done with a computer. The job is essentially the same—search and compare and appraise. Arduous but lovely labor. The details in how I determined “condition” and “value” and “nearest approximate edition” are not relevant to this narrative, but this was the stuff of my hours, with short breaks only for meals

and to sleep, for three days.

Obviously, this was a library of a man who could afford the best of books. I must admit I had always associated Brom's name with some species of grass—California brome, soft brome, Ripgut brome, or the like. This was the family library of H. Mansfield Brom (1849-1919), manufacturer and philanthropist, friend and confidant of robber barons, and the library had come down from father to son.

But I digress. I worked diligently and time seemed to disappear. Then, a peculiar thing happened. I had just finished cataloging a copy of Milton's *Il Penseroso and L'Allegro* with illustrations by William Blake, and, laying it aside, I bumped a stack of books causing them to fall to the floor. One book landed with the cover splayed. Straightening a crumpled page, I read, "All events in the Universe occur at Once, but we Experience them Sequentially. Take a forest, for example;— the Trees have had to Grow; but we didn't Observe them, and now it is a Forest."

This seemed to me an odd notion, a mixture of David Hume and *The Upanishads*. I read a little more, and the thoughts were revealed to be those of a student in a state of despondency after being rejected a reigning beauty beyond his station in society. The title page: *The Courageous Cadet* by Sir Henry Bulwer, published, 1831, in London by Fishburn & Hughes, Ltd.

Who was Sir Henry Bulwer? A search for 19th century English authors let me to the *Cyclopedia of British Literature*, edited by Dr. I.S. Noval, where I found this entry:

Bulwer, William Henry Lytton Earle (Baron Dalling and Bulwer) 1801-72, British diplomat and author, known as Sir Henry Bulwer. Popular in his lifetime for his novels, he is now chiefly remembered for the speculative ideas in his plots, making him a precursor of the modern genre of science fiction.

So, Sir Henry is only remembered by literary historians interested in dates and changes, but once he had been the preferred reading of my friend Brom's grandfather. I needed to put a price on this book. I admit I was also interested in these "speculative ideas."

The computer is a labyrinthine maze of information. To some it is a highway, but to me it is more like the sands of the Sahara, shifting and growing every day. My day stretched into night. Anything resembling science fiction in *The Courageous Cadet* was only in embryonic form—the passing thoughts or musings of the protagonist. Otherwise, the plot was pedestrian, and the writing style was sentimental and dated.

The student, Horatio, preparing for a commission in the army, stays holed-up in his room after his love interest has disappointed him; and when he can no longer stand the isolation, he wanders the streets of the city in ever-expanding circles. What he sees is predictable, but every so often his mind goes off in an odd direction.

Looking into the window of a haberdashery, he considers the possibility of “a spiral of time” and the nature of “standing still in the present,” of how this “resembles Infinity” and how “Infinity resembles a pool of water.” Another time, after nearly being run over by a stagecoach, he sits on a bench in a park to catch his breath, and he compares time to a triptych of canvases on which you can paint the past any color you want. Time is simultaneously objective, subjective, and “canny” (secret or supernatural), and he divides time three ways: time for rest, time for work, and time to devote to the Deity.

It was at this point I remembered seeing a small engraving between the endpapers of a scythe leaning against a broken Doric column which I recognized as a Masonic symbol for the precariousness of life and the impermanence of material reality. Needing a break, I let the computer rest and put an entry in my notebook for Monday: “A long day with not much accomplished on the library. Still, I am making progress.”

At the bottom of the stairs, there was a pile of suitcases and travel bags. The monks were ready to depart. Brom and I were given sweatshirts with the logo of the Gaden Monk’s Tour. We went out on the porch and waved goodbyes. Back in the house, I sat down in front of the TV and ran through the channels looking for the Olympics.

“No Olympics on Sunday,” Brom said.

“Sunday?” I asked. “I thought this was Monday. Friday, we drove up here and went to the empowerment, and Saturday I started work on your library, and Sunday I worked some but got sidetracked by a novel by an obscure author. This should be Monday morning.”

“For one thing, this isn’t morning; it’s afternoon, and I saw the light on where you’re working, in the early hours, when I got up to pee. I think you worked all night and forgot to sleep.”

I went back upstairs and looked at my notes. The entry was there with the date. I had even made a sketch of the Freemason’s engraving, but I could not find the copy of *The Courageous Cadet*. Instead, I found twenty-six volumes of Bulwer’s novels: a set with gilt pages and lettering and blue cloth covers with leather corners. However, the publisher was Collier, not Fishburn & Hughes, Ltd., and the set was in the bindery style of the late 19th or early 20th century.

Trying to backtrack my pages on the computer, I could find no trace of the *Cyclopedia of British Literature*, and yet I knew something about the life of Sir Henry Bulwer and had read (or thought I had read) one of his novels.

I went back downstairs. “I guess you are right,” I said. “Somehow, I got out of step in time. Do you think that ice cream parlor next to the yoga studio is open on Sundays?”

“Sure,” said Brom, “do you want to go?”

“Can we take the Maserati?”

“We can, and you can drive.”

I don't know if His Holiness would approve of a monk behind the wheel of a red sports car, but I couldn't resist. When we hit a stretch of open road, I shifted into high gear and made up for lost time.

## **MY EYES WEEP TEARS**

Reality soaked with tears—should I define reality? No, I'd rather watch *The Bachelorette* on TV, reality TV, a really real show showing you your reality can be ok, you just have to get on TV to experience it, follows Andy Warhol's prediction that everybody will be famous for 15 minutes, but what did Andy know about reality? for him a Campbell's soup can is art.

My reality at the moment is mantras, goes to show that everyone has their own reality, anyone else here doing mantras all day? At present, I'm doing a hundred thousand Vajrasattva hundred-syllable mantras, I get up, make a cup of tea, offer some to Ekajati, my protectress, she has one hair, one eye, one tooth, one tit, surrounded by flames, she needs a cup of tea, then I get down on the mantras.

Three weeks ago, I was working on a poem, decided “spade” was the first word, and as far as I could see, it could've been the first word in the world, thought I'd put everything in that poem, decided I didn't care if I alienated the reader or not, knew there should be a line about getting stoned and some sexuality.

I saw tit—

and I knew the best thing to do is never nothing.

I can't not do nothing.

I cannot do nothing again.

## **OLD BOOT**

Nothing as sad as an old boot lying in the middle of the road. Like someone left piece of a costume on the stage. Jubal cut diagonally across the street and retrieved it, wondering how it got there. Maybe fell out of a car. Maybe.

Old boot in the middle of the road. One bare foot, somewhere, limping along. A boot falls from a car. A boot falls from the sky. Someone tosses a pair of boots out, and they get separated. One boot in the middle of the road, and another boot in a box. A missing boot. A missing foot. A boot looking for a foot. A foot looking for a boot.

A woman screams at her husband, "You stupid son-of-bitch!" and throws a boot at him. He ducks, and the boot sails through the window and lands in the yard by a clump of four o' clocks. The neighbor's dog, Ronny, picks up the boot and carries it down Willow Street, where Tiger meets him. Tiger tries to get the boot away from Ronny, and in their tug-of-war, they are nearly hit by a car. They drop the boot in the street and head down a trail to Santa Rosa Creek.

Max is sleeping off a drunk under a bridge. His sleep is troubled. Memories of earlier days. He falls off a ladder and is partially paralyzed. His wife leaves him for his business partner. He goes bankrupt. When he finally recovers from his fall, he's alone. He awakes this morning to find he has only one boot. Two dogs rush by.



Jubal looks at the boot. A useless thing, one boot. By the alleyway near the bus stop, there is a pile of boxes. In one of the boxes there are a few books. Jubal scans the titles: *Saint Joan* by George Bernard Shaw, an anthology of Black writers, a collection of critical essays on J.D. Salinger, and a monograph, *Shelly, Keats and Rome*. He can smell mildew, but the engravings in this book on Shelly and Keats interest him. His girlfriend, Fanny, would like this book. He takes it and sets the boot down by the box. A boot for a book.

Max, still groggy, searches for his boot to no avail. He gives up and starts trekking towards town. When he passes the bus stop, he notices a boot by a box. It is not his boot, but it is the right fit. It is not the right style, but the man is not fashion conscious. He laces the boot and wears it for a couple of days, until he finds his own boot under a bush. He leaves the other boot on the bank by the creek.

When the man has moved on, the boot becomes despondent and demands a change of situation. From within and from all sides and in every direction it emanates an occult vibration. I do not know how it is changed, but it is no longer gravitationally held down. It pronounces the sacred word, "Zut," and transforms itself into an over-starched shirt worn by Vincent Van Gogh.

## **OPEN WIDE**

Dentistry means pain, means stay away, means lots of money, my partial made by my dentist, Doctor Wind, he operates, veins filled with sunlight, pools of blood in the sink, a sink once the standard contraption to spit in before the present suction device that dangles from my mouth, that and the spigot blowing air, suck and blow, blow and suck, my gums need irrigating, another trip to the hygienist, how long will it be before I learn good hygiene? go for those gums, let the hygienist rag me about taking care, using better tools, the rubber-tipped doodah to get into the space between the tooth and gum, work it along the gum, bleeding means work harder on this cleaning technique, get that plaque, get those gums rubbery, rubber gums, need to get between those teeth, floss and rub, use a Christmas tree brush, a brush at either end, scrub those gums, get those bacteria on the move, septic, halitosis in those gums, germs from a lifetime of eating, kissing, sucking, germs from every girl and boy I've kissed, added together, gumfulls of funk

added to a mouthful of sugar meat vegies carbs and drink, making some kind of solvent to dissolve the tartar from the toughest tooth, deconstruct, not many teeth left, well more than my friend Lu, he and I have tooth decay in common, losing our uppers, molars gone, working forward toward the incisors, chewing with my front teeth, grinding them down, need that partial, still have a couple of anchor teeth, special fitting, high dental art, the final step in several years of getting my mouth in shape, root canals, old caps and fillings removed, new caps installed, gold, porcelain, should I get a diamond installed in this incisor? American flags in fashion today, not until my mouth is stable, keep the jaw line in shape, until the mouth has a constitution, teeth are the duly elected representatives of the entire digestive system, the mouth connected to the throat connected to the stomach attached to the colon attached to the nether mouth, causal chain loop, the system representative of a living organism, a complex eater being eaten, \$1200 that tooth, \$800 this tooth, \$1000 for that one, \$1600 for a bit of reconstructive surgery, nip and tuck of dental finance, could you make my new tooth coffee-colored like the rest of them? no, let's not cap it, just a filling for now, Doctor Wind a little on the expensive side, but I get what I pay for, a dental program, remembering a dentist who cut the wrong roots, midnight dentistry in a Berkeley free clinic, the equipment on the blink, me having to steady the x-ray machine by holding it in my hands, probably jiggled the picture to the wrong tooth, took a picture of the wrong tooth, later, infection, abscess, anesthetic, tooth removed from the side of my gum, flashing on dentistry around the turn of the 20th century in San Francisco in Von Stoheim's film, *Greed*, based on Frank Norris's novel, used chloroform or pulled the tooth without, maybe drank a little whiskey or took a toke on the opium pipe, just handle it, I remember getting novocaine as a kid in the late 40s, and the drills running on a motorized pulley affair, grinding away, today's air-powered drills get the job done, no sweat, so I can usually get a tooth drilled without novocaine, hate novocaine, cottonmouth coming on long after you've left the dentist's office, screw the painkiller, except for maybe a root canal, feels so fine when the drilling's done.

## **DOWN ON THE OL' IMPLANTATION**

After having the radioactive seed implantation, I was feeling bruised and glowing wildly and needed healing vibes from everyone, but now, after some weeks, I feel less oppressed having cancer, and I'm released from the constant deliberation of the should I-shouldn't I wait and see

mental games going on in my head. The operation was no worse than a kick in the groin with a steel-toed boot, I hardly noticed, and yesterday, I went down to my bone doc and had him remove the pins from my right ankle, which were placed there after I broke both legs. No excuse now for not being able to sit in the full lotus.

Funny thing, he gave me a few local anesthetic shots around the ankle, but then he couldn't find his screwdriver. I told him it would be ironic if I had to go out to my car and get my Philips head screwdriver. He said his screwdriver was special, but that a small Allen wrench would do, and he finally borrowed his office partner's instrument and went to work. Got them right out of there, and I couldn't feel anything, although the idea of little screws being screwed out of my ankle made me twitchy, so I got on a passing cloud shaped like a Garuda bird and flew to Tibet, while they worked, the nurse giving me a count down, there's number 2, one more to go, squit, squit, squit sounds, very small threads, squiddle, squit, ik. Whoa, I felt that one, but keep going.

Not much of an incision, so once the screws were removed, I hardly cared about the radioactive seeds, and I did pass a seed, must've made it down a little passageway in the prostate, caught it in my handy radioactive seed screen and put it in my personal lead-lined pillbox, very Doctor Tellerish.

Went to the urologist this morning, who told me I'm doing fine, I had a list of questions, are the rivets in my jeans picking up radioactivity? No. Told him that I showed the seed I passed to a friend, will that hurt them? No. I got more radioactivity with the x-ray when I got my pins removed, I told them I was becoming very concerned about all this radioactivity, so they covered me with a lead jacket. Am I being overly cautious? Yes? How many times did you insert the needle with the seeds? About 2 dozen, how many seeds did you plant? Over 100. Did you put some extras around the tumor? 2 or 3. Are the effects of the hormone treatment going to conflict with the radioactivity as it relates to getting an accurate psa reading? Probably, so we'll wait 3 months to get a blood test. Is there anything else? Oh, yes, said the doctor, remember, I wasn't sure exactly what a curie was? I checked, a curie is a unit of radiation determined by disintegration,  $3.70 \times 10^{10}$  to the tenth power per second, named after Madame Curie.

One of my heroines, I say, did you ever see that movie where she and her husband make a vat of radioactive soup and distill the radium until they have a lump that glows in the dark? No, says the doc, I don't remember seeing that movie, however I asked the guy from oncology how much a curie was. That little guy with the mustache? Yes, right, I asked him, and he said, one curie is a lot, that we use microcuries, small amounts that are decaying fast, but you knew that, I bet, you have such an analytical mind, Jubal.

## **CHILDHOOD FEARS**

Everything is big and invasive. And confusing. Almost everything has potential to harm, to surprise, to discombobulate. I'm afraid to go to sleep, of letting my fingers hang over the edge of the bed, deep waters, dangerous sea monsters or tigers, under the bed, shadows of the boogie man, man of boogers, hulking in the shadows, watching me on my way from the house to the barn. I whistle a snappy tune, look up at the sky, God, how many stars, how far away, what's between them? Millions and millions of miles of space, and nothing, maybe dust, maybe a trace of gas, between them. No surviving out there, no air, no gravity, weirdness drifting away in a void, between the house and the barn, rustlings in the shrubs, snakes, wild cats, ghouls, something from outer space, would it reflect light? turn itself into the path that leads to the barn?

Make it to the barn, hope the Foolkiller isn't lurking in the rafters, smash my skull with his club, a shifting noise, horses munching hay, but that fluttering, an owl in the loft, my heart in my throat, breathe easy. Horses in their stalls, munching hay, harmony in the Universe. Fear inside me, choking me, rumbling in my muscles, creeping over my common sense.

Run. Run back to the house, caught in the terrible imagining, excited by the fear itself, its loathsomeness, the threat, the joy of freaking out, surrendering to the phantoms nursing on my prayer.

## **ELVES**

At one minute to ten on the day before Christmas, the elves gathered at the sleigh in the mall.

Where was the boss? He was usually early, but it was now two hours past starting time, and still no sight of him.

“He must’ve got caught in the traffic,” said Monty. “Traffic was horrible this morning.”

“Yeah,” said Alex, there was a wreck near Cotati. Cars were backed up for a long way, so I took 116 through Sebastopol.

“I don’t think so,” snorted Smitty, his hat tipped rakishly. “He’d be here by now. He probably had something important to do. He’ll be here by noon. We’ve got plenty to do before he gets here with more.”

“We need to get back to work,” I said. “If the boss is a no show, we’ll tell the kids they have to write their wishes on a piece of paper, and we’ll get it to Santa later. As to whether they’ve been good or not, if they don’t know by now, they’ll never know.”

“Right on,” said Monty. “I’ve got a mountain of Faxes to work on, and I still have invoices to check.”

Smitty was looking anxious. “We’re cutting it pretty close this year. If I haven’t figured out to get that contraption up and running by the time he gets back, I’m in for it.”

“I know; I know,” I said, “but let Monty do what he’s got to do, and I’ll give you a hand. But, first, I have to go to the warehouse and get a flex-all.”

Everyone returned to their tasks, and I walked down the passageway behind the shops to the storeroom. I got my heavy, green cloak and headed out the back door to my jalopy. Could use a coat of paint; might take out that dent by the front light. If only I can get all these packages ready.

Frank was in his cubby when I got to the warehouse. I’m in a hurry when I come up to his cage. I come up at an angle. Frank growls, “There’s someone ahead of you.” I look over, and, sure enough, there’s a man in a baseball cap, brim forward, standing back. “Sorry, I say.” The man nods for me to go ahead, and I move toward the counter. Frank must not have noticed this exchange, because when I step up, he says, “Let him go first.” Ticks me off. “Listen you fat fascist,” I spit, “if you’d spend less time telling people what to do and more time just doing your job, we’d all be a lot happier.” Some Christmas cheer.

“I am doing my job, keeping people in line happy.”

I want to reach across the counter and grab him by the shirtfront and say, “You want a piece of this,” but I know I’m getting agitated, so I let the anger go and simmer down. “I need a flex-all and fast.” There’s a tremor in my voice.

Frank goes into the stacks and comes back with a box. He types a bit on his computer, pushes the box towards me and says, “It’s not much fun coming to work when you get your ass kicked

every week.”

## STITCHES IN TIME

Back in the saddle as caregiver—the right rhythm—write a bit, puff up a pillow, write some more, cook a meal, meditate, check on mom—ideal, since I have no compulsion to be anywhere.

Mom fell off a curb at the hardware store, said something about noticing a very dapper dude at the curb, the curb, which she proceeded to forget about in her flirtation, thought she could float, think she wasn't looking where she was going, neighborly folks picked her up and sat her on the curb, moved her a bit to see if she was broken, drove her home, put her in her chair, where, it looked to me when I get there four days later, she had sat, surrounded by flotsam, and in the long line of women in her family, without complaints, figured her shoulder would heal on its own.

Costanzo brought me the message in the middle of the night, your mom has fallen, you should phone, in the morning, she answers and says her arm hurts and would I come home, so, I'm running around, breaking camp, tent, blankets, bell & dorje slung into a duffle bag, Rebecca asks, Jampa, are you cooking breakfast, this morning? why yes I am on the schedule, would you help? oatmeal, bread, butter, yogurt, scrambled eggs should do it, I'll cook, you pack, how much oatmeal should I make? make it in equal proportions in a big pot, enough for 25, go for it, let's see, Jeff said he had to go to Durango and he'd drive me to the airport, time to give Ani Tsultrim a copy of my poems to deliver to Ram Das, last goodbyes—Rebecca made enough oatmeal for 75, a huge offering.

Durango airport with only a minute to spare, last through security, pulling off my shoes, belt, hat, explaining the dorje, a religious implement, using skillful means to explain skillful means, last passenger on the plane, only one seat left, on standby for next flight from Phoenix, fees wavered by kind clerk, asked if I could go to Oakland rather than SFO, bumped up to first class, given a \$100 voucher and handful of drinks coupons, which I passed around, first on and first off, Sonoma express to Santa Rosa airport and a cab to Oak Tree Drive, home by midnight, there's Mom, looking a bit peaked, says she's glad I'm back, didn't want to disturb me in the Buddha fields, Om to home.

Next day, primary care doc says she needs an x-ray, so we go over to Saint Joseph's, back to the

doc, broken arm, there, Helen, you need to see a specialist, just across the street at the bone palace, I drove to the parking lot, she gets out, another long medical history to fill out, papers on privacy, mom plowing the back forty, no problem, but finally asked for a chair, ekg, blood work, more medical history for admittance, and a bone doctor, said he was not exactly sure what she'd need until he cut in there, new socket? perhaps pins and plates?

As it was, shoulder dislocated, he put the shoulder bone back in its socket, used a few stitches to hook it together, considerable amount of blood had drained into her elbow, needs to be reabsorbed into her lymph system with massage, she wondered if she could just leave it, but the doc told her it would be like a broken wing, she'd not be able to fly.

Three days in hospital, the nurses loved her, she used to be a "rose lady" volunteer, so she knew the ropes, when we were leaving, her nurse told me that I was taking their good patient, what would they do? she's mine, I said, and I'm keeping her, Mom told Charity there was a time I might have traded her in or another mom, she loves to tell this story of when I was maybe 9 or 10, and Mom, my sister and I were driving across country, and Lynda and I were arguing over a comic book, weird tales, and mom said she'd had enough and if we didn't stop arguing, she'd have me walk home, pulled the car over, told me to get out, we were in the middle of Colorado, mountains in the distance, a great space with a highway running thru it and mountains way off there calling me, I didn't complain, grabbed my jacket and started out across the plane, gave my mom a shock, says she wished she'd never made such a demand, drove a little way down the road to call my bluff, Lynda set up a wail, she'd be good, don't leave him out there, Mom, she backed up and I got in, but I'm still drawn to those mountains in Colorado.

This is the house of broken bones, Mom and I trading off, last year I broke both legs, but we're making progress, working out a new routine, pillows under the arm, therapy, we've had so many patients in this house, we are equipped like a hospital, everything but x-ray, we're having a few laughs, watching old movies, me stitching up my books—ideal, really, keeps us in stitches.

## **HIGH SCHOOL DANCE**

I was looking for a ring I lost. At the bottom of a box in my closet were my class yearbooks. I can hear distant, high-pitched voices in the schoolyard. Graduating seniors, giddy entering the so-

called real world. Take a quick peek.

“To a good head of whom I feel has a good life ahead of him. Stay as cool as you are.”

“To the guy who steals the most hubcaps. You are really a cool guy.”

“To a conceited, pesky brat. But sometimes sweet. Boy did we ever luck out on that Chem. final. Reemmbbeerr??”

There I am in the third row, thinner, a wave in my hair, a real cool head. Wave Set, I used it to create an impressive DA. Duck’s Ass. Had to have my hair just so. Hair was a big thing. Jeans had to have the belt loops removed and the edge of the waistband turned. The seams on the pant legs were trimmed off and the bottoms curled. This was the style. And we danced the foxtrot when we weren’t bopping out. Like, “Wow, man.”

We wore suits. Suits, mind you. The dance was at the Claremont Hotel, and Tommy Dorsey conducted the orchestra. My date was a drag, so I took her home. Then, I cruised back and picked up a girl I knew only by reputation, who smiled and got in when I opened the door of my Chevy.

1959. Hamburgers were six for a dollar. A gallon of gas was 19¢ and I had a five in my pocket. “The world is mine,” I shouted.

“Would you like to share it?” asked Lola.

We parked among scattered cars along a dirt road overlooking the city. The lights sparkled. Her breasts sparkled. I had my right arm wrapped around her shoulder and my hand inside her bra, while she kept my left hand from climbing any higher up than her knee. We were both breathing deeply, and our tongues were entwined, when there was a loud “cathunk” on the hood of my car.

One part if me could have cared less, and another part was not exactly sober enough to register much interest, but a small, paranoid part, an instinctual reptilian intelligence knew that it was imperative I investigate.

A blurry figure bellowed, “Come out of there, you bitch. Take me back. I promise everything will be as it was before.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” was Lola’s wooden reply. “I’d sooner die.”

“That can be arranged, too,” he said.

“Your boyfriend?” I inquired.

“Was,” said Lola. “Ron.”

I wiped some fog from the window with my hand. I could see this Ron waving his arms in front of my car. “The good parts will still be good, and the bad parts will be new,” he claimed.



“Oh, go away,” said Lola.

I started my car and backed away. Here’s Lola’s entry in my yearbook: “Mad Lover, Best of luck and happiness to one who is...well, to one who is! Remember me.”

## **MAP TO THAT MEMORY**

I’ve climbed the endless steps, following the curved banister, to bring you dark proof. I have kept the struggling facts pressed between facing mirrors, afraid they’ll dissolve if exposed to the arsonist light.

Only one veil separated us the night when we met. It rose like steam behind a beaded entry. Fresh off the boat from hell, and already I’d begun to fall.

## **THE DIARY**

The diary was on the kitchen table. This was unusual. Jubal knew that Fanny kept a diary. He had seen her writing in it at her desk by the window in the bedroom. He remembered her writing in it a couple of nights ago, how beautiful she looked in the light that fell across her shoulders.

She always snapped the clasp shut when she was finished. There was a little key, she kept on her key ring. She would ferret the diary away when she was done.

Sure, he was curious about what she wrote. Her hidden thoughts. Her tortured soul. What were

her revelations? Her observations? Her epiphanies? But no matter how much he wondered, his curiosity didn't get the better of him. A diary is private. Secret. He would sooner open her mail than read a page of her most intimate thoughts.

But here was the diary on the kitchen table. Open. And he could not help but see the entry. It was dated three days ago. At the top of the page were bold letters: "3 I's OF SPY." (1) Identify the target; (2) Initiate the contact; (3) Infiltrate the network. 1+1=1, and following this cryptic formula, a schedule: Newark to arrivals platform. Ramps. Terminal C. Inside building. Penn Station, Newark to Penn Station New York. Scissors, paper, rock.

Jubal wondered, What is this about? Is she meeting someone? He had to admit he had felt his relationship with Fanny was suffering. She was more than distant. Lately, she was absent. Jubal was intrigued by her behavior and, at the same time, confused. He was unsure how to proceed.

Ask her what was up. Would she feel this was an attack? Should he keep quiet? He could feel anger mixed with desire. Desolate and despairing, lost in murky ignorance, wishing he was past caring, feeling a dream was dying with love and trust fading. His thought reminded him of a poem written by an over-literate teenager, but it was a verse written in his heart, and he wished he had never peeked at the open diary.

It's not a thought lost in mist. It's more like a December wind. Jubal knew he was jumping to conclusions about the implications of what he had seen written. He flipped the diary open to another page and read: "Finally, I got to go to Chicago. I got some money, so I didn't have to work for a living. I was staying with a friend when David showed up. I had met him in Stockholm, and we had sworn eternal love, but it was three years since I had seen him. Like an eternity. David hadn't written. I had no idea what had become of him. It was morning. We went to the corner, to The Poet's Café, for coffee, and he asked me if I still loved him. I told him I was in love with someone else. I said, 'Do you hear that motor bike running up and down the street?' He said he did, and he seemed frightened. He left, saying he was going to Winnipeg."

On another page: "I had a dream. I was in a big city, maybe New York. I was moving like on roller skates. I was on a big ball with roller-skates underneath. I could move around, and as I moved around I could strike attitudes. It was very quiet. I was wearing robes, white, rumped. I couldn't tell where they began or left off. I could move through this city, but no one seemed to notice me, and I thought, this is what it is like when you're dead. It seems like this is happening more and more while I'm alive. It's strange not to be noticed. I'm glad when a stranger acknowledges me."

Another note: "Jubal can go on forever. David got it over in a jiffy. I think I preferred that." Jubal could remember riding the motor bike up and down the street. He thought, A "jiffy" can be a very important moment for some.

## HOW COULD I HAVE LOST IT?

How could I have lost it? A diamond ring. My mother's. She said she gave it to me to give to my daughter, Bianca. I asked Bianca. She said she doesn't have it. I didn't send it. I can't remember my mom giving it to me. She said I said, "Thanks." If she remembers that, she probably remembers right.

My mother is 96 and sharp as a tack. She can remember things that happened at the beginning of the last century, and what's more important, she can remember what happened yesterday. But I also remember her telling me she was looking for a diamond ring she had lost. "How could I have lost it?" Those were her very words. She turned the house upside down looking for it. Looked in the closets, under the bed, in shoe boxes, had me check the lock box at the bank. Maybe she is trying to pin this ring thing on me.

I ask her, "Is this the ring you lost?"

"No, this is another ring," she says. "This is a ring of my mother's. The ring I lost was a ring your dad gave me."

"Well, I don't want to think about it, right now," I say. "I must've put it in that safe spot I can never remember, but it will come to me."

I slept on it. In the morning, I could vaguely recall putting the ring in a white box, a gift box with some white cotton as a cushion. Or was this just dream stuff? In my dream, I thought I could imagine putting the white box in the side pouch of my suitcase, so it would be safe and ready to go when I visited Bianca in New York.

Only, I'm back from New York, and I hadn't remembered the ring. Maybe it was still in my suitcase. But, no, no ring in the suitcase. No side pockets, even. Still, I've got the memory. Maybe another suitcase. How could I have lost it? Why can't I remember Mom giving it to me? This is going to be tough. If I get obsessive about it, I'll tear up the floorboards and rip out the sheetrock looking for the damned thing. Sift through the debris. I won't rest until I find it. I'll be as demented as a crack addict looking for a fix.

"Let it go," Mom says. "It probably didn't cost more than \$500."

"Yeah, \$500 in 1930 dollars."

“No, like \$500, now,” she says.

“Ok, I’ll let it go. Maybe it’ll just pop up.”

“Right,” she says.

“Right,” I say. But I know neither of us will let this go. Rings are powerful. I can feel the pull already.

“And all the boon was summed,” says Mary Lou. We are drinking beer at Lucy’s. “You’ll find it, don’t worry. It’s lohst, now, and yu can’t change that.”

I don’t want to argue. I could say, “I can look for it,” but I don’t. Instead, I focus on the rim of the glass in my hand.

## **DANGEROUS ANGELS**

Steve’s driving. Jon’s riding shotgun. I’m sitting in back.

“He wants his wings,” Jon says. “Let’s see if we can score some weed.”

Steve looks over his shoulder with a smile beneath his Pancho Villa mustache. “You want to smoke some boo, kid?” I make a little nod of the head. “OK, I’ll see if I can score a couple of matchboxes. I know a guy downtown.”

We’re in West Oakland. 1963. We’re tooling around in Steve’s Mercury, which is chopped, channeled and conspicuous enough for a cop to pull us over just on principal. “I’m going to park here and go and talk to someone. See you in a few.” I watch Steve cross the street and walk behind the furry dice hanging from the mirror.

Jon and I have been playing a head game based on the card game in the movie *Last Year at Marienbad*. It started on our trip out from New York. In New Jersey we had scored some speed and proceeded to drive non-stop across the states, one hop to Chicago and then, the vast prairie. Blew the oil pump in Nebraska. We pushed the car back a mile and into a one-horse town. Shot pool in a bar with a pot-bellied stove. Yucked it up with the locals.

Anyway, we’d begun this game. The object of which is to remove an object, say a matchstick or a card from a row. A move consists of a player removing as many objects as need, which can

include all the objects, from one row at a time. There are rows of 1, 3, 5, & 7. Whoever removes the last object loses.

Like I say, the objects can be cards or matchsticks or coins, whatever is at hand when playing at a table. But while we were driving along, we didn't use objects; we'd just say what to do to imaginary objects in our minds.

Now, in Oakland, Jon says, "I take two from the top row."

And I say, "Take two from the next to bottom row."

Jon says, "Take three from the next to the top row."

I say, "That leaves 5, 2, 1 and 1, right?"

"Right."

"Then, I take all the top row."

At this point, Steve opens the door on the driver's side. I'm getting nervous. I'm wondering, "What's it like to be stoned?" Will I become crazed, like in Marijuana Madness?"

"Shit!"

"What do you mean, 'Shit?'" Jon says, "Did you score?"

"I got burned. I gave this guy I thought I knew ten bucks to cop for me, and he went upstairs and out the back. I waited on the stoop, but he never showed."

"Shit," says Jon.

"That's what I said," Steve says. We sat there for a while in silence.

"Take one from the top row," I say.

"What're you talking about?" asks Steve.

"Damn," Jon says, "how'd you do that?"

## **CUTTING THROUGH**

Shakespeare never followed orders or oracles. He walked to the counter at a Cotati convenience

store and asked for a quart of oil. He'd been hard at work on a play and needed a break. A drive to Oakland to practice Chöd might do the trick.

He grabbed some 30-weight and started to pay for it, but the clerk stared at him with a blank expression on his face. Shakespere grabbed the clerk by the front of his shirt and spat in his face, "Are you going to take my money or not, you dumb fuck?"

As soon as the words leapt from his lips, he knew he was way out of line. He knew what they would be saying, "That Shakespere, always beating up some clerk." Only the last time it had been the grocery store manager at Whole Foods. "It's the vibes in here; everybody in this place is sick," he'd shouted.

Now, this convenience store suddenly seemed oily, so he spun around and walked out saying, "Stick your oil up your ass, asshole." Slick.

Road rage, warbling his woodnotes wild, he was doing 80 on 101, when a gorilla clambered across the road. He skidded to the side. Steam rose above the hood. Getting out of the car, looking up the hill after the gorilla. Walked around the car. Got to cool off. First it's temper tantrums, then hallucinations. Must be the drugs I'm taking for my sex change. I know I am to be or not to be in harmony, chilling out in an omni-spatial matrix. I doubt the amount of dark energy in the mandala of racial drift in this play, as a woman janitor in a burqu, listening to poets picnic by the pier, Cleo on her hands and knees in the first light, astray, crawling towards a super nova of scorpions rising in the eye of Scorpio in the split personality soup of every diamond hanging I, phantom feather of selfhood at iambic feet in the Fayum.

The gorilla shook an oak tree, sending acorns scattering.

## **SCHOOL BUS**

Mrs. Brown was Jubal's school bus driver, but she didn't have a school bus. She used her car to drive the kids to school. Five of them, who lived outside the regular bus route. The city had no regular school buses. Public school students had a free pass on the city buses coming from and going to school.

This is how the city stayed segregated. You could go to any school you wanted to—all you had

to do was get on a bus and ride. The result was students from a neighborhood went to the nearest school. Jubal lived in the hills, and the nearest school was five miles from the nearest city bus, and the city hired Mrs. Brown to drive Jubal and his neighbors to school. Bret Harte Junior High. Named after the writer.

Mrs. Brown picked the kids up at the turnaround near the Bartlett horse corals. Jubal could see the car coming from his smoking hideaway in the eucalyptus. He kept his eye peeled on the sharp turn across the canyon, she'd be three, four minutes more. He needed that hit of nicotine to propel his sorry ass through the school day. A couple more drags on a Lucky Strike, feel the hit, heart valves opening and visionary eye fixed on the day's gold ring.

It wasn't Mrs. Brown who spoke to him about smoking. Mrs. Brown smoked. It was his mother. She had noticed an accumulation of cigarette butts near the mailbox. "If you want to smoke, smoke in the house," she said, "Don't stand out on the street."

Jubal rode home with four others. Don, Burt, Rob, and Nancy. Jubal had a thing for Nancy. She was a year ahead in school and, maybe, six years ahead in flirting. But Jubal was gaining ground..

One November day, he told her it was his birthday, and she said she would have to give him a kiss. Jubal said she should give him a kiss for every year. Fourteen kisses were what he wanted. Nancy didn't say no.

They walked along the fence that borders the Bartlett's, and there was Scottish Broom in bloom on the other side of the road. A trail climbed from the road to the top of a hill and Nancy's house. Jubal's house was across the paddocks, and this was where they usually parted company.

That day, Jubal followed Nancy behind a large bush, out of sight of the road. He was a walking hard-on, and he was curious to experience a kiss from a girl who knew something about kissing.

## **STUFF THAT HAUNTS ME**

Stuff that haunts me—things I said and shouldn't have, things I said I could have said better, things I didn't say.

Misery comes from every direction, and what am I going to do about it? I can't always be watching TV. I can't expect the Kali Yuga Age to be easy. Did I think samsara would be exhausted

when John Kerry was elected?

I feel like a blind man who doesn't know where he is. And now, a theocracy is in ascendancy supported by the oligarchs. A Protestant reformation of a secular humanistic government with power flowing into church pulpits, along every roadside, in every suburb.

Right after 9-11, he Halloween boogie man himself, Osama Bin Laden, appeared on TV, looking dapper, and addressed the American public, saying our security was in OUR hands, not the hands of the two candidates, and I knew it would be aiding a terrorist even to listen to him, let alone consider what he had to say, and heaven help me, if I should want to do as he suggested. This would be like negotiating with a terrorist.

Who was it decided it was a bad policy to negotiate with terrorists? What kind of strategy is that? Sure, I know, no concessions. That by caving into terrorists' demands, we fall prey to their tactics. But have we seen any letup of terrorism because we don't negotiate? How is this calculated?

Osama's two demands: (1) solve the Palestinian/Israeli conflict & (2) get the fuck out of the Near East. What's there to negotiate?

## **LEAVING ON A TRIP**

Leaving on a trip from Oakland to our Longvale ranch with my horse trailer and a fourteen foot aluminum gate, drove through an aluminum gate the last time I was at the ranch, Dad left the jeep at the bottom of the mountain, and I drove behind his Caddy on the way up, but the dust was choking me, so I took an opportunity to cut him off and get ahead of his dust, speeding up so he wouldn't have to eat my dust, and I was going about 30 around a sharp bend and drove right through the new gate Dad had installed, of which I was unaware, so now I'm driving up 101 with a new gate, bought with my hard-earned allowance.

Driving through Santa Rosa, there were stop lights synchronized to keep cars coming to a halt, I was never so glad as when the freeway bypassed Santa Rosa, and I could speed by saying adios Santa Rosa, but this time I stopped at an in-and-out roadside restaurant, ate a hamburger, swigged a coke, listened to "Shaboom, Shaboom" on the juke box—Sh-Boom: hey nonny ding dong along along along, boom ba-doh ba-doo ba-doodle-ay, oh life could be a dream—this was the only stop I made, no I didn't check to see if the gate was still there, I got in my car and headed



up the road, well, I stopped down the road from the Longvale store to unlock that gate, and I've looked all along the road between my stops, and no gate, it was tilted up at an extreme angle in the horse trailer and couldn't have just fallen out, must've been heisted when I stopped for the burger in Santa Rosa.

I was so excited when I started out knowing I had a new gate, and I could replace the one I had busted, I'll never catch up, I'm still paying for the wheel I tore off the jeep the time before I drove through the gate, and I'd just gotten the outhouse rebuilt after I burned it down when I mistakenly poured gasoline rather than kerosene into a stack of old tires I'd thrown into the dry creek bed and lit off, blowing myself into the air, landing on the opposite bank by the alfalfa field, sent a plume of smoke up a couple hundred feet in the air, black billowing chimney of nauseous burning tire smoke, singed off my eyebrows and bangs, gave me good second degree burns on my cheeks and lips, my girlfriend about crapped when she saw me walking out the inferno of tires and old boards I'd heaped together, my clothes singed and sooty, my lips starting to blister, she couldn't find anything to sooth my condition but kisses, then thinking of her lipstick, which she proceeded to smear on my burns, sirens in the distance, a fire truck responding, a couple of heroic firemen looking at my clown appearance and wondering what I'd been up to, the creek spewing clouds of black smoke, and me without a permit or an ounce of dignity.

I shrugged the whole thing off, in those days in the county no permit was needed to do a burn, although a courtesy call to the local fire district would have been appreciated, the firemen only hoping a house or barn wasn't on fire or a plane hadn't crashed, because a light plane had crashed on the land about a mile away the year before, and an ambulance had been summoned to help the severely burned pilot, no telling what had caused this mighty conflagration, just me in a pyromaniacal moment, it was not long after the firemen had left that I noticed the outhouse was now on fire, no point in saving it, hated the stinking thing, rather rebuilt it, a new location, new wood, fresh hole, a whole new world of bowel relief, but not relief from the mounting amount of things to be rebuilt or replaced.

What do I have to do now? the outhouse, the gate, the wheel on the jeep, forgot the wheel on the jeep, new tire, new rim, new wheel, lucky I didn't damage the axle or bend the frame when I flipped the Willys over, lucky I didn't kill myself and my best friends, Bill and Jerry, jeeps easy to over-steer when you're going fast around a corner on a mountain gravel road, logging trucks to be expected, having too much fun driving up riverbeds, getting stuck, going back to the homestead for a tractor to pull the jeep out, getting the tractor stuck, bogged down with water running over the seat, getting the D4 Cat to pull the tractor and the jeep out, but the D4 can't help with a new wheel, flipping over going around the bend, fast, but not that fast, slow enough for everyone to scramble out before it fell on us, sitting on our asses in the mud, happy to be alive, glad to be in one piece, everything of a piece except the jeep.

What's that wheel over there? is that the spare? No, the spare's still there, that's the right front, tore it right off, the Willys made it through the whole damned Second World War, through the battle of Normandy, maybe Guadalcanal, and now it's wrecked by boys.

## VISITING THE POET LAUREATE

Apple Valley, off Highway 116, in Sebastopol. Park on the street. Pass through double glass doors with a sign that says to report to the nurse's station before taking patients off the premises. A tall, blond woman with a badge and an enticing smile tells me David is in room 34, bed B. "The middle bed," she says.

On my trip down the hall, I meet people in wheelchairs, some slumped over, asleep or not, a man in a blue shirt, drooling, trying to reach a gray towel with red piping laying on the linoleum at his feet. The usual rest home smells of urine, antiseptic, and old age funk. But it is warm and dry inside. Bodes well, even with the demented moaning.

David, sits upright in his wheelchair, a copy of *The Sporting Green* on the hospital tray before him. There are yellow carnations and family photos at the bedside. On the cover of the newspaper there is a photo of an excited rugby player, his arms splayed in exultation. Apparently, England has won the world cup in rugby. A headline to the left of the player says, "Aussies shirt Philip."

I wonder about the meaning of "shirt" and David says the word is like "dis." I guess the Aussies are disgruntled.

I ask, "You mean like, maybe, I pop my cuffs at him?" I use my English persona, and David snickers.

"I think it has more to do with taking your shirt off and waving at him," he says.

There is a flushing sound from a toilet going on in a side room. David tells me it's his roommate, a Japanese man with a name that sounds like Nietzsche. Probably not spelled like the philosopher. I ask, "Who's in the other bed, Dostoevsky?"

Outside the window, a sparrow is eating birdseed from a feeder. I look closer at the feeder and see that the seed has sprouted, and a small lawn is growing there. I think of the rugby players

playing on this small lawn. I can hear music from a distant radio. The clatter of trays on a lunch cart reminds me of applause. I can see the game in progress.

“...what with the genome, and the whole urge to create Frankenstein and the perfect soldier, there’s so much going on right now in biology and medicine and politics...biological warfare...”

I’m listening to myself talk to David, and he’s saying, “You don’t think they want to produce hundreds of thousands of these monsters and let them loose against the enemy?”

And I’m just saying, “No, but it wouldn’t be from lack of trying, and you know there is this myth,” when Cecelia, David’s wife, walks in.

And David is saying, “Well, there’s a lot of yearning.”

And Cecelia says, “Yeah? For whom?”

## **BIG GAMBLE**

Twenty bucks to blow in Reno. Jubal’s first shot at gambling. Money for gas, for food and \$20, to gamble.

Ardy drove them in his Karmen Gia. Ardy loves to drive. He loved to sing and drive, and before long they were Reno, *biggest little city in the world*.

And in no time, the \$20 was blown at a Blackjack table. With only a handful of change, Jubal then concentrated on nickel slots. And Fortune was smiling, and a nickel hit a jackpot, and \$60 worth of nickels gushed from the machine, filled the tray and spilled on the carpet. Jubal was jubilant.

He collected his winnings, and he collected his thoughts. Turn this \$60 into a fortune, the urge to gamble was pulling, Take the money and run, the urge to retire was pushing.

Roulette is a wicked game, and the click of the ball was inescapable. While Ardy matched cards with a scantily dressed dealer, Jubal rubbed elbows with the Monte Carlo crowd.

Big imaginings, but a small stakes betting system. Jubal’s idea was to double up on the bets he lost in order to maintain his original capital. He played the outside with 25¢ chips placed on black or red. By this means Jubal increased his bankroll to \$300.

Ardy was impressed. Ardy was ahead by a few dollars, and the two gamblers decided to go upstairs to the casino's restaurant and have lunch, eat steaks, and drink a bottle of wine. So, they did that.

On the floor, after lunch, the tables turned. Jubal, following his system with the dementia of a drunken sea captain, cast his fate upon the waters of chance and found himself wrecked by nine losing turns of the wheel. First, 25¢ doubled is 50¢; second, 50¢ doubled is \$1.00; 3) \$1 is 2; 4) 2 is 4; then, 4 is 8; 8 is 16; 16 is 32; 32 is 64; 64 is 128; and soon enough, the 9th turn, a lost \$128 bet requires \$256 to redeem it; and it also means that after eight doubled bets, Jubal had lost \$255.75, which, minus the cost of lunch was all he had. It had been a gamble, not a really big gamble, but it had been a big lesson in the vagaries of chance.

On the way out of the casino, Ardy said, "Well, we had a good lunch."

## **TOO MUCH INFORMATION**

Three times this week I've been called Michael. I'm introduced, or I introduce myself, as Jubal, but the next thing they call me is Michael, so I've developed this rejoinder—"It's Jubal. Michael is an Archangel. Jubal was a descendant of Cain." I suppose there's a little sarcasm in my tone. I try to keep my voice flat, so the irony will be apparent, but it's hard to punish a Buddhist nun for her absentmindedness.

We're in Mendocino, at The Children's Garden, a lodge-pole constructed building I'm told was originally a Zendo. Energy radiates from the children's drawings on the walls. The toilet is kid sized. The moon's light shines through the skylights. Ani Yeshe is about to give her "Doing a Three-year Retreat" talk & slideshow. She has a digital projector attached to her computer.

I've set her zafu and zabuton near the wood stove because this nun still gets cold, even after living in a leaky yurt in the Arizona desert for three years, doing mantras in the sagebrush among longhorn steers, coyotes and rattlesnakes. One nun in the group got bit and had to break her retreat and leave the boundaries she had set, a yurt encircled by a six-foot fence, bit on the ankle in her garden, a rock garden looks harmless, nice even rows of sand, not looking at that curled configuration on the rock, carried to the emergency room after hobbling forty yards to the main house, lucky she was on the perimeter of the compound, not supposed to be walking with a leg

full of poison, but she didn't want to disturb the other nuns and break their retreat.

Ani Yeshe only found out about her sister during the next month of group study, still in silence, she got a note which explained the whole episode, maybe too much information, but the details altered her perception of being contained in a sphere of natural mind, to the reality of the jungle, referred to in the texts as samsara, illusion takes on new meaning when you are in pain and fear death's fang. Torma studies, thanka painting, sand mandalas and translation of *The Heart Sutra*, then another month of layabout, doing the Nyondro, one hundred thousand recitations of Vajrasattva's hundred syllable mantra, one hundred thousand mandala offerings, one hundred thousand raisings of bodhichitta, the one hundred thousand refuges done while she's doing her one hundred thousand full-bodied prostrations, the second year, two months layabout, one month study, layabout is practice session after practice session, Sutra and Tantra, mantra and study, the third year, three months of solo practice and one month of group practice, and out to three years, three months, three weeks, three days, three hours, three minutes and three seconds just to finish the three year retreat and come to Mendocino to reveal her presence, sitting like a mountain, like she's taken the king's throne, a lot of information processed, now clear and focused.

"Do you consider meditation to be the most important part of Buddhism?"

"Finally, there is no meditation, only virtue and purification," she replies.

"In what context do you consider your morality?"

"In the context of the six perfections. Meditation can only be accomplished with virtue, with that and purification, allowing compassion to arise unhindered. Purity is skillful means."

Another log is added to the fire. Old hippies sitting in a circle in a kindergarten listening to a teacher tell a tale that has been told since the first fire was built, how to be patient, to keep focus, to relax, how to handle bliss when it arises, to understand the reptilian impulse and the surreal flickering of images on the cave wall which portend the light outside the cave, the intensity of clear vision in our mind-stream, that all accomplishments and possessions are illusory and how concrete are the karmic conditions which hold us in the grip of existence, our sense of mortality being the first realization along the path towards liberation.

I tell Ani Yeshe about my breaking both legs by falling off the roof in a rainstorm. "But maybe that's too much information," I say.

"No," she says, "there's sixty-four thousand things going on in a single thought. That's a lot of information, Michael."

## **FIFTEEN MINUTES LATE & THE BATTERY IS DEAD**

Fifteen minutes late, and the battery is dead. And he's supposed to take the Lama to catch his plane. He climbs the hill to the main house, a half-mile, hot, dusty, saying mantras, hoping the local mountain lion won't pounce on him. He imagines a scenario: "Where's Jubal. Go look for him. Report back." Later, "Jubal's been eaten by a mountain lion. Nothing left but a leg bone, but it'll make a great thigh bone trumpet."

He climbs the hill, rounds the bend, thinking how it's always something. He sees the luggage on the front porch. This Lama doesn't travel light. A roll of thankas, Tibetan paintings, and four black suitcases. Maybe he should prostrate up the driveway. Full body. Do guru yoga mantras. No, no time for this. Just say there's going to be a delay. Phone a friend. Get a jump. Hope there's time. The Lama nods. His English is good, says, "I gave myself an extra hour in case of such a contingency." Jubal has a reprieve, returns to the van to wait. Half an hour, a jump-start, and they're on their way.

Driving through the village of Gem, there's a stack of elk antlers in front of a tannery. A sign says, "The buck stops here." Jubal points to the antlers, and the Lamas's mantra machine kicks into overdrive. They travel further, the mantras at a low hum, and a rainbow arcs across the road ahead of them. "Wow, Rinpoche, you liberated a whole herd of elk." Not a mile further down the road, a bolt of lightning shoots straight down from the sky in the distance. Incredulous, Jubal guesses either one of the elk was rejected in nirvana or the Durango Airport has been obliterated by a flying saucer.

No, the airport is intact. He parks in the short-term parking section. Unloads the bags. Grabs a cart to ferry the luggage to the terminal. The Lama is in fine form, doing a little shuffle. Jubal watches a pair of tennis shoes move in small steps in a circle. A little Lama dance to propitiate the local deity. Not much time to spare, but the flight is on time, and Jubal is feeling only mildly fatigued. They are in line, and Jubal thinks, The battery slowed us, but all the obstacles have been removed. How does he do it?

After they are checked in and are walking towards security, Jubal notices the Lama has a purba on his belt under his robe. A purba is a triangular-shaped dagger made of iron and brass, eight or nine inches in length, used to slay demons. No way it can get past a metal detector without sounding an alarm. Jubal is sure they will never let him on board with that, but Jubal is not one

to interrupt the Lama. The Lama marches right through security without the purba being noticed. He didn't check it in, didn't show it to anyone. Walked right through the metal detector. Jubal stood in the visitor's section. The Lama turned and waved and was gone across the causeway.

Telling this story later, Jubal says, "Half the time it doesn't seem this man is even in his body, and the other half of the time, he doesn't seem to even be on this planet." And he quotes Jigme Lingpa: "Through signs one comes to believe. Through faith one comes to understand."

Jubal recites mantras on the way home. All blessings flow from the teacher.

## **DILLARD**

Dillard had given up on living simply. He moved from his cabin in Weston, Massachusetts, and headed for California. He had been living near Walden Pond in a carriage house behind his daughter and son-in-law's farmhouse. A place has power, but when Dillard first set foot in the carriage house, he knew it would not be his final home.

"You'll like it, Dad," Joy had said. "It has an indoor pump and a catalytic toilet."

"What's a catalytic toilet?" Dillard asked.

"They use them in Alaska, where they have permafrost and can't dig a hole for an outhouse. It fries your turds in a metal box. Anyway, you won't have to disturb us by coming in and using the bathroom, and you'll have the whole place to yourself during the day, while Sam and I are at the lab and Tim and Con are at school."

"Well, it's good of you to give an old man a place to rest his weary bones and get his bearings."

"Now, Dad," Joy said, consolingly, "I'll make us some coffee."

What I have, Dillard thought, what I have is a great family in this time of terror and promise. The world is collapsing, and the cities are vomiting up their loneliness, and even as I recognize the rot, and the years pass, I still find I have a stubborn joy. He puffed through his nose at the pun on his daughter's name. The stars were coming out—huge, remote eyes in the sky. Dillard needed something new, to know nature in its muddled leafiness.

The smell of coffee awoke Dillard from his dim vision. A car passed on the highway, and there

was the sound of a bird that sounded like a bird imitating a seagull. Dillard couldn't see this bird hidden by dense leaves, but he was sure if he saw it, it would be big. Real big.

The screen door clattered. "Here we are," said Joy. "You know, Dad, you'll be living just down the road from Walden Pond, where Henry David Thoreau stayed. They've rebuilt his cabin, and what with donated materials they managed to keep the cost of building it to his original budget of \$29. So, you can live here like Thoreau. Hoe a few bean rows and think transcendental thoughts."

Dillard had figured it out. With no rent payment, he would be able to get along on his Social Security check and the interest off his modest investments. He could walk along the Ol' Post Road and dream of the Redcoats coming. He could sit in the tavern and josh with the locals. Like Thoreau, he could wonder, "By fronting Nature, what truths are revealed?" So, he settled down to a simple life. He wrote in his journal:

7:00 Joy has her son, Tim, standing by the stone fence, awaiting his bus.

7:30 Joy drives Con to his pre-school.

8:15 Sam heads for work at Brandeis University in nearby Waltham.

8:30 Joy takes the second car to her laboratory where she and Sam do research in neurobiology.

"What exactly does plasticity of the synaptic and intrinsic properties of cortical neurons and circuits mean?" he had asked. After a few minutes listening to Joy try to explain, he wished he had never asked.

Both Joy and Sam have recently been promoted to full professorships—two jewels in the University's crown of academic achievement. Dillard had asked, "Well, Ms. Professor, what are you going to do after you figure out how the neuron in the synapse works?"

His daughter smiled. "Oh, I might give up science and write a novel or become a full-time environmental activist."

(And this is the novel—the novel I'm writing about my dad. I feel like I'm inside of a coffin. The inside of this coffin is slightly longer than my father's corpse. Imagine if it was the other way around.)

So, as I was saying, my name is Dillard Adam Street, and I have been dead for a long time, and my daughter is writing a novel about me. At first, I didn't like it, dying, but now I like it. I'm only sad that everyone can't be dead at the same time. But that's ok. It's ok that people come and go.

Finally, I just had to go. I had to go back to California. Simple enough. I couldn't die near Walden Pond. Just not right for me. I tried to live the simple life—cut my coupons, count my change, putter around the garden, be a grandpa—but it wasn't me. Certainly, a story must not reference



itself, and neither should an old man.

“The skeleton of a story shouldn’t show through,” my editor said.

## **THE INTERVIEW**

The application asks his age. If he puts down nineteen, they will never hire him. If he puts down twenty-one, they’ll never believe him. Jubal is nineteen and looks it. A hick from the west coast in the Big Apple looking for work at IBM. Jubal was impressed by the typewriters in front of the building. Frank O’Hara had likely written a poem on one of these typewriters on his way back to work as curator of MOMA, and now Jubal was applying for a position in the same building.

He’s sure that filling out this application is a big waste of time. He won’t even get an interview, let alone be hired to train as a salesman or a repairman like his friend, Bradford. Bradford had flown from San Francisco to Kennedy and taken a train to Connecticut. But Bradford was back, had returned to his day job as a watchman on the Campanile in Berkeley. While he was gone, a grad student had jumped off the tower, and now there was a hubub about the symbolic nature of this monument. A campus psych prof had proclaimed the dynamic created between the phallus of the tower and the breast-shaped arcs of the Golden Gate Bridge created a tension that worked on people with unstable personalities to leap to their deaths. Nothing about a fall from that height being sure to cause death as a motivating factor.

Bradford was back, but he wasn’t going to sell typewriters. He was going to get an master’s in mathematics.

Jubal, on the other hand, in New York, nineteen, with a pregnant wife, needs a job. So, he puts down 24, that he has a BA in English and lists his job experience: Retail clerk at Norsco in Pinole. Jubal thinks, “The first thing they’re going to ask is ‘Where’s Pinole?’”

## **WHAT COMES NEXT?**

What comes next? Betrayal, theft, disease, some calamity, you can be sure. Or what comes next might be appetizing. Make a cake. Jubal's birthday, tomorrow. Bake him a spice cake and decorate it with Timmy's tiny army men. He's into the army right now, so into this war. Flags everywhere. I told him, "Your American flag decal is not going to get you into heaven." He just stared and said, "Well, my 'Earth In Upheaval' license plate holder might."

He's got a point. Seems like worlds are colliding. Saved by the bell from another Columbine massacre at Shaker Heights. The kids had shotguns and dynamite. That boy shot on the bus last week. Another car bomb in the suburbs. Another flight canceled. Next, they'll require everyone submit a full profile to any airline you plan to fly on. Metal detectors in pre-schools. Lie detector tests. "No, I'm not supplying him with sugar. How much television? Four hours, no not more than four hours. Four hours, that's it."

Better to have the violence on TV than on the streets. That was Shakespeare's theory. Show the blood. Seemed a good idea, in theory. Go ahead, gouge out Gloucester's eyes, but then, Peckinpaw made the blood gush. Pioneered those gadgets that make blood shoot out like the bullet hit an artery. And Tarantino takes bloodletting on the screen to a whole new level. Why violence works on the screen is our surprise that we are just bags of liquid and air, our sense of being contained, and then we're leaking, shocks us, gives us a thrill. Anything that moves on the screen IS the movie, holds our attention, enraptures us.

Maybe we should eat out, tonight, get some hamburgers. Eat some burgers with mad cow disease. No, I'm going to bake a nice spice cake. A spice cake with white frosting. Just frosting. And while it's baking, I'm going down to the creek and meditate. I've got an hour.

A flood came through. Lots of trash on the banks. Looks like the contents of a supermarket, all these shopping carts, and that tattered sleeping bag hanging in the branches, the belongings of a homeless person's camp washed downstream. Pussy willow and blackberry bushes and the stalks of last year's anise reflect in the water, but there doesn't seem to be a lot of life in the water. A silent spring look.

Limbs and vines, a slab of blue plastic, reflected, the water clear, hardly a ripple, and the reflections, perfect, until a breeze ripples the surface and slightly warps the images. Sights deceive us, like yesterday in the Coffee Catz, a man with a trim beard working at his laptop next to a younger man with a ponytail sharpening old razors on a whetstone. The younger man asks the waiter for vegetable oil and is brought some 3-in-1, and the man at his computer looks confused, does this coffeehouse serve oil? Maybe the other man knows the owner, and it is just his luck to sit next to a man sharpening razors, while he surfs on his computer.

I have a thirst, and I keep coming to this cafe to drink tea, and the man with the trim beard drinks coffee, and the other man is served oil, whatever, the world cruises along its path, me sitting on this log by the creek, and the sap in the vines rising, and I feel love for strangers, even The Shrub, feel loving kindness, so I breathe the spring air, knowing that the love I'm feeling is real, and the "so" is such a big word, means volition, means cause and effect, means by the force of my argument to change the effect and be the cause, because I'm bound by my lifestyle, and I can only be unbound by joy and compassion, and the leaves turn, and the rain falls, and the creek fills, and the homeless...Jubal will be home soon...

I'd better check the cake, the cake, God, the cake, and after that, what?

## **ZEN GARDEN, TAOIST LAKE**

Coming home, hot and irritable from a long day at work, I park in the alley because it's close to my garden, and the four 'o' clocks have closed.

Walking along the checkered path, I mingle with the ghosts. Suit and tie, my hair slicked down, I'm totally freaked. I'm going to turn to magic.

Not going to look at my stuff. Bogus, that's me. "Bug off," I say. Where I live, in the suburbs, everybody's shit's the same color.

The wind chimes by my window chime, and in my dream, I am a fireman, so I scramble out of bed and jump into my gear. I'm sure there's a conspiracy to change the color of the grass.

"Been there and back—and I've got the love handles to prove it." It's the middle of the night, and I go outside to piss. Hypnotized by the Big Dipper, I pee on my shoe.

A flood, big enough to carry me across the continent. Terrific and inexhaustible. Charged with the energy of a Death Star. I stand on my front porch awaiting obliteration.

Left no footprints. No reflection. No rustle. No point in searching. Poof. Gone.

## FROM THE JOURNAL OF DOUG OPORTA

It's cold out here. Freezing. The county has still to show. This is the end of Svenson Road. He said to park at the T. It dead ends at 4th Parallel. So this is the place. I should be back in the Public Safety Building at my desk. God, I should be in Kauai on the beach. Give me a warm day with Perspophone poking her head out from the Underground. Shit, that's poetic. Where is the county? This is the city line. Svenson ends at 4th Parallel. That hayfield is in the county.

Remember: they may not want to negotiate. Remember: keep my temper. What reward is there in only being nice to my friends?

I feel like my flesh is frozen. Like the blood is frozen in my skull. Be home with my family. My house. My mortgage. Dollars. Value. Shrinkage. Transparent accounting, that's what I need. What's it going to cost to run a gas line across that hayfield?

Wow, three vanity plates together: SOUNDBT, YYYKNOT, THAJNX, and later, a student driver car with a license plate that reads PRAY4US.

Good show on Nova on the Shroud of Turin. How does it function? What covered the past? Stain or electrons? Perfect negative. There's a car. Is that him? Keeps going. Cloud of unknowing.

Get back in my car and listen to the radio. Shit. My clipboard in the back seat. There it is. Fill out this form. Send out a surveyor. Sign painter. We can do that in the city shop. Control this situation. The county. Control my appetite. Another donut in the bag. Coffee still warm in the thermos. Colon, elimination, my past, my future, my identity, in fact, intact, unless I'm attacked by vampires. Ug. Heard Bob talking about a movie he saw about a diabetic vampire, who took his blood sugar level with one of those thingamabobs, read 590, had to shoot up at the table. Great that Bob has an old tube amp, listening to the Rasumovsky Quartets was a treat.

I bit my arm. I sucked my blood. I cried out: "A sail! A sail!" Shit, is the county guy ever going to arrive?

Step out. Walk over to the street sign. He shouldn't have promised so much. Problem of the shroud. No other meeting on my calendar. It was because it is good for us. What kind of logic is that? Oops, tangled in a wire. There, free. Fits into my record of failure. The music resonates in the abdomen's core. He'll come here soon, or...

Seems my dog never eats. He may eat when I'm not looking. Dogs might die if I don't look. Can dogs look up? Here's a license plate reads J30, which is the same as the model number of this car. What kind of car is this? Funny insignia. Must be foreign, but what's up with this vanity plate? It's like a file with "file" written on it. Someone asleep in the front seat. Oh, shit, it's the county.

## WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

What happened next was to defy anything I had ever expected, and as usual, I was completely unprepared. Fat chance I was going to spend the evening cuddling with Fanny, watching Kill Bill Vol. 1. The kitchen was buzzing with flies, and there was a stench, which I recognized as something decomposing.

A touch of awareness kicked in as I entered the room. This was not the kitchen as I remembered it. What are these flies doing here? I wondered. How did they get in the house? The door to the back porch was open, and it was dark there. Louder fly noise from that direction.

I walked over and flipped on the light. Nada. Flies. Lots of them, coming through a tear in the screen door. Must be something dead under the porch.

Flashlight. One in the car. Better get that before I go any further. Fanny called from the front room, "Jubal, what are you doing?"

"I'm going out to the garage."

"Bring in a bottle of wine, if you're going out there," she said.

"Right-O," I signaled back, but the wine would have to wait.

My curiosity was working overtime. Even my tabby's curiosity had peaked. He rubbed his body against my leg, my trusty sidekick. I got my torch, and we follow our noses and the buzzing. It's a big house, built over a hundred years ago, built of brick. Most of the houses in this town are built of brick, the clay mined from the quarry where the rodeo & fairgrounds now sit, fairground built to celebrate the resurrection of the town after the 1896 fire. The town grew out of its ashes like a Phoenix. Mythical bird. Didn't expect to find one rotting under my porch.

I spoke to the tabby. "Scratch, is that the rotting corpse of a mythical bird or not?" Scratch looked and sniffed. "It's not a peacock or an ostrich or a dodo—those are real birds, although the dodo is now extinct—no, this is not a real bird, this is a Phoenix, and a Phoenix is a mythical bird. A bird of the imagination. A bird in the dimension of pure qualities. It's a bird that arises once in an eon, and is supposed to rise from its own ashes. Only, this bird is rotting."

Scratch look at me and back at the Phoenix, seeming to say, "Yes, I can smell. Its corpse is rank."

I went on. "It's fouling up my house. What goes here?"

There was a wooden chair by the step, and I used that to prop open the screen door. Then, I turned on the ceiling fan in the kitchen and waved my arms at the flies. "Out, out," I said, excitedly. I had been looking for my fourth mystical beast in the game Five Great Karmas. I had Psyche's Anthill in the garden, and I had a Griffin in the garage. Fanny had slain all but my last Basilisk, the last still her role to realize. And now, a Phoenix! Rare. Not easily encountered. Harder to contain, but possible—there were ways. High-test asbestos-steel lining a living porcelain sarcophagus. Three months in the making once it's ordered from McHammermil. I'd always expected to get a sighting before I would order one. This is different. A body in this summer heat turns to compost fast. So, now what? And how did a Phoenix become mortal?

The flies seemed to understand my gesticulations. Only a couple remained, buzzing by the sink. I was totally buzzed myself, projecting my next move. Thrown off balance. Expecting new activity ahead.

"Jubal," Fanny called, "don't forget the wine!"

## UNREAL REALITY

Why should intent or reason, born in me,  
make sins, else equal, in me more heinous?  
John Donne (from "If Poisonous Minerals")

Having given up stealing, I can recount the details of the experience that led me to make that decision. My name is Jubal Dolan. I am named after my grandfather, a man who skirted the law on more than one occasion. The events of my story took place in Berkeley in the early 1960s. I had dropped out of college and was hard up for cash, so I took to stealing books from one bookstore and selling them to another. Not a lucrative enterprise, but it kept me in cigarettes and coffee.

Although there were many bookstores near campus in those days, there were not so many that I could avoid repeating my crime in the same store within a short time, and it was inevitable that a clerk would notice the pattern of a long-haired figure in black entering and departing the store without making a purchase or who would appear at another time with a book to sell. I was not

the only “fringie” who practiced this trick, so clerks were on the lookout for shoplifters. I later became a bookseller, so I can appreciate the damage the loss of one volume does to the integrity of an inventory.

I took a large volume called *Macroeconomic Theory*. Made a bulge in my overcoat. Got caught on my way to the door. Thought, “Should have known better,” but it was too late for this thought to do me any good. The clerk was angry. He told another clerk to phone the police, and it was here, while he was looking away, I had another choice to make. I could have kicked my captor in the shin and bolted. Perhaps, I was weary, but a Raskolinkovian need for punishment arose in my heart. I thought like this at that time. One minute I thought it was my duty to help redistribute capitalist wealth and the next I was duty bound to suffer. I let myself be arrested and taken to the city police station to be booked and jailed.

When my jailer escorted me to my cell, he said, “We’ll put you in here; you two have a lot in common.” In the lower bunk was a figure in the shadows, so I took the upper bunk. Metal walls with rivets, green paint, wool blanket, no sheets, no pillow, an unflushed toilet, a mute for a companion—it would be home, for now. Time for reflection, time for remorse.

It is not wise to ask another prisoner what they’re in for. If they volunteer information, fine, but don’t pry into another’s sorrow. After we had a supper that looked like meatloaf covered in library paste, my cellmate spoke, “Before you arrived, I had the upper bunk. I don’t remember the face of the man who was here, but after he left, I took his place.”

He went on, “I will tell you my story. Stop me if I get off track. You look like a student at the University. I was one once, but I flunked out. I had nowhere to go, so I stayed in the area. This may sound familiar. I heard what the jailer said. Curious. I assume he meant that our crimes were similar. I stole from stores. Books were my specialty, because you can trade them for cash. I got brazen and tried to sell a book back to the same store I had stolen it from without even leaving the premises. The clerk just looked at me and laughed, although I doubt he found it funny. Then, he called the cops. I could have fled, but I had a feeling of guilt, like Saint Augustine, and waited patiently for the patrol car to arrive, and here I am.”

Incredible. It was my own story. Maybe I dead and had gone to hell. Maybe it was a weird coincidence. Maybe I was crazy. I was mulling this over, when the jailer called a name. It sounded like Yaqub Almansur. The cell door was unlocked; my companion put on his coat and left. I only saw the back of his head. I waited awhile, and then I took the lower bunk.

## A CUP OF TEA

All things that can occur to a man, from the moment of his birth to the moment of his death, have been predetermined by him.

–Arthur Schopenhauer

I live in the forest. I have not always lived here. At one time, I lived on the other side of the village; but now I live here, on this side.

Nobody really knows me. There are rumors that I am crazy, but I pay that no mind. Most of the time, I am happy. My body is tanned, and my beard, once red, is now white. I am content with things as they are.

There is no lock on my door. I put a board against it to keep out the wind. I do not think of women. When there are none about, it is best to think of other things. Once, I wooed a girl, but that did not work out. Besides, it is not germane to my story.

“Germane,” that word gives me away. I have had education, and I have tried my hand at poetry; but I will try to tell this story in a straight-forward way and stick, as best I can, to the old language.

The winter has been mild. There have been travelers on the road above my cabin, unusual for this time of year. I was making tea in the evening when I heard a knock. I opened the door, and a gray-haired woman in a red cape with a hood stood at my threshold. “It is cold, and I need shelter,” she said.

I could see that it had started to snow again, so I closed and braced the door after I let her enter. “It is warm by the fire,” I said. “Would you like a cup of tea?”

“Ah, tea, yes; tea would be lovely.”

“Take the chair. Make yourself comfortable. The water is hot. I just need to find another cup and get the tea.”

“I have tea,” she said. “I am a tea merchant, and I always have samples on hand.”

She had removed her cape and draped it over the chair. Although her face showed age, she had retained a youthful figure. On a strap over her shoulder was a small bag. She sat it on the earthen floor and undid the clasp. The bag held yet other bags, each with a tag or label.

“I have blends that will revitalize your spirit,” she claimed, “teas for extra energy and teas of exquisite flavor. Some are worth of the palaces of India.”



She certainly was a saleswoman. "I don't know," I said, "it's late; a tea to help me sleep would be fine."

"I am Gwen."

"I am Ezra."

And we had tea.

Having infrequent visitors led me to be talkative. Our conversation was animated and moved from topic to topic, finally settling on food. She talked with a foreign vocabulary, and I could not understand all her thoughts. There were terms such as vitamins, fatty acids, immunity systems, molecular effects, metabolism, omegas. I remember her saying, "We need to open up to infinity, if we are to become infinity."

I felt at a loss, as I listened, so I followed my intuition. When she wound down, I said, "It seems to me that no matter what you eat, if your digestion is good, your stool is firm and regular, your urine has its usual odor, your fingernails are pliant, your gums don't bleed, your lungs are strong and your pulse strong, you are probably healthy. Primitive man ate what you call organic, and his life was short and brutish. One may eat regular meals with a balanced diet and still live a life of misery. Besides, when your number is up, it's up."

She looked at me a long while and said, "You Ancients have these notions. And how do you feel?"

I sensed my feet were numb, and my legs felt icy. I tried to stand, but my body began to shake. I tried to take a step and fell. I overturned my cup, and my tea spilled. "The tea!"

"Yes," she whispered, "the tea is poisoned. I avenge the death of King Benzra, who is the man you murdered. You coveted the Mirror of Odin which has two sides. Life is one side, and I am the other."

She left me sitting by the fire, and I am dead.

You may wonder how this is written. As I said, there are rumors that I am crazy. And this condition has the advantage of second sight. I wrote these words before the events took place.

If I could see this coming, why did I not avoid my fate? The king mentioned by Gwen once commanded me to write him an epic poem, and I spent many sleepless nights at my task. My muse finally led me to compose a poem of a single word.

I intoned this poem to the king, alone, and afterwards he gave me a dagger to kill myself, while he gave up his kingdom and took to the road as a beggar. As for killing myself, I found this difficult to do. I left the world behind for these woods, but nothing is simply done. This once and future

king returned, and I gave him a fitting reception with my ax. And now, it is my turn.  
As for the *word*, the word is for me to know and for you to find out.

,