



DRAFT





# Ode to Sunset

A Year In The Life Of American Genius

*A Fiction by Pat Nolan*

DRAFT

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*No poets were actually named in the writing of this fiction with the exception of dead poets who serve as historical or literary markers as is often required of dead poets. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales is entirely coincidental.*

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*“. . . it is characteristic of American genius that the casual eye does not easily distinguish it from charlatantry. Purity of intention lies at the center of American achievement. Modern American writing is about honesty. The American tradition is to offer discovery, not virtuoso performances.”*

—Hugh Kenner

*“A satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity.”*

—Flann O’Brien

*“For every ten jokes you acquire a hundred enemies.”*

—Laurence Sterne

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*day 9 week 56*  
*month 146 year*  
*286*

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# day

*“A man of letters is the enemy of the world.”*

—Charles Baudelaire

**Carl Wendt smoked distractedly** in the haze of red neon and the small spotlight illuminating the entrance to the bar. Smoking inside was banned by law. He'd been admonished for his politically incorrect habit more than once.

*“Please don't smoke in here.”*

*“I can't be in the same room with you if you smoke.”*

*“Smoking is bad for your health.”*

*“No smoking.”*

*“That's a smoker's cough if I ever heard one.”*

*“It's like kissing an ashtray.”*

*“You could use a mint.”*

He'd heard them all.

The air felt wet, on the verge of drizzle. The tip of his nose was cold. He sucked in smoke and stared at the brake lights and headlights prowling the street. There were no open spaces to park on the entire block.

He wore a tan sports coat over a pair of faded jeans. The tight fitting blue polo shirt had a small stain where the bulge of gut started. He buttoned the top button of the coat and thrust a hand into his pants pocket. He had enough change for another drink he figured. He blew out harsh smoke. He should quit. Then he'd have more money for drinks. But drinking and smoking went together. They were the addictive behavior twins.

Rough gray stubble accented the square of his jaw. He hated shaving, but disliked beards and the sartorial attention they demanded even more. Besides, those disposable razors he favored cost an arm and a leg so he shaved at most every other day and today was one of the off days.

He was about to flick the butt away when two younger men stepped in front of him. The one with the goatee looked familiar. He did the talking.

“Carl? Carl Wendt? Hi, Russell Kennston, we've met before, briefly.”

“Oh right. What's it? Russ?”

“Russell, yeah, it was at the Michael McArdle reading a couple of months ago. At the library?”

“Yeah, Mike’s a good poet.” He dropped the butt onto the sidewalk and scraped his toe across it.

“You going to hear Mitchell Tjantor read tonight?”

“Who?”

“Mitchell Tjantor, he’s reading tonight.”

“Oh, yeah, at the . . .”

“IZA, Inter Zone Arts, yeah. We’re on our way down there now. I can’t believe how far we had to park.”

“Five blocks,” his companion, a round-faced sandy haired man with a complexion to match, offered as if he were providing the answer to a quiz.

“You going?” Goatee’s eyes brightened in anticipation.

“Oh, yeah, yeah.” Wendt coughed into his fist. “I was just gonna stop in here for a drink before I went down.” He sized them up. “You wanna get a drink?”

Sandy and Goatee both glanced at their watches and then at each other.

“Yeah, sure, we have time, we can be a little late.” Goatee was the decider.

“Morgan Tilson is the opening reader, and I can miss most of what he’s got to say,” Sandy spit nastily.

Wendt pulled open the door for them and they strolled in, innocents to a gingerbread ale house.

At the bar, the bartender nodded to Carl and then eyed the two younger men. He wouldn’t have to card them. Carl turned to Goatee. “You buying?”

Goatee was taken aback, but smiled. He took out his wallet and peered into it. “Yeah, ok, I’ll buy you a beer.”

Wendt waved away the offer. “Uh, beer upsets my stomach.” He turned to the bartender. “Jameson, water back.” Goatee went with a beer, as did Sandy, and placed a tenner on the bar when the drinks came.

“That’s twelve for the drinks,” the bartender insisted. An embarrassed silence followed while Goatee reached for his wallet. Sandy instead pulled out a couple of crumpled bills from a pocket of his jeans. “Wait I got the two bucks,” he squawked generously.

Wendt held his glass up with “cheers.”

“Yeah, so like what are you writing these days? I mean besides your column in the weekly. Getting any new poems published? I read that piece of yours in the Bookman Institute’s newsletter. The one on the function of charlatantry in American literature?” Goatee was going for broke.

Carl took a long slow sip from the small glass. He was going to have to perform for his drink. He watched over Goatee’s shoulder as a large man in suspenders rose from the bar and lumbered toward the hallway for the men’s room. He’d have to think of something else.

“Oh, yeah, well, that’s an old essay. I wrote that almost fifteen years ago.” A girl in a parka hood with fur trim was watching her boyfriend play pinball and taking furtive sips from his bottle of beer. He looked back into Goatee’s eager face. “But I got a couple new things with a publisher in El Lay. A monograph on the Comics and Poetry collection at the Sanderson Estate Library, a big catalog, with a shit load of color plates. PS Press up in Portland is going to bring out a selection of miscellaneous writings in the fall, you know, book reviews, some of my columns, essays.” He was boring himself and the little glass was empty.

“Hey, that’s great. You doing any readings any time soon? I heard you once before, at State. But that was like, what, three years ago?” Goatee hadn’t touched his beer.

“Oh, yeah, when my book comes out I’ll probably do a reading in North Beach.”

“Good, good, I’ll keep an eye out for the announcement.”

Wendt looked at the small empty glass and then at Goatee. “So what is it you said you do? Russ?”

“Russell. I teach at City College. Literature, creative writing.”

Carl took a closer look at Goatee as if his unlined face would reveal the depth of knowledge of someone so young.

“You’re a college professor?”

“Part time.” Goatee glanced nervously over at Sandy. “There aren’t any full time openings around here, but I’ve got my CV at a couple of universities back East and the Midwest so.” He shrugged as if that completed the sentence. Sandy smiled wanly, a hint of foam on his upper lip.

Wendt held up the empty glass. “Drink up, boys, I’m ready for another one.”

Goatee’s look of semi-adulation turned to panic. He frowned at his wristwatch as if it had just bit him. “Yeah, well, we better get going. There should be a big crowd to hear Tjantor. We’ll want to get a good

seat.” Goatee waited, expecting Wendt to say something. “You coming?” Wendt waved him off. “You guys go on ahead, I’ll catch up. I gotta pay my tab.”

The two pushed back out onto the street, Sandy on Goatee’s heels like he wasn’t moving fast enough.

The bartender came down to remove Goatee’s untouched beer and Sandy’s single quaffed draft. “Ah, I’ll take care of these, they didn’t even touch them.” Carl pulled the change out of his pocket and deposited it on the bar. “You think I got enough for something from the well?”

The bartender looked over the array of coins expertly and nodded. “Yeah, I think so.”

“Old Overshoe.” Carl spoke jocularly.

“Yeah, Old Overshoe,” the bartender laughed.

**The thing about Wendt was that even at his age**, he still had most of his hair. It was easy to pick him out in a crowd, a battlement of steel gray in the precise crimp of a natural wave. Irma stepped down the concrete steps in front of the old warehouse that housed Inter Zone Arts. Carl turned when she called his name. He smiled. “Irma, the mermaid.”

“Must you be so infantile?”

In his mind Irma Maurice wore a slinky gold lamé sheath and smoked using a long cigarette holder even though she always dressed stylishly, never outlandishly, and she didn’t smoke anymore. “You got a cigarette?”

“I don’t smoke.” She opened her brocade clutch and extracted a box of filter tips. “Don’t let Philippe see me give you these.”

“Can I have the box?”

“No, just take one.” She snatched the box back looking over her shoulder. Philippe, a large bald man, was engaged in a discussion framed in the open doorway of the gallery.

“I thought you didn’t smoke.” He slipped an extra cigarette into the sport coat’s breast pocket.

“Don’t be an idiot.”

Carl lit up and waved back to someone he wasn’t sure he recognized.

“What did you think of the reading?” Irma waved at someone she knew who was waving at her.

“It was ok.”

“I didn’t see you come in. Did you hear the first poet, Tilson?”

“I got there late. I was in the back. I missed the first guy.”

“What did you think of Tjantor?”

“He was alright. Life is a learning experience. Poetry’s the same way.”

“He mentioned your name.”

“Oh, yeah? I must have missed that.”

“You liar. You always show up to readings right at the very end. You mingle with the exiting crowd, cadge a smoke, play off your reputation, pick up starry eyed aspiring poets, borrow money and who knows what else from them.”

“Irma, why so bitter?”

“Just jealous I supposed. Here comes Mitch Tjantor. This ought to be good.”

Mitchell Tjantor was a short rotund man with a mop of blond curls that made him look like an overweight self-abusing Lord Fauntleroy. His round ruddy face held the glow of triumph. “Irma, so nice to see you.” They air kissed. “I was just speaking with Philippe.” He indicated the large bald man striding toward them. He turned to Wendt and held out his hand. “Carl, Mitchell Tjantor, I don’t believe we’ve met before.”

Carl politely blew a mouthful of smoke over his own shoulder. “Mitch, nice to meet you. Good reading.”

“Thank you, thank you, that’s much appreciated. I hope you heard what I said earlier tonight, about you being a leading influence on the poetry of the current generation.”

“Yeah, thanks, I appreciate that.” He glanced at Irma who rolled her eyes. “You’re too kind.”

Philippe Maurice joined the little group. “Carl, so nice to see you.” He said it with his teeth so it made it hard to believe that he meant it. “You enjoyed the reading, I assume.” His eyebrows pushed ripples of skin to the top of his dome in a gesture of supreme archness.

“Oh yeah, it was great,” Wendt beamed.

Mitchell Tjantor brightened. “A few of us are going over to Shepard’s for a drink. Would you care to join us?”

“That sounds like something I could do.”

Irma sidled up to him as they left in a group for the bar down the street. “Mission accomplished.”

**Monica was a grad student at State.** She was complaining. She was doing her thesis on American women poets, but had to pick one in particular. Wendt was trying to explain to her what was so great about the

Bud Powell tune they were listening to. Shepard's had one of the best jazz jukeboxes in the city.

"Everybody's done Dickinson, and Plath, and Stein, and Levertov, and Millay, Niedecker and Sexton, they've all been taken." She was maybe twenty-two, slender enough to wear a tank top without a bra. She wore her hair like a woolly hat and she had a nose ring. A belly button piecing showed above the dark band of her low-slung black skirt. A jacket of some iridescent material hung off her shoulders as if she wasn't sure she was taking it off or putting it on and she played nervously with the white scarf in her hand.

"Right there, that drum section, man, that's clean, and it introduces the cats back to the head. Oh yeah." He smiled down at her worried young face. She smiled back unsure why.

Carl nodded his chin in time to the beat. "*Tempus Fugit*, Time Flies. A classic Bud Powell composition. Miles called it *Tempus Fugit*, but the original title Powell gave it was *Tempus Fugue-it*. He was emphasizing the musical form." Carl was drinking gold liquid from a little glass and pearls of knowledge were falling from his lips.

Monica nodded as if he had spoken privileged lore. "Wow. Did you know him? Bud?"

"Powell? No, unfortunately, that was way before my time, too. I hope I don't look that ancient."

"Oh, no, that's not what I meant. It's just that I don't know that much about jazz." She gave a helpless sideways smile that said I feel stupid.

"Hey, no big deal. Listen, why don't we blow this joint? We can grab a bottle and go up to my place. I've got some great jazz sides. On vinyl. I can teach you a lot about jazz."

Monica turned her head and let her gaze drift slowly around the bar, at the framed celebrity photographs of the owner, Colin "Shep" Shepard, cheek and jowl with famous people, at the tables occupied by cohorts of poets and hangers-on, at the faces of those crowding around Mitchell Tjantor holding court at a nearby table, as if the answer she should give him would be written there, somewhere amidst all of that. It wasn't. "Yeah, sure, cool."

**Wendt passed a hand over his face** as if to brush off the remaining grains of sleep. His eyes resisted opening either from the glare of the bright bathroom light or in anticipation of what they'd be seeing in the mirror. He focused on the plumbing and turned the handle to let the

hot water warm. He sat back on the commode, his shorts around his ankles and released the night's accumulation. He didn't trust his aim in his near waking state. He could see the empty bed from his vantage with the door open onto the bedroom. Monica had left a note on the bedstand. She had to get to work. "*Thanks for the Jazz.*" She'd underlined the word *Jazz* several times accompanied by a rank of exclamation points. She signed it with an *M* shaped like a heart and post scripted her cell number. "*Call me.*" Kids, he shook his head, always on the go. They don't know how to take their time, slow down, enjoy life. They hadn't learned that yet. Some would never learn.

He had put on Coltrane's *Africa* and they had gone at it for the full sixteen minutes and twenty six seconds. She had been quite drunk and consequently had lost both her inhibition and any sensation. The pulse of the music moved her in unexpected ways. At the end she'd gasped, "That's the most amazing music I've ever heard."

He was raw, scorched by the intense friction through no effort of his own. Wendt had learned that at his age the optimum position was on his back. It saved him, and for some of his encounters as well it was their preferred position in that it gave the illusion of freedom and power.

She'd guessed his age as fifty and he had agreed. To her that was as old as she wanted to go. But kids her age, they don't know fifty from sixty. Then she admitted that fifty was her father's age.

He'd said something corny like "Who's your daddy," and that got her hot. He'd flipped the album over and they went at it for the length of *Greensleeves*. But slowly.

Wendt ran a warm washcloth over his face. She'd remarked on the lack of books in his room, didn't he have a personal library? He'd directed her to the worn copy of *Finnegan's Wake* and the anthology of Chinese poetry under the *Webster's New Collegiate* next to the laptop on the writing desk in the corner of the room opposite the doorway. He explained that the rest of his books, with the exception of the review and comp copies piled on the floor next to the record crate atop of which sat a vintage portable Montgomery Ward hi-fi, were in the public library and not taking up precious space in his tiny bedroom. And that he could go into just about any bookstore and browse the latest. "They even have couches so you can sit and read the books with a cup of coffee. It's like having a huge living room full of books. And people, but I don't mind people."

"What about your books? Your books of poems. The essays. Where

are they?” He’d pulled a box out from under the bed. There were mainly copies of *Synthetic Lament*, a selection of poems dating from a few years back. She’d never seen it. He wasn’t surprised. She had *The View From Below*, the essays. A friend had given her a copy. He had very few copies of *Not A Bad Answer*. He’d signed a copy of his latest and she was thrilled. Some people were so easy to please.

He was going to have to take a shower but that meant checking with the water police. He snagged his robe off the hook behind the bedroom door and then unlocked the door leading to the rest of the house. He stepped into the hallway and to the head of the stairs. The noises were coming from Angela’s office. He crept down the carpeted steps with a degree of self-conscious stealth.

She was at her computer with her back to him when he walked in. She’d heard him.

“It gonna be OK if I take a shower?”

“Got lucky, did we?” Her fingers continued to move lightly, fluidly over the keyboard.

“What?”

“Coltrane. You always play Coltrane when you score.”

“Shit, I didn’t think I was that obvious.”

“You are.”

“She followed me home.”

“You better shower.”

“Thanks, Angie.”

“There’s fresh coffee in the kitchen.”

“Thanks, Angie.”

“Carl, we need to talk.”

“I better shower then.”

**Angie reheated Carl’s cup** while he thumbed through an assortment of legal sized envelopes, announcements, postcards, and a large padded mailer ostensibly containing the review copy of a book. Wendt always greeted the appearance of such book bundles with “more inventory for the book trade!” And if more than one bundle arrived the same day he would invariably say, “The book trade is brisk.” He’d confided to Angie one night in his cups that he’d stolen that phrase from the French poet, Blaise Cendrars, though the poet had said “the coffee trade is brisk.” She hadn’t bothered to ask who this Blaise person was and why Carl would steal his line. She did know poets stole from each other. He called it the



vast web of allusion that is literature. And she hadn't wanted to get him going on a long diatribe on the state of modern literature, especially when he'd had a few.

She pulled up a chair to the table and sat at his right elbow. In her early forties, she favored no nonsense close cropped hair that emphasized the shapeliness of her head, her shell-like ears, and great taste in accessories. She was Italian Irish so her blue eyes appeared particularly bright set against her light olive skin. She hated that Wendt occasionally called her Modigliani. She wore a maroon v-neck sweater over a white turtleneck. Her faded blue jeans fit snugly over her wide hips.

"I'm expecting that advance from the Sanderson Estate for that monograph."

"How long have they had it?"

"What."

"The monograph, how long ago did you send it to them?"

"I didn't. It's an advance. They send me the money. I send them the text. If they don't like what I've written I've got my kill fee. And if they like it, I get the rest of the payment."

"And they wouldn't like it, why? Because you might have said something libelous about someone, or disparaged most of the art world including the artist you're writing about, insulted the museum or institute that commissioned you to write the monograph in the first place?"

"Something like that. I tell it like it is. You have to pay for my opinions, no matter what you think of them. It's the poetry you can get for nothing. Anyway, I'm expecting a hefty check so I can catch up on what I owe you."

"Carl, that's what I want to talk to you about."

"Angie, you know I'm good for it. I'll get on the horn to the Sanderson right away."

"Carl, that's not it. I'm selling the house."

"What do you mean? Sell the house? How can you sell the house?"

"I can sell it because I own it." Angela made a firm line with her lips and met Carl's disbelieving stare.

"But why? Are you going to upgrade? I hear the housing market is soft. You might not get what this place is worth."

"I found a house and some land up in Mendocino County, on the coast, near a place called Elk."

"Up to the country? I hate the country! And you're thinking of moving to a place named after an ungulate?!"

“It’s on the coast, it’s peaceful, and Sam needs to get away from the potentially bad scene when she starts attending junior high, you know, the gangs, the drugs.”

“So you’re moving up to Mendocino County which just happens to be, what, the largest dope growing region in Northern California? What am I missing?” Wendt stared with distaste at the cup in his hand as if it were the source of his irritation.

“Mom said we could even ride horses on the beach.” The eight year old girl had on a red and white striped long sleeve pullover. She held half an English muffin poised over the toaster.

“Samantha, how come you’re not at school today?”

The young girl made her grown-ups-are-so-stupid face. “It’s Saturday. *Wendt?*”

Carl laughed. Angie frowned. “Attitude, attitude, young lady.”

“Sorry.”

“So you like this idea of going off to Bum, uh, Feather Egypt to ramble in the brambles, lope along the sandy shore on the back of a beast of burden, wear baseball caps advertising farm machinery, and drive large noisy gas guzzling four-wheel drive vehicles?”

“Wow, I didn’t know I could do that too! That’s even better!”

“Wendt!”

“Obviously my descriptions of the privations of country life were not dire enough. Do you know how many miles you have to drive for a latte?”

“Carl. I’ve made up my mind. We’ll be leaving shortly after the school year ends, in June.”

“Ok, ok, I understand. And I don’t blame you. But I can’t go live in the country. I spent a week in Bolinas with Irma and Philippe once and I thought I was going to go out of my mind with boredom. I’m a city boy. No apologies.”

“That’s a relief, Carl, because you were never part of the moving to the country equation. I don’t need a mad noncle going stir crazy miles from a bar. Or a hospital. Besides, as you said, you’d hate it.”

Samantha had spread jam on the muffin and sat at Wendt’s left elbow. “You’re a noncle.” she said it biting into the muffin and laughing as if it were hilarious.

“That’s right, a noncle is a male member of the family not related by blood and not married to any of the adult females but who serves in a fraternal role by being objective and protective.”

“You think we’re a family, Wendt?” Angela’s voice wavered, unsure, charged.

“How long have I been rooming here, Angie? Twelve years? Hell, I was here when the alien landed.” Carl indicated Sam who giggled, jam on her chin, and repeated “the alien.” “I’m kind of like the perfect stranger. Here when you need me. . . .” He turned to Sam, “And I did my share of baby sitting and diaper changing. . .” and back to Angie, “And gone when you don’t.”

“A symbiotic relationship.”

“You could say that. You used me and I used you.”

“It’s never been that simple.”

“No, I guess not. When I arrived here twelve years ago, it was a student commune, a rooming house. I was brought here for a night of indiscretion by the incomparable Sylvia!”

“Margie.”

“Margie, right. Who was Sylvia?”

“Sylvia lived in what is now Sam’s bedroom.”

“Right, right, stinky Sylvia.” Wendt answered Sam’s chortle. “She wore a lot of patchouli oil. Smelled like basement mold.”

“Margie left you behind when she went to live with Ronnie.”

“Abandoned like a neglected teddy bear with a torn ear and stitches on my belly.”

Sam brightened. “Hey, that’s from a children’s book!”

Angela made a wry face. “More like a stray tom.”

“Well, the rent was affordable and the company quite congenial.”

“I suppose you could call a house inhabited by six college students, four of them women in their twenties, congenial.”

“I was more of a father figure, available for consultations day or night!”

Angela closed her eyes and shook her head. She opened them and saw her daughter looking at Wendt with the same wide-eyed fascination that had afflicted most of her roommates in the past. “Sam. Saturday. You know what that means.”

Sam’s shoulders drooped. “Clean my room,” she moaned.

“That reminds me,” Wendt drained the last of the coffee from his cup. “I need to do laundry. That OK? I took a short shower so I’ve still got some credit, don’t I, water meter lady?”

Angela shook her head. “I’ve already done a big load this morning. And besides I’m hosting a group this afternoon.”

“Is it that time of the month already? The meeting of the Man-Eaters Society?”

“Carl, it’s a weight watchers group.”

“Banished to the laundromat once again.”

“And Carl, think about what I said. You’ll have to find someplace else to live. You might even have to get a regular job.”

“Ouch!”

**Of all the lousy laundromats** in all the god-forsaken corners of the city, she has to walk into mine, Wendt thought as he looked up from the battered copy of *Finnegan’s Wake*. She wore a ratty knitted hat decorated with a large plastic daisy pulled down over her ears causing the shoulder length salt and pepper hair, stiff with dirt, to protrude like angry feathers. She hadn’t bothered with her dentures again. A dirt streaked transparent plastic raincoat covered an overcoat and two tattered men’s shirts over a badly soiled bright yellow angora sweater on top of a housedress with a bright tropical flower print. Her dingy white tennis shoes had enough holes to qualify them as sandals. She carried her belongings in two common white plastic supermarket bags. She stopped at the change machine and checked the coin return. Then the soap and bleach dispensing machine, and finally the pay phone. She gave a cursory glance into the large metal garbage cans at either end of the double row of washers. She bumped past as he drew in his knees and then stopped to stare at him over her shoulder.

Wendt shifted his weight in the uncomfortable blue plastic chair and returned her stare.

“You somebody I should know?” She had shuffled closer so that now she stood almost touching his knees.

“Mother, is that you?”

She was redolent with the scent of eau de dumpster and a splash of spoiled citrus. “Smart ass. I seen you before.”

“I am a man about town.” Wendt marked his place with a finger and looked up into the muddy yolks of her eyes.

“I mean your picture, I seen your picture.”

“In the post office?”

“No, no, not there. I’ll remember. I always do.” A serene calm fell over her wrinkled, blemished and bruised face as if she were traveling to a distant place where that memory resided. Then her expression went slack and she brought Wendt into focus as if he’d just appeared before

her. The book in his hand caught her attention. “Whatcha reading?”

“*Finnegan’s Wake.*”

“I knew him.”

“Were you at the funeral?”

“I never go to funerals. I won’t even be at mine.” She cackled the classic cackle of the classic old hag. Must be something that comes with the lifestyle, Wendt mused. And now that they were friends, she didn’t feel shy about asking for a loan. “Spare some change?”

Wendt had seen it coming. He made the helpless gesture with his hands. “I used all my change doing the laundry.” His smile was insincere.

“How about a twenty then?” Her demeanor was suddenly lucid, intense and focused.

Wendt laughed. “You caught me at a bad time.”

The old woman turned away from him in a maneuver that required many tiny steps until her toes were no longer facing him. “It’ll never be the right time for you,” she replied shuffling off to where she became a baggy silhouette in the bright daylight of the doorway to the laundromat.

“Well, Jimmy,” Wendt said, addressing the tome in his hand “looks like it’s just you and me again.”

**The bartender at the Red Hen on Geary** was a young Filipino guy by the name of Bruno. Wendt always addressed him as “Mr. Brown” as in “Mr. Brown, one more” and pointing to his empty beer glass. While Bruno refilled his glass, Wendt consulted the obituaries in the daily paper. The Irish were in a dead heat with the Chinese.

*John C. O’Connell, born in 1928. Johnny, we hardly knew ya.*

*Chester Lim, born in Fresno ninety-one years ago. Chester, baby, congrats on a long and prosperous life. Productive too. Seventeen grandchildren, untold great grand and great great grandchildren. Way to keep the Lim line alive.*

*Margaret “Peggy” Grady, nee O’Leary, native of San Francisco, a fun loving gal and active member in St. Jude’s Auxiliary.*

*Milton John, fifty-four, after a courageous battle with cancer. Didn’t say what kind. Bet there were a few snarffles in English class roll call. “John, Milton?” “Present.” Lost on everyone except the English teacher.*

*Wen Pai Li, Robert Mackenzie, Gilda Rukowski.*

*Patricia “Patty” Nelson, née Francis, born 1922 in Napa, moved to San Francisco as a child, attended Mission High, graduate of Berkeley, married Peter Nelson,*

*moved to Larkspur, and in her later years, lived in Palo Alto with her only daughter, the renowned physicist, Eugenia Trebabi.* No mention of grand kids. Mitochondrial dead end for you, Patty, sorry.

Bruno placed the full glass at Wendt's elbow and picked up the paperback. "*Finnegan's Wake* by James Joyce." Bruno had graduated from State with a degree in Psychology and a minor in Sociology. He'd wanted to be a cop but he was just a hair too short. As it turned out his education made him perfectly suited for his present occupation. "I heard that this is like one of the most difficult books in the English language."

Wendt looked up from the paper and reached for his beer. "It's in the top ten. I like it because you don't need a bookmark. You just open it up to any page and start reading. It's not one of those books you're gonna read from cover to cover. I mean you can, but what's the point? It starts at the end and ends at the beginning. Great reading for the laundromat where you're gonna be constantly distracted anyway."

The door to the Red Hen allowed a narrow rectangle of daylight into the dim interior and an amorphous silhouette detached itself from the outside and entered.

Bruno wandered down to serve the customer. He was a regular. "Hey Wendt!" he called out as Bruno placed a beer and a shot in front of him.

"Hey Sleepy!" Wendt called back. He flipped through the pages of the daily and scanned the calendar of events. *Gallery opening for Ronald Hymen at Turtle Island Gallery.* An address down on Battery. *Reception for the artist, 6 to 9 PM.* There would be some sort of arty buffet, and of course, wine. And someone there that might loan him a couple of bucks. He flipped the paper and searched the real estate listings with a frown.

Bruno had wandered back down. "Bad news? Or just constipation?"

"Naw. Man, I can't believe what they're asking for rent these days."

Bruno shrugged. "It's the city." That said it all.

"I gotta find a cheap place to rent, and in the city."

"What's wrong with your place over on Balboa?"

"The owner's selling. I'm going to have to move out."

"Jeez, that's too bad. What are you paying now?"

Wendt hesitated knowing the reaction he'd get. "A hundred bucks a month."

Bruno's brown face was placid with incomprehension for a moment and then contorted, eyes shut, mouth wide open showing perfectly white teeth and purple gums as he expelled the laughter. "A hundred bucks!!?"

A hundred bucks?!! Man, you can't even get a flop in the Tenderloin for a hundred bucks. A week. A hundred bucks?!! Welcome to the real world, pal! A hundred bucks! Man, that's rich."

Wendt was a little chagrined. "Yeah, I know. That's what I was paying when I moved in a dozen years ago. I might have to find gainful employment." Then they both had a hearty laugh.

"Seriously, though. You're a well-known poet, a published writer. You should be able to find work."

"Writers are a dime a dozen, poets are a penny each. And reputation does not guarantee income."

"You could do one of those readings, you know, charge at the door. Get some musicians to back you up like that other poet guy does with the one surviving member of that band from the sixties."

"Yeah, but how often can you get away with that? After a while it gets pretty old. And the public is fickle. The people I appeal to are old farts and intellectuals and the odd college student whose attention span is that of a gnat's. Gigs are not gonna pay my rent for long."

"Yeah," Bruno had to agree.

"I've always lived on wits and luck. I still got my wits, but maybe my luck's starting to run out."

Bruno shook his head, "I can't believe it, a hundred bucks a month. How did you ever swing a deal like that?"

Wendt took a deep drink from his glass. "It's a long story. The short version is that the house used to be a student commune bought as an investment by the parents of one of the students while she was attending State. I happened to be screwing one of the students at the time. Not the one who owned the house. Well, after a while the kids graduated and went their separate ways. The owner had a sperm bank kid and stopped renting out the rooms."

"Except to you."

"Yeah, she kinda liked the idea of a celebrity living under her roof. Though there were times when she probably regretted it." Wendt drained the beer. "Well, I gotta go pick up my dry cleaning." He indicated the empty glass. "On the tab, ok?"

Bruno made a face. "Ok, but you're at the limit. And you know how the boss lady feels about that. Pay it down when you get a chance."

Wendt nodded and hefted his laundry duffel over his shoulder. "I'm getting paid for my column on Monday so I'll have some cash."

Sleepy, a short man in a greasy ball cap came by his name from the

fact that he had large lidded eyes resembling those of a gecko. “Sleepy” was probably better than “Gecko” as it didn’t sound so much like an ethnic slur. “I read your column every day, Wendt.”

“That’s good, Sleepy,” Wendt said with his hand on the door plate, “but it only comes out once a week. That’s why the paper it appears in is called a weekly.”

“And it’s all bullshit. Who gives a fuck about art galleries and poetry and all that other intellectual crap? Why don’t you write about something that people care about? Like the lousy bus service or the homeless problem or how the Chinese Government is buying up the city. I could write the bullshit you write.”

“Yes, Sleepy, and therein lies the difference, the insurmountable gap between could and did. You could write that bullshit, but I did write that bullshit.” With those final taunts of faux-wisdom Wendt pushed out into the traffic noise and glare of early afternoon Geary Blvd.

**At the intersection Wendt turned** and walked up the block to Clement. He skirted the knot of housewives pausing over the fresh produce display out front of the corner market. He waited as a BMW hesitatingly poked out into the intersection and then strode across in the company of a clot of pedestrians.

Past the beauty salon and the florist shop the large yellow and red sign on the building front read *Empress Cleaners*. Large plate glass windows flanked the glass door. A wall of plastic sheathed clothing hung from an automated track behind the counter. Wendt recognized the scent of cooking oil even over the prevalent odor of dry cleaning chemicals. No one seemed to be around. Then a short man who looked like an aged Tin-tin, had Tin-tin aged and had he been Chinese, parted the plastic foliage of dry cleaned apparel. A gray streaked shock of black hair swept across his two-story forehead, cowlick like a bent blade of black grass. His gray loose fitting shirt was buttoned to the collar and covered the khaki slacks to mid-thigh. He eyed his customer suspiciously. “Ah, Mr. Wen.”

“Ah, Mr. Wang.”

Wang held out his hand expectantly. “You have clean?”

Wendt extracted the billet from his wallet and handed him what appeared to be accidental origami.

Wang unfolded the claim and examined the red printed number. “This old,” he stated.



Wendt agreed. "Could be. A month, maybe."

"Month? Thirty day no responsible!" Wang crowed.

Wendt tried to smile. This had become a too familiar routine. "Mr. Wang, you are an honorable man. I have been your customer for many years. Never once in all that time have I ever lost an item or been dissatisfied with your service. Your patience is that of the Sages. As a poet I esteem your worthy ancestor, the poet Wang Wei."

"No Wang Wei."

"No Wang Wei?"

"Wang Hsu, Wang Lin, Wang Zhou, Wang Dai, Wang Lo, Wang Chung, Wang Pa-jen, Wang Jiong, Wang Mei, no Wang Wei."

"How about Wang Dang Doodle?"

Wang consider the name a moment. "Maybe Wang Dang, no Doodle."

"Again, I appeal to the wisdom of your culture that honors literary men and poets. I am a poet in the tradition of the great Li Po."

"Li Po own market?"

"No, Li Po the poet."

"Own grocery corner Anza." Wang stated positively.

"A different Li Po, one who lived long ago, in China."

Wang shrugged. "Not know."

"Well, how about Han Shan?"

Wang shook his head.

"Po Chu'I?"

"No ring bell."

"Su Shih"

"That fish?"

"Mei Yao-ch'en maybe?"

"Never hear."

"How about Tu Fu?"

Wang's grin spread to expose a few misshapen discolored teeth. "Du Fu!" he exclaimed and then launched into a lyrical recitation that was both strange and melodious to Wendt's ears.

"Yes, Tu Fu, a poet, like me," Wendt pointed to himself for emphasis.

Wang snorted derisively. "You no Tu Fu, Mr. Wen, you tofu. White," which he pronounced *'why'*, "and no tase." Wang laughed uproariously and walked to the back of the establishment repeating in Chinese what he had just told Wendt and was joined in laughter by unseen others.

**Wendt never went looking for trouble** but it often found him. There were two of them, slouching against the concrete stairway to the stucco duplex, hands deep in the pockets of their hooded sweatshirts. And to make matters worse, both his hands were occupied, duffle under an arm, dry cleaning on hanger over the other shoulder. But what could he possibly have that would be of value to them? Underwear, tee shirts, socks, faded jeans, and they weren't smart enough to know that the suit coat was silk, Armani. He had five bucks in his wallet, change from the dry cleaning, which he had paid for with the twenty he had borrowed from Monica. It was all the money he had and it had to last him until Monday or at least until he could put the touch on someone else. That just wouldn't do.

“Listen, you fucking punks, you fucking caught me with my fucking hands full. All I've got is my fucking laundry and my fucking dry cleaning. I've got five fucking bucks in my fucking wallet in the inside fucking pocket of my fucking jacket. It's my last five fucking bucks. You could probably fucking take it because there's fucking nothing I can fucking do about it. As I said, since my fucking hands are otherwise fucking occupied, I'm gonna fucking ask you to let me fucking go on my fucking way. Five fucking bucks ain't fucking much in your fucking world, but it's a fucking lot in mine. If you were to fucking decide to fucking ignore my fucking request and take the fucking money any fucking way, I would be fucking forced into an act of fucking desperation. And you don't fucking want that because the first fucking thing I would fucking do is pay a fucking visit to fucking Raj, you know Raj, he's the fucking loan shark who lives down the fucking street on Funston. I'm gonna fucking go and borrow fifty fucking bucks from Raj knowing full fucking well that once I take the fucking loan I now fucking owe him eighty fucking bucks. I'm gonna fucking take that fifty fucking bucks and go over to fucking Mel's on Presidio, and you fucking know what Mel sells, he sells fucking hot wrenches, and I'm gonna fucking give him the fifty fucking bucks and say give me the cheapest fucking chrome you got, all it's got to do is fucking shoot a fucking bullet and go fucking bang. And I'm gonna fucking come back here and put a fucking hole where the fucking bridge of your fucking nose was, and give your fucking shaved head buddy here a lead fucking implant in the side of his fucking skull and then I'm gonna take your fucking iPods and your fucking iPhones and your cheap ass fucking gold jewelry and the fucking money your fucking parents give

you for your fucking allowance and after I stick the fucking piece up your fucking dead ass I'm gonna take your punk fucking shit to the fucking guy over on Arguello and fucking sell it all for the eighty fucking bucks I owe Raj I don't fucking care how much it's fucking worth. You don't fucking want that to fucking happen."

Wendt smiled and caught the eye of one of the boys glancing shyly from under his hooded sweatshirt.

The boy, an Asian teen with a bad case of acne, nodded back, "Hey Mr. Wendt." The other boy, a Caucasian teen plugged into earbuds, just nodded without focusing on the adult.

"Staying out of trouble?" It was such a patronizing question that Wendt almost felt embarrassed asking it. But he'd been young once, he knew what mischief lurked in the minds of teens.

"Yes, Mr. Wendt," hamburger face answered.

Wendt strode off. "Why?" he called out over his shoulder. The boys stared after him bored and not all that surprised. Tarantino eat your heart out. Nobody fucks with Wendt.

**Wendt slipped into his black woolen slacks** by the light of the square blue screen on his work desk. He brought up a file as he zipped his fly. Opening the file, he cinched his belt at his waist after tucking in the dark blue microfiber shirt. He scanned the text buttoning the cuffs. He hopped on one socked foot pulling the other one on and did a little pirouette, butt grind, gloat and gleeful hand clap. Then he closed the file.

**"Hey Carl, need a lift?"** Wendy was just pulling away from the curb when he strode up. She flicked the lock on the passenger door and Wendt dropped in the seat. "Don't you look sharp. Something special going on tonight?"

Wendt adjusted the lapels on the Armani after he yanked the seatbelt across his lap. "Gallery opening over on Battery. Turtle Island. In that space over by the TV station."

"That's an art gallery?" Wendy was Japanese but in a very American way. "Wasn't that a night club a while back, The Porno Lounge? Got busted for pimping, remember?"

Wendt nodded and held on to the dashboard as Wendy swerved to the left turn lane and just made the light.

"Yeah, now they're using it to pimp another commodity."

"You think of sex as a commodity, Carl?" Wendy shifted down as

the pre-millennium Toyota took the hill. A dark bolero jacket covered an immaculate white blouse. Her black sheer hose poked out from the tight shiny black skirt as her feet in sensible shoes worked the clutch and accelerator. There was just a hint of glitter in her eye makeup and her long black hair was held in place at the back with a large black plastic clip. She turned her head and smiled at him.

Wendt patted the breast pocket of his coat. "You obviously didn't read my Valentine's Day column." She was thirtyish, maybe, it was hard to tell. "You wouldn't happen to have a cigarette, would you?"

"No, no, I don't smoke."

Wendt looked at the console where the tiny ashtray was wedged open by a mass of stubbed filter tips.

"Oh wait, look in the glove box, there may be some in there."

Wendt pushed the lock and the drawer fell open. A crumpled blue cigarette package topped the heap of what looked like trash and the suspicious outline of what might have been the butt end of a small pistol. Wendt fished a cigarette out of the pack and stuck it to his lips.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't smoke in the car." She wrinkled her pert narrow nose. "Stinky."

Wendt tucked it back in with the remaining cigarette and slipped the pack into his shirt pocket, snapping the glove box closed with his knee.

"I read your column about Groundhog Day, though. I didn't know that about the relationship between that holiday and bear baiting. That was really interesting. My great grandparents are from Hokkaido where the Ainu practice a bear ritual. I've been told some of the old folk tales." She slowed to a stop at the light, sifting into first.

Wendt admired her profile. Not the softness of Harunobo. More of the angular beauty of Kunisada or Eisen. "Wait till you read my piece on St. Patrick's Day. If you hear about me getting jumped by a gang of Irish guys, you'll know why."

She laughed a pleasant laugh and already they were through the Broadway tunnel. "Drop by Joe's around closing. I can give you a ride back to the neighborhood." She pulled to the curb and Wendt made a quick exit.

**Wendt ducked his head into the door of the bookstore** and caught the clerk's eye. "Larry around?"

The clerk, a mop of tight curls and equally wooly beard, shook his head. "He's up at the office or at home."

“How about Nancy?” He stepped in and stood at the counter. The store was crowded with tourists.

“Naw, she’s out of town.” The clerk placed a small book in a paper bag with the store logo for a shapely redhead in a tight fitting black dress with a cowl collar. “You heading over to hear Charles St. Charles at the Unitarian tonight?”

Wendt looked over at the large poster advertising the reading above the stairway leading down to the book jammed basement. He gave a wry smile and shook his head, “Too ivy league for me.”

He stepped to the door and crowded past a gaggle of Asian youngsters making their way in. “Tell Larry I came by,” he called over his shoulder.

On the sidewalk a mob had bunched up at the open door of a Muni bus and he had to skirt them to step into the alleyway where he could look down to the end of the short paved passage between buildings named in honor of St. Jack and see a scene that could have easily been thousands of miles away. He bowed his head briefly and repeated the mantra he always intoned at this spot. “The world belongs to me because I am poor.”

Thrusting open the colorfully painted door, Wendt stepped in and surveyed the lava field in Vesuvio’s. There were the regular denizens with the best seats by the windows onto the alleyway, and the mushrooms who never left a particular bar stool. He wondered when the Portuguese Fisherman’s hat would go out of style. It had long outlived its expiration date. And the few aging relics of the bohemian past, square shouldered in sleeveless tops, long armed gold bracelet beauties evoking a bygone era.

Wendt nodded to the scowling bushy browed red bearded ruddy faced character hunched over the table by the front window. The man wasn’t seeing anyone. A poetry casualty, someone with a lot of talent and quick celebrity that had gone to his head as did the coke, smack, and booze. He had razed the field of his creativity and was now just the hollow burnt-out shell of a promising poet. Henry Longtree, that was the name. Edited a magazine, *Trigger Point*, named after an obscure islet in Puget Sound. He was younger by a couple of years. Friends with Philip Mignon.

Carl hated the way Frank rolled the *r* when he said his name. Frances Fitzpatrick was in his usual spot where the bar met the red velvet wallpaper, draped like a lanky Irish lemur. Some people were relics of the

past and others were affectations of those days. Frank was the latter. He dressed like a British intellectual from before the war, the tweeds, wool slacks, brown oxfords. He affected a sweep of sandy bang across his sallow forehead. The tiny cookie duster draped over a weak mouth showed a hint of gray. His eyes were like green olives with just a hint of pimento, a narrow ridge of nose separating them. He held up the glass, “Carrl, drink with me.”

It was an invitation he wasn’t going to refuse.

Frank called the bartender over. “For my friend. . . .”

“Jameson,” Carl spoke.

“You are in one hell of a deep shite hole,” Frank confided when the drink arrived.

“Why’s that?” Wendt knocked the shot back and centered the empty glass on the cocktail napkin in front of him.

“That fecking St. Paddy’s day hatchet job, you fecking ejit!

Wendt hated it when Fitzpatrick affected an Irish accent, born and raised in the Mission District, for cry’s sake. “What are you talking about?” He pointed at his glass and with Frank’s nodded ok called the barman down and pushed the napkin and glass toward him.

“You’ve desecrated a Saint’s feast day. A nation’s saint. Do you think they’re going to take this lightly, boyo?”

“You know the real Irish never gave a rat’s ass about St. Pat until the sheenies over here made it a rallying point. It’s a holiday adopted world-wide. I don’t know if that’s a good thing or a bad thing. I mean it’s an excuse to get drunk, eat boiled meat and over-cooked vegetables. Maybe we need more of those kinds of holidays. I’d prefer more drinking and less meat, but to each his own.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about, lad, it’s what you said about it being a pagan holiday!”

“I just pointed out that that date was an ancient Roman holiday in which people drank to excess and fucked like a bunch of Bonobos. I merely mentioned that, because of the Catholic Church, the fucking part of the celebration had been cut out and so an Irishman is left with only one choice, drink and fight. Fucking, you might have heard, is a sin, but fighting isn’t. If that’s not fucked up, I don’t know what is.” Wendt drained the glass and dropped it back on the napkin. He eyed Frank with his head turned to the side.

Frank shrank back into the shadows of the velvet flock. “Sure, I know that, I know that, it’s just that you don’t want to be fucking with

an Irishman with thin skin. They're worst kind."

The drink had glazed the nerves in Wendt's cheeks and forehead with a pleasant gold glow. A flag went up. Food!

"Frank, get serious. For one, what Irishman doesn't have a thin skin, and two, it's a newspaper column in a throwaway rag that nobody reads except you and some terminally bored people who need to get a life."

Frank nodded his head gravely. "Don't underestimate the bored."

**The art at Turtle Island was by an artist** who could be excused if he had never heard of Jean-Michel Basquiat and prosecuted if he had. Wendt had timed his arrival to just before peak attendance. The art critic from the daily was standing in front of a painting that looked like bad graffiti.

"Ken."

"Carl, nice spread tonight."

"Thanks for the tip."

Wendt headed for the buffet and acquired a small ceramic plate. He appreciated real crockery. Paper plates sagged under the weight of the food he usually piled on. Prawns, half a dozen olives, stuffed grape leaves, some sushi, a stack of crackers and a wedge of Brie. He paused before the fondue and the steam table with the meatballs. He would have to return for them. He positioned himself out of the flow of traffic and with his back to the increasing throng so he could discreetly stuff his gullet.

He was finishing up the prawns when he felt a tug at his sleeve and turned to look down into the moist eyes of a dark haired woman, a girl in his book, her lips twisted in a smile that held back another emotion.

"Courtney Laroche!"

"Hey Carl."

"Help, I'm a rock."

"You told me a million times why I should think that's funny but remind me again, it was a song by the what, The Motherfuckers?"

"Mothers, Mothers of Invention, but that's neither here nor there. It's great to see you!" He spread his arms out. "I'd give you a big hug but my hands are full."

Courtney heaved a big sigh like the worst was over. She pulled on the elbow of the young man standing next to her. "This is my friend, David."

Wendt switched the plate to his other hand and balanced his wine

glass on it. “Dave?”

“David, David Bloom. Carl, wonderful to meet you.”

Some people can grow the best looking beards. Bloom was one of them. It was almost Christ-like in its perfection. He was a short man, Courtney’s height without her heels so she appeared to have a couple of inches on him.

“He’s a big fan of yours, Wendt.” She smiled as if she were offering a gift or a sacrifice. Bloom’s cheeks pinked.

A fan meant two things to Wendt, a resource and a liability. Fans were always good for a few bucks, a meal once in a while, drinks. On the other hand, they thought that by providing those favors that it privileged them to something that he didn’t have and something they didn’t really want but didn’t know it. It was like paying interest on a loan and he hated paying interest.

“So, Dave, what do you do?” Wendt’s tone was almost fatherly.

“I’m a writer, a poet.”

Wendt nodded gravely as Courtney explained. “We met at a graduate seminar at the Washington Institute of Modern Poetics in Seattle. David taught the class on prewar populist poets, Rexroth, Fearing, Patchen, Williams, Hughes.”

Bloom cleared his throat slightly embarrassed. “There were some post-war, too, up to the early fifties. The New Critics,” he added, “You know, Ransom, Tate, Brooks, Warren.”

Wendt knew them all too well, the gang of four that had essentially chained American poetry to the British model. He glanced over Bloom’s head at the increasing throng of potential nosers. He knew he would have to make another pass at the buffet and refill his wine glass. He looked down at the young man. “You don’t smoke, do you?”

Bloom reacted as if he’d been accused of a crime. “No, no, of course not!”

Wendt nodded, “Yeah, yeah, too bad. Think you could loan me a couple of bucks to buy a pack? All I have is a hundred dollar bill and none of the markets in Chinatown will break a hundred just for a pack of smokes. I can pay you right back, later tonight, if you’re going to be around.” Wendt said it like he didn’t mean it.

“We’re on our way to hear Charles St. Charles at the Unitarian. Aren’t you going?” Courtney was wise to Wendt and tugged her boyfriend’s arm.

Bloom had pulled out his wallet and was staring into the gap of the



fold. "All I have is a twenty."

"Oh, that'll do." Wendt held out his hand. "Come by Enrico's after the reading, I'll have it for you."

Bloom extracted the bill slowly and handed it to Wendt. "Maybe there's something you could do for me."

Wendt winced. Interest. "What would that be?"

"A group of friends, poets, are putting on a memorial reading for a young poet who died recently, tragically, and I was wondering if you would consent to participate. It would be a great honor, and Ian, Ian Blake, the poet who died, admired your work enormously. He even dedicated a poem to you in the manuscript of his we're trying to publish. We hope to raise enough money at the memorial and if you're on the bill, we're certain of a good turn out."

Wendt eyed the dwindling offerings on the buffet table. He knew when a poet died tragically that it was usually by their own hand. He inched sideways to the end of the table and had to reach over to secure a few rounds of dry baguette with some kind of vegetarian goop on them. He stuck one in his mouth. Not bad actually.

"What's it called?" Wendt eyed the second savoring the first.

"The book?"

"No, the poem."

"*Ode To Sunset.*"

Wendt repressed his gag reflex. "That's original. What's the book called?"

"*Ode To Sunset.*"

"Might as well stick with what works."

"Come on, Wendt, it's for a good cause." Courtney put on pouty lips that he had never believed.

"I'd love to, man, but I can't. Rules of the game. I have an agent, Nora White. She has a policy. You have to go through her, even for a benefit. My rate is a hundred bucks an hour or any portion thereof. Of that fee, twenty percent goes to paying down a loan I was foolish enough to accept from her, fifteen percent is her cut, and I get the rest. Now that may not sound like a lot to you but that's the way I live. You want my time, you have to pay for it, nothing personal, that's just the way it is. Now you can go to her and ask her to waive the policy for just this one time, but she'll tell you that if she lets you get me for free she'd have to allow it for every memorial for every dead poet north of Fresno. It's business, baby."

“I’d like the opportunity to talk her into allowing it.” Bloom’s handsomely bearded expression was sincere, sincere and humorless. “Ian was an incredible poet. I’m surprised you haven’t heard of him. He’d just won the Lambert Prize.”

“I won the Lambert Prize. Years ago. What’s it worth now?”

“Five thousand, I think.”

Wendt grunted. “I got five hundred.”

“I hope that we can get you to agree. It would be such an honor, especially Ian’s honor.”

Pious shit. “Listen Dave, good luck convincing Nora, but let me just warn you, she’s a mean skinny little blonde who would rip out your pineal gland and replace it with your sphincter just as soon as look at you.”

Bloom’s shocked look indicated that he understood exactly what that entailed. Courtney dragged him by the arm. “Come on, we’re gonna be late.” She flashed Wendt that little wistful smile. “See you at Enrico’s.” Taking a few steps she looked back over her shoulder. “Maybe.”

Wendt turned his attention to the buffet table. The repast was disappearing fast. The fondue was overdue. He found a few scraps of bread and a skewer. There were what appeared to be meatballs.

The tattooed young man in the white serving jacket watched Wendt cautiously eye the last of the gray clumps in the oily orange slick. “They’re soy,” he volunteered.

Wendt pulled back. “No, no soy. Do you know what that stuff does to your sex drive? I’ll pass.”

“Performance anxiety, Wendt?” Diane McCracken spoke the words with a heavily rouged mouth set in a plump peaches and cream complexion that highlighted the small broken veins in her cheeks framed by a retro Doris Day coif. She always traveled with an entourage of hangers-on who tried to appear bored by everything but only managed vacuous. He knew a few of them. Raynelle Boyce, an angry black woman who just really wanted to be loved by another angry black woman. That she didn’t realize this gave her that sour look of someone with a leather fetish. Cory Chap was a rich kid who still used his father’s tailor and self-published his own books of poems. One anonymous reviewer had suggested that future Chap books be accompanied by a recycle symbol on the cover. And a couple of giggly ingénues in little black dresses.

“Lady Di, what an unpleasant surprise.” Wendt looked at the soy balls and then at the short but imposing woman and then back at the faux meatballs. Maybe he was being too hasty.

“Carl, you are so impertinent.” She gave it her best false smile.

Wendt nodded his head. “At your service.”

She waved a bare arm at the walls, the art. “This has all the infantile self-expression of crayon scribbling on restaurant placemats.”

“I think that’s where he got the idea.”

“Though that one is rather impressive, the colors, I mean.”

“The one that looks like a big dildo?”

Diane McCracken managed a pained painted smile. “We’re all going to *La Mar*, that fab new retro bistro in the financial district. You’ll join us, won’t you?” The way she said it, it was a command. “I’m anxious to hear why you aren’t going to the Charles St Charles reading.”

“I could ask you the same thing. After all, you are the publisher of Elbow Press. You published his latest book.”

“Alba Press.” She half closed her eyes and looked at him sideways. “Wendt, dear, don’t be so obvious. I’m not there for the same reasons you aren’t there. All those sad people with their sad sad ambitions and their sad sad sad naked envy wishing that they were the ones up at the podium.”

“That’s not why I’m not there.”

“Oh?” Diane had cocked an eyebrow.

“No food at a poetry reading.”

“Carl, that’s a scream! Come with us. I crave your quotidian wit.” She leaned forward confidentially. “These people are brain dead,” she spoke low and huskily.

**Wendt balled up the hot dog wrapper and made a basket** from where he was sitting on the stool. He exchanged glances with the young Asian girl in the blue green and red hat behind the counter. “Nothing but net!” He slid off the stool and sauntered out to the mouth of the alley and looked up Broadway to the land of large bare breasted women. He strolled to the open facade of Enrico’s and took a round marble-topped table in the corner of the terrace. He mentally accounted the remains of the twenty. Five fifty for the polish dog. A small price to pay for having refused to accompany Lady Di and her troop of baboons. He couldn’t decide what irritated him most about her, her money or her personality. That left enough for a six dollar glass of house wine, maybe two. A quick survey revealed groups of couples chatting easily over appetizers and white wine in a takeoff pattern before soaring off to a higher, greater evening. A few of the regulars occupied their vantage with a view

to the street.

Mahoney, in his iconic beret, bristle brush of a white moustache, red nose and flush veined cheeks, eying the passing humanity. Olive, his skinny shadow of a female companion, ramrod stiff and a gaze that indicated that she was probably somewhere else. Cal, the overdressed Italian wannabe old time gangster, and his water glass of vino. It was a little early for the rush of younger regulars and tourists. A black man in a beret and a heavy overcoat sipped a small glass of red wine at the table next to his.

The waiter arrived and nodded to Wendt. “Un petit vin rouge.” The waiter had heard it before. “House, ok?” Wendt nodded and stared for a moment vacantly over the heads of the customers and thought in a loosely yet semi-urgent way that he needed to act on his impending eviction. He searched his memory for a likely name, someone who would be able to assist him. The list was short. His ex-wife Sheila and her husband Jerry Pawl, Irma and Philippe, Tom Presley, and Aaron Shone. If that was the best he could do, he might have to panic.

“Excuse me.” The black man from the next table addressed him. “I couldn’t help hearing you order *un petit vin rouge*.”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Bud Powell, right?”

Wendt smiled. Someone who finally got it. “Yeah, Bud. You into Bud?”

The man rose from his table and walked over with the help of a cane. “Mind if I join you?”

“Any friend of Bud’s is a friend of mine.” Wendt held out a hand. “I’m . . .”

“I recognized you from your picture in the weekly. Your column, *Gone With The Wendt*.”

“Right, Carl, and?”

The man sat down in the chair opposite. “Roy, Roy Banks.”

“You play, Roy?”

“A piano bar down on Market. The tourist trade looking for the ghost of Beatnik past.”

The waiter arrived with Wendt’s drink. Roy indicated that it was on him.

Wendt raised his glass in appreciation. “I gotta warn you, they’ll be by here later this evening.”

Roy laughed. “No worry. My daughter’s coming up from San Mateo

to take me out to dinner. There's a Chinese place over the way, reminds me of the old restaurants I used to go to when I lived in New York. No tourist frills, just good food."

"Charlie Low's?"

"You hip." Roy saluted him with his glass.

"To Bud," Wendt raised his in return.

Roy chuckled again and shook his head.

"And jazz," Wendt added.

Roy shook his head again and smiled, "You cool, man, I don't often get with someone I just met. But I can tell we're in the same groove."

Wendt nodded. "So you were in New York?"

"Yeah, late '60's, the whole loft scene, Cecil, Archie, Sonny."

"That was good music."

"Oh, yeah, still is, but it's tough to get that kind of cohesion with cats out here, everybody's so spread out, you know, it's very. . . West Coast."

"Yeah, I hear what you're saying. I was in New York around the same time, by the way. Thought I'd make it big as a poet if I was in the big city. Where the action was."

"That's right, you're a poet, too. I thought you just wrote that column in the weekly. But now I remember, yeah."

It was Wendt's turn to laugh. Now here was someone who had no inkling of his supposed reputation as a literary figure. None of the usual presumptions would apply.

"I read your column on Black History Month, by the way." The waiter had come up and Roy indicated another round. Carl stared at the grape residue at the bottom of his glass. His white man's Negro fantasy was about to be demolished. He was going to be called on his own presumptions and suppositions no matter how scholarly and neutral they tried to be. His editor had admitted that the Black History column had received mixed reviews. A couple of haters, but mostly the whines and yashoulda crowd.

"You said a lot of things that even some black folk don't know. I don't want to say that you got it. Because you don't get it unless you lived it. But as far as that goes, you get it more than most of the well-meaning white folk I know."

Wendt shifted in the metal café chair and gazed at Roy in anticipation. Now he was going to get it. The waiter returned with their red wines and removed the old glasses.

"You said something that I felt was exactly correct, and that's where

jazz is the way that we can integrate the cultures, for a love of the music. On the other hand, I thought that the title of the piece was a little over the top. ‘White Like Me?’”

Wendt shrugged. “Sometimes I overplay the ironies, yeah.”

And just as he put the glass to his lips, Jeremy was standing there, his arms holding a spiral notebook clutched to his chest. He was a short wiry man who looked like Woody Woodpecker on crack. He had read a book on Beatniks and had come to North Beach to be a far out poet, but instead had become just another sidewalk casualty. That didn’t keep him from writing obsessively. In addition to the notebook he was holding, the ratty bag slung over his shoulder contained more creased and folded sheaves of paper and pages, his entire oeuvre to be exact. He was the messenger you wanted to shoot because his message was always such a downer, a virtual wet blanket, but then what can be expect from a post-apocalyptic messianic narcissist? This time wasn’t going to be any different.

“Morgan Tilson committed suicide, d’ya hear?” he announced perkily. “They found him this morning!”

Roy’s look had suddenly become guarded and he reached for his cane.

“What the fuck are you talking about, Jeremy? And who the fuck is Morgan Tilson?” Wendt was only a little annoyed, the grape having a rosy palliative affect. Where had he heard that name before? Then it came to him. He was one of the poets at the Inter Zone Arts reading the previous evening. “Ok, wait a minute I remember now. He bit the big one, huh? How?”

Jeremy eyed Roy suspiciously. Roy glared back. “His lover found him this morning. In his apartment over there off of Sanchez. In the bedroom with an empty bottle of pills by his naked body on the floor. Somebody said in front of a full length mirror, but I’ve never been there so I wouldn’t know.”

Wendt recalled the previous night after the reading, drinking at Shepard’s, and he had noticed the poet he had assumed to be Tilson, a good looking guy with long hair pulled back in a tight drug dealer ponytail. He’d been really wasted, and not in a happy way, at a table with a gang, a couple of handsome specimens and the usual dorky gay intellectuals.

“Any idea why?” Wendt didn’t really care, his curiosity was impulsive.

“I heard that they found a note. But somebody else said that it was just a long poem.”

Wendt nodded. “That sounds about right. A poet starts out to write

a suicide note and ends up with a long poem.” He addressed Roy. “It’s like a sickness.”

Roy had relaxed his guard as it appeared that Wendt knew the homeless bum. He savored the red taking a measure of Jeremy.

“Dad!?” The black woman in her late twenties in a conservative pale green suit coat and matching skirt, coif carefully piled on top of her sleek black hair, appeared a trifle alarmed. Her father was seated with what appeared to be a white haired wise guy and talking to some street rat.

Roy brightened and struggled to his feet. “Ah, Darlene. Carl, this is my daughter, Darlene. Darlene, this Carl Wendt, he writes that column in the weekly, *Gone With The Wendt*. He’s a poet too!” he said as if that were an important revelation.

Darlene smiled politely, but not convincingly. “Dad, have you been getting drunk.” It was as much concern as it was censorious.

“No, honey, I am fine! I just had *un petit vin rouge* with a fellow Bud Powell aficionado.” He let his daughter hook her arm under his and then turned to leave. “We will have to continue this conversation at a later date,” he said to Wendt. He reached out and handed Wendt his card. “My email address is on there, drop me a line.”

Jeremy plopped into the chair Roy had vacated. “It’s crazy, all these poets dying in the last couple of months, it’s like there’s a serial killer of poets.”

“A serial killer of poets? Jeremy, poets are an endangered species, they’ll die off on their own accord. Besides, I thought you said it was suicide.”

“That’s what they say it is, but, I mean, come on, it’s the cops. They never speak the truth.”

Wendt stared into his glass. They speak the ultimate truth, not that he wanted to explain that to Jeremy. He knew he was going to hate himself for encouraging him. “You think there’s some kind of conspiracy between the police and a serial killer to murder poets?” He smiled perversely. “It does have a certain ring of truth to it, though.”

“Right, right, that’s what I’m talking about. Like that kid drove his car into a brick wall going 100 miles an hour.”

“A poet did that?” Even Wendt felt a sense of shock at the image of the impact, then, “Well, poets shouldn’t be allowed to drive, anyway.”

Jeremy had leafed through the pages of his current spiral notebook. “Eric, no Ian Blake, Blake, you know, like the famous poet. “

“Yeah, I know that, Jeremy.” Wendt mulled over this new bit of

information. He's never met either of these poets, but here within twenty four hours, their names were linked to death, and peripherally, linked to him. Tilson was the poet whose reading he had skipped, and Blake was the young poet who had dedicated a poem to him, something he wouldn't have known if he hadn't met Courtney's boyfriend. He was getting contact paranoia from Jeremy. "You're keeping track of the dead poets, too?"

"I have a theory."

Wendt groaned. He was sorry he had even started his conversation with Jeremy.

"Every time a poet dies, two more are born.

"I thought that was fairies."

"Some fairies are poets." Jeremy was crazy but he wasn't stupid. "And of course if the poet is famous or he's published a lot of books, then more than just two poets are born, sometimes five, even six!

"But, Jeremy, even if only two poets were born every time a poet died the world would soon be overrun with poets." That was a disturbing thought.

"Exactly, that's why they're killing off the poets, they're afraid that they'll take over."

"Take over the government?"

"No, no, poets should never be in government. Unless maybe in China. But Mao was a poet, and look what happened there. No, poets'll just be taking over, you know, the population."

"Like being on welfare, or in the university, which is only distinguishable by degree, or clerking in bookstores, or selling Tupperware, or walking the streets."

"Yeah, yeah, Wendt, you know what I'm talking about!"

"Now that's a really scary thought."

"The thing is, some people are born poets and don't even know it!"

"But their feet show it."

"How so?"

"They're long fellows."

Jeremy did not miss a beat. "Yeah, right, and they're also vaguely dissatisfied. Anyone who is vaguely dissatisfied is not living up to their poet-tential."

"You might have something there." Now he was agreeing with a fool.

"I was born as a poet on the day Allen Ginsburg died. I saw it on the entertainment news and I went out and bought a book on Beatniks and



read all about them. I quit my job and drove out to California. To be a poet!”

Wendt laughed. “A noble occupation, don’t let anybody tell you any different. But aren’t you worried that they might target you next, if as you say, they’re out to get poets?”

The gleam in Jeremy’s eye was more than just drugs. “I have the perfect protection.”

“Which would be?”

“I’m invisible.”

“That helps.”

“No one knows who I am!”

“But what about the poems you sell to people on the street? I mean the people who buy them think you’re a poet. Maybe one of them is a poet serial killer.” Wendt almost immediately regretted planting that seed.

“That’s the beauty of it! No one takes me seriously. To them it’s just some bum’s scribbling. They don’t even suspect that I’m a real poet!”

The waiter had come up to the table and was giving Jeremy the hairy eyeball. Jeremy knew the routine. “I gotta go.” He packed up his notebook. “I’m a *persona au gratin* here,” he said as he hurried off the terrace.

Wendt indicated his empty glass and nodded. The waiter understood. Wendt was going to pay for this one. He peeled off each bill as if it weighed a ton and set the glass of wine just out of reach on the table. It was going to have to last.

So far his social drinking had gone well, having to pay the minimum for his liquid refreshment being his ultimate goal and part of the game he played with himself. It gauged his likability, his popularity, his presence in the world of friends and strangers. He had vowed to live by his wits and shun the accrual of worldly goods. He was an epicurean monk in a silk Armani jacket. Even that incongruity had been gifted him by an admirer, a widow he saw occasionally, who lived in Pacific Heights. The suit coat had belonged to her late husband. He filled out the shoulders in the same way, she’d told him. His Florsheims were the only extravagance he allowed himself. And the silk socks.

One of the young women at a table on the other side of the terrace had been glancing over her shoulder at him. She was a pretty blonde in a white sleeveless top, a shimmering sequined jacket draped over the back of her chair. She turned away when she saw that Wendt had noticed and said something to the Asian woman sitting next to her who tried to

casually glance in his direction. He'd been recognized. They giggled. And found out.

He could have gone over and introduced himself, confirmed their suspicions, but he was preoccupied with the thought that he would be losing his low rent city cave. He knew from his friends and acquaintances who had jealously derided his housing arrangement that he wasn't going to be able to replace it. He would have to compromise. He could either continue to hustle, make the minimal effort to get by and rely on the goodwill of friends and people who would be willing to accommodate a brilliant and nationally known poet, though the latter attribute had faded some over the last decade or more as he had not kept up his dues in *LUCKY*, the *Literary Union of Charlatans, Kooks, and Yahoos*. He was still brilliant though, and that and a couple of bucks could get him a latte, at the very least someone to treat him to a latte. His other choice was to get serious, get back in the flow, and reconnect with everyone he'd ever insulted and undoubtedly kiss some ass, eat some crow. In that case he could maybe afford a room or a tiny apartment in the neighborhoods, or Noë Valley or the Outer Mission. But he'd have to put himself out there. And he hadn't done that in some time. He had done the minimum and had been free to work on "the monster" as he thought of it. Maybe it was time to let the monster out of its cage and let it do the work. Now that was an idea.

**A cab had double parked out in front and the cabbie**, a narrow man in a leather vest and leather cap, sauntered through the tables to the doorway of the enclosed part of the bistro. He bobbed his chin and large dark framed glasses at Wendt shouting into the bar, "Call a taxi?" A drunk in a powder blue sports coat stirred his gray head and looked blankly at the cabbie and then got up from the stool. He appeared to be gauging the distance to the cab and wondering if he would make it.

The cabbie approached Wendt's table, ignoring his passenger. He extended a hand blotched with color.

"Digger, good to see you."

Digger had once been a poet. He was from New York. He'd been a poet in New York. He had come to California to be a poet in San Francisco. It hadn't worked out that way. Instead he got a divorce and started driving cab. He wasn't a poet anymore. He was a painter, a water colorist.

"Lemme ask you something, Wendt."

“Yeah, go ahead.”

“Remember a guy by the name of Chuck Lazar?”

“Man, that’s a name I haven’t heard in a while. He was with that group of poets in Oakland in the late ‘70’s, right? They had a magazine. *Fabulous*, or something. The editor was that tall Frenchman who looked like Marcel Duchamp. What were they called, the California Pretenders?”

“Well, I don’t remember all that. I just know him as the guy who took off with my ex-wife.”

“Oh right, that, too.” Wendt had completely forgotten that side of the story. Digger’s wife had gone off with Lazar and holed up in a warehouse studio in Oakland and did nothing but fuck. Then the story was that he got bored with that and went back to Ohio to live with his mother. “What about him?”

“My ex called me up a couple of nights ago to tell me he died.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s too bad, recently?”

“Naw, last summer, July.”

Wendt grunted. “That’s two more new poets we can account for.”

The drunk had sideswiped an empty table and a chair had overturned. Digger left to tend to business.

Another dead poet. Wendt felt like he was being spammed by the Dead Poets Society. *Please donate your body (of work).*

**You could always tell the military guys, even out of uniform.** They were the ones with the close cropped hair, wide eyes and loud mouths. They said things like “look at that!” and “let’s go there,” and “damn!” They draped themselves in players’ jerseys, and usually not the local brand, or ill-fitting team hoodies. They were mostly drunk and ran in packs of three to six, blocking the sidewalks with their gawking. They were headed for the topless joints up the street, and later when they were drunker and stupider, Chinatown. Wendt watched one such group pass by the front of the bistro, one of the young men towering above his cohorts made even taller by the large black Stetson perched on his pale head. This was the West after all.

He watched a young couple at a nearby table stand and don their coats, the man briefly glancing at his watch. The woman spoke on her cell phone. They exchanged glances, stepped down to the sidewalk and out between two parked cars to flag the passing cab.

It looked like Murray at the wheel by the leather beret and the

medallion pinned to the front. Wendt had caught Murray's cab more than a few times before and knew him to be a strange duck. He claimed that the medallion was apotropaic, to ward off the evil eye since being a cab driver you came into contact with a lot of people and some of them could give you the evil eye. Which, of course, was total bullshit. The medallion had an intricate lacquered design that if looked at closely revealed the portrayal of a hairy vagina. It was interesting enough that someone sufficiently curious, mainly a woman, would want to look closer and receive a shock. It was Murray's equivalent of a joy buzzer. He'd come to the city during the great loon migration of the sixties and had accepted the personae of the prankster after numerous transpersonal experiences aided by whatever psychotropic was available. He still lived on Oak with some of the very people, a commune known as The Coy Okies, he had joined up with when he first arrived. Since then he'd developed into a first class mindfucker.

**They were standing at the railing** when he first noticed them, three he knew and the other a fresh face. They approached him like a delegation, Enny, Meany, Miney, and Mo. The one in front, a short man who shaved his head, Paul Ruiz, a North Beach poet, claimed to be the Picasso of poetry, not because of his writing style, but because of a slight resemblance to the aged painter. It might not have occurred to him that at his age Picasso still had a full head of hair. With him were Stoddard Leary and Michael Brazon who like to be called Michel. Brazon claimed to be a surrealist but in actuality his style was mostly comic book lists of prepositional phrases.

"Carl, so good to see you," Ruiz proclaimed with collegial bluster.

Wendt returned their nodded salutes. "Gentlemen? I assume. Have a seat." He moved his wine glass within easy reach. Now the games would begin.

Stod sat next to him, the skin of his stubbled lank cheeks graven with deep creases as if his face were eroding. A bird's nest of tangled sandy and gray hair perched atop his narrow head, the bags under his eyes like the folds of mauve drapery. "This is James Shue, he's a documentary film maker!"

Fresh Face was indeed fresh faced. He affected a certain look that Wendt couldn't quite place. It was retro in a style that had never lost cred with certain types, the rough workman's checkered shirt, the dark workman's chinos, the work boots. It was rugged and outdoorsy except

that this kid's outfit had not been worn anywhere that might have been considered outdoorsy or rugged. A shock of dark hair had dropped across his forehead. Wendt reach across the table and shook his hand. "Jim? Carl Wendt."

"Uh, James. Carl, wow, great to meet you!" Fresh face turned into bright face. "I love your work!"

Wendt always felt a little uncomfortable when presented with such gushing proclamations. They made him uneasy, as if someone had just said I fucked your mother, or your daughter or your son. Or even your wife, though that could often be expected. It was too close, too personal. It was as if someone were talking about something of which they knew nothing, something that only he knew. But he got over it. "Yeah? Thanks, I get that a lot."

Michel and Paul had dragged over chairs to ring the small café table. This had attracted the waiter and he stood by, attentive.

"You boys buying?" Wendt asked, voicing the waiter's query.

Everyone turned and focused on Fresh Face who acted as if there were no question about it, of course he was buying. He indicated the group at the table. "Whatever they're drinking, and I'll have an iced tea."

Wendt took in the sincere good natured expression of the fresh face. Stranger in a strange land, he mused, and then it came to him. Jack Kerouac. That was the look he was affecting, a young Jean-Louis.

Stod had anticipated his trajectory. "Guess who he's making a documentary about." His grin showed the gap of a missing eyetooth.

Wendt took his time. "Well that's a hard one. Let's see. He's being escorted around by three North Beach poets. Let me ask you this, Jim, have you been to the bookstore?" He indicated up the street with his thumb.

The film maker, bright as a carbon arc, nodded his chin eagerly. "Oh yeah, we were filming there earlier today. I interviewed Lawrence."

"And Vesuvio's?"

"Oh yeah, but the light in there is really bad. But we got Frances Fitzpatrick to say some things."

"Pompous asshole." Michel interjected.

"Kyle McKenzie, too. The Scottish poet."

"He's not Scottish, he's from Dubuque. We were at Iowa at the same time," Stod insisted.

"He was kind of out of it. Wanted money before he'd talk on camera, and then he got really abusive. I don't think we're going to be able to

use any of that footage.”

“And then you ended up with Larry, Moe and Curly.”

Bright face dimmed into a forced embarrassed smile. “They’ve been extremely helpful.”

“Yeah, fuck you, Wendt,” Michel spit in a fit of faux Gallic pique.

“Merely a term of camaraderie and endearment. And at least they’re a household name.” Wendt could see that Stod was getting impatient and about to blurt. “Ok, if I had to guess, and this would be a wild guess.” He paused. The waiter set out their drinks, replacing Wendt’s empty with a full. “Jack Kerouac.” He was greeted with a gallery of grins. And almost as if in unison the four poets hoisted their drinks in salute. “To Jack.”

“Carl, James would like to interview you as well.” Ruiz looked up from his drink. “If you’d consent.”

“For a documentary on Kerouac? I was barely out of high school when he died. What do I know? I read him. I never met him.”

“But you’re of the first generation of writers to be influenced by him. Besides, most of the writers of his generation are dead. . . .”

“So you go to a secondary source.”

“And those alive don’t have anything new to add. . . .”

“I don’t know what you mean by new.”

“Insights, anecdotes.”

“Sounds like the makings of a legend.”

“Oh yeah, that’s why I’m making this documentary. I think he’s a great American writer, the greatest.”

“Ok, I’ll do an interview. But, like McKenzie, I want the money up front.” And as if to allay the shuttered suspicion, added, “You’ll get your money’s worth.”

A group of conservatively dressed young men and women passed by singing hymns, the repent brigade out to save more souls and condemn sinners, but also an excuse for vicarious titillation. They were topless joints after all.

Jim Shue paid for another round. Wendt agreed to Wednesday, around noon. Shue gave Wendt his card. Wendt didn’t have a card. Nor cell phone number. Or cell phone. The young film maker frowned. He’d barely touched his ice tea. Wendt assured him he’d be at the Red Hen at the appointed time, but would need half up front as a guarantee. The three poets brought their drinks to their lips to hide their smiles. You had to hand it to Wendt, and the next time they ran into him, he

would be obliged to spring for a round.

After a pregnant silence, the young man broached the subject of the interview fee. And after a deliberate moment, Wendt explained that his standard fee was a hundred dollars, and then paused in consideration of Stod's eyebrows furiously pushing the folds of forehead upward, adding that that was the amount of the advance, but since it was about Kerouac, his own personal hero, he would accept seventy five in advance. The film maker rolled his eyes to the left in a quick calculation before agreeing. And then Wendt explained that he'd have to have the remaining one hundred twenty-five before they started the interview.

**Enrico's began filling with patrons**, most of them tourists who tried to appear unobtrusive while gawking at the adjoining tables. The celebrities usually stayed away on weekend nights unless they were really needy or escorting friends from out of town, and Enrico's was a place to be seen by the sight seers. Ruiz, Brazon, and Leary traded lies with each other in a competition to impress the young filmmaker and charm him into picking up yet another round.

Then the contingent arrived, a well-dressed gaggle gathering at the entrance to the terrace and surveying the availability of table space. There were at least half a dozen of them trying to position themselves in close proximity to the elderly man with the beige topcoat draped over his shoulders, graying hair, long, covering his ears in the Wildean style, a narrow chin to match a narrow nose pointed toward the heavens. Wendt recognized him from the picture that had accompanied the review of his new book of poems, *Ion Eon*, in the Sunday paper's book section. Charles St Charles. It appeared that Diane McCracken and her sycophants had joined him.

No one area of the terrace held enough vacant tables to accommodate the group. There was a table in close proximity to Wendt's that was empty and another at the far side of the café. One of Lady Di's minions ran interference with the waiter as Diane approached a couple at a nearby table, gesturing to her party and then to the empty table across the way. The guy shrugged in agreement though the woman with him didn't look pleased and raked Diane with a narrowed glare. Diane barely noticed the challenge. She had already turned to face Wendt and his coterie. She smiled a phony but effective smile. "Carl, darling, be a dear and let us borrow your table." The empty table and the recently vacated table were being pushed together and chairs rearranged. The addition of Wendt's

table would have probably accommodated Charles St Charles and friends. But it wasn't that easy. Although she was practiced at walking on hot coals, ignoring veiled innuendo, spoken or displayed, Diane McCracken had just stuck her hand into a bag of snakes.

Brazon's fury was most evident, his face contracting like a bright red rubber ball squeezed by the hand of anger and resentment. He bared his bad teeth, spittle forming at the edges of his mouth. He was going for apoplectic. He mouthed the words a few times before they became audible as if he were getting a running start. What came out was remarkably mild. "It isn't his table to lend."

Diane looked down at him as if she couldn't believe she'd actually been spoken to. Stoddard spoke up. "No way we're gonna leave." He held up his half full glass of beer. "Still got time on the meter, lovely Rita." This was getting to be more than she could stand. Paul Ruiz looked down at his hands to avoid seeing Diane's eyeballs spin in disbelief that she was actually being refused. Young Shue looked on, bewildered, having no idea who this woman was, trying to impose her will on them.

Wendt smiled and spread his hands in the helpless gesture. "Sorry about that Lady Di, looks like I've been out-voted."

The woman frowned down at him and then as if night had suddenly turned to day, she smiled. "Oh, no, no, please, you've misunderstood what I meant. I mean why don't you join our tables so that we can all sit together? Carl, I don't know if you've met Charles St Charles." She motioned to the man in the camel overcoat and he ambled over, a question mark for an expression. He was accompanied by a nondescript woman with a pinched face and a permanent frown creasing a pale forehead. Diane made the introduction. "Charles, this is Carl Wendt. Carl, Charles St Charles.

The white haired man smiled faintly and extended his hand. "Carl, nice to meet you. I've heard so much about you." He looked up at Wendt with a calculating gaze. "I didn't realize you were such a large man."

Wendt smiled, "Well, not Charles Olson large, but yeah, I'm topping six foot." What about you, five five with the platforms, Wendt was wise enough not to add. "Good meeting you too, Charlie. That was a nice review in the Sunday paper book section."

"Oh yes, I saw that. By Mike Seaton. I have no idea who that is, but it was very sweet nonetheless. I'm surprised I didn't meet him tonight at



the reading.”

Wendt said nothing but knew that if Mike had been there St Charles would have been well aware of the man humping his leg. As it was Mike was probably too drunk to find the door to leave his apartment. “Yeah, I would have been there too, but I had a prior engagement.”

St Charles cast a disapproving glance at Wendt’s table mates. “Ah, yes, surprisingly there was quite a crowd. I didn’t realize that my work was so well appreciated out here.” Lady Di had indicated a place for St Charles away from the obviously lower caste scribblers but the gray haired poet chose to situate himself at the table drawn up next to Wendt’s where, if they wished, they could hold a conversation.

“Well, we may be provincial here on the left coast but we do read.” Brazon’s attempt at sarcasm was nasal and hysterical, too much venom and not enough barb. But it did merit a glare from St Charles.

Wendt chuckled and indicated his table mates. “Charlie, allow me to introduce some of the city’s finest poets.” This statement drew dark scowls from Lady Di and Marguerite Sayrah, the prim woman who had accompanied St Charles and whom everyone referred to as *Kay*. Wendt continued the introduction as if he were the ring announcer at a prize fight. “Michael, I mean, Michel Brazon, renowned surrealist, editor of the surrealist publication *Ton Trou*. Stoddard Leary, accomplished poet and essayist, and professor of creative writing at New Arts Institute, Frisco.” St Charles rose slightly from his chair to shake Brazon’s hand and then Leary’s in turn. “Yes, Stoddard, didn’t you have an article in a recent Pan-American Poetry eReview?”

Leary seemed startled and pleased that someone beside his intimate associates had paid attention to that piece. “More of an editorial than an article.”

“More of a letter to the editor,” Brazon sniggered. Stoddard appeared not the least bit perturbed and ignored his cohort as Wendt continued with the introductions. “Uh, Jim,” he indicated the faux Kerouac youngster who practically leapt the table to grasp the old poet’s hand. “James, James Shue, so nice to make your acquaintance.” Wendt added, “He’s a documentary film maker.”

That seemed to pique St Charles’ interest. “Really? What are you working on currently?”

“Kerouac,” Ruiz interjected, “A documentary on Kerouac, Charles. Hi, Paul Ruiz. We met once before at the IWC.” And at St Charles’ blank look, “the Intermountain Writer’s Conference in Denver?”

St Charles shook the hand with a narrowing of his eyes as if that would recall the precise time. He smiled blankly, the effort not worth it. “Yes, of course. Paul?” and let go the hand. If nothing else the reply highlighted the awful fact of Ruiz’s fawning. But fawning is like a driving wheel and once it gets rolling it goes until someone puts on the breaks or it runs out of steam.

“Uh, yes, we spoke at the end of the panel discussion on metrical irregularities in Post Modern American Poetry. Yours were the most telling points of the evening if you don’t mind my saying so. Conrad Endorf was not only rude but way off base. I think. . .”

Wendt watched in amusement as St Charles squirmed in the obviously awkward onslaught of sycophantism. He liked his yes men to be a little more circumspect. His ploy to bring the litany of ass kissing to an end was to draw attention to Ruiz which was what Ruiz had been angling for all along.

“Ruiz was Picasso’s father’s family name. I see you have a likeness of Pablo printed on your tee shirt. And I’d be blind if I didn’t notice that there is a resemblance between the image and you.” The grin on Paul’s face was wide enough to rip it in half and backlit by a coloring of pink embarrassment. For some people the attention they desire is often something they have no taste for or it is more than they can contend with. The reality trumps the fantasy and they are uncomfortably naked. But Ruiz had asked for it. “And Paul,” St Charles continued, “is Pablo in Spanish. The writing says, ah, yes, an oft repeated quote but with some contention as to its authenticity. *‘je cherche pas, je trouve,’* I search not, I find.”

“Yes, yes,” Paul came back, his embarrassment receding to an unnatural boldness, “I’ve heard it translated as ‘why look, I found it.’”

It was St Charles’ turn to be taken aback. “That’s creative.”

Brazon weighed in since he felt that he was the de facto faux Frenchman. “Technically, that translates as Charles says, as *je*, I, *cherche*, search or look for, *pas*, not, and *je* again, I, *trouve*, find. However there is a greater subtlety to what Picasso is saying. Essentially what he’s saying is don’t fucking bother looking because I already fucking found it!” Brazon’s laugh was that of a squeaky wheel of an office chair being dragged across a plate metal floor. Everyone else merely managed a guffaw or a wan smile.

Stoddard had been watching Wendt who seemed to be drawing back like a bystander at a mud fight. Maybe it was time to splash the observer.

“Ah think it means ‘what, what, where?’” Stoddard pronounced with a Southern drawl, “Whadyou think it says, Wendt?”

Wendt didn’t lose his benign smile though his eyes did harden as if to say *thanks, motherfucker*. He raised his hand almost defensively. “Ah, French is not my strong suite.”

“Now come on, Carl, don’t be modest. You’ve published translations of Blanchnoir, Serge Ragut, Follain, Ricane.”

“Oh yeah, well that was back when I was dating Val Richards. She grew up in France as an embassy brat. We translated some poets together when we weren’t fucking or eating. Come to think about it, I lost about fifteen pounds when I was with her. Guess I didn’t do that much eating. Food, anyway.”

“Valarie Richards?” It was as if a small bulb had lit up under the tan parchment of St Charles’ face. “I was a judge for the Nickerson Award, what was it now, ten, fifteen years ago? She was hands down the best poet who submitted work. Unfortunately, there was a political choice that the foundation insisted be made and so she was short listed. Whatever happened to her?” He smiled expecting good news. The looks of those he was addressing should have told him different.

Ruiz having been temporarily sidelined thought it was time to play his hand and regain the limelight by moving the subject back to himself. “Carl, I think your French is more than passable. You can at least venture a guess, can’t you?” With this last he flashed a triumphant grin at St Charles that was a bid for acceptance as well as redemption for his fawning.

The look wasn’t lost on Wendt whose shrug said “if that’s the way you want to play it.” He looked at the bottom of his empty wine glass and then fixed Ruiz with a hard stare. “It could mean pretty much what everyone has said it meant, but there is an underlying Cartesian element, Paul, that should make sense to you, ‘I think therefore I am lost.’”

There was an echo of chortles from those within earshot. Ruiz retracted into his chair like a turtle into its shell. St Charles’ veiled smile indicated that he knew he was in the company of a sharp wit and that he should proceed with caution. Now others were bidding for his attention and with a nod to Wendt, engaged those for whom his presence was a great honor or at least that was what could be gleaned from their comments.

The kid paid for another round at their table but less cheerfully so. More people arrived standing around looking for empty tables or chairs

in the vicinity of the visiting poet. Not a few hostile stares were directed at the table occupied by Wendt and company. Brazon chuckled, "The Noë Valley elite want a seat." That remark overheard was greeted with full face disapproval that included the wrinkled nose of you stink. The poets nursed their drinks gleefully knowing that they were occupying territory the literary swells thought belonged to them.

**Presently the terrace filled with literary types** as if a tour bus had just dropped off a load of poetry tourists. Wendt was known to about half of those in the crowd, either by reputation or acquaintance. He searched the faces for ones that he had not seen in a while. There were many nods of chins and waves of hand when they caught his eye. Those he owed money he discreetly avoided. He spotted the Gonzales twins, Jorge and Luis, the rising stars in the gay Latino literary scene. They were like mannequins, perfectly posed, every move of the head or hand designed to be yet another in a sequence of narcissistic statements. They could have cared less about Charles St Charles. They were there to be seen. An earnest young man with pleading eyes spoke sincerely to St Charles whose cheeks appeared rigid with boredom and having heard it all before. He saw that Wendt was watching and gave a grim smile which totally confused the acolyte as it was obviously the wrong reaction to what he was saying.

Wendt caught sight of Andy Porter in a long tweed coat and tan scarf at the edge of the crowd. When he saw Wendt he pushed past a knot of bodies and came to stand behind him. Andy was almost as tall as Wendt with a bedraggled mop of ginger brown hair and a scraggly chin beard. His eyes were the color of glee, but he was young. "Hey, old man."

"Andy, haven't seen you in a while, what you been up to?"

Porter shrugged, "It's a long story."

"Did you go hear St. Charles?" His tone was moderately incredulous. He knew that St. Charles was not Porter's cup of tea.

"No, no, my granny's birthday. We went out to dinner." He held his coat open to display the suit and tie.

"Country club?"

"Yeah. Marta texted me. *'The party is going to Enrico's.'* So I made my excuses, and here I am." The noise level had risen to the point that made conversation difficult. "Let's get together sometime this next week."

Wendt nodded and made the mental note that he could wait till mid-week to hit Porter up for a loan. "How about the BeBop on Clement?"

“Thursday, ok? 12:30, 1?”

Wendt nodded again and then understood that he could no longer stand the complaints of his bladder. The fresh faced documentary maker was engaged with another fresh face, a young woman who by the cut of her jib seemed to be bright and intelligent. He would hate to have to break that up but that’s what he planned. When he got back from the men’s room.

He stood up and motioned Andy to the chair. “Porter, save my chair till I get back.”

Andy dropped obligingly into the seat and turned to talk to the person sitting next to him. Stoddard grabbed Wendt’s arm. “You’re not leaving, are you, buddy?” He said it with a jerk of his head toward the filmmaker who looked like he was about to fall into the wide pools of the girl’s eyes.

“Naw, gotta go to the can.”

He pushed the door open to the lavatory. It was a typical square gray tile affair, one wide stall, wheelchair compliant, and a urinal. A man was standing at the urinal, his head cocked toward the door. Another man stood at the small sink and ran water over his hands. The man was Reginald Meyer, former book editor for the daily. “Hey, Reg,” Wendt said as he tested the door to the stall.

“Fuck you, Wendt!”

“Get over it, Reg.”

“Fuck you!”

“Occupied,” came a voice from the closed stall. The man at the urinal was zipping up and Wendt stepped to the urinal. The man considered waiting for the sink but thought better of it catching a glimpse of Meyer’s contorted goatee in the mirror. “If I had a gun I’d shoot you!” Meyer punched the hand dryer. It gave a metallic cough and then a high pitched whine.

“If you had a gun, you’d shoot your dick off.” Wendt answered, smiling to himself and emptying his tank. He shouldn’t hold it for so long. It couldn’t be good for him.

“What did you say?” Meyer’s tone was pugnacious. He was a short man with close cropped gray hair and a lopsided goatee who believed that everyone slighted him because of his height and the chip on his shoulder was there to make him appear taller.

Wendt had turned and was zipping up. Meyer, stiff as a stake, both hands clenched at his sides, didn’t notice the door being pushed open.

“You want to do what? Reg, how I could respect you after that?” He

laughed and pushed past the man entering who by his startled look wasn't quite sure what he'd stumbled into.

Wendt felt the need for a cigarette. He glanced at the packed terrace. The waiters were frantically trying to get to as many people as possible. They were anticipating a good night of tips, both proffered and accidental. Some of the crowd had wandered into the dining area of the bistro. Surely someone among all the assembled must have a cigarette, a cigarette and a spare twenty? That didn't seem too much to ask.

The redhead at the bar had fixed him with a stare. When she noticed that he noticed she smiled slowly as if reeling in a line. Wendt was congenitally curious. He ambled over to where she was standing. "Got a cigarette?"

That might not have been exactly what she was expecting. She smiled a wary smile. "Yes, I do," placing a large designer purse in the space on the bar between them. "Do you mind filters?" and dug into the recesses of the black leather bag. The bag matched her sleek black dress with the cowl collar that essentially acted as a basin to collect the flow of her luxuriant carrot colored hair. She had a round pale face not overly made up so she wasn't ashamed of her freckles. She reminded him of that ginger bird who had married into the Royal Family, what was her name, probably a Scotty, too. "Oh damn," she swore and held up an empty pack. "Do you think they sell them here at the bar? I could buy another."

Wendt didn't reply, transfixed by the abyss of her ample cleavage.

She held out her hand. "Let me introduce the rest of myself. Hi, I'm Kathleen MacNamara. Everyone calls me Mac."

"Mac, a true pleasure to meet you, I'm Carl. . . ."

"Yes, I know, Carl Wendt. I asked the clerk at the bookstore who you were. I was there when you popped in earlier this evening."

"I must have been blind."

"I even bought your book." She reached into her bag again and retrieved a paper bag with the store logo on the front. She held the book out to him as proof. "Would you sign it?" And produced a pen from her purse as well.

Wendt flipped open to the title page of *Synthetic Lament* and poised the pen, "Katy was it?"

"Mac is fine, I haven't been Katy since I was in pigtails."

She was only a few inches shorter than Wendt and fixed him with her impish green eyes. He smiled and handed her the book. "That couldn't have been too long ago."

She showed him her perfect white teeth like the cream filling of a scarlet icing pastry. "I bet you say that to all the girls."

Meyer had come out of the men's room and made a point of coming over to spit a final

"Fuck you, Wendt!"

Mac raised an eyebrow in near censure.

Wendt shrugged, "A fan."

The barman shook his head, and pointed in a direction up the street in answer to Wendt's question. "No, we don't sell cigarettes here, but you can get them at the convenience store up on the corner of Grant."

"Why don't we do that," Mac said as she pulled a sheer black jacket off the back of the barstool and shouldered her purse.

"Yeah, sure, cool."

They made their way through the crowd on the terrace. The first thing he noticed was that Jim Shue was no longer at the table nor was the young charmer he'd been talking to. The kid was going to pay him an advance for the interview and now he'd taken off. He was about to get a read on what was going on from Stod when he saw Brazon push his chair back and get unsteadily to his feet. Wendt had seen this routine before. Someone in the crowd must have set him off and he was getting prepared to launch into one of his surrealist tirades that actually owed a lot to the example of Gregory Corso. He also noticed that St Charles, surrounded by his admirers, seemed a little distracted or confused, and when he saw Wendt, managed a wan smile. Wendt waved and Andy waved back thinking he'd waved at him. Andy also flashed a discreet thumbs-up.

As they were about to step to the sidewalk, Courtney La Roche and David Bloom happened to be standing there, trying to decide whether or not they should attempt the crowd. Courtney's features hardened when she noticed Mac and it gave her smile a slight malicious air. Bloom had an air of anticipation about him and Wendt knew exactly what it meant.

"Mind if I catch you later on that twenty? I had to pay off my bar tab." He didn't care if Bloom believed him or not.

He clapped Wendt on the elbow familiarly and said, "Listen, why don't we just consider that a down payment on your participation in the memorial reading for Ian Blake." He said it like that would be the end of it.

"I'm going to have to get back to you on that, pal." Wendt felt like a

prick, but now was no time to haggle.

“We’ll be here when you get back.” Courtney said and almost immediately felt stupid.

“Students?” Mac muttered the question as they trudged up the incline to the corner and then up Columbus to Grant.

“Naw, I’m not a professor, never have been. They’re just a couple of kids, writers I know.” He held the door of the liquor store open for her. “I’ve done some bad things in my day. Teaching creative writing isn’t one of them.”

**Wendt stared at the ember of his cigarette** and then up and across the thicket of masts and antennas at the fog bank blocking his view of the Rock. It was big and gray, a lot like what was resting between his ears at the moment, a big mass of humid air that obscured all. In decades of living in the city he had never been in a motel room on Fisherman’s Wharf, let alone one with a balcony. The rough cold breeze off the bay pressed his shirt against his chest. The chill made his eyes water. His nose suffered the numb isolation of an extremity.

He could never be a teacher. Besides, at his age? Deny something and its potential truth emerges. It was the power of negativity. The seed planted.

He replayed a memory of part of Kathleen’s. . .Mac’s monologue that at times had sounded too well rehearsed and part of her personal myth, something she trotted out to draw herself for a new acquaintance, probably with a variation for guys, and one for women. At other times it was as if she had just uncovered something about herself that she never knew or had just found the words to express, a confession of hesitant innocence. She’d offered to buy him a pack of smokes as well, but he’d declined, claiming that he was trying to quit which was the truth, he just hadn’t been very successful.

In the cab over she explained that she had been taking a creative writing class at the community college in the *hills*. He had not understood where that was and she had to explain that it was in the hills overlooking San Leandro and Hayward and Fremont, in the East Bay. *Chabot*. That was the name of the college. Wendt had heard of it but didn’t really know where it was. Ditto for the other places she had mentioned. She was proud of the fact that she had taken the same class for over five years and not just for credit any more. Borden Colm had been her creative writing teacher for all that time. She was fond of him, disappointed when



he didn't return from his camping trip in the Sierras last fall. He'd been despondent over the break-up with his longtime partner. Everyone said.

Wendt knew Borden, or of him. He'd been in the same room with him at a party in a Berkeley of so many years ago. They'd never been introduced. What Wendt knew of him and his group was that they worshiped Charles Olson. Who was someone that Colm insisted that his students read, Mac explained. She admitted that she didn't get Olson right away. Or all the time. And now the woman who replaced Colm, Sandra Pruitt, preferred a little known Argentinean woman poet whose name she couldn't remember, and had said as much, that Olson was not worth their time.

Wendt knew Sandy Pruitt and said nothing. But Pruitt, according to Mac, was only there temporarily because she was applying to some doctoral program in Boston. Maybe Wendt should apply for the job, he was a well-known poet after all, and Mac was positive that he'd be a great teacher.

She had pressed her body up against his in the back seat of the cab and if Wendt hadn't had the idea before, he got it quickly. As did little Carl. She'd laughed, a chortle actually, as she sensed or felt the effect of her closeness, the satin of her dress making a sound, an almost metallic sound, and shifted again into a position that put her more or less in his lap. By then they were at the motel.

She was married. No kids. Her husband was an assistant service manager for a big dealership in Fremont. She had her own business, hosting intimate apparel parties and selling a line of boutique lingerie and accessories, all very high-end and not in the least bit slutty, in her opinion, like the Fredericks line. She found poetry, the company of poets, stimulating, so intellectual. Their ideas left her head spinning for days. She went to all the big readings though she had missed his, when was that, three years ago, at State? She'd ticked off the names of the poets she was acquainted with, including some newly familiar to him, Ian Blake and Morgan Tilson, both deceased, and names he knew, Leon Rebut, Oscar Cleve, also recently passed, and of course, Larry, still very much alive and kicking. She had introduced herself to St Charles after the reading but a pushy Doris Day bitch she at first thought was a transvestite had cut in just as she had started up a conversation with him.

She'd found the keycard in her voluminous purse and slid it in the slot, pausing to look over her shoulder at him, teasingly, as she pushed open the door.

Wendt knew the type. Early forties maybe, the second awakening, this time to the vast potential of sensuality. Fearless in their headlong determination not to appear weak or indecisive. He was respectful, but wary.

He flicked his cigarette away and watched it bounce on the cement sidewalk below, a feeble ember separating itself from the butt and extinguishing. The room went dark and what little light that had escaped onto the balcony was no longer there. He would have been completely in the dark had it not been for the bath of orange from the parking lot standards illuminating and reflected on the rooftops of the neatly angled row of dark cars. He couldn't immediately find the handle to slide the door open into the room.

Inside was pitch black. He peered over to where he knew there was a bed and tried to discern a shape, a shape languorously awaiting him. He began to unbutton his shirt. The noise was behind him. Before he could react he was propelled by a fairly powerful shove onto the bed. She straddled and pinned him to the mattress. Briefly he panicked, a taste of adrenaline biting his tongue. Now that his eyes had adjusted to the vague light coming in through the sheer drapes and the seam of fluorescent white from the partially closed bathroom door, he caught the merriment and mischief in her expression, a smile that could almost be called ferocious. She reached behind her back and then leaned forward to release the twins.

Ah, Wendt mused, the mountains have come to the Poet.

# week

*"I'd better be a poet or lay down dead"*

—Jack Kerouac

**The bear trap was still firmly attached** to the back of Wendt's head. Pain throbbed down either side and in the hollow at the back of his neck radiating icy shocks across his shoulders, the steel teeth tearing holes into the top of his skull. Even his eyeballs hurt. Not the typical penalty for over-imbibing, it had come out of nowhere the day before. No matter how he twisted or rotated or stretched did the discomfort loosen its grip.

He rolled over under the blanket listening to the familiar is-it-Monday-already-get-Samantha-off-to-school scramble with slamming doors and running footsteps as well as Angela's loud whispered demands for quiet. After his shower, he dressed and ambled down to the empty kitchen for coffee.

Angela had overslept. The coffee wasn't made. He was looking for the coffee filters when he saw the note on the whiteboard tacked to the refrigerator door. He had thrown the plastic tray from his frozen dinner in the garbage, not the recycling Angela hated to remind him. Again. It was easier to go out for coffee than upset the delicate ecological balance of Angie's kitchen.

Moisture edged his bedroom window and he craned his neck for a look at the sky. A gray presence hung over the distant line of cypress like a lead quilt and told him nothing. The daily had predicted a late season shower. No way to tell if it had come or gone. He came back down the stairs adjusting his shoulders into the three quarter-length leather jacket. The inside left pocket yielded a long forgotten cigarette. He patted his pants pocket to feel the presence of his keys and the thumb drive.

The streets were dark and wet and the wheels of passing cars spoke a sound like *slick*. A getting-ready-to-rain-again gray gloom hunched his shoulders and turned up his collar. Gusts blew drops against his back.

At the Korean doughnut shop Wendt bought his usual cruller and coffee with the change left over from the twenty he had borrowed from Mac. The yellow crime scene tape had been taken down and an elderly Asian woman was washing the spray of blood off the wall. The daily had made it out to be a gang killing. The cruller tasted of fish oil, the coffee,

barely that, too. Wendt didn't recognize a single face behind the counter. Apparently there had been a changing of the guard. And they were cutting costs.

Wendt strode across Geary at Ninth and headed for the library to check his email. Angela used to let him use her computer until she discovered that he'd been surfing porn. Now he had to queue up like the rest of the unemployed, homeless and ne'er-do-wells. Usually there was nothing but self-serving drivel, junk and announcements. Once in a while a note from people he hadn't heard from in years and couldn't understand why, unless they owed him money, he should care. And it was never that. Other times there was nothing. And that left him feeling vaguely disappointed.

A security guard was talking to a homeless man who had a filthy green army blanket draped over one shoulder and looked like he had just awakened from a twelve thousand year sleep. As Wendt pulled open the plate glass door, he recognized the man. He was known as Shitter Magee and perpetually surrounded by an aura of his own stench which lent the truth to his name. He was the regent of reek. The guard looked as if he were holding his breath and at the same time keeping Magee from entering. It used to be that you just had to be quiet in the library. To that was added your personal olfactory offensiveness couldn't be loud enough to wake the dead.

Staff librarian Coralene Purlee greeted him with a curt formality. He returned her greeting with a nod. She was a short robust black woman in her mid-fifties who always dressed in a brown pants suit accessorized with a gold pin above her name tag. The pin depicted a mule. She'd been the librarian at this branch for as long as he could remember, easily a dozen years.

The new staff librarian's little gold name tag simply read *Lydia S.* Wendt always attempted friendly small talk but Lydia, hair dyed orange or green or blue or jet black or any combination of those colors, greeted attempts at personal interaction with a glower. Her black lipstick matched her attire and the double lip piercings gave her a bruised pained pout complimenting the nose ring, the eyebrow piercings and the Chinese ideogram tattooed on her neck. Wendt had made the mistake of asking her if it really meant "cut here."

When Wendt rounded the corner into the computer alcove, he noticed that there was a line waiting for the next available terminal even though one of the spaces was unoccupied. He made a beeline for it and then stopped short as he reached the empty chair. There was a reason no

one was sitting there. The stench of sewer suggested that Shitter Magee had recently checked his email.

After leafing through a well-thumbed back issue of *Art In America* and being reminded once again that the bar for the art of bullshit among bullshit artists was constantly being lowered to accommodate all the bullshit art, Wendt took a cubicle vacated by a heavily made up young Latina dressed in a fashionable skirt, blouse and jacket—a job seeker from the serious expression of her rouged high cheekbones. Some of her personal scent lingered and distracted him momentarily as he tried to bring to mind the password to his account.

There appeared to be over a week's worth of email. He deleted the penis enlargement come-ons and on-line drug pitches. That left a dozen or so legit messages, about half of them announcements for up-coming literary events. He zapped the four that were either out of the area or for writers he'd never heard of or didn't want to hear of. Two of the readings looked like they might attract a good crowd, one later in the week. He noted it on an index card he retrieved from his inside jacket pocket.

Then the announcement for the North Bay Writers Conference. He'd been a guest panelist for the last three years, thanks to his old friend and wino, Steve Merna, who taught in the English Department at the State college up in wine country. He scrolled through the names on the announcement twice before realizing that he was not listed, not on any of the panels as he had been in years previous or as one of the celebrity readers. He flinched. Their generous honorarium usually got him through the lean summer months.

He didn't remember having given Mac his email address but there was a thank you note that expressed the hope that they would meet again soon and in the not too distant future. He was almost certain he hadn't given it to her. He wasn't sure how he felt about that. He did have to admit that she had a way with acrobatics that had been uplifting.

Dick Granahan's post had been sent to undisclosed recipients. He greeted all his friends and invited them to check out his blog at the provided *url*. Wendt was fond of 'Grannyhand,' but he didn't have time for no stinking blogs.

A long convoluted email from Ron Fellowes of PS Press in Portland, sounding very hyper and depressed at the same time, demanded his attention. Yes, they were going to publish his book but there had been some unforeseen delays. And it was possible that his former business partner, Derek Muller, would no longer be associated with the project or

the press for that matter. Hence the publication date of *Hip Gnosis* would have to be pushed back to the spring of the following year. The abject apologies were almost too painful to read. So far it was not shaping up to be an incredibly positive morning.

He opened the one from somebody Russell with suspicion. The first sentence reminded him. Russell Kennston, the kid professor from City College, sounding him out about an in-class talk to his group of advanced writing students. Wendt shuddered. Then he got over it. There was a small discretionary budget from which he could draw a fee, the kid explained. Wendt replied that they should meet for lunch soon. He'd have to hammer out the details, make sure to ascertain the amount budgeted for speakers and adjust his fee accordingly. If nothing else, it meant a free lunch and drinks.

**Wendt heard his name in Spanish** as he was about to step off the curb. It was the driver of the library maintenance van coming out of the service access waiting to turn into traffic. The driver's side window was open and a hairy arm with a big gold wristwatch beckoned him. He recognized Ricardo Rosario, one of El Salvador's leading poets. He was a stubby man with long sideburns, an angular nose and bushy eyebrows.

They exchanged names in their own languages.

"Carlos."

"Ricky."

Rosario may have been a literary luminary in his homeland, but in the city he worked as a janitor for the public library. "At least I am near books," he'd once consoled himself to Wendt. He had come to the States on the chance that because of his stature as a respected Latin American author he might find employment in one of the many fine universities or state colleges. He did have a PhD in European Studies from the University of San Salvador after all. Perhaps it was his affiliation with certain leftist groups through colleagues and old girl friends that made his acquiring a visa difficult. And his public excoriation of those who had murdered Dalton made it all but impossible for him to return to his native land. He'd been forced to adopt the identity and social security number of one Paul Hernandez, born in Lodi, and worked full time cleaning up after book worms.

"I thought you worked out of the Mission branch."

"Si. The guy who work here call in sick so I got to come over and clean up the mess."

"One guess. Shitter Magee."

“I don’t know why they let a guy like that in the library in the first place. The temple of the word. This guy come in and evacuate his bowels like he was in a stall.”

“Well, it’s a public place and he’s part of the public.”

“He should not be allowed to do his private in a public place. It’s like taking a crap in church.” Rosario swore at the traffic backed up at the light and blocking his access to the street.

“You heading back to the branch?”

“Yeah, need a lift?”

“I could, down to Fourteenth, Taqueria Catorce.”

Rosario looked over his shoulder. “We’re not supposed to give rides except for library business. But you have books in the library, right?”

“Last time I looked.”

“You’re one of our authors! That’s library business!”

Wendt belted himself in. About then a lane opened up and Rosario nosed the van into traffic. They exchanged the usual pleasantries of jaded men of the world, accomplished literary figures that they were. The weather then bits of gossip, distractedly.

Wendt brought up his coming eviction and asked Ricky to keep an eye out for a cheap apartment in his Glen Park neighborhood. Rosario replied that he would be glad to put Wendt up until he found something permanent except that his wife’s cousin had just come up from El Salvador and was staying with them. Her and her three kids. Wendt thanked Rosario for the offer and then lapsed into an embarrassed silence that included trying to figure out what to do with his hands.

“You got a cigarette, Ricky?”

“No, I quit, oh, about three months ago.” He rapped the dashboard with a knuckle. “So far, so good.”

“Yeah, I’m trying to quit, too,” Wendt said as he pulled the visor in front of him down just on the off chance. A half empty pack of Chesterfields fell into his lap. Who smoked Chesterfields anymore? Where could you even buy Chesterfields anymore?

“These yours?” Wendt held up the pack and fixed Ricky with a side-long glance.

Rosario didn’t blink. “No, not mine, Carlos. Must be that *cabron* on the night shift. something. . .Barragán, I don’t know, some unpronounceable Mick name.”

“Think he’d mind if I took one?”

Rosario shrugged as he turned from the left lane on a yellow. “I don’t care. Take them all. Fuck him.”

“I’ll just take one,” Wendt said as he slipped two into his jacket pocket.

**On the three block walk to the taqueria,** Wendt lit up and after a few puffs came to the conclusion that perhaps he should donate the remaining cigarettes to the Smithsonian. They were that stale. He spat the taste. He needed to quit. He wasn’t a track star from Mineola Prep anymore.

Taqueria Catorce was a run-of-the-mill taco joint, a narrow shotgun space with chairs and tables along the walls on either side of the path to the counter. But it was there that the illusion ended as the space doglegged to a larger open area outfitted with three back-to-back booths. Charlie Reyes sat at the far booth staring at the screen of a laptop with a serious expression. A black man of Cuban and Puerto Rican ancestry, he was copy editor for the weekly. The newspaper’s offices were on the floor above the restaurant. Every Monday Wendt met him here for lunch. Upon the completion of which Wendt would turn over his week’s column that he had copied onto the memory stick on his key ring. Charlie would then load the file onto his laptop. For that exchange he accepted a cash payment.

“Why so glum?”

Charlie looked up and gave Wendt a toothy greeting. He still sported a big disco mustache and sideburns, the half *pro* fitting like a fuzzy helmet on an almost perfect bowling ball head. “Aw, I’m not happy with the Giants’ pitching staff this year.”

“You’re not happy?! There are people being paid really big money to be unhappy about the Giants’ pitching game and here you are doing it for free!”

Charlie leaned back against the padded green cushion of the booth with an appreciative chuckle. He had known Wendt for half a dozen years, almost as long as he’d been with the weekly. It was Wendt who had introduced him to Clarissa. Wendt had officiated at their wedding. It was because of Wendt that he was the father of Jolie and Jade, the twins. Clarissa had drawn the line at making Carl godparent.

“I love baseball. It’s a great experience. I feel comforted just looking at a baseball diamond. It is for me typical of the formalized, unchanging stages on which a variety of chance human and spatial relationships can occur.”

“Just another name for the waiting game, a way to kill time.”

“Not a fan?”

“You know I’m not religious.”



“It’s baseball, Carl.”

“No, it’s a religion, an aimless religion. It has annual rites, collective hysteria. That alone qualifies it as a religion.”

A young girl with surly dark eyes dropped a plastic basket of tortilla chips between them along with two plastic cruets of red and green salsa.

“Baseball is a very subtle game, mathematical, but there’s poetry to it, a kind of spontaneous logic.”

“As any ritual should. It’s essentially an *agon*, a celebratory contest following high solemn rites. Only problem is that the solemn rites have been removed from the picture, unless you consider tailgate parties solemn rites, and so now you have an aimless contest that has more than just a few homoerotic overtones.”

“Ok, what are you talking about, homoerotic?”

“Well you have a bunch of young muscular guys running around in tight revealing outfits. They have a bat. They have balls. When they hit the ball with the bat, they explode into a run. And whether it is hit over the fence or another guy in tight fitting clothes catches it with a big leather contraption that could be an anus or a vagina, the spectators have a kind of mutual orgasm.”

“Ok, ok, I think I’ve heard this comedy routine before, George whatsisname, the funny hippy guy, right?”

“I don’t know, Charlie, maybe. I mean anybody with eyes can see what’s going on.”

“You’re saying it’s what, sex?”

“Of course it’s sex. No one wants to admit it though. Look, you get these highly paid prostitutes to prance around in a grassy meadow. It has a particular kind of titillation, will he or won’t he hit the ball, will he strike him out, walk him? And what’s with four balls? Who has four balls? Two guys, that’s who.”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute. . . .”

“If it’s gonna be about sex why not be up front about it. I mean, what’s the incentive to actually play the game as a real life and death contest? These guys are paid the big bucks to essentially go through the motions. So what if they lose. They still get paid. Why not make the consequences more interesting? Like the losing team has to forfeit something, something meaningful, their wives or their cars or their kids. Better yet, the losing team would draw straws and the one with the short straw would be killed. Ritually, of course.”

“Kinda like the Aztecs. Or gladiators.”

“Now that would be a contest with consequence. And if you knew

someone was going to be killed, you would bring a certain solemnity to your attendance and you would be prepared to be impressed by the real rather than the make-believe.”

“That’s kinda bloody, even for you, Carl.”

“You’re right. The winning team should be allowed to pick through the stands and fuck anybody they want. Big conjugal tents would be brought out after the game and people would be chosen by their ticket number and brought down to the field to have sex with the champions.”

“But the ticket holders could be women or men.”

“That’s a problem for you?”

“Well, no, though I could see attendance at games going way down. I mean who’s gonna want to be fucked by the opposing team.”

“Charlie, you’ve been a Giants fan too long. The home team could win. Think of the honor conferred on you at being fucked by the hometown champs. And when you lose to the visiting team, you’re being fucked by them anyway so why not be real about it?”

**“Draw it mild, tarbender.”** Wendt always spent the remainder of the afternoon, after his big Mexican lunch with Charlie, at Ben and Eileen’s place off of Eighteenth. It served the dark as dirt old sod stout. He had been coming to Dover’s Gentlemen’s Club almost from the day he arrived from the East Coast.

Apparently Beanie, as they were called collectively, were spending more and more of their time at Club D’Oeuvre, their new enterprise in Trieste. That’s what the pardender said setting the roiling column of primeval brew, creamy head a good two inches absolutely radiant with a beige inner light, between them.

“They’re setting the kid, Archibold, up with the business. And it’s close to the Dalmatian Riviera where they like to winter.”

“Archibold?”

“Yeah, family name, on the mother’s side.”

“No kidding. They call him ‘Arichibold?’”

“Naw, Boldie, or just Bold. He likes that.”

“So. Bold Dover?”

“Yeah. Pretty much.”

Wendt quaffed just enough to savor the earthy flavor resident in the foam.

“Did you hear?” Pat asked, one foot on the side of the metal sink where the washed glasses sat. “Grady O’Grady killed himself last week.”

Wendt looked up surprised, distracted from his veneration of the holy

quaff. "Grady who?"

"You know, Grady O'Grady, the Irish poet. He's famous."

"No, I don't think I've heard of him."

"Whaddya mean, you never heard of him? Aren't you're a poet?! Why don't you know him? Hell, it's O'Grady, man!"

Wendt shook his head. "No. I'm drawing a blank. Nothing even close. O'Grady, you say?"

"Oh for fucking Christ! Fucking O'Grady, Grady O'Grady!" Pat pointed at him with the mashed matchstick he took from his mouth.

"And his last name is the same as his first name?"

"Yeah, Grady, son of Grady. What's the big fucking deal?"

"Nothing. I just met a guy, also a poet, whose first name is the same as his last. Charles St. Charles. There's something sinister about that kind of symmetry."

"What, you have something against Irish poets?"

"No, no, not at all. I really love Yeats, and well, Brendan Behan, of course." Wendt's mind went blank, distracted. Each of the little expiring bubbles in the foam seemed to be calling his name. He could mention Seamus Heaney, but, as Bette Midler once said, why bother. Now he couldn't remember any other names. "James Joyce!" he blurted.

"He's not a poet."

"He writes like one."

"Agreed."

"George Russell."

"AE, yeah."

"Swift, Wilde."

"Granted."

"Robert Dillon."

"Who?"

"Beckett. And ok, how about Flann O'Brien?"

"Ah, yes, a distant relative you might say."

"I didn't know you were an O'Brien."

"I'm not," Pat emphasized with the curl of his lip. "Flann O'Brien's real name is Brian O'Nolan."

"I did not know that," Wendt said trying to sound interested. "So you're related to a literary celebrity. And you know me." He savored another taste tentatively. "I'm impressed."

"Well, and who the fuck are you? You write a bloody column that nobody reads in a sex and drugs advertiser. You say you're a poet. I've heard people say you're a poet. But I never heard any of your poetry."

Or read any.” Pat now had an elbow on the bar and leaned his head forward as if it were the prow of his attack.

Wendt took a long and considered drink letting the bitters wash around his gums and then like ambrosia slide down his gullet. “Hey, no offense meant. Sorry to hear of it in any event. Grady.”

“And a young man at that, in his forties.” Pat wiped his hands on his apron as if it were an act of contrition. “A tragedy, in fact. And just having won the Louis Oxford award for his book of poems, *Atlas Stumbled. Gas,*” he admitted after a pause.

Foam ringed the glass half way down and Wendt knew that he would soon require another. “Ireland?”

Pat nodded as if he were saying yes. “Boston.”

Wendt drained his pint and nodded back as if in agreement.

The bartender drew another, mild. “There’s some corned beef and cabbage left over from the St Pat’s celebration if you’re interested.”

Wendt shrugged as he drew the brew toward him. “Yeah, maybe later.”

“Well, make up your mind, otherwise I’m throwing it out.”

**The real working class started drifting in around five.** Wendt had just returned from draining the lizard, considering another pint. He waited for the bartender to finish his conversation with a tweedy unshaven old gent leaning on the bar in a lopsided stance.

“I hate it when St. Paddy’s day falls on a Thursday,” the old man was saying, pulling crumpled bills from his pocket and flattening them on the bar. “I can’t leave the house.”

“Oh? Why’s that?” Pat was nothing if not an engaging steward of the sauce and all around straight man.

“Well, I’m Irish, and I have to wear green on St. Paddy’s day.”

“Yeah? So?”

“Only faggots wear green on Thursday.”

Wendt reconsidered his order and waved off the bartender who had thrown an inquiring glance his way. A gaggle of young construction workers raised a shout of approval by the shuffleboard table. He needed some fresh air, maybe now a Chesterfield wouldn’t taste so bad.

**Dorian Pillsbury had a shrine to Roger Wilson** down at the end of the hallway by the door to the bathroom on the left and to his bedroom on the right. A large framed b&w portrait of the late poet, naked, appearing to look over his shoulder in a suspiciously derivative pose was

mounted in a spare, tasteful frame on the wall. A slim volume of his collected poems and some original first editions were bookended by art deco bronze athletes of Greek antiquity. A few of Roger's personal items were placed in a small rectangular shelf beneath the portrait and over which was draped a yellow silk scarf once belonging to the selfsame Roger along with a single votive candle.

Wendt and Roger Wilson had been contemporaries of a sort. A few years younger, Wilson had run with the high octane crowd that made Wendt, no slouch himself in following Rimbaud's exhortation on the necessity of self-derangement, appear like a lumbering tortoise. Roger had taken a tumble down the stairs at some hole-in-the-wall bath house and broken his neck.

Dorian Pillsbury (which he pronounced "pullsbry") was the Pillsbury Doughboy of American poetry, "dough" in the literal sense that it meant money. A tall, gangly New England patrician in his mid-seventies, his mottled paper white skin had the appearance of a desiccated mushroom. Twin plastic tubes inserted in his nostrils snaked from the oxygen canister that followed him in a little wire cart, and but for his deflated appearance would have argued for inflating him. He lived on the third floor of the building he owned overlooking the Mission District. He employed a delivery boy, a cleaning woman, and a young assistant who sometimes helped out in preparing his epicurean repasts. He had no need to go anywhere. Any physical activity would soon have him gasping for breath.

As a senior editor at FSG, which he referred to as Fakes, Simpletons, and Goons, Dorian had made his reputation as someone who could spot a literary trend. When his more radical assessments didn't agree with the corporate vision, he moved to the West Coast and started his own independent press, Gelett Garnett, named after a couple of local rascalion publishers from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and which further reinforced the reputation of his critical acumen. Wendt had met the older man shortly after Dorian selected some of his poems for the critically acclaimed *Singled-Out*, 1980, in which promising young writers of the preceding decade were, in a word, singled-out.

Monday nights he regularly ended up at Dorian's. Despite seeming at death's door, Dorian had a robust appetite for food as well as life. His steaks were flown in from Omaha. Sometimes Japan. The seafood was always fresh. He had a well-stocked wine cellar with vintages from all over the world although he favored local varietals from the Sonoma Valley. Desserts were always spare, delectable and loaded with calories.

Dorian thought himself an epicurean, though probably not by Livy the Younger's standards.

Julie was Dorian's assistant. She didn't try to hide her dislike of Wendt. A young woman in her late twenties with a perpetual sour expression, she had a nose like someone had placed a baby's limb in the middle of her face. She assisted Dorian in preparing the meal which meant that Dorian breathed his emphysemic wheeze over her shoulder and directed even the slightest move.

"Julie doesn't like me," Wendt said after the door to the apartment had closed behind the departing assistant.

Dorian shrugged bringing a square of medium rare filet mignon at the tip of his fork to his lips. "I didn't hire her to like or dislike my friends. She's very smart and an obsessive neurotic. That makes her an excellent assistant. She's become protective of me which can be annoying at times. I don't want to excuse her ill-manners, but it's touching that she thinks I should entertain a better class of friends."

Parsley potatoes and roasted asparagus spears accompanied the filet mignon. Wendt poured another glass of the cabernet, finishing off the bottle. Dorian pointed to the sideboard where another bottle of red wine waited to be decanted.

Dorian's condition always made it seem that this would be his last supper. But the old gent didn't dwell on his own mortality. He seemed to derive a special pleasure from talking about the mortality of others, in particular those who had thus far preceded him.

**"Walker Klein drank himself to death you know."**

"Yeah, I know, I watched him do it. Towards the end there, he was just a fucking zombie. I saw Henry Longtree the other day, same fucking thing, bleary eyed into the sunset."

"And Odell Corcoran. Again, not altogether unexpected."

"That surprises me. I thought she had it going on. Once she stopped the lesbian superwoman posturing, she showed she had some interesting stuff."

"You're thinking of Adele Cochran. Odell was that handsome black poet from Jamaica. He was always in such demand."

"As a poet?"

"Not as much. And then after he got sick, not at all. He could have single-handedly wiped out the entire poet population in New York City. Fortunately, they are not all tramps."

**“And around the holidays, Khalid Bradica.”**

“The guy was almost a hundred. I think even he was beginning to think he was immortal. His last words were something to the effect that he wanted to be buried like Frederick the Great.”

“With his five dogs?”

“Actually, I think with his five ex-wives. They were understandably not amused.”

“Carl, you’re making that up.”

“I hear he choked on a chocolate covered cherry.”

**“Perry Lowery and Cliff Velez, a double suicide.** I suppose the correct term is murder suicide. Cliff was such a talented photographer. He’s the one who photographed Roger for the portrait in the hallway. And Perry. Wasn’t he just rage and resentment personified? He was short listed for the National Book Critics Award. And the fact that Shaundra Eun won put him into a tail spin.”

Wendt grunted, sucking a thread of mignon from between his incisors. “Art is indifferent to our expectations.”

**“It’s been five years since Robbie Hadley went off the deep end.”**

“That reminds me. Chuck Lazar. I heard it from Digger who had it from his ex.”

“Oh yes, one of the Oakland people. That was some time ago. Didn’t they call themselves the California Pretenders? He was one of the better ones. And Laura Villalobos.”

“Whom I made the mistake of referring to as Laura Villabozos.”

“I seem to remember that story making the rounds.”

“I was young and in love with myself.”

“Yes, Carl, you’ve remained remarkably youthful in that respect.”

“Is she still prowling the literary salons? She was quite the cougar in her day.”

“Laura? I have a recent message on my answering machine from her. She is quite alive, and all claws.”

**“Did you know Grady O’Grady?”**

“Funny you should mention that name. I just heard about it today. What was it? Ran the car in the garage?”

“Asphyxiation is just not a way to go,” Dorian wheezed for emphasis, “I can assure you.”

“I’d never heard of him before.”

“He was associated with that Cambridge set who call themselves The Neo-Brahmins.”

“Ok, Michael Harry, Bridgette Smiley. *The Reverse Review*. That group.”

“Actually, that’s the *Revere Review*, after the famous New Englander. Mark Oldham called them ‘the British are coming’ gang in his article on the Boston literary scene in *Book Forum*. To which he could have added, ‘Too late! They’re already here!’”

“Where was Revere in the 60’s? We could have used him then. Herman’s Hermits?”

**“Ever hear of a kid by the name of Ian Blake?”**

“Certainly. He just won the Lambert Award. I was on the committee that recommended him.”

“He died in a vehicle accident?”

“Tragic, yes. And such a promising young writer. The car he was driving went out of control and swerved into a brick wall. He was killed instantly.”

“How about this guy Morgan Tilson?”

“I learned about it just this morning from Julie. Another fine poet. And a Lambert Awardee as well.”

“So what does the Lambert prize consist of these days, a bag of cash and a one-way ticket on the ferry across the river Styx?”

Dorian strained at a low coughing laugh, it was about all the air he could allow himself, and raised his glass in salute. “Poets are dying every day. What’s killing our poets?”

Wendt was reminded of Jeremy’s conspiracy theory. “Maybe it should be ‘Who is killing our poets?’”

**Wendt cleared the table, retrieved the bottle of port** from the cabinet in the sideboard, and poured two glasses. It’s what they did on Mondays after dinner. Wendt would recount the salient details of his previous week: whom he had met, insulted, what literary events and art shows he had attended, and what books he was reading. Currently it was a fascinating book titled *Out Of Pangaea*, about the evolution of the South American tree mole with implications on early hominid development.

Dorian let Carl do the talking. It saved his breath. Dorian for his part would enumerate the celebrities he had known in his day and invariably this led to a list of the dearly departed.

“Ted. Well before his prime.”



“Same with Jack. In Florida, the elephant graveyard of French Canadians.”

“Frank, of course. Such a shame. And Jimmy. Ken, too.”

Wendt made a mental game of anticipating who he would name next. Robert, Ron, Allen, Tom, Michael, Sean, Phil, Martin, David, Victoria, Jeffrey, Lindsey, Hunce, Darrell, William, Mort, JC, Jerry, John.

“Paul.”

“Blackburn?”

“Of course.”

They consumed a goodly portion of the Madera. Dorian’s liver red lips and inflamed gums loosely gathering his giant yellow horse teeth the only sign of color on an otherwise creased parchment visage. His rheumy eyes glimmered under the hedge of dusty gray eyebrows. Wendt could make him laugh. But it was tiring, even when he wasn’t talking.

He had Wendt retrieve a manuscript box from his desk in the study. He wanted his opinion of the poems. He was considering publishing them.

“Mitchell Tjantor?”

“Yes. Let me know what you think. Julie brought them to my attention. You know I ordinarily don’t read unsolicited work.”

Wendt quickly glanced over a few pages. “At first impression there’s imagery that challenges your assumptions. I’m all for that.”

“There is something quite compelling about them, in a primitive sort of way. Do you know Mitchell Tjantor or his work?”

“Just met him last Friday.”

“This is quite a departure. But take your time.” He wheezed a sigh. “Now if you’ll pardon me, I have to go lie down. The meal and its amenities have made me positively soporific.” Dorian used the edge of the table to leverage himself to his full height, each joint seeming to creak in protest. “By the way, there’s a stack of books next to the desk that have come in since last week. Feel free to pick through them.”

Wendt watched attentively as Dorian tottered down the hall, trailing his oxygen canister behind him and pausing at the shrine before turning into the bedroom. He flipped through a few more pages of the manuscript and decided he would be more comfortable on the big black leather couch in the study. The title page read *Skid Marx*.

He was fond of Dorian’s living room with its large picture window overlooking the bay and the lights of the city below. The room itself was decorated in a subtle mix of art and literature. Arts and Crafts bookshelves held rare and first editions by some of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century’s greatest

authors as well as some who, like sky rockets dazzling at first sight, had faded into the obscurity of an all devouring anonymity. A sturdy two tiered coffee table held not surprisingly an array of art books and museum catalogs. After-dinner eye candy to Wendt's way of thinking. The leather couch in its oak frame was positioned so that at a glance the orange halo hovering over the Oakland shipyards was visible as well as the string-lighted girders of the Bay Bridge reflecting on the dark waters.

A tasteful selection of modern Japanese prints patterned the wall next to the sliding panel doors that lead into Dorian's office. The walls in the office were taken up with more bookshelves and file cabinets. A large San Francis print looked down on the oversized green and white electric typewriter perched to one side of Dorian's scrupulously tidy desk. The smaller paper cluttered desk away from the window was obviously where Julie worked.

A tiny green light blinked at the bottom edge of the computer monitor. Wendt idly pressed the space bar on the keyboard and the screen came to life exhibiting an open page of email on the desktop. Julie had forgotten to log off before she left in a huff earlier. Never one *not* to indulge his curiosity, Wendt scrolled through the emails, aimlessly opening and closing them at random. The ones that had not been read he avoided. He recognized some of the names of the senders, most unfamiliar to him, though a string of emails from Mitchell Tjantor suggesting strategies for the publication of his manuscript implied that it was a done deal.

A pile of books filled a box beside Dorian's desk. Wendt found one or two that he could turn over quickly. *The Collected Works of Alcide Bava*, a slim volume translated by Alfred Daria, and something called *How An Irishman Born In French Canada Tried To Become A Thirteenth Century Chinese Poet Along The Russian River In Twentieth Century Northern California, A Memoir* by Brian O'Flattery. No jacket photo, obviously an assumed name. Wendt never cared for titles that ran more than five words and said everything about book just by reading it. A copy of *Nostalgia For The Infinite* by the surrealist Lucian Graff on the blotter of Dorian's desk caught his eye. He set the memoir down and picked it up. It was signed by the author. That would be worth something at the book seller's. But it wasn't in the pile. He pawed through the pile again, the two books tucked under his arm. There had to be at least something else worthwhile.

Wendt retrieved the half full bottle of port and his glass, and stretched out on the couch. He snapped on the parchment shaded lamp, settling

in for a more careful look at the manuscript Dorian had asked him to appraise, cheaters astride his nose.

The poems, on closer look, were impenetrable. Forward progress was impossible. They stymied even the most basic of assumptions. The language was so precise that it had the feeling of having been machine-made. He flipped through the pages. Maybe not all the poems were like that. But they were. They spoke with a tone that was eerily inhuman. On the one hand the poems displayed an interesting use of language and its potential for ambiguity, but on the other there was an insipidness that made prosaic sound exciting. They were tiresome, and in the long run, irritating.

Soon he tired and settled into merely enjoying the last of the port. The bear trap had loosened its grip. It might have only been a hunger headache. Still his troubles seemed to have just begun. He had to deal with losing his living arrangements and as much as he would like to push it from his thoughts, it was becoming the immovable object in the space between his ears. He had to think about acquiring a cash flow that satisfied more than his daily needs.

Wendt's income consisted, in part, of micro loans and outright gifts from a large network of people he knew or was always getting to know. His weekly fee from the column ensured that he could at least pay Angie their agreed upon rent for the room. But then what did Charlie say, there was a new sheriff in town intent on cutting costs at the weekly. An occasional grant or honorarium allowed him to repay his generous friends and thus ensure their generosity the next time they were approached. It was his own lopsided, quirky pyramid scheme, a poetry pyramid.

He refilled his glass and tried to assure himself that the North Bay Writers Conference had committed an oversight by excluding his name from the calendar of events but that was accompanied by the vague sinking feeling that they hadn't. That, however, would not solve his dilemma. He'd been living on a trickle and now he needed a steady stream. You might have to find work, Dorian had advised with fatherly concern when Wendt told him of his impending eviction. "But you're a talented man. Have you considered teaching?"

Wendt looked at his hands and the empty glass. The bottle empty as well. Idly he flipped through the books he had rescued from the pile. He was too preoccupied with his own dilemmas to solve the literary ones posed by the writing in the books. His eyeballs felt rough and dry. He turned off the light fitting his back in a comfortable hollow on the leather cushions. He should have passed out by now. The dark was splotchy

and constantly shifting in shades of darker and darkest. Lately he hadn't been feeling the effects of alcohol. That was it, then. He'd done it. He was finally immortal.

**Wendt woke with a start, Dorian standing over him.**

"Get up, get up, you can't stay! What if he comes home and finds you here?"

Wendt sat up and shook the sleep from his head, holding it in his hands while he tried to make sense of what was going on. "Who?" he asked, bewildered by Dorian's agitation.

"Roger! Roger! He could come home any minute! He would be so jealous. You have to leave. Here, take your books and go!"

Wendt stood blinking on the street. He had glanced at his watch clambering down the stairs. 4 AM. He adjusted his shirt and shoulders inside his jacket and made his way to the intersection and the beckoning Hopperish glow of the 24 hour coffee shop.

**Wendt took note that the swim** consisted of a lot of information about the proportions of oxygen to hydrogen, and a lot of that information consisted of lists, of coincidences, of lists of coincidences, and that he was doing the Australian crawl when he wasn't doing his favorite, the breast stroke.

His finger was poised to depress the doorbell over which a brass plate bore the name *R. Granahan*. Professor emeritus Richard Granahan had a duplex over in the Saint Anne's neighborhood. At that moment the dingy white door with a large dusty square of pebbled glass taking up the top half opened and Marguerite Sayrah emerged, blinking twice before realizing who was standing there. Then she made an unpleasant face and brushed passed him with a grunt of disapproval. She was followed by a short round man with an orange billed Giants ball cap and a patchy black beard. He was dressed entirely in black, except for his orange Converse sneakers. He kept his head down to avoid looking directly at Wendt.

Wendt shrugged and let himself in. He followed the hallway down to Dick's bedroom. Diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, the old man was given six months to live. That had been nine months ago. Dick Granahan, prize winning poet, scholar, and infamous lothario, had been Wendt's faculty advisor at State during his ill-fated attempt at a post-graduate degree. As Dick was also fond of a hearty brew, they often went for a drink at *The Rustic Union*, a pub within walking distance of

campus. Granahan's graduate level Advanced Poetry Seminar met there on occasion. What he called his "meet the masters" class. He would invite well-known literary figures to dinner and drinks in the company of his students. He discontinued it after a while because, as he said, "there was just too much disappointment."

Then there was what became known as the "Grannyhand" scandal. Apparently, RG, as some people referred to him, had offered extra credit to some of the female students in his undergraduate Advanced Poetry class in exchange for the rendering of a particular sexual favor. Grannyhand seemed to say it all.

Close to retirement, Dick quietly resigned his position at State and the University just as quietly swept it under the rug. Not long afterwards, Granahan was offered the position as head of the writing department at New Arts Inc., the chain of liberal arts diploma mills with campuses in most big American cities. At New Arts Inc., Frisco, or NAIF, sexual relations between staff and students were not unheard of or particularly frowned upon.

The Grannyhand affair was not without its backlash or consequence, however. Dick's wife, Jane, divorced him. His only son, Austin, refused to speak to him. And his daughter, Marla, possibly exhibiting some of her father's predilections, became a lesbian porn queen. It had been a rough time for his old friend and Wendt was one of the few who stood by him. Through the odd coincidence of chance and habit, they would get together regularly on Tuesdays. Even so, it was not quite a month of Tuesdays since he'd dropped by. Watching his old friend die was not at all comfortable.

Richard Granahan was a profane little man with a slab of snow white hair slapped across a wide forehead and a nicotine stained cookie duster below the bloated and pocked bulb of broken blood vessels. When RG died, and that might be any day, they could roll him up, attach a handle to him, and he would be no larger than a moderate sized suitcase. But even now, bedridden, he seemed quite alive. At least his hand was, under the sheets. Pummeling? Or grabbing?

"That's ok, Dick, you don't have to give me a demo. I'm quite familiar with how it's done."

The shrunken old man startled, pulled as he was by two dissimilar impulses, surprise and ecstasy. Surprise won because it was more immediate. "Wendt, you crazy son of a bitch, you could have given me a heart attack!"

“Why don’t we just say that I saved you from another one of those little deaths?”

Dick, laughing now and relieved for the distraction, extended his hand in greeting.

“Hope you don’t mind if I pass,” Wendt said pulling a chair closer to bedside, “I know where that’s been.”

Dick’s face glowed red as the big smile that broke across his face rendered him speechless.

“So, been practicing long?”

“At my age sex with anyone but myself would just be plain embarrassing. After you reach a certain place in life, your cock is your only friend. You and it against the world! To my amazement I can still get it up. Long enough to do the job!”

“Ow! Please, Dick! Too much information!”

“At one point I figured why not get that momentary pleasure that still puts a sparkle in my eye. I want to die with that sparkle in my eye. I work on it daily.”

“So that’s why you were rowing with one oar.”

“Right, yanking the crank.”

“Stretching the slinky.”

“Choking the doughboy.”

“I always heard it as choking the chicken.”

“Yes, that’s fairly common, as is pounding your pud.”

“Whatever a pud is.”

“I’ve heard that pud is the diminutive for pudding.”

“I guess that makes sense, in its own odd way. As much as baby batter makes sense.”

“On the other hand, it could very well be a shortened form of pudendum.”

“Pounding your pudendum? I can see why it was shortened. But I thought that pudendum applied to female genitalia.”

“It has come to be applied almost exclusively to the female but it applies to the male as well. Interesting that the Latin root for the word is the verb ‘to be ashamed.’ So you can see that self-gratification has a long history of disapproval.”

“Beating your meat, if you’ll pardon the mixed metaphors, doesn’t beat around the bush.”

“Clearing the pipe is also quite graphic but quotidian.”

“I was always partial to flogging the log.”

“Well, yes, that does have a kind of assonant alliteration that is stock and trade in these kinds of euphemisms. Like buffing the banana or grappling the gremlin.”

“Lobbing a gob.”

“Collaring the cleric, testing the testicles, yes, like that.”

“Venting the ventricle, pumping the python.”

“Have you ever heard punishing Percy? That goes a ways back.”

“Right, like playing pocket pool.”

“And there are those that take on the attributes of labor like varnishing the flag pole or adjusting the antenna.”

“Basting the ham.”

“Painting the ceiling.”

“Warming up the engine, restarting the rotisserie.”

“Lubricating the lance. I imagine that has quite a provenance.”

Granahan had started giggling, his eyes moist with delight.

“True, jollying the Johnson is more contemporary. As is jacking junior.”

“I believe that the British have it as wanking the willie, or just wanking which is rather pedestrian for a tribe that prides itself on its poetry, don’t you think?”

“Don’t they also say pulling the taffy?”

“Boffing the bishop.”

“How about fingering the skin flute?”

“No, I think flute refers to another feature of that nether anatomy.”

“I was thinking *flute* like something someone would blow.”

“Of course. Then there are the ones that refer to other species to aid in their subterfuge. Stroking the snake. Taming the shrew. Tugging the slug.”

“Wagging the walrus. Bending the badger might also be one.”

“Spanking the monkey.”

“Oiling the one-eyed eel.”

“That’s rather exotic but since we’re being aquatic, how about releasing the tadpole torpedoes?”

“Goosing the frog?”

“Hmm, that has a rather cross species perversity to it.”

“Opening a worm of cans.” Wendt smiled at the interpolation, but Dick didn’t seem to notice, intent as he was now on what had become a competition.

“Manhandling the midget, tenderizing the tube steak.”

“Stretching the meat sock.”

“Waxing the carrot.”  
“Twanging your magic twanger.”  
“Practicing the secret handshake. Also referred to as performing a sleight of hand.”  
“Pulling the wool over old one-eye.”  
“That’s only if you’re not circumcised.”  
“Good point.”  
“Then for the educated man there’s always erecting a singular proposition.”  
“Oh, in that case, fleshing out the future.”  
“Enabling the opposable advantage.”  
“The precious thing hard to obtain.”  
“What’s not hard? It’s available day and night.”  
“It’s Jung. The infantile ego and all that crap.”  
“Well, that takes all the fun out of it.”  
“You asked.”  
“Well, how about this: stealing fire.”  
“Exactly what I was getting at.”  
“Grasping the awful truth.”  
“Dowsing the abyss. For the existentialist wanker.”  
“Quickening the pulse.”  
“Ordering the hors d’oeuvres, whisking the marinade.”  
“Restocking the inventory. For the neo-Darwinians.”  
“Slapping your pappy, mastering your domain.”  
“Shaking hands with the master.”  
“Now you’re getting down to the truth!” Granahan insisted, animated by the amusement of their word play.  
“Grappling with the love vine.”  
“That’s fine if you think you’re Tarzan. But then who doesn’t?”  
“Owning up to your onanism.”  
“Tagging the bed sheets.”  
“Going blind on a date with yourself.”  
The old man shook with a paroxysm of laughter, gasping for breath like a wicked rag doll.  
“Shit, Granahan, you ok?”  
Eyes watering, a smile full of yellow gnashers, Dick nodded. “It’s laughter you have to watch out for. It’ll kill ya.” He wheezed out a few more chuckles.  
“So who were you wanking on?”  
Granahan hesitated. “Who was I what?”



“Come on, Granahan, who did you have across your knees in the fold-out spread? Wait a minute! I ran into her on my way out!”

Granahan’s mug was the model of sheepishness. “Yeah, Marguerite Sayrah.”

“Ok, I’m beginning to see a pattern. Wasn’t Kay one of your students at State?”

“Yeah, fuck, Wendt, you’re on the right track. No need to spell it out.”

“A sister in the silly putty sorority of the grannyhand. I bet there’s even a blog devoted to the posting and discussion of their experiences, barbecues, bitch sessions, travels to Cancun where they seek out old retired English professors and fulfill the old farts’ fantasies. Though I’ll bet Kay doesn’t belong to that group or read their blog.”

“I’ve done some things I’m not very proud of. I’m ashamed of my anti-social transgressions.”

“Well, yes, you did teach creative writing.”

Granahan ignored him. “And that’s one chapter in my life I would do over if I could. I’m not going to get the chance. I feel bad enough about it. You don’t have to rub my face in it.”

Wendt pulled the half-pint bottle from his inside pocket and held it up to Dick. “Here, maybe this’ll give you a lift out of your self-pity. It’ll help with that mealy taste in your mouth.”

“Jesus, you really are trying to kill me, aren’t you?”

Wendt shrugged and took a bite of firewater. “Headache cure.”

“Now that, on the other hand, is just unhealthy. Wendt, it’s not even noon!”

“I eat at noon. Now’s the time for a drink.”

“You on a tear? You look a little rumped.”

Wendt told him the tale of his eviction from Dorian’s couch. “This is just going to be one of those days that’s longer than twenty four hours.”

“How is old Dorian these days?”

“Just like you, dying.”

“Yes, and the vultures are circling.”

“Speaking of which, what’s going on with Kay? She just renewing old attachments?”

“Who? Oh yes, Marguerite. Very funny.” Granahan sighed, “She’s under the illusion that she’s my literary executor.”

“Who was the little guy with her?”

“A poet, I can’t remember his name. He is quite technically adept. Which is why I might question his qualifications as a man of letters. They’re different realities, you know.”

“So like Igor to her Mary Frankenstein?”

“They want me to post my thoughts and poems on this blog they created for me. They didn’t like the name I came up with, but they weren’t going to get me to do it otherwise. It’s called *With My Last Dying Blog*.” Granahan dragged a swivel arm table with a laptop attached to it directly in front of him. “I’ve got this set up, see. It’s supposed to be some sort of cross media engagement of the arts. So I’m to type in some old poems or the couple of new ones, the ones that still dribble out. Or I recycle some of my old essays. Or lectures. I can say pretty much anything I damn well please. People can comment on what I say in this comment box, here.” He moved the arrow to point at the small rectangular window to one side of the page on the screen. “I call it the snark tank. Lot of mudslinging and mud wrestling goes on in there. But what do you expect? They’re just kids.”

“Ill-mannered children jockeying for status in the eyes of their elders,” Wendt volunteered.

The old man sighed, weary. “Some days I don’t feel like saying anything. Then I get a flood of queries asking me if I’m ok when in reality they’re wondering if that last post I put up was virtually the last one and am I now just a flat line.” Dick widened his eyes in mock disbelief. “And the sycophants! It’s like having a whole meadow of sheep lined up to kiss your ass with their bleating inane servility! The last couple of times I’ve posted I’ve been saying things like ‘Get a life!’ Or ‘fuck off!’ That’s why Marguerite and Igor were here. Because I was being uncooperative and ruining her expectations of me.”

“What’s the big deal? You get to ensure your legacy.”

Dick spat “Legacy” as if the word had a bad taste. “I’m a fossil.”

“So you’re immortal chalk. Why not lay down some tracks, let the future generations figure out what you’re all about?”

“I’d rather jerk off.” As soon as he spoke the words, Dick’s look of consternation and dread prompted Wendt to glance back over his shoulder. A tall shadow in a religious habit had materialized in the doorway. There was something very unfeminine in the angles of the face peeking out from the starched frame of the wimple.

“It’s ok, sister, he’s a friend of mine,” Dick called anxiously as the nun’s shadow melted away.

“What happened to Paloma?” Paloma, a busy little Filipino woman, had been Dick’s hospice worker from the beginning.

“I don’t know. One day this nun shows up. And says she’s one of the volunteers at the Hospice Center and would be taking Paloma’s place until they found a replacement for her. Maybe she went back to Manila. It’s downright creepy. I went to Catholic schools growing up in Marquette. All my teachers were nuns. Do you have any idea what that does to you?”

“Maybe. I attended a nursery school and kindergarten run by two French nuns of an Irish order. The Sisters of Perpetual Redundancy. I learned to speak a little French and dislike the Irish.”

“You know the problem with having nuns as teachers? You fixate on saintly women and end up with one, and everybody knows you don’t want to live with a saint. Let me tell you, I know from experience. We used to fear and hate them. We had this joke. If penguins are flightless birds, what are nuns?”

Wendt shrugged, the bottle to his lips

“Fuckless chicks!”

**The nun was having a cigarette** leaning against the stucco balustrade of Granahan’s stoop. The nun was a man.

“Got a cigarette?”

The nun reached deep into his habit for a crumpled pack and shook one out.

Wendt accepted a light. “So what’s the story with the nun getup?”

The nun scoffed a laugh and told the story. Granahan’s hospice worker, Paloma, had complained to the parish priest that Dick was doing lewd things in front of her and she was worried that if Granahan kept at it, he would go to Hell. She liked her job and was fond of Mr. Dick, as she called him. She just wanted to know how she could get him to stop. Father Russo, the parish priest, knew the Granahans quite well. As a young family they often attended services together, and he had counseled Dick and Jane before their divorce so he was aware of a lot of the intimate details of their lives. He knew that Granahan had attended a parochial school run by nuns as a child. He decided to try and shame him by replacing Paloma with a nun, but he didn’t want to subject the good sisters to such wanton display. Father Russo knew that he was a performance artist who included a skit about a nun in his repertoire. The man owed the old priest a favor. So he garbed up and roamed the halls looking fearsome.

“Hasn’t helped, has it?”

“No, he’s still greasing the mongoose.”

“Getting rosin for the fiddle.”

**Wendt cut across Golden Gate Park** on his way back to Balboa. A man was seated in the shrubs bordering the path. He could have been a gargoyle had he not been made of flesh, shoulders slumped with the droop of destitution. Wendt instinctively touched all that was of value in his possession just then, a hard bound first edition of Richard Grana-han’s *Remotely Normal*, freshly signed, in his jacket pocket. He had come upon it a few weeks earlier at a garage sale in the neighborhood at the bottom of a box of giveaways that included textbooks, technical manuals, and old issues of *Sunset* magazine. It had caught his attention as it was the only book that looked like it had never been opened. It would bring a tidy sum from Hank at Croft Enterprise, the bookseller over on Blake. With the few signed editions, comps and review copies of books he’d received in the mail in the last week or so, he might just make enough mad money to go slightly insane.

At Fulton and Tenth, he had to cross diagonally because of the two patrol units, the ambulance, and the unmarked car with two plainclothes cops emerging. One of the uniforms was reeling out the yellow crime scene tape. Wendt stepped to the curb and looked across. Some on-lookers had gathered at the periphery on the opposite side. A middle aged Vietnamese man, a recent immigrant by the ruddiness of his skin, and his young daughter kept their distance as well.

“What’s going on?” Wendt queried.

The man frowned and looked down at his daughter and gave it his best. “Somebody him stab,” not really sure they were the right sounds.

“He stabbed somebody?” Wendt craned his neck but it didn’t make him any taller and he couldn’t see much except the medics standing around like they’d done all they could.

The Vietnamese man tried again. “Somebody.” He paused to confirm what he was thinking and then “Stab. Him.”

“Oh, ok, somebody stabbed somebody.”

“Him,” the Vietnamese man insisted.

**Carl ascended the outside back stairs to his room.** It was a stiff climb, two and a half stories accessed through a little side gate into the small yard crowded with Angie’s raised beds. He was avoiding Angie by

sneaking in the back. He had some of the money he owed her, but he was betting on getting more cash in the coming days, especially if young wannabe Kerouac came through. He would be able to cover the entire amount and have enough to get by for the week. On the other hand, he had to amass some serious funds if he was going to rent his own apartment or get into another roommate situation. Dick had suggested that he go after Stoddard's position at NAIF. Why even give a thought to teaching? He turned on the cold water tap in the bathroom. Fat chance, besides. He splashed his face and rubbed a washcloth across it. That brought the blood to the surface. His eyes looked tired, though. He needed more sleep. And his shoulders and upper back felt heavy, on the verge of ache.

**"You know what's killing the independent** book stores, don't you," Hank intoned, "it's this damn e-publishing books on demand crap. Quantity goes up, quality goes down. The big chain bookstores can shunt all that obscure stuff off onto the limbo of their virtual shelves. But bricks and mortar, especially independents, are expected to eat these dust collectors because we support the arts or some such bullshit." Harry Croft was a poisonous pinch penny, a fact somehow made obvious by his lantern jaw, who dealt in ephemera and erotica. Literature fell into the former category. His face was weighed down with wrinkles, folds and fissures, and probably not because he didn't smile. Henry, no one called him Harry or Hank, to his face at least, thought of himself as a British bulldog, a stick figure bulldog, but a bulldog all the same. "I'd like to see the arts support the bookstores for once. Instead I get pilot fish like you trading on their name and inflated reputation pawning the hopes of some dumb shit from Bum Fuck Arkansas with delusions of grandeur. I know you don't give a shit, Wendt, because you're a worthless, uncaring prick, and you only think about *numero uno*." Croft loved books. He just didn't like authors.

Wendt stared at the spine of the book in his hand. He had no idea who the author was. He set it down and picked up another.

"Who the fuck is Meredith Vanedom? And why has she written a book called *Far Be It From Me*?" Henry made a show of flipping through the pages. "And it's not even prose! It's poetry!" And then with a tone of withering disgust, 'and it's xerography."

"How about Marissa Twillwell and *Floor Sample*?"

"Marissa Till who? Tillwell?"

"Uh, no, Twillwill. No, *well*."

“Noel Twellwell? I thought you said her name was Marissa.”

“I didn’t say Noel. I said Marissa. Twillwell. She’s a professor at the University of Oklahoma or Missouri. Somewhere back there. I met her years ago when she came to read at State. Ever since then she sends me a copy of her latest poetry book. Signed.”

Henry took the book from Wendt’s grasp and opened to a random page. “Was she impressed by your iambic pentameter?”

“As I with her caesura.”

Henry set the book aside. “Any more signed copies?”

Wendt pulled a handful from the paper shopping bag.

Henry flipped to the title page of the first one on the stack. “These aren’t signed like that Richard Nixon autobiography you tried to sell me once, are they?”

“What are you talking about? The signature was there when I picked it up at the thrift store. How was I supposed to know it wasn’t his?”

“Do you really think Nixon would sign it ‘Best wishes, Tricky Dick?’”

Wendt shrugged. “Speaking of Dicks, I have a Dick Granahan. Signed.”

Henry arched his eyebrows, little blond gray almost invisible commas. “A death bed signature?”

“Yep, the hand is still warm.” Wendt chortled at his private joke. It was one of those yahaddabethere moments.

“Ok, put that one in the cash stack. He’s going to kick any day, right?”

“Yeah, he’s in a holding pattern, but it won’t be long now.”

“Alright, I’ll take the signed ones cash, no questions, and the others, the shredder fodder, book credit or twenty five percent.”

“Wait, last time it was thirty five.”

“I’m not making any money off this, Wendt. Twenty five. That has to be it.”

“How about a *Nostalgia For The Infinite*? Signed.”

“By Lucian Graff?” Henry shook his head and made a mocking mouth. “That’s out of your league, Wendt. Where would you get something like that?”

“Oh, I don’t have it,” Wendt lied, “but I know someone who does and they might be willing to part with it if the price is right.”

“I don’t believe you. But just in case, I might have a buyer.”

“There’ll be a finder’s fee. Fifteen percent.”

“I can’t do more than ten percent.”

“Tell you what, ten percent and buy the books at thirty.”

**Wendt had his usual post book sale** lunch at the Hawaiian Italian pub on the corner of Masonic, a meatball sandwich with a pineapple chipotle glaze, and didn't think too much of how easily his negotiations with Croft had gone, compared to the usual haggle fest. He liked to sit at the bar and watch the foot traffic waiting to cross at the intersection or for the municipal transportation. He himself avoided the bus, the You Suck Bus, as he sometimes called it, or more accurately, the Suck You Bus. If he couldn't cadge a ride from a friend or acquaintance, he walked. In spite of all his bad habits, it contributed to his relatively good health, both physical and mental. He allowed himself to take it all in stride. Sometimes giant steps were needed.

She was a brunette and had basically spilled her little black dress torso across the bar while a few moments before she had been cackling wildly over something very funny she had apparently told herself. She raised her head a notch above her outstretched arms and fixed him with one gleaming eye and corner of her mouth taut with a mischievous smile.

"What drug are you on?" Wendt didn't really want to know, but it seemed like a polite thing to ask.

With both eyes crazed, she returned, "You wouldn't guess in a million years."

"I don't think I have that long."

"Ambien."

"You're right, I would have never guessed. "

She straightened up, arching her back like a steel spring. Now the smile was downright scary. "Hello Kali" or maybe "Holy Kali" Wendt instinctively thought.

"Don't I know you from somewhere?"

Alarm bells sounded as Wendt's homunculus raced down memory lanes looking for a link to this particular person or personality. He didn't have much to go on. "A lecture? Book party? Poetry reading?" he offered unconvincingly.

She threw her head back in a fit of exaggerated hilarity. "Poetry reading!" she said bringing her face close to his. Her breath had an odd synthetic sweetness to it, maybe it was the Ambien. "A poetry reading? You gotta be kidding." Then she appraised him with one eye closed. "Naw, you're not who I thought you were."

An older balding man, perhaps in his sixties, had come into the pub and was casting about with someone in mind. He strode toward them and positioned himself at the woman's elbow. "Hey Tanya, there you are!" He tried to smile and glower at the same time. He fixed Wendt

with an anxious hostility. She was young enough to be his daughter and they both knew it.

“And there *you* are! Wendell!” she said turning to him, a sexual wraith poised like a ribbon of smoke.

Emboldened by the favor of her attention, he tried on a mean scowl and asked, “This guy bothering you?”

The shriek turned every head at the bar. “Him? Bothering me?” Another shriek. “Quite the contrary. He’s deathly afraid of me!” She gave a smile that showed the fine even teeth of a bone grinder.

The man chuckled hesitantly not quite sure what to make of the comment. “Um, you? Ready? To? Go?” He ticked his head in the direction of the door.

She snatched her little black handbag off the bar. “I’m ready to go if you’re ready to *go!*” she declared with sardonic enthusiasm. “Maybe some other time,” she winked at Wendt and turned her back on him as if he had never existed.

**Wendt paid for the twelve-pack** he’d pulled from the cooler at the bodega on the corner of Geary and Collins. He cradled the beer in the crook of one arm as if it were a baby wrapped in brown paper swaddle. The whine and rattle of a pneumatic tool sounded from the auto repair shop down the street. He crossed the apron to the open bay of the garage. A couple of the Hispanic mechanics glanced his way. They knew what he was holding.

Wendt made a left at the access drive between the two buildings. At the back of the space was a chain link enclosure with automobiles in various states of construction and deconstruction. Bordering the causeway, a wooden gate reinforced with metal straps was set into a large wooden fence itself reinforced with large metal straps. If that wasn’t forbidding enough, there was an eight foot sculpture of Fudo, the gate guardian, made entirely out of old wheel rims.

Wendt pushed open the gate and stepped into the concrete courtyard, the achingly bright sparks of an arc welder sputtering in a far corner.

Cleve Comstock, the large man in grimy gray-blue coveralls addressed Wendt with his big belly. “Things went well with the book fairy I’ll assume.” Wendt handed him the goods and they walked to the little outdoor sculpture pavilion complete with antique refrigerator known as the Ale-yinator. Cleve’s bright red cheekbones were shiny with grease and grime. There was something slightly Vulcanish about him in a Falstaffian way. Tufts of copper colored hair seemed to spout in discrete clusters on



his head and from his jowls as long wooly sideburns. He did not, however, walk with a limp.

A rail thin young woman in similar coveralls and an arc helmet tilted back to reveal the severe contours of a tough face removed a glove and plucked a can from the end of the box. Ronnie, her embroidered name patch said, was one of Cleve's long time students at Iron Hat Works, the classroom/studio of Comstock's business. He claimed that he only taught welding, but in actuality he taught the ancient art of working iron. In exchange for lessons, he had his students work on his commercial products, wrought gates and fences among them, for customers from around the world.

"Sold some books this week, huh?" Ronnie stated with a cheery squeak. They popped their tops almost in unison.

"I could have won the lottery."

"If you had won the lottery I would expect some specialty brew. But since it's the same old watered down piss you Americans call beer, I'd say you sold a few books." Cleve Comstock was a Canadian. He'd grown up in Toronto where the difference between Americans and Canadians was barely noticeable, but out in the more westerly longitudes his cosmopolitan sense insisted that there had to be a difference.

Ronnie had ended up with one of Wendt's old girlfriends. He had run into them at Puss 'N Boots, the lesbian bar in the Castro. They were celebrating Ronnie's acceptance at IHW, or as the students liked to call it, I Hate Work. He had met Cleve through them and since the studio was right around the corner from Harry Croft's enterprise, he had made a habit of dropping by after lunch with a little liquid refreshment for the crew. In the process of consuming the brews, they would invariably trade lies. Cleve liked to tell variations on his Blue Line Road story.

Cleve had been hitching through the South, returning to the University in Toronto from spring festivities in Lauderdale. He was picked up by a meth addled Johnny Reb in a classic Duke's of Hazard muscle car, though he called it *Stonewall* not *Gen'l Lee*, and that was because the crumpled front end had come about from literally crashing into a stone wall. JR's travel strategy had been to stick to the back roads as he would get pulled over by the State Troopers for various infractions, including a missing headlight, on the Interstate. The back roads took them through various little burgs in Alabama or Arkansas or some State beginning with an A. Maybe it was Louisiana. No, he would have remembered if it was named after a woman. However, the back roads were fraught with their own gendarmerie pitfalls. You had to avoid the speed traps set up by the

local cops and even then you weren't safe because of the road wardens.

Road wardens were something like game wardens except that their purview was the rutted potholed macadam off the beaten path. They had no official capacity and their job was to help stranded motorist jumpstart a dead battery, change a flat, give directions, call a tow, and the like. In reality, they were a kind of back country unofficial redneck police force who weren't supposed to be armed but were, and liked to exercise what little power they had over strangers, especially scraggly young kids in their souped-up machines. They had been stopped by one such road warden in the stark blackness of a back country night.

Cleve had been asleep when he was awakened by the screech of brakes. When he got his senses about him, he could see that someone on his side of *Stonewall* had a shotgun pointed at him. Framed in the driver's side window was a hand with a pistol. The road warden commanded them to exit the vehicle, slowly. Cleve, who hadn't shrunk in size since then, though at the time might have actually been a little more robust, hardly ever exited vehicles in a hurry. To JR's protests, the man with the pistol, a Sasquatch sort of fellow himself in tattered overalls and a greasy baseball cap, merely repeated his demands for JR to shut up while waving the iron in his hand menacingly. Cleve realized then that the person wielding the shotgun was a young woman about his age, in her late teens, a skinny redhead with an Orphan Annie hair helmet. Then the hayseed warden demanded their drugs. He knew they had them. As far as Cleve knew the only drugs they had was the New York pin roll they had smoked down to the cockroach brown nub earlier that day. JR insisted that they didn't have any drugs, though even Cleve didn't think he sounded all that convincing. The old farmer made them both get down on their knees in the headlight of their car and told them to take off their clothes. He had them throw their jackets and shirts in a pile by his pick-up truck. He made them take off their undershirts. This made Cleve very uncomfortable as he was one of those people who believed clothes made the man and if you were naked then you were just like everyone else. The old redneck ordered the young girl to search through their clothes for the drugs he suspected they were holding. Cleve finally got enough of his wits about him to realize that the redhead was shaking like a dog shitting razorblades. And she was pointing a shotgun in his direction. After fumbling through the pockets of the jackets and shirts, she reported that there were no drugs that she could find. Then Jeeter made them take off their pants. Again JR howled his objections but to no avail. Now they were kneeling on the gritty hard roadway which dug

into the soft flesh around Cleve's kneecaps quite painfully. To make matters worse, perhaps it was the cool night air, but he had developed an erection. The skinny girl giggled as she emptied their pants pockets of mostly change, gum wrappers and pocket lint. The old redneck said nothing for a while, staring at the protrusion in Cleve's shorts. Cleve was certain that this was going to end up like one of those shaggy farmer's daughter stories with the shot-gunning of the traveling salesman. Then the old guy made them both stand up and had Daisy Mae yank down their skivvies. Now it was JR's turn to get an erection. Maybe it took longer for him to get aroused because he wasn't as sensitive to the night air as Cleve was or maybe it was the proximity of the young woman's face to his loins when she pulled down his underwear. There they stood like two large pasty white grubs in the headlights of the Dodge and the pick-up, their sexual equipment at the ready. Farmer John looked grim while his daughter giggled nervously now. To Cleve's amazement, he ordered her to take her clothes off as well. She pouted and shook her head and said she didn't want to take off her clothes again and besides she didn't even know these boys, they weren't from around there. The salty old cracker swore back at her, insisting that she had to take off her clothes to search the car otherwise she would contaminate the evidence.

For Cleve this was the moment when it all went a little beyond strange. Jethro took the shotgun from her and she began to pull her top over her head. Just then there was a crackle of static and the voice of an angry god seemed to erupt from the road warden's back pocket. It said "Billy Goat this is Nanny Goat where the hell are you over?" The warden swore and pulled the two-way radio from his back pocket. "Nanny this is Billy, I'm in the middle of a traffic stop, can this wait, over?" There was a pause as the night rushed back in silence. Finally the voice asked if he were making Raylene take her clothes off. Again. Raylene had stopped with her hands over her head, top covering her face and exposing rather large moon shaped breasts whose nipples, exposed to the cool night air, had popped out like plastic turkey timers. "If you're not back here in five minutes," the voice continued angrily, "I'm gonna take a hammer to every damn one of the little clay figurines you got down at Disneyworld, do you read me, over?"

Cleve remembered the old hick sputtering like a tractor out of gas before jumping into his pick-up and roaring off, Raylene having to leap onto the running board and into the cab as it was rolling. They quickly stuffed themselves back into their clothes, Johnny Reb in a boiling rage, his eyes like saucers, spinning, crazed. Or better yet, like Duchampian

rotoscopes. As soon as they drove off, they headed for the Interstate. In his self-righteous outrage, he was going to report the incident to the troopers. It didn't take long to find them as there was a cruiser at the next Interstate rest stop just down the road. When he explained to the troopers what had happened with that son of a bitch road warden down on Blue Line Road, they laughed till tears rolled down their cheeks. Fit to be tied, Johnny Reb insisted they do something about it. One of the troopers, after catching his breath and wheezing out a few more guffaws, shrugged, thumbs hooked in his belt, and consoled that at least the old guy wasn't wearing women's underwear. In a moment of indignant perversity, Cleve spoke up. As a matter of fact the old guy *was* wearing women's underwear, frilly pink things. The shock and consternation on their faces was priceless as they looked at each other, the one saying "Oh shit, Eules is off his medication again!"

**Meagan crossed the large well-appointed** reception room of her swank condo on the Bay side of Divisadero and hugged him. "Reggie Meyer is here tonight. Don't make any trouble, ok?" She gave him an extra squeeze to show him she meant it.

Wendt always envisioned Meagan Twohy in an extravagantly large witch's hat that fit on her head like a big shadow. In actuality she was a slight woman with the short cropped coif of a recovering cancer patient.

"Hey, I come as a man of peace." He was a little flush from climbing heart attack hill after having consumed a goodly amount of beer with Cleve and Ronnie not to mention that because of these circumstances he had to peace like a race horse.

Meagan raised a skeptical eyebrow and flashed a smile that was a credit to her orthodontist. "Well, pull yourself together. Piece by piece."

Wendt could see loose knots of guests through the wide wall of glass out to the terrace. Smokers most likely. That would be his next stop. He fixed with a stare a congregation of society swells who smiled back rigidly in self-defense and then parted to allow him access to the guest lavatory. Glancing over his shoulder as he opened the door, he caught what looked like the hair crater at the back of Reg's head across the room. He had buttoned-holed someone and was giving them whatfor. Mitch Tjantor?

The collection of scented soaps Meagan kept in large glass bowls as decoration always held an odd fascination for him. Bringing them to his nose and sampling their distinct scent gave him a childlike pleasure. It

was the kind of collection one might find in the bathroom of a spinster aunt.

Wendt let go with a stream that hummed like a guy wire in a high wind, a low moaning oscillation. It only lasted until the pressure on his bladder became bearable. Then he relaxed. No prostate problems if that was any indication.

He passed his comb through the few stiff locks that had become undone in the gusty breeze on his way over. He might have been thirteen the last time he left home without a comb. And then he ran water over the tips of his fingers much in the way Pilate had once done and was now repeated countless times in solemn ritual throughout the world, a kind of symbolic ablution. Forgive me for the sins I'm about to commit. Wendt always tried to look on the bright side. He flushed almost as an afterthought.

Meagan Twohy's Tuesday evening salons reminded him of a scene from Polanski's *Fearless Vampire Killers*: the shabby literary vampires, an assorted collection of gray heads and graybeards, the usual freeloaders, the pretentious tenured academics, the odd intellectuals even when there were an even number, the well-off and bored friends of Meagan's who considered these evenings as missionary work among the artistic challenging. There didn't appear to be anyone under forty with maybe the exception of the house boy tending the buffet, a lanky swish Latino. He recognized Lai Pechart, Yvette Van Etee, Deana Ferg, poor Sandra Whistlehunt, Kenneth Leotarda, Alfredia Lobur, Helen Harris, and Peggy Kiritani.

He had to squeeze past a clot of intense conversation on his way to the terrace where no doubt someone would offer him a smoke. He almost bumped knees with Daisy D'Arco, poetry dowager, and confidante of Kenneth Rexroth in her younger days. She always sat in the chair by the sliding door in the large wall of glass, in the traffic lane, to avail herself of the opportunity to speak to everyone who passed by, keeping herself, even at her advanced age, in the flow but seated as if at a bus stop waiting for that long overdue bus, death. He couldn't see how her hair could get any whiter, but it always seemed like it did. She grabbed him by the sleeve and he looked down at her mottled, badly powdered, droopy eyed face.

"I saw Sierra's show at the Hanford. She's really outdone herself this time." She always said that. It had been years since that show.

Wendt made a sour face. "Who?"

"Sierra North? Your ex-wife?"

“My ex-wife’s name is Sheila Norberg.”

Daisy made a disparaging sound by blowing air through her heavily rouged lips and dismissed him with a wave of her hand. “You always say that.”

The air outside met him with a brisk slap, typical for an early evening in late March. It was perfumed by the aroma of burning tobacco. Charles St Charles smoked. He would have never guessed. Right about then a pair of sweater sleeves wrapped themselves around his neck and a boozy breath preceded the wet peck on his cheek.

“Dottie, you’re not in Kansas anymore.”

“That’s clever, Carl. Clever Carl, that’s what I’ll call you.”

“Where’s the tin man?” Wherever Dottie was, Lynel would be. Dotty and Lynel were a team, a poetry husband and wife. Dorothy Krandell was by far the better poet but Lynel Pauk was a better bullshitter hence he was the one with the teaching position. That was how they had met, in a workshop Lynel had taught at Iowa.

“He’s over there with the saint who ain’t.”

Wendt glanced in the direction she indicated and saw that Lynel Pauk, in his usual black leather motorcycle jacket, was pocketing something that Charles St Charles had just handed him. Wendt knew the move quite well and it looked as though Dottie and Lynel were hustling, though some would call it begging, on his turf. It was not like there was anything he could do about it. It was a form of financial networking in which something, however insubstantial, a mention in an interview, a poem in dedication, a positive appraisal, a book review, a favorable portrayal in a memoir would be assumed in return. That was the way Wendt worked it and undoubtedly so did Lynel and Dottie.

“We were doing readings in Seattle and Portland and decided to come down to Frisco to visit friends and maybe hustle up a reading at State. Lynel had a meeting with Larry about a book.” She shrugged, wearily. “And he’s thinking about going after Stoddard Leary’s position at New Arts.”

“What happened to Kansas?” Wendt was really wondering what was going on with Stoddard Leary and why his job was all of a sudden fair game.

“Things in Lawrence are going to shit. There was a blood bath in the English department. Ly was lucky to escape with minor flesh wounds. There’s a real conservative cast being ushered in by the new department head at the University. And there’s something about Ly not jumping

through the requisite number of hoops or something fishy with his resume, that he may have exaggerated a little. . . .”

“Not Lynel!” Wendt exclaimed in mock shock.

“Funny Carl, I think I’ll call you funny clever Carl. By the way, Ly would like it if you could hook him up with Dorian Pillsbury. You know, just an introduction. Ly will take care of the rest.”

Dottie steered him over to where Lynel, Charles, and Jim Wagstaff, the editor of *Anorexia*, the minimalist poetry magazine, were gathered. It was one of those rare moments when he was in a crowd of four smokers and everyone offered him a cigarette. He took them all.

Charles St Charles had a week’s residency at Mills College in Oakland, something it was obvious that Lynel wanted to get his hooks into even though Wagstaff, who had some connection or knowledge of the program, thought that Dottie would be a perfect candidate for a residency since it was a woman’s school not realizing that the head of the department at Mills, Gretchen Oldham, absolutely detested Dottie and consequently her work. Or so it seemed. Maybe it was a failed lesbian romance. Gretchen had been in Iowa at the same time as Dottie. And by association, Lynel’s chance was that of a hen in a foxhouse. When everyone’s attention turned to Wendt as a potential candidate, he merely shrugged and cited the fact that he never crossed the Bay unless it was a dire emergency, and a week’s residency didn’t meet the requirement. Besides he’d had his run in with Gretchen as well. Wendt had noticed her when he came in. She was the tall blond with the frozen smile.

It was also apparent that St Charles was going to have to sing for his supper. Meagan had arranged for him to give a little impromptu talk to the assembled. She introduced him by citing his reputation and his published works, *Replay Reply* and *Chromosome Ozone* as well as his latest, *Ion Eon*, and the forthcoming, *Or Oar*. Wendt found a plate at the buffet table, arranging it with chicken wings, a small wedge of brie and a stack of crackers, and stationed himself close to the exit. That way if he left early it wouldn’t be so obvious. From where he was standing, though, it appeared as if a glitch was developing.

Reg Meyer had confronted Meagan with his rage mask which consisted of bug eyes, flared nostrils and a display of really ugly gritted teeth. It soon became evident what his problem was because he shouted “Either he goes or I go!” Then Reg strode over like a cocky little Napoleon and showed Carl his rage mask. Carl had seen it before. And he’d heard it before.

“Fuck you, Wendt! Fuck you!” Spittle flecked the corners of Reg’s mouth. His cheeks were taut, colored by the mauve of wrath. “I hate you! If I had a gun I’d shoot you!”

Wendt blinked, once, slowly. “Jeez, Reg, I’m just starting to get something to eat. Get over it.”

That was the wrong thing to say. When Reg tried to repeat it, he gagged on the words. “Get. Get. Over it! Getoverit?” He actually appeared to be hopping in anger. Reg screamed. “You fucking whore!”

Wendt pointed at him with a partially gnawed chicken wing and said to those in his vicinity, “Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain.”

Mitchell Tjantor, who was nearby, stepped up to intercede. “Reg, Reg, calm down, calm down.” That was his mistake.

Like a spavined pit bull, Reg turned on the mediocre Samaritan. “Mind your own fucking business, Tjantor, and don’t tell me to calm down. Do you want to know what this fucking whore of a motherfucker did? Do you really want to hear what this sonofabitch did?”

Tjantor had the good sense not to answer. Wendt stared glumly at the plate of food in his hand.

“I know how to hurt you. You’ll see how it feels to get fucked over. The new managing editor at the weekly is a good friend of mine. When I get through talking to him, he’ll drop that joke you call a column like a bad habit. In the trash, like you, where it belongs!” Reg, pleased that his rage had coughed up some self-righteous bile, appeared to relax. He didn’t expect what happened next.

Wendt pulled him up by the front of his shirt and brought his face close to his. The gesture was aggressive, the words, ambiguous, as had often been noted of Wendt’s poetry. “Don’t make me love you.”

**Wendt stubbed the cigarette and** contemplated the slog back to Balboa. It had been a long day, not to mention the headache. A group of people were descending the stairs from Meagan’s apartment as he ambled away. Meagan had taken him aside after he had let go of Reg and hustled him to the door. The problem was that because Reg happened to be St Charles’ chauffeur while he was in town, Carl would have to be the one to leave. She had slipped him a twenty. He hadn’t seen anyone that he could put a fresh touch to, anyway. Except Cicella Lacrayone, and there were always strings attached. He didn’t like strings.

A car remotely unlocked with the double honk of a horn behind him. He turned to catch a skinny brunette in a short spiky do and glasses, keys in hand, beam him a big smile.



“Hey Carl!” the familiar voice called out.

“Ginny?”

“Jeanne.”

“Right, Jeanne! Were you at Meagan’s? I didn’t see you.”

“I was with the unimportant people. I saw you though. That was quite a scene. Apparently Reg Meyer doesn’t like you.”

“Something like that. Squirrely little bastard, he’ll get his someday.” Wendt said it with a chuckle.

“You still over on Balboa?”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s been a while, hasn’t it? I’m still on Balboa.” Wendt considered recounting his soon-to-be homeless plight but thought it a little early to play the pity card.

“I’m headed that way. Get in, I’ll give you a ride. I assume you’re still not driving.”

“I could never afford a car.”

On the way over to Balboa, Jeanne caught Carl up. When they’d first met, he had been doing grad work at State. She, at the time an undergrad, was one of Granahan’s students. Her first novel, the one she wrote in graduate school, got picked up by Holt. But sales were disappointing and her second novel languished with her agent who was now her ex-agent. Then she met Ted at an MLA convention and he had a teaching job and she got pregnant and they married. She went into a real funk after the baby was born. She thought she’d never write again. A few years ago she’d heard from her old editor at Holt who wanted to include some of her short fiction in an anthology of stories by women who had recently given birth. The work was from long before she married and had a child but that didn’t seem to make a difference. Reworking the story got her back into writing and now she had started on another novel, about the politics in women’s writing circles. She’d attended the evening at Meagan’s salon to be reminded of what the literary scene was like. She’d gotten more than she had bargained for.

They were doubled parked in front of his place. She asked after Granahan. Wendt told her that he didn’t have long, but he seemed to be handling it as best as could be expected. She informed him that Stella Warzog, the former English department chair at State, had passed away recently.

Wendt chuckled, remembering. “The Steel Warthog we used to call her. Well, the afterlife won’t be the same when she’s done with it.” Jeanne laughed easily, enough to prompt him.

“There’s often an open parking spot around the corner on Funston. You can park there and come up and listen to some music. It’d be like old times.”

Jeanne gave a lusty confident chuckle. “Do you realize that I cannot hear a Coltrane tune without thinking of you.”

“All the more reason to come up.” He might have sounded a bit too hopeful.

She put her hand firmly on his knee and the hand that had started to wander. “Thanks for the thought, Carl, and no reflection on Coltrane, but I’ll pass.”

**He got under the covers and turned out the light.** He had a pleasant but vague memory of Jeanne and their rather short but passionate fling though he was having difficulty bringing the particulars into focus. That would be necessary if he were going to have sex with his long time only true love. Burp the gecko.

**Wendt pushed himself away from his desk** and stared at his hands. This is all your fault, he thought. A rectangle of white light filled the center of the blue screen waiting for him to load it with squirming black glyphs. Scraps of paper, note cards, torn envelopes, handbills took up space on the desk next to the laptop, each scribbled with an idea, a phrase, an observation, a telephone number. He had gone through and emptied all his pockets, about a week’s worth of collected thoughts and inspirations. Wednesday being hump day, he needed to organize his next column. Once he got going, the actual writing of it would only take a few hours. Getting going could be a problem as he was a world class procrastinator. Plus there was a vague autoerotic thrill to bumping the deadline. He practiced the old crocodile philosophy: don’t make a move until you’re absolutely sure you’re going to get it all in one bite.

And he recognized the symptoms, in anticipation of the discomfort of another headache, as an accumulation of haze behind the eyes that was part of a band around the interior of his skull whose locus was just beneath the anterior bulb at the back of his head.

He took another spin around his tiny bedroom to give himself a pause. Maybe more coffee but he was already distracted by the expectation of a payday from the young documentarian. His first cup that morning had resulted in Angie giving him the good news.

She was delighted that the sale of the house had gone so quickly. Their neighbor, Mr. Quan, had heard that she was putting it on the market and immediately offered ten percent over what she was asking, no questions. Wendt listened to her prattle on about how wonderful it was that they wouldn't have to put up with real estate agents and prospective buyers traipsing through their lives. He idly passed his eyes over the bumper stickers plastered on the fridge for probably the ten thousandth time. *Free Tibet. Save Mother Earth. Save the Rain Forest. Conserve our Precious Resources. Make Love not Waste. US Out of My Life. Give a Hoot, Don't Pollute. Think Peace. Practice The 3 R's: Recycle, Reuse, Renew. Say No To GMO's. Save our rivers. Water is Life, don't mess it up! Be kind to your Mother, Earth.* There were layers upon layers of bumper slogans and politically correct reproach. He had once given her one that read *Don't Let Your Bumper Stickers Tell You What To Think*, but it wasn't featured among the display of world saving admonitions.

"So Carl, I'm going to have to ask you to go through the boxes and file cabinets in the garage and find something to do with all you've stored down there. I'll be renting a storage space in the city until I get my tons of stuff moved up to the place in Elk and you can keep your things there temporarily. I mean everything is happening so fast. I can barely believe it. Escrow should close at the end of April if all goes well, but Mr. Quan has agreed to let me rent the house till Sam finishes school at the beginning of June. I'm so excited!"

She didn't say anything about the money he owed her. She'd patted him on the hand and looked into his eyes with motherly concern. "I hope everything's going to work out for you."

**Checking the phone messages from the day before**, there was one from Julie, Dorian's assistant, asking about the Lucian Graff book, if he'd seen it. Her tone was accusatory. Wendt made a note to return it with his apologies though he could make the argument that Dorian had insisted he take it when he turned him out at four in the morning. But then what he could get for it from Croft was not worth violating his old friend's trust. There was also a message from Dottie giving her and Lynel's itinerary for the next few days and hoping that they could connect while they were still in the city. Charlie Reyes had left a brief message asking Wendt to give him a call. He sounded worried. Charlie always sounded worried.

**Wendt slipped the gold chain around his neck**, one that Danni Markov had given him. He was going to be on camera, after all. Danni had been his only long time relationship besides his ex-wife, and the endless running love battle with Valerie Richards. Danni ended up marrying a psychiatrist and lived in Santa Barbara. Funny that it had taken him so long to make the connection. Sheila Norberg, aka the-artist-known-as Sierra North, his ex, had also married a psychiatrist. Val hadn't. She couldn't afford a psychiatrist, number one. And she wasn't crazy. Just tortured. Word among old friends who had momentarily strayed from their social orbit and bumped into her indicated that not much had changed. She was described variously as junked out, raggedy, burnt out, or zombified. The last time Yolanda, another ex-lover, had seen her she was living on "smack and cheese," and implying that he should look in on her. He was a coward, he knew it. Save her from herself. But he was no superhero. Or psychiatrist. He meant to do it. It was just never the right time.

**Carmen was the owner of the Red Hen.** She wore an ill-fitting purple muumuu and an irritated expression. She came to where he was seated at the bar, dragging one foot puffed in gout wrapped with a safety orange orthopedic slipper, not with a beer, but his tab. He fanned the bills out on the edge of the cork-lined drink tray.

"No need to get fancy." And when she returned with his beer, "Don't ever have me ask you more than once."

Wendt sipped the beer, contented that his credit had been restored. He listened in on some of the conversation Carmen had resumed with Old Sharon, a Red Hen regular.

"Russian, Russian, that's all I hear any more."

"I get 'em in here all the time, because you know, it's the *Red Hen*, right? And they can't even talk English right, you know?" Carmen shook her head like it was the most lamentable thing imaginable.

Wendt glanced at the time stamp on the muted wide screen TV at the far end of the bar. He had time to enjoy the first beer of the day and contemplate its amber pleasures. That's if the kid showed. Or remembered their appointment. The imperative to get more cash was giving him hemorrhoids. But so far, no need to panic.

Perhaps he had reassured himself too hastily. A lozenge of light appeared along the edge of the opening door from which a shadow detached itself. Enter Michel Brazon.

"Mickey!"

“Michel, my name is Michel.”

“Michelle is a girl’s name in this language, pal. At least Mickey is the name of a world famous rat.”

“Fuck you, Wendt.”

Been getting a lot of that lately, Wendt mused.

Carmen unglued herself from her conversation with Old Sharon and reluctantly meandered down to stand in front of Brazon and fix him with a baleful stare that demanded “what’ll it be?”

Michel glanced at Wendt. “You buying?”

Since his credit was once again healthy he nodded in assent and Carmen reached for a mug to draw the draft.

Brazon stopped her. “Uh, got any bottle beer? Heinie?” And then to make sure she didn’t misunderstand him, “Heineken?” The green oval affixed to the cluttered mirror behind the bar spoke the answer to his query. Brazon, once it came, raised the bottle in appreciation. “*Salut, confrere*. To the life of a poet, such as it is.”

Wendt had to laugh. Brazon was bearable in small doses. Unfortunately he didn’t come in small doses. He was, however, good for the latest dirt and that could sometimes be useful and, if nothing else, a cynical diversion.

“What’re you doing in this part of town?”

“Uh, hanging with my girlfriend.”

“Is she making you unhappy?”

“Yeah, uh, we just had a big fight. I’d rather not talk about it.”

Wendt shrugged. It occurred to him to ask “What’s going on with Stoddard? Is he in some kind of trouble?”

Michel made the drinking mime. “Nothing anyone can do about it. Drowning in his own hundred proof tears.”

“What, so he just found out he’s impotent?” Wendt cracked.

Brazon rasped a chuckle. “Yeah, kinda, in a way, you might say that. But it’s the muse he can’t get it up for, and the subsequent lack of success, fame, celebrity, what have you, is crushing him.”

“Stoddard always had his limitations.”

“Maybe that’s what he’s finally bumped up against.”

“But he’s a good teacher. So I hear.”

“Well, not any more. If he does show up to class, he’s either hung-over or tying one on. So the Administration at NAIF has put out feelers to replace him. How can you charge for a class when the teacher is either blotto or doesn’t show up?”

“Blood in the water.”

**Fifteen minutes later Wendt began to feel** a little apprehensive. And Brazon had put another Heineken on his tab. Fifteen minutes was also about as long as it took for Brazon to become tiresome. He was an insinuator. Give him an inch and he would take that inch and an additional sixty-three thousand three hundred and fifty-nine.

“You heard about Tom Trolley, right?”

“I thought it was pronounced *Tro-lay*, and yeah, I heard. What was it, a couple of weeks ago, heart attack?”

“Bee attack.”

“Bee attack?”

“Yeah, he’d moved down to Big Sur to live with his daughter on some back road on a mountain top out in the middle of nowhere.”

“Bixby Canyon?”

“Someplace like that, and he’s sitting out on the deck, enjoying the sun, the view, thinking that this is the life, drinking the wine, probably smoking the herb, if I know Tom, and he gets stung by a bee! He goes into shock and dies in a matter of minutes, just like that!

“Living in the country can be dangerous,” Wendt opined gravely. “I’ve always thought that. Snakes, gopher holes, mosquitoes, poison ivy, falling trees. I know, I spent my summers as a kid in the country. There’s so much that can go wrong and you’re what, light years away from civilization? You can actually die of boredom. Not for me, man.”

**Another fifteen passed and Wendt** had devoured the bowl of glazed sesame sticks and was picking at the crumbs. Carmen was never very generous with the snacks. “What d’you think? This is a lunch wagon?” was her answer to the request for a refill. It was starting to look like the kid was not going to show up. As well, after half an hour Brazon had run out of material and was starting to repeat himself.

The phone behind the bar warbled like an obese seagull. Carmen waddled to where she picked it up and spat “loreden.” She listened with an expression of severe disdain. “Yeah, this is the Red Hen!” She sounded indignant. “Who?” and at the same time threw her evil squint down on Wendt. “This ain’t a public phone. Ya wanna talk to him call the pay phone.” She rattled off the numbers and thumbed the handset off. She hobbled back to her stool in the corner of the bar by the door. “Wendt, that phone call’s for you!” she yelled as the pay phone on the wall between the *Gyys* and *Gals* came to life. “Some people have cell phones, you know! Even bums like you!” she added. Carmen was still

mad at him because once, long ago, she thought she had had a chance with him. She never did.

Wendt picked up the handset on the third ring. “Yeah, this is Wendt.”

The voice at the other end apologized profusely, explaining that he had just returned from an unexpected trip to LA and his flight was delayed because he was supposed to get back in plenty of time to make their appointment at the Red Hen but he just got in and had to wait for his equipment which was coming in another taxi so not to worry everything was going to be just fine, they would have to improvise and shoot the interview at the place he was house sitting and he was sending a cab over to pick him up if that was ok.

Wendt never turned down a ride in a cab.

And, the voice added, they could order out and get any kind of food he wanted, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Tai, Sushi, Eritrean, Basque, Spanish, Mexican, Russian, Polish, Salvadoran, what have you. And what kind of beer did he like? Or wine? Or whatever.

Wendt had had only two beers so he was certain it wasn't some early stage euphoria kicking in. “Fish and chips. From the Korean place over off of Polk. And beer, good strong dark beer. It doesn't have to be Guinness.”

Brazon was curious when Wendt came back to his stool and began the preparation for leaving, namely knocking back the remaining lager in his glass. “What's up? You leaving?”

Wendt nodded, anticipating leaving the mental anchor behind. “Yeah, taxi coming to pick me up. Place over on Greenwich, the upside of Van Ness,” he said, regretting it immediately.

“Hey, that's just over the hill from where I'm going. I'm reading at the coffee house on Stockton tonight. Think I can snag a ride?”

Wendt stared at a spot on the door over Brazon's shoulder wishing that he were already gone. He nodded. “Sure, why not.”

**In the uncomfortable silence between** the end of the phone call and Carmen alerting him that the cab was out front, Wendt went over scenarios of how to ditch Brazon once they arrived at the destination. Brazon was a leech and he would try to cut in on his action if he could. It would probably be just as easy to tell him to get lost or that it was just business. But in that symbiotic relationship of poets of their ilk, the seed of generosity can often blossom into a flower of unexpected abundance. Brazon and pals had put the kid on to him, after all, and so he was entitled

to a commission even though the two Heinies were probably all he deserved.

When they stepped out of the Red Hen to board the cab, a shout was raised from down the block. Brazon swore under his breath, ducked and scurried between the cars parked at the curb and into the back of the waiting cab. A large white man was walking briskly toward them shouting something to the effect that he told him before not to bother and said a name like Natalia or Natasha. The man had a full head of hair with touches of gray. Prominent cheekbones and flat forehead spoke of Slavic origins. He was dressed in a thigh-length black leather jacket, dark slacks and white loafers. A pale yellow shirt was open at the collar to reveal a wealth of gold chains. He paused in his tirade momentarily to consider Wendt. They were dressed almost exactly alike, except for the white loafers. A newly arrived countryman? Wendt took the opportunity of his hesitation to slip into the open door of the cab.

“What the fuck was that all about?” he demanded as he slammed it behind him.

Brazon was slouched down below window level at the opposite side. “Uh, I think that’s my girlfriend’s father. He doesn’t like me.”

The man was now standing at the curb, still shouting but no longer in English.

“That’s not her father, man, that’s her pimp,” the cabbie interjected.

“Well if it isn’t Cuntcap Murray. Any time now. Before this guy exercises the nuclear option.”

Murray put the cab into the flow with authority and cabbie disdain for on-coming traffic.

“You have the address over on Greenwich?”

Murray held up a gloved hand in acknowledgement and glanced into the rearview. “As called in. But we’re going to have to take a detour. Some kind of police action gots Van Ness closed from Broadway to the Civic Center. Guy with a gun. Already killed a couple of civilians.”

In spite of Murray’s intimate knowledge of short cuts and byways, they encountered a backup and jam in the vicinity of Van Ness. No one on four wheels was going anywhere. Wendt got out and walked the rest of the way, up the steep grade to the address on Greenwich. Brazon thought better of it and decided to wander over to the police lines to see if he could see anything. He could even write a poem about it, but all the participants would be ostriches in keeping with his penchant for obvious comic book surrealism.



**Wendt had been to the address before.** It came to him slowly, the familiarity of the mahogany wainscoting and rail up the stairs to the main floor, the alabaster foyer with the spiral steps leading to the upstairs bedrooms and den, even the garden patio where the young film maker had set up the equipment for the interview. Hard to believe that almost forty years had passed. He'd arrived in the city only a few days before. Sheila was still back East finishing her last quarter at Princeton. The occasion was a book party for Richard Brautigan's *Rommel Drives Deep Into Egypt*. Catered by Kentucky Fried Chicken, they had provided, apparently at the author's request, a life size plastic statue of the Colonel holding his signature bucket placed prominently in the foyer at the intersection of the party traffic. The life size figure had a startling peripheral effect in that it triggered the reflexive awareness of a presence. It persisted in making people jump. At one point, a short blonde in high leather boots who had come with the ghost of Lew Welch knocked it over, yelling at it as it tumbled down the stairwell, and a momentary quiet descended on the festivities.

He had met Irma for the first time that night. And Dick Granahan. Actually, had him pointed out. Roger Wilson. Peter Tobias. And Danni Markov, come to think of it. At one point he'd stumbled onto a den of vipers who had just come back from Afghanistan with a load of hashish. Nothing stayed in his memory for very long for almost a week after that. It had not been unpleasant but it was disconcerting. Maybe that was why he preferred to drink and get stupid. In that case, the memory loss was useful.

As if on cue, right as Jim Shue finished filming Wendt's rambling free association on Jack Kerouac, the fish and chips arrived. Katje Marsh, intricate Japanese trout tattooed sleeves speckling both arms, poured him a glass of Guinness and pulled up a chair. She was the young woman Jim had been so taken with at Enrico's. She produced a video blog devoted to Kerouac called *Go Moan*. She wanted to use some of the interview footage on her blog.

"As I always say, the poetry is free, everything else is for sale, lease, or rent." He may have been leering. There was a certain tasty *savoir faire* about her manner. That and her tight youthful body.

"I really don't have a budget" and reading his mind, as if that were difficult, "And I don't fuck old men."

Wendt felt the sting but covered with a weary smile. "Don't knock experience. Once you've tried old, you'll be sold."

She had a charming laugh even when tinged with ridicule. “Listen, if I had to go to bed with every writer I interviewed or whose work I used in my blog, I’d never get off my back. I’m just trying to get a little information. I suppose I could go to the usual biographical sources. You are in Wikipedia, are you not?” At Wendt’s blank look she continued, “But I’d like to hear some of it from the horse’s mouth.” She added, “In a manner of speaking.”

“First I’m old and then I’m dog food.” He liked her even more. He might even be in love, at least for the moment. “What do you want to know?”

“I read somewhere that you were born in Dublin. Is that right?”

“No, no, I was born and raised in the good old US of A. In the country, in fact. On an old commune outside of Indianapolis. This particular commune dates to right after the Civil War, back when it was considered a utopian experiment. When I lived there it was a community of Reichians, pseudo-Mennonites, and conscientious objectors, like my dad. Misfits mostly. People who wanted to experience a different way of community long before it was considered cool to drop out. The land was owned by descendants of a local Civil War hero by the name of Jerome Doubling. The community got to be known as Doubling and eventually, with the inevitable elision of the final consonant, it became Doublin or Dublin. It’s in the same neck of the woods as places with names like Bean Blossom and Gnaw Bone.”

“So you grew up on a commune?”

“No, not really. My parents split when I was little and my mother who was originally from Indianapolis moved back. She went to work as a paralegal for the ACLU and my dad stayed on the land and became a cabinet maker. He had a PhD in psychology from Yale but he found his calling in making things out of wood. I always had the coolest handmade wooden toys as a kid. So I would spend summers with my dad on the land and the school year with my mother in the city. I got to experience a radical world in the summer and a conservative Catholic one the rest of the year. I attended Cathedral High.”

“And Dublin is where you met Norman Barnacle?”

“Yeah, his daughter lived on the land, and she brought him there to live with her. He was pretty old, ailing. Couldn’t get around because of his legs. Arthritis, probably. So some of us stronger boys were assigned the task of helping him. You know, push his wheelchair, provide a shoulder to lean on, that kind of thing. Everybody called him ‘Barney.’”

“He was one of the great Irish poets of the Twentieth Century. What was it like to be around him?”

“No big deal. I mean we were told that he was a great man, but that didn’t really mean much to us. And he was an odd bird. He had long white hair which back in those days was very unusual. And bad dandruff.”

“Bad dandruff?”

“He always wore a dark blue suit, even in the heat of summer, and so it was quite obvious. He looked like he’d just stepped out of a snow-storm. Or got hit with a confetti bomb.”

“Did he ever talk about poetry with you? I mean, he was a world renowned poet and I assume he had an influence on you.”

“Not that I remember. And if he did, I wouldn’t have known it. He had a tendency to repeat himself, like a lot of old people do, you know, tell the same story over and over.”

“Really? For example? About Amy Lowell?”

“Never about poets. He used to tell the story about when he was a young man in Ireland and he was a champion cross-country runner and he had won some medal and had given it to a girl he fancied. And I think she took it and ran off with another fellow. It was either that or she turned down his marriage proposal. You got the impression that she was the one who got away. His first true love.”

“Did he ever recite his poems to you? Or talk about the great men he knew? He knew Yeats and Beckett and Joyce and Graves and Pound.”

“No, I don’t remember him reciting his poems, but you know at that age I would have taken it for senile babbling anyway.”

“Oh well, that’s unfortunate.”

“He used to recite the *Iliad* on special occasions, though. He would begin by saying ‘this is the story of the rage of Achilles, of pride and selfishness, of love and war, and death.’ It would be in the evening, usually a full moon, July or August, around a bonfire, and it was mesmerizing, magic in a way. There was no TV on the land. There was barely electricity. And he spoke it as a kind of sonorous singing. I was always impressed that he had memorized all that. The names, the endless list. And the battle scenes. They were quite vivid. I could visualize them above the tip of the flames where the fire edged into the black of night. At dramatic moments, he would stab his cane into the fire and stir up the sparks. I think he enjoyed those recitations. He was going blind from

macular degeneration at the time, but I didn't realize the significance of that till much later."

**Whenever Wendt sat in front of a** wide screen TV he was usually in a bar and expected to be watching a game or a sports show. He was surprised by what he saw.

Jim had wanted him to view the footage of the interview. Normally Wendt would have passed but the kid had paid him the two hundred, half of it by check which was not the preferred method but he could sign it over to Angie as part of his obligation. The check was written to the account of Spitz, Schein, and Shue, investment bankers from St Louis. Obviously he was someone to make nice with. And the three pints of stout mellowed him considerably as had the gut full of greasy fish and fried potatoes. Not to mention that Katje wasn't tiring on the eyes and he was in no hurry to leave the orbit of her frank playful beauty. So he climbed the spiral staircase to the den and flopped down on the black leather couch

The image was startling. It was himself as he had not seen himself before and did not want to see himself again. He looked old. His age, but old. Still, a shock. He was reminded once again how mirrors lie. And the voice. It didn't sound anything like he heard himself. Not only that, he wasn't sure he liked what he heard himself saying.

"I was laughing. Everything I had been taught about poetry was contravened. *Mexico City Blues*. This can't be real, I kept thinking. Like it was some big put-on. But I couldn't stop reading, drawn to the writing by a morbid curiosity. I had to know how deep that well of innocence would go. The prose never reached the same intensity for me, only in maybe *Railroad Earth* or *Visions of Cody* — *Joan Ramsbanks In The Fog*, wow! Has anyone ever listened to *Pic*? Or realize that it's homophone in French means *spade*? And even though it's considered politically incorrect, no one faults Samuel Clemens for doing the same damn thing."

Had he belched? He'd had a nervous stomach despite his perceived nonchalance. They would have to edit that out.

"Jack's characters are latter day Huck Finns. Innocents, stirred by the winds of circumstance. And do you think that Huck could be domesticated? Would you want him to be? The descent into alcoholism is the fate of lonely old men's failed domesticity everywhere."

He was mortified. His mouth moved on the screen and it was speaking gibberish not to mention that it looked like it belonged to a wrinkled

rubber mask. He wanted to put his hands over his ears and cover his eyes at the same time.

“In Kerouac we see the supreme American innocence stomped on by the hobnail boots of puritanical culture and hierarchy. He is by turns ignored and excoriated. He is the behemoth in the room.”

His posture was bad besides. He should have sat up straighter. His gut took up the entire foreground. He looked like a lounge lizard, an over-the-hill John Travolta, barely staying alive. His teeth looked bad too. Why hadn't he cared before?

“It is the intellectual priesthood and the sacrifices they expect that will kill you. You will be spread-eagled and eviscerated by the carrion critics who dine on the entrails of literature. What is perfectly natural is subjected to the mumbo jumbo of no-talent elitists. They, not alcohol, killed Kerouac.”

He regretted doing the interview but giving back the money was not an option. He had signed the release. He didn't know anything about Kerouac, anything meaningful and insightful, anyway. He adored the man and his writing, but that was different from being able to speak objective truth about his genius.

“His bilingualism blessed him with an exceptional ear. It allowed him to code switch between French and English and chain together a unique syntax that accommodates both languages. And he understood the dictates of jazz improvisation. He learned how to evoke that line straight from Bird, Dizzy, Monk, and Bud, listening to Symphony Sid or some other jazz radio or in Minton's or at the Five Spot. And he would blow like them at rent parties in a spontaneous bop poetry accompanied by his friend David on the French horn, a most appropriate instrument for him, don't you think?”

His eyes appeared glazed and unfocused.

“Out of the crucible of cool came the hip new language whose progenitors are Lester Young and Lord Buckley, the new yawping of American poetry, its lexical and syntactic foundation. Jack gave voice to that language.”

It was the lighting. The lighting was bad he decided.

“Jack made it ok to be silly, to goof, to improvise, to be the fool.”

He consoled himself with the likelihood that his contribution would end up on the cutting room floor. Why not another lie?

**When I was a young boy I would hold my father's hand.** That thought, those words, occurred to him as he wandered part way down

the Lombard steps and then cut over to Chestnut before heading back toward Columbus. No reason accompanied them. Then the image expanded to the peripheries. They were heading for a white door. It was the door to a washroom at a service station. He had pissed his pants.

He hadn't been expecting a crowd. Something was going on. And when he got closer he saw that there were cameras and a crew filming. It was a big production from the amount of equipment, not some handheld film school effort. Tracks for the camera dolly had been laid down and there were more people behind the camera than in front of it. Two actors dressed in black stood idly awaiting the set up. A fog machine, as if the local variety wasn't good enough, was producing too much fog so a fan had to be brought in. All the while a young actress dangled from the crane in a harness. Everyone had their eyes on her, even the two cops obviously there for crowd control. The crowd was behaving itself, mainly neighborhood folk and tourists who had suddenly ended up in Hollywood when they thought they were in Frisco.

Not one to gawk, still Wendt was curious. He asked the big Samoan in the expensive suede black and orange team jacket, "What's going on?"

"Eh, makin a kung fu movie, man. That Eve Won." The big man pointed a large fist at the suspended actress.

"Oh, yeah? Never heard of her."

The man in the suede jacket looked offended. "You never heard of her? Man, she been in alla big Hong Kong kickass flicks. She the best." And then after an appraising glare, "What, you been living inna cave, man?"

So much for that. Wendt was about to duck into the entrance to the Art Institute when he recognized the couple coming toward him. Courtney and David. They were holding hands and had yet to notice him. When they did, they were delighted to see him.

"Carl, you'll be glad to hear that I spoke with Nora White and she has no objection to you reading at the memorial for Ian Blake. She even suggested that you waive your fee," Bloom beamed at him.

"Come on, Wendt," Courtney twisted beseechingly.

"When is it?"

"Next month, the nineteenth. We were going to do it on the twenty-first, but the hall was already booked. Wednesday is not a great night for an event, I know, but it's the only one we could get. Besides, Ian had a lot of friends and admirers. And you'll be on the bill. That will bring a big crowd." Bloom slapped him on the arm collegially.

Wendt tried not to growl. He didn't say 'don't count on it' but the twitch of his jaw spoke plainly.

"Are you here for the Kenny Retain show? I hear his oils are really amazing." Courtney knew how to change a subject.

"Actually no, I came in to use the can. I've already seen the show and reviewed it in my column. It's dog shit smeared on plywood with a palette knife. Though much to my dismay, I couldn't use those exact words."

**"You're an asshole."**

Nora White and Associates, Literary Representatives, held court at a tiny red table at the far back of Tosca's. The associates were three Maltese mutts named Sam, Miles, and Bridgette. Nora looked like she could use a cigarette. She smelled like she'd already had more than a few. What could have been an angora sweater was merely an accumulation of dog hair on a wool shrug. A veneer of hair spray held her curls in check, what curls there were, dyed blond and worse for the wear.

"Thanks for your vote. If I get enough, I can win the Rusty Sphincter Award."

"Golden Sphincter, and there's a limit on how many times you can win."

"Then when do I get inducted into the Asshole Hall Of Fame?"

"You've already been. But you're such an asshole that you never showed up for the ceremony."

"What's this all about?"

"Why did you tell those kids you wouldn't read at that memorial unless I gave the ok?"

"I don't do readings for free. It sets a bad precedent."

"You haven't had a reading in the city in what, three years? I think you're in the hole on this one."

"The longer it takes me to get a paying gig the more expensive I get."

"I don't quite follow your logic."

"Besides I didn't think he'd call after I warned him about you."

"Snakes in the hair again?"

"More Cyclopean than Gorgon-ish."

"With friends like you I don't need enemies."

"Face it, Nora, your enemies are all your old friends. You're in the literary biz, you know, knife in the back and all that."

Nora dropped her chin in assent and slid off the chair untangling the dog leashes. At full height her nose pointed directly at Wendt's heart.

“Walk with me, Carl. Time for me to leave my perch before the health inspectors and their wives come in for a drink, anyway.”

“Health inspectors frequent Tosca’s?”

“Figuratively, Carl, figuratively. I’m talking about the couples who come in here and see me with my dogs and think they can quote public health code about them being in a food service establishment unless they’re seeing-eye or service dogs.”

“Well, they’re right. That is the law.”

“So, you’re a health inspector now?”

**On the walk up Grant to Nora’s apartment** they fell in behind a trio of young people that from the swagger and stagger of their meanderings indicated that they’d been hoisting a few. Two men and a woman, one of the men and the woman engaged in a passionate embrace as they made their progress. The other man trailed behind.

“Poor guy doesn’t have a girlfriend,” Nora observed more to herself than to her dogs or Wendt, “and he has to watch his friend get smooched.”

“I think the woman’s his girlfriend. Or his wife.”

“The third wheel’s? You are an astute observer of human nature, Carl.”

“Or I’ve got a good imagination. But that doesn’t explain why he’s sobbing.”

Nora reached into her bag and retrieved the key to unlock the grate. “You’re a savant, an idiot, but a savant.”

“Ah, is that a promotion?” Wendt held the iron gate open. “From asshole to idiot savant?”

“No promotion.” Nora herded the dogs ahead of her and up the narrow gray painted stairs. “Idiot savant asshole. It just takes longer to say.”

**Nora splashed cranberry juice into a couple of water glasses** of vodka in the kitchen. Wendt moved the pile of manuscripts from the big overstuffed chair in the living room office onto the floor among the other piles of paper and dropped onto the threadbare cushion, stretching his legs to the ottoman piled with padded envelopes.

She placed the drink in his hand. “You know as well as I do why you’re not getting asked back to the North Bay Writers Conference. Don’t play dumb.”

“What are you saying? That it’s my fault?”



“Carl, you were screwing the director. . .”

“Co-coordinator.”

“Whatever. For the three previous years you were applying your variable foot to her, and then last year you dumped her for some shrill ingénue. Didn’t you think she’d notice?”

“Come on, Nora, it’s just sex.”

“You won’t learn, will you, Carl. For a woman, it’s never just sex, no matter what she leads you to believe.”

“Well, whatever the cause, I’m gonna miss that money.”

“I know all about that. I’ve been talking to Angela. She’s smart to move out to the country. It’s best for Samantha. She has asthma and the pollution in the city gets deadly at times.” This from a woman whose apartment was a giant ashtray.

“I need to make money, not just my usual chump change. Any ideas?”

“Oh, I have ideas but none of them relate to you.” She surveyed Wendt from the leather office chair that engulfed her like a large fielder’s mitt. Or a malignant mushroom. “I suppose I could pay you to read some of the stink that comes in the mail. Would you be willing to do that?”

Wendt considered his drink, and shook his head no.

“How about a speaking and reading tour?”

“Would I have to leave the city?”

“Carl, you are a parochial anachronism.”

“What part of poet doesn’t cover that?”

“Of course, you’re going to have to leave the city.”

“Got anything like featured speaker at a convention? I hear they do pretty good.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Nora confined her sarcasm to a loud mocking laugh. “I’m thinking more along the lines of writing groups looking for authors to come and talk to them about their experiences with the craft and how to get published. I have a couple of other clients who do pretty well.”

“The Tupperware circuit? I think not.”

“Suit yourself. But there you go acting like a snob. Just like the people you say you hate.”

“Writing isn’t about joining a group and penning borderline erotica for your friends. It’s not a knitting circle.”

“Oh my, that’s pretty sexist. But I’m not surprised, considering the source.”

“You don’t just suddenly decide you’re going to be a writer once the kids move out or you reach a midlife crisis.”

“I can quote a list of names longer than my arm that proves you’re talking through your hat.”

“My point is that it’s a synthetic hell when what you really need is an authentic hell. These people write for the chance to get on Oprah, they don’t write to try to make sense of their confusion, to overcome the doubt and anxiety that will turn them into an esthete of the word. And at the same time make them whole. I’m not interested in talking to a room full of broken crockery wanting to be reassembled into a piggy bank.”

“Get off your suffering artist high horse, Carl, save it for the impressionable young seductees. Nobody cares more about what you do more than you, as the author, and after that the appreciation drops off a cliff. I’m not talking about baring your soul and converting the rabble. I’m talking about a snake oil show. Give them what they want and let them do with it what they can. People want opinions. Is it good, is it bad? They don’t want art. They wouldn’t know what to make of it. They want to be told how to do something that will make them money or held in awe by their friends, and most of the time making loads of money does that. Esthetics is not listed on the stock exchange and you can’t deposit it in a bank.”

“Ok, you got my attention with ‘deposit it in the bank.’ What do I have to do?”

Nora trumpeted a victory chuckle as she went back into the kitchen to dilute the cranberry juice. When she came back, she laid it out for him. She was connected to a number of Writer’s Clubs and Guilds throughout the State. As well, some of her clients who ran writing workshops were always on the lookout for guest writers to come in and talk. Maybe lectures at a few community colleges, but that would have to wait till the fall semester. He might do reasonably well in the short term. The long term depended on how successful he was in the short term. Make money, and then make more money. That was her motto. In the meantime he could do some fact checking for some of her clients. And if things were particularly slow, he could proofread manuscripts.

Wendt snaked a cigarette from the pack on Nora’s desk. He lit it with her personalized pink butane. She had one in her mouth and another burning in the ashtray. “Yeah, maybe, but I don’t want to cut in on Val’s livelihood.”

He had gone to the kitchen to refresh his drink. There was little more than a corner left to the potato juice. Then he spied the full half gallon set back among the clutter of appliances on the counter.

“Val is a flake. She brought back some work I had her do for me a couple of weeks ago. She hadn’t touched it.” Nora paused and angled her head like a drunken parakeet. “Aren’t you going to ask how she’s doing?”

He nodded reluctantly knowing that Nora would tell him anyway. “Yeah, how is she doing?” He didn’t want to care.

“That was the last time I saw her. She knows I’m not happy with her. She poached one of my clients. He gave her money to edit his manuscript and he hasn’t heard from her since.” Nora blew smoke from her pursed lips with a whistle of exasperation. “The woman is not well.”

**Wendt wobbled over to the coffee house** on Stockton where Brazon and another poet were reading. The place was deserted except for the poets and one or two other patrons. A shot of espresso put some timber back in his sagging foundation.

Nora drank way too much. She hadn’t been such a drunk when he’d first met her years ago as a successful young editor. That was back when he was on the way to becoming a successful young poet. He’d been sidetracked. She hadn’t. She’d used her savvy to build a successful career representing authors. All the same, they’d built up a rough trust that resembled more of a truce over the years. She didn’t take any of his guff, and he knew she wasn’t going to bullshit him. She’d walked him through the grant writing process once and then, realizing that he was hopelessly inept at paperwork that did not proceed directly from his own imagination, took over the grant writing for him. If the application was successful she charged what she called an administrative fee. Wendt, in turn, felt that he could take advances on the grants before they were awarded. That created problems. Mainly his being in a deep hole to her. She was in business after all. Of late though, it seemed like drinking was a large part of her business. And her smoking! She was going to set herself on fire one of these days.

He was beginning to wish Brazon’s reading partner would self-immolate. The man was a dishrag of self-pity from which he wrung every drop of sloppy sentiment for all it was worth. At a nearby table, Brazon, who had read first, now seemed transfixed, a rigid grin of nervous approbation, his right knee bouncing in rapid agitation as if from a drug that was just too good.

The umpteenth occurrence of the word *agony* seemed like enough of a cue for Wendt to get up and leave. He sauntered down Union. A patrol car with its lights flashing was pulled over to the curb alongside the park. Someone was getting a blue light special. He headed to Joe's to check on when Wendy got off work and maybe catch a ride back to the neighborhood.

He couldn't tell if the headache was leaving or just taking a breather. He reviewed his conversation with Nora again. They'd batted around the idea of his going after Stoddard's position at NAIF. He had enough of a reputation, but that and three-fifty might get him a latte. And besides, he wasn't a teacher. He shook his head confirming it. The ache rattled awake like a tiny toy in a gumball machine.

**Wendt met Andy Porter for lunch** at Bebop Dim Sum Café on Clement. The place was run by a jazz lover from Taipei who still had not mastered his adopted tongue. The musical ambiance was Golden Age bebop. Whenever the owner saw Wendt he would shout "Bud Powell!" but unfortunately it came out sounding like "butt powwow!" Invariably heads would turn.

He had spent the morning being guilty and dithering over imaginary details. Sometimes his life, like the weather, sucked. Even though there were hints that spring would finally make an appearance, fog banks persisted. There was always sun in the Mission. Just ask those who lived there. Out in the Avenues, cold steel-gray wool clung to the belly of the sky.

Andy was cheerful, maybe a little more than usual. He was young, after all, hopeful, full of ambition, full of himself. This was different. He was bursting with what he wanted to say.

"Good news?" Wendt asked as the waitress placed the pot of green tea between them.

"I got the fellowship. I'm going to China!" Then he shared his excitement, in Chinese, with the waitress who giggled and moved quickly back to behind the service area. Andy liked to practice his Chinese on restaurant staff, often with hilarious results. Wendt was clueless but amused by Andy's apparent discomfort.

"I think I just said 'a dog's leg is bitter as ashes after sex.'" He shrugged, resuming his cheery demeanor. "I'll be a year in Shanghai. I'm really looking forward to it. I don't leave till late August, but I'm going to make an exploratory trip in June, just to get a feel for it." Andy was

beside himself, “It’s going to be really cool,” and blushed at his enthusiasm.

“That’s great, Andy.” Wendt poured the tea into both their cups. “Your girlfriend will be housesitting for you while you’re gone, I assume?” The wheels had begun their spin, tumblers rolling, in the slot machine behind his eyes. Andy lived in a studio apartment on Turk, a pied-à-terre owned by a relative or a friend of a relative.

“I don’t think so. She’s spending the summer with her parents in Rhode Island, and she’ll be gone as soon as her classes are over.” Andy made a fake sad face. “We’re kind of in the process of separating. She’s going to intern in DC, and I’ll be in China.” He turned over a hand, palm up, as if letting something go. “Why?”

Wendt explained his upcoming eviction from the Balboa address. He would need a temporary launch pad until he could find a more permanent situation. He mentioned that Nora was arranging a reading tour for him. He did not mention that nothing had been settled and often Nora’s schemes resulted in miscommunications and the threat of lawsuits. So, ostensibly, he was assured, virtually, of a cash flow.

Andy agreed readily. And having Wendt look after his tiny apartment would be perfect for the month he was away on his recon mission to Shanghai.

*Ka-ching!* Wendt thought, which is not in itself a Chinese expression meaning *jackpot*. The perfect solution had presented itself, an archipelago of housesitting for his friends dotting the summer months while they vacationed in Big Sur or Yosemite, Paris or Athens, someone to collect the mail, stack the newspapers, water the plants, pet the gold fish. The wobble of his flight for the last couple of days stabilized, and his smug became a little more self-satisfied.

There was more to Andy’s show and tell. He handed over an issue of *Autoclone*, a literary magazine from Tasmania, for Wendt to page through.

“International, with a twist.”

“It’s the first time my own writing has appeared outside the country. That is if you don’t count the poems I published in *Perverse Notions*, an on-line magazine from Oslo.”

Wendt recited a list of his foreign publications. “Translated into Hungarian, Czech, Finnish, and Romanian. I have no idea if they even came close. I was in that French anthology and whoever translated those poems made me sound like a tight-assed academic.”

“Weren’t you in an Italian anthology?”

“Right, I was. Do you know that in Italian my poems rhyme? But then so do everyone else’s. It’s a wonderful lyrically rich language.”

He tried to remember the name of the anthology, but that had been years ago. *Secret Ballot*? Something like that. And that had been Sheila’s doing. One of the editors was a friend she made when she’d studied a year in Padua. He remembered how delighted he’d been at the thought of being read in Italian.

Interesting also that the French experience had turned out to be so phonetically askew. And his inclusion in that anthology had been with the help of Val Richards who was a lycee schoolmate of the publisher of the volume. He remembered the name of that anthology because of his original mishearing of the title, something that caused him additional consternation once he learned the truth. He had been told by Val, who had a habit of slurring her words when she took certain pills, that the anthology would be titled *L’heure du temps* which his rudimentary French told him was a typical Gallic redundancy but, loosely translated, was *The Time Of Day*. When he finally got his hands on the volume he read his mistake. The title was *L’horreur du temps*.

Andy passed a book the size of a small shoebox across the table. “Here’s that anthology I was telling you about.”

“Whenever I read an anthology I always think of all the poets whose poems are not represented, and that’s an anthology in itself.” Wendt scanned the columned gallery of names on the back cover. Not one signaled recognition. “Ok, here’s one, A. W. Porter. That’s you, right?”

A rosy glow colored Andy’s cheeks. “Yeah, but you know, the editor was a year ahead of me at Stanford. It helps if you know someone.”

“You’re telling me?” Wendt flipped the volume and read the cover. “*Poets of a Later Latitude, A Geography of Poets Under 30*. No wonder I didn’t recognize any names.” He set the large book on its spine and let the pages flop open at random. “And look at that, it opened right to your poems! Good placement. Do you have to pay extra for that?”

The noodles arrived and Wendt ordered a Tsing-tao. He was beginning to feel *pretty*. A significant worry had been alleviated. It made him feel a hundred pounds lighter, virile even. He felt like having fun, special fun, rather than his usual mundane day to day fun. A frenetic Charlie Parker solo punctuated his musings.

“I always like looking through the contributors notes, sometimes they’re more interesting than the poems.”

Andy chuckled his agreement.

“Let’s see now, herewego, Andrew Walter Porter. . . .”

“Walter’s my mother’s dad, my grandfather’s name.” And then as an afterthought, “Isn’t Walter your first name?”

“You are correct,” Wendt said considering his first taste of the old German recipe of his Chinese beer, “but, no offense, I didn’t want to be known as Wally so I go by my *nomen*, my middle name. It’s one syllable so it’s direct, to the point. Kind of like ‘shit’ or ‘fuck,’ both of which I’ve answered to, by the way.”

“What about Walt? That’s one syllable.”

Wendt feigned consideration with an impish grin, “A little too Whitmanesque, I’d think.” He referenced what he’d been reading with his finger on the page. “Anyway, your note says, born in Santa Barbara in, hmm, for some reason I thought you were older. Currently pursuing a post-graduate degree in Asian Studies at Stanford. Published in *Yadda Yadda*, *This Then*, and *Contemporary Literature In Translation*. So you’ve got some cred, that’s good.”

Wendt turned a page. “Who are these other clowns? Jesus, look at this guy, Ross Arbuckle, associate professor and he’s hardly a few years older than you. Two books of poems, too. You’ve got some catching up to do.

“Jerrold Lloyd, professor of Creative Writing, a string of books from presses I’ve never heard of, the recipient of the Golden Lyre and he’s barely twenty-nine. Ok. Laurel Hardy, also twenty-nine, lives in Vancouver, MFA from SFU, recent book, *Special Agent* from Screaming Lesbo Press.

“Barbara Keaton, professor of European Literature specializing in Beowulf. How can someone so young specialize in Beowulf? Baffling.” Wendt shook his head with mock consternation for Andy’s benefit. Andy, for his part, was enjoying the running commentary.

“You’re traveling in some pretty rarified company. And Darla Costello. A Steiner Fellow. How nice. She’s like a year younger than you and yet she has two books of poems, *Don’t I Know You From The Microwave?* from Platypus Press. . . must be an Australian publisher . . .”

“I think that’s a misprint. It should be *I Don’t Know You From The Microwave*.”

“ . . . and *Last Warning, Poems of Self-Destruction and Resurrection*. Her titles are intriguing.”

“Get this, the guy she studied with is the Buddhist poet who runs the monastery outside of Omaha.”

“Omaha. Perfect place for a Buddhist monastery. Om. . . Aha!”

“So essentially Costello studied with an abbot.”

“You know her?”

“Sure, she’s part of our gang, you know, the writers down in Palo Alto, the two Steves, Panke and Timey, Alfred Falva. Darla’s married to Ben Turpin.”

“The musician?”

“Right, the horn player. He’s been on Leno.”

“That’s some glamorous crowd you’re running with.” And referring to the book again, “How about Laurence Mot-Kerlit?”

Andy shrugged. “I’m like you, I haven’t heard of a lot of these clowns, either.”

“Professor of Abstract Languages at Buffalo. Now there’s a job for a poet, a buffalo job.”

The noodles had cooled to an edible heat though their spice ensured that they were enjoyed tentatively. Distracted, while they slurped and then inhaled big gulps of air through their mouths to cool their tongues, Wendt leafed through the paper brick.

“Ok, so explain to me what these guys are about. Are they any good? Besides you. I know you’ve got chops.”

Andy was bursting to please. “Well, there’s a real mish-mash in here because the editor wanted to be representative. A mistake, I think. Anyway, you’ve got your conpo. . . .”

“Whoa, whoa, your what?”

“Conpo, conceptual poetry. Or poets.”

“Alright, I can see poets as a concept. But I thought conpo would be more like the poetry my friend Deidre Davis, DeeDee the Destroyer we call her for the number of marriages she’s torpedoed, taught to the inmates at San Quentin or here at juvenile hall.”

“Uh, no, it’s like when you say Ampo for American Poetry. Or Fopo for foreign poetry. And formal poetry too, I suppose.”

“I’ve heard of faux pas, never Fauxpo. But I can dig it. Pretend poetry. That could be what I write.”

“And there’s Fempo and Gaypo.”

“Is there a bipo, you know, for bisexual poets? Or would that stand for bipolar poets? Like Jimmy Schuyler. Or Ann Sexton.”

“That would probably be bipopo,” Andy said without cracking a smile. “And Avpo which stands for avant-garde, or average poetry.”

“Sometimes they’re the same.”

“Mopo for modern poetry.”

“Mopo sounds like one of those Japanese toys you keep on a key chain.”



“And there’s Autopo, Surpo, Clapo, NeoClapo, Pomopo.”

“Northern California Indian poetry?”

“No, Postmodern Poetry. Native American poetry would be Napo.”

“It’s like you’re naming off future generations of Marx Brothers. I mean, look at all the possibilities. Synpo, Cypo, Actpo, Poactpo, Slapo, Slangpo, Slampo, Slurpo, Minpo, Haipo, Gypo. . . no, wait, he really was a Marx brother.” Wendt pointed his faux porcelain spoon at Andy for emphasis. “So by what you’re saying, it sounds like schools of poetry are similar to vaudeville acts.”

“There is a Hypo. It stands for hybrid poetry.”

“Oh, I see, I was thinking of haiku poetry. Hybrid poetry, isn’t that a little redundant? On the other hand, hypo could also stand for hypothetical poetry. I’m pretty sure that’s what I write.”

“That would probably have to be hypopo. And I suppose you could have hypnotic poetry which would be hypnopo, and you’d have to have posthypnotic poetry and that would be pohypnopo.”

“Now you’re talking! We’re starting to sound Greek!”

The pot stickers and pork buns had arrived and both men fell to with a relish that belied the simple fare.

“Come on, Wendt, weren’t there schools of poetry in your day?”

Carl held the slug of beer in his mouth and raised an eyebrow. I’m continually being defined by my past, he mused.

“Oh, sure,” he said finally to ease the embarrassment that had set Andy’s ears aglow. “There was the Homunculus School of Poetry. Only cared about what went on in their heads, the body mattered not. Their poems had that hall of mirrors effect, you know, the repetition of an image ad infinitum. If they’d had any imagination they’d have called themselves The Infinite Regress School.”

Wendt turned his eyes upward and to the left as if he were scanning a script. “And there was the Heavy Metal School. Not to be mistaken for the Leaden School. They were mostly second gen New York School types though they were more into ‘rock mine off’ than Rachmaninoff. Working class kids who got the call. It was short lived. The working class has a built-in bullshit meter and it wasn’t long before they realized that the poetry scene was complete bullshit.”

Andy chortled and had the waitress bring another round of Tsingtaos. Wendt was going to tsing for his lunch.

“Then there were the Homo Poets. The name has nothing to do with sexual preference or orientation, and everything to do with sameness. Some of those people should have been working for the department of

weights and measures! Their obsession with the anal perfection of the identical was maniacal.” Wendt stabbed at a pot sticker with a chopstick. “The Pointless School of Poets, they’re still around. The Iceberg School of Poetry, all below the surface, lying in wait for the Titanic of the unconscious. The Surrogate School of Poets and their exclusive magazine, *Turret*, Vince Clayborn, dreadnaught and editor. The Usurpers, anti-academic slammers who for all intents and purposes grabbed up all the academic posts and honors that they had once so vociferously trashed. OG’s, the Old Guard, and the Leaden School with their dense, turgid paperweight verse.

“Of course, my favorites of all time were the Anti-Gravity poets, floating above the fray, resisting the pull of gravity and it’s aura of authoritarian self-righteousness and inherent elitism. The California Pretenders, a band of wild and woolly poets, essentially neo-romantics, who are no more because romantics are well, lemmings, and so,” Wendt made a mime with his hand that depicted a leap off a cliff, “you know the rest. Defenestration. Did they jump or was they pushed?”

“I had a prof in a survey course as an undergrad who described the romantic poet as posed on a promontory, wind in hair, waves crashing below, an image that’s stuck with me.”

“Exactly! Poised to leap.” Wendt smiled with satisfaction that his point had been proven. “And then there’s the whole underground of secret poetry societies.”

“Really? Secret poetry societies? Who’s in them?”

“Nobody you’ll ever hear of. They’re mainly loose fits, not quite misfits, the lumpen poetariat collected under various acronyms like TAN-TRA, The Association of No Talent Rejected Artists, or POO, Poets of Outer Orbit, whose motto is Kerouac’s ‘Poetry is shit.’”

“Didn’t Genet say that, too?”

“Probably. It’s a French thing. *Merde*. Such a poetic word.” Wendt took a sip from his glass. “The AWWA, The Association of Waxed Wing Ascenders also known as The Icari. And of course the C Squared group, the Comic Cosmic poets.” He paused. “Maybe that’s the Cosmic Comic poets. Also known as The Holy Fools.

“Anyway, all this speaks to a factionalized regimented poetry world. There have always been poetry groups, exclusive societies of amateur writers who essentially snubbed anyone who wasn’t part of their crowd. And sometimes they affixed a name to their association, as a kind of shorthand for those in the know. It was Breton and his Surrealist who institutionalized the idea of a school of art or literature. Surrealist and

Surrealism became brand names. And now everyone wants to brand themselves, literally and figuratively. I mean, look at the prevalence of tattoos. You can't be a loner anymore. You can't be unique. Or to be unique you have to be so extreme as to be the center of attraction that aligns everyone else like iron filings around a magnet. And then you're just part of a group, a social network, a school. When anyone talks about outsider art, they're just stating the obvious. All true artists want to be outsiders. But being an outsider, an eccentric is anti-social. Group poetry, by your designation, groupo, is in."

"So like what are you, Carl? A ronin, a masterless poet?"

Wendt laughed. He liked Andy. Andy was a good poet on his way to becoming a university professor. He had a choice. Be a good poet or be a good professor. One invariably diluted the other. "That's right, the I-Don't-Belong School of Poetry that excludes everyone and includes no one." Wendt drained the bottle into his glass and then looked up meaningfully at Andy. "Being a poet is not a club or association you belong to. Poetry is the leprous affliction of the exiled and shunned. It is not some kind of cult. It is the reaffirmation of a singularity."

Andy had been down this road, or one like it, with Wendt before. He had an idea of what was coming. But that's why he paid for lunch. Lunch with Carl Wendt was bound to be informative if not enlightening.

"The independent or non-aligned poet is relegated to the status of hobbyist by the professional cant of the academics who promote their own in a self-perpetuating literary daisy chain that includes big payoffs like inside track on hiring and fellowships. It has nothing to do with literature and everything to do with who is fucking who and who knows who is fucking who and how they can use it as leverage to keep the whole inane squirrel cage spinning. A bunch of no-talent hamsters."

"Hey Carl, ease up, I'm going to be one of those academics, you know."

"Not you, kid, you've got a head on your shoulders. Besides, you're a scholar, not a professional poet."

"Gee, who would that be?" Andy begged with mock innocence.

"Warren Pace, and just about everyone else in the Monotonous School of Poetry, is a perfect example. Also known as the monotonos or the monos. Today I suppose they'd be monopo. And the Flatliners, an off-shoot that has lost most of its adherents to attrition or career changes.

"The collective under the banner of 'school' is the Trojan horse used to infiltrate the citadel of academe. The Monos created a cachet and

marketed it through the exclusivity of social networking. Someone always had to be out, so that its members could be in. Poets United, whose initials says it all, a subset of more rigid intellectuals and poseurs, used exactly the same ploy. No effort is made to understand the undercurrent or the essence of the art, only the desire to make it different which only makes it, by its sheer novelty, self-cancelling.

“And what do they have to offer? Their awful middle class boredom, passing it off as profound intellectual angst. It never worked for me. Their focus on the technical aspects of poetry masks a deep misunderstanding of what poetry is. It’s not about technique. It’s not about how tight your pants fit. It’s about talent. It’s about undermining, not commodifying. But I suppose when you want to appeal to bourgeois taste, you have to think product, the aesthetic object that can be bought or bought into.” Wendt paused. He had to laugh at himself. His aesthetic critiques often degenerated into faux vitriol, amusing bluster of a Falstaffian cast, especially before a bemused audience such as Andy. He wasn’t about to take himself seriously. Not over lunch. But a few more points needed to be made.

“Once they’ve achieved the metaphorical high ground, they set themselves up as guardians of the velvet rope, id checkers, sniffers of social status, quantifiers of the quibble, bureaucrats of subtle hierarchy, enforcers of the status quo, crabs in a barrel, judge and jury.

“I had a guy come up to me after a reading some years back to tell me that he really liked my poems and admired the fact that I still kept at it. ‘This poetry racket is a hell of a hard one to break into,’ he told me. He knew. He’d tried. Eventually he gave it up, too many obstacles, too many tiny exclusive circles you had to run around in. Then he said to me, and I’ll never forget this, ‘they only know what they think and think only what they know. Everything else is unknown to them. The imagination is a primitive construct to mask what we really think about what we know, you know?’”

Sonny Stitt assaulted the bridge of *Bopping A Riff*, an old Bebop Boys standard from the forties with Bud on the piano comping in stride. How could music so old be so current? The chef was flashing him teeth and a thumbs-up from the entrance to the kitchen area. Wendt returned the teeth and the thumb.

Andy picked up the check and loaned him, in a manner of speaking, a twenty, the unspoken fee for mentoring.

Wendt grabbed a toothpick and a handful of peppermint candies by the register. “Have you heard anything about NAIF and Stoddard

Leary?”

Andy made a face. “I don’t have much to do with that crowd, you know.” He tried to sound apologetic. “The last time I saw Stoddard was at Enrico’s, the night you were there.” Andy smiled as if remembering something pleasant. “You left with that redhead.”

“Ah, yes, Mac, the astral acrobat,” Wendt spoke cryptically.

“Anyway, Stoddard got increasingly drunk and boisterous, and at one point took off all his clothes, yelling ‘If Allen Ginsberg can do it, why can’t I!’ Why?”

“Word is that his teaching position at NAIF is up for grabs.”

“Go for it, Wendt, you’d be awesome! I would even take your classes!”

“I’m sure I’ve told you this before, Andy,” Wendt said sucking on a mint, “I’ve done a lot of bad things in my day, but teaching creative writing is not going to be one of them.”

**Wendt hooked up with Dottie & Lynel** at the Zig Zag Room in the Haight. The Zig Zag Room was run by a Frenchman of Lebanese descent named Pierre who had heard every joke about Lesbians and Lebanese there was to tell. And in the process he had probably lost what little sense of humor he originally had. The Zag, as it was affectionately known, was a staging area where literary types could fortify themselves before having an evening of literature inflicted upon them. Next door to The Zag was the Upright, a coffee house that hosted weekly poetry readings and known once, not so affectionately, as the “Uptight” when the series was run by a group of Abstract Maoist Feminists.

“I didn’t think they’d let us in.” Dottie was not wearing her contacts and in consequence her round dark framed glasses gave her a wide-eyed owlish appearance. A black knit hat with a skulls and crossed bones motif allowed a fringe of dirt blond hair to peek out at her cheeks and just above her shoulders. She wore what looked like a European style military long overcoat.

“I saw the gaggle of black and whites down on Stanyan. What’s up with that?” Wendt accepted the pilsner from the bartender who explained, “Shot some kid in a stolen car after a screaming chase down the middle of the street in mid-day traffic. Yashouldaheardit.”

Wendt slid Andy’s twenty ever so tentatively across the bar on the off chance that Dottie or Lynel would offer to buy the beer.

“They just reopened the street not more than fifteen minutes ago,” Dottie offered. “I thought that they were going to cancel the reading.”

The way she said it sounded ambiguously disappointed.

Wendt stared down at what was left of the twenty.

“So what’s up with the angry little guy? At Megan’s salon last Tuesday?” Dottie wanted to know.

“Reggie?” Wendt chuckled, “Short story, long answer. I should have beat his ass but he’s one of those guys who won’t go away unless you push them off a cliff.”

“I thought his head was going to explode.”

Wendt shrugged, “Yeah, he’s a pain in the ass.” And changed the subject, “Who’s buying archives these days?”

“Nobody. University libraries are cutting way back on acquisitions. And it’s not so much because of the cost of the materials. Most authors will sell their lives for a pittance. It’s storing all that paper that’s the real cost. Storage space.”

Wendt grunted and nodded like he’d heard it before.

“You could try finding a private investor. That’s what Ly and I are doing. Ly has correspondence with the crème de la crème of the literary world back from when he had his magazine *See* in the early eighties. Berrigan, Schuyler, Weiner. He was smart to hang on to those.” She smiled at Lynel and he smiled back. “And we’ve got all our early manuscripts and journals, his and mine. Now we just have to find the right person to buy them.”

Wendt thought of offering Harry Croft’s name but he wasn’t the right person, not for Dottie and Lynel. He was Wendt’s own private runnel of trickledown economics. “So there’s such a thing as a poetry investor?” He didn’t want to sound incredulous.

“Oh yeah, collectors, and not just poetry, of course, all kinds of limited edition literary ephemera, chap books, that sort of thing. Autographic manuscripts, too, which is why it’s good to write your work out by hand first even if it doesn’t turn out to be the final version. Especially if it doesn’t turn out to be the final version!” Dottie and Lynel clinked their drink glasses and grinned at some private joke. “We thought that Dorian Pillsbury might be someone who would be interested.”

Wendt’s frown was like the growl of a dog protecting his meal ticket.

“We called him up but all we got was his assistant who was super bitchy. She said that Dorian was in the hospital.”

Wendt looked down at his beer. The phone message on his machine earlier from Julie he had deleted before he heard more than half a dozen words because he didn’t want to deal with her usual histrionics. He hated what he was thinking. If Dorian kicked, he would get more than just a

finder's fee for the signed Lucian Graff. He didn't want to think of Dorian dying just yet, though like Granahan, it was a matter of days, months, not years.

Dottie sailed into his thought stream. "Denny Darns passed away recently. Down in Pismo Beach."

"Denny, wow, no," Wendt blinked. He hadn't thought of Denny in a while. They'd crossed paths in Wendt's younger, rowdier days. Even though they'd lost touch, he kept an affectionate memory of the wild old man. There was a little more than a decade's difference in their ages, though he remembered Denny holding his own at the drinking trough.

"He was at Iowa when Ly was there, teaching fiction."

"Didn't he get fired from the program?"

Dottie and Lynel exchanged meaningful looks. "He was asked to leave. ADU."

"Adu? You mean *adieu*, like good-bye?"

"No, A-D-U, Alcohol, Drugs and Undergrads. But he landed on his feet, dried out. Bluffed his way into a teaching position at a community college on the central coast. He stayed in touch with Ly, and he liked to write long letters. By hand!" She widened her eyes to the size of silver dollars. "Anyway, his novel? *The Color of Sunset*? About the art scene in Santa Barbara? It was optioned by some big Hollywood producer, and all of a sudden old Denny had a rocket in his pocket. There's this bohemian literary circle in San Luis he had been hanging out with, and next thing you know he had groupies."

Wendt tried to imagine the types of groupies that would be found on the eastern flanks of the rolling toasty brown hills of the central coast range. "The wives of vintners? And cattle ranchers?"

"More like university wives and their daughters. And some of the local artistes, of course. Apparently it got almost as crazy as it did in Iowa."

Lynel responded to Dottie's remark with a low sardonic chuckle that didn't reflect anything funny.

"He had so many women after him that they had to beat him off with a stick."

This time Lynel's laugh was genuine. "I think that should be 'He had to beat them off with a stick,' honey."

Dottie cocked her head to the side. Then with a shake, "No, I think the way I said it is right."

Wendt had to know. "So was he in. . . ?"

"Flagrante delicto? You bet, but, you know, in a very Chance the Gardner fashion. He liked to watch."

Wendt understood. Old men and their cocks.

“The funeral is next week. Denny’s sister asked Lynel to speak at the memorial.” Lynel nodded his agreement. He wasn’t much of a conversationalist. Wendt couldn’t imagine him delivering anything more than a haiku for a eulogy. But maybe he would don his professorial hat and lecture the mourners. He had heard of, but never witnessed, Lynel’s vaunted logorrhea.

And would he attend the funeral in his signature black leather motorcycle jacket? It was the Lynel Pauk bad boy of poetry look of his youth, though that image had been compromised once he took the teaching position at the University of Kansas. He still sported a ridiculous Gorgeous George pompadour, now thinning, the architecture precariously held in place with hair spray, and streaked with gray.

They had stepped out to the sidewalk to grab a smoke. Dottie continued her chatter, a result of her favorite diet pill, no doubt. Dottie was tall for a woman, tall as most men so when she talked she didn’t have to talk up and was better heard than many of her sex. Men adored her and women found her charmingly threatening. Wendt wondered if Lynel’s silence was because he couldn’t get a word in edgewise. Dottie was Jay to Lynel’s Silent Bob.

“Lynel’s going after the job that’s opening up at NAIF,” she said, probably not remembering that she had already told Wendt of their plan. Lynel agreed with his eyebrows. “Lawrence is turning into such a debacle. We need a scene that’s a little more laid back.” Wendt said nothing, having heard through the grapevine that Dottie and Lynel’s time in Lawrence could be compared to Quantrill’s depredations.

A knot of poets along with a knot of hangers-on, a knot of poseurs, a knot of sycophants, and a smattering of wannabes had gathered at the entrance to the Upright with more than a few anxious types glancing at their watches or consulting their smart phones. Dottie and Lynel drifted over at the greeting from some new arrivals, one of them being Todd DeCal. Dottie threw Wendt a questioning look.

“Save me a seat. Gotta see a man about a stallion,” he said cryptically.

**Over the urinal in The Zag’s men’s room** someone or more than one someone had scratched *Pierre is a Zouave* and *Pierre = yesterday’s piss* into the square maroon tiles. Also in ink written in tiny letters in the pale grout between the defaced tiles, *pee air*. Wendt washed his hands, dried them with the annoying hot air drier, straightened the shoulders of his



jacket, tugged his cuffs, checked his fly a second time, and pushed back into the bar.

“You’re an idiot!” The man speaking the words displayed a mouth full of teeth and the tell-tale crinkle of glee around his eyes. Wendt didn’t recognize the man addressing him, a thirtyish, short haired, almost balding fellow dressed in Levi’s and muddy gray pullover. He knew that he would get to know the man better once he accepted his offer of a drink. And opting for a shot of Jameson’s, he settled on the bar stool next to his new found fan. The ‘idiot’ part referred to a column he had written some time back entitled *You’re An Idiot, or Inquiry into the Self-Destructive Behaviors of Pencil-Neck Hominids, Especially Poets*.

Apparently the man agreed with Wendt’s point of view, for the time being at least. Often there was an underlying argument lurking beneath all the jolly adulation, a point to make, a bone to pick. It surfaced after the second shot of Jameson’s. The man was a frustrated writer. He named off the writing courses and conferences he’d attended, the North Bay shindig being one of them, and where he’d first met Wendt but Wendt probably wouldn’t remember him which of course he didn’t hold against him though he probably did, and all those boring workshops, and what he was leading up to was how unfair it was that he had done all that work, jumped through all those hoops, paid his dues and his tuition, and he still couldn’t get published. And as his list of complaints lengthened so did his tone turn accusatory, blaming the elitism of the literary establishment in general and specific authors who represented that establishment. And when he didn’t get the kind of validation he was looking for, especially after the third Jameson’s, he began aggressively demanding that Wendt proffer his own opinion because here he was taking all these writers to task and Wendt wasn’t offering yea or nay but merely sucking down the expensive Irish whiskey.

Wendt glanced around the bar as if for some succor. The place had pretty much emptied out, most of the earlier patrons probably sitting next door at the Upright with their hands piously clasped and wishing that they had not zigged into the pretentiousness clutches of a literary evening. “So what have you written?” was the wrong thing to say, but he asked anyway.

It was the opening that Craig, as he had identified himself, was looking for. He had written a short story. Just one, Wendt mused, but kept it to himself and accepted the fourth shot as payment for what was going to be an onslaught, a blow by blow, if not a word by word, recounting of Craig’s *magnum opus* which was about, strangely, or not so strangely

considering the source, Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas and the pubic hair on the soda can affair. The subject perked Wendt's interest to a degree and he briefly considered where he himself might go with something like that. And Craig was becoming rather caught up in the telling of the story, having put away more than a few beers and shots himself, and listing all the minute and insignificant details. There was a point in the story where Clarence Thomas finds the pubic hair which Craig felt he should dramatize. "There's a pubic hair in my drink!" he exclaimed. This caught the attention of Pierre who had been discreetly monitoring the conversation, one-sided as it was, polishing glasses at his post at the end of the bar.

Wendt didn't think he'd ever seen Pierre move that fast before. Pierre poked a fat Lebanese finger in the direction of Craig's face. Pierre had news for him.

"You! Out!"

Still enamored by what he assumed was authentic and telling dialogue, Craig looked at Wendt imploringly. Wendt shrugged. Once Pierre said out, he meant out. If you didn't believe him, he'd bring out the bat. You didn't want Pierre to bring out the bat.

**The clock on the wall behind the bar indicated that the reading** next door was almost over. Wendt considered sliding in for the last few minutes but figured that most of the audience would probably be in the mood to unwind and find their way into The Zag. So why move, he already had a catbird seat at the bar. He could nurse the shot and hang-glide until the spillover after the reading brought in the true patrons of literature and bought him a drink. Or two.

Dottie and Lynel found him staring at the residue at the bottom of the shot glass. "Where were you? We saved you a seat." She didn't wait for an answer. Instead she proffered a body, a baby faced young man with an unruly goatee. "Carl, this is Tim Carbone. Tim was a student in one of Lynel's graduate seminars. He lives in the city now."

"Wow, Carl Wendt, I've heard a lot about you. Really surprised to meet you!"

"How so?" Wendt sensed a new fan.

"Well, I'd heard you were dead."

"Not dead, just worse for the wear," Wendt said with a laugh. "You know what Sam Clemens said," and at the blank look, explained, "Mark Twain," which sparked recognition. "Besides, if you can't be a legend, be a rumor."

“Mark Twain said that?”

Now both Dottie and Lynel were laughing much to their young protégé’s consternation. Wendt dropped his large hand on the young man’s slight shoulder. “For the price of a drink, I’ll tell you all about it.”

As the young man tried to attract Pierre’s attention now that the small space at the front of the bar was filling with parched authors, Wendt glimpsed Courtney and David squeezing their way inside. Courtney had seen him and waved. They made their way over and Wendt introduced them to Dottie and Lynel and then to Tim who had successfully made his purchase and handed Carl his beer.

The noise level in the bar rose to just below a din and conversations were not so much spoken as shouted. Facial expressions, body language played a big role in making points on numerous social and discursive levels. Bloom produced a flyer that featured Wendt’s name as one of the poets who was scheduled to read the following month at the memorial for Ian Blake, someone whom Carbone seemed to have heard of, and if Dottie and Lynel had not, they pretended that they had. Carbone made a show of entering the date of the reading on his smart phone. Dottie and Lynel made apologies as they would be in LA around that time. Wendt said nothing. He didn’t like the idea that his participation was a foregone conclusion. And there was the matter of his fee.

It seemed as though Lon Murphy always managed to have one of his minions secure a table by the window after these events. Alonzo Murphy was what Richard Harris would look like if he’d been zapped by a dwarf ray. Still he managed an aristocratic bearing, glaring down his fearsome beak at all even though he had to tilt his head upward do so, a black great coat draped over his scarecrow frame, full head of white hair down to his shoulders. Wendt tried to avoid having to actively dislike anyone. He was out of luck with Lon, and the vortex of tiny-minded elitists who swirled pretentiously around him and his vastly overrated literary magazine, *Hermes*, known to many as *Herpes*.

Once, in the likelihood of some twenty years ago or more, Wendt had had a throwdown with Murphy outside the old Intersection on Lombard. Ted Berrigan had read that night and had expounded on the difficulty and ambiguity of the word “read.” Which was it? Read or read? In any case, out on the street afterwards, insults were exchanged, exception taken, challenge given. Their faces were within kissing distance of each other. But it was mostly splutter and bluster, no chance of osculation. They were separated. Nothing was going to happen. They were poets.

Todd DeCal had joined Murphy, a devil in a blue dress on his arm. She turned to look in Wendt's direction and he saw that it was Mac. Amusement flickered briefly around her rouged mouth subtly changing the hue of her peachy complexion as she turned back to let Lon kiss her hand and offer her the chair of one of his subordinates. If anyone deserved to be next in line for a dirt nap, Lon got his vote. He had to admit it. He hated that prick.

He watched as Mac leaned over and whispered something in Lon's ear which caused the old gas bag to cackle obscenely and flash his Hollywood whites. She threaded through the crowd, black bag clutched like a football against the blue sheen of her dress, and hip action any running back would envy. She made as if to pass him by and then stopped. She fixed him with a mischievous hurt. "I thought you'd respond to my email."

"Email? I haven't checked my email in over a week," Wendt lied, "But you're here, I'm here, who needs email."

"I'm with Todd tonight." Then "I have to go to the little girl's room" with a little girl pout.

Wendt turned back to his drink. Since when did you have to check your email to get laid?

The guy at Wendt's elbow couldn't help overhearing and nodded sympathetically. "Women. I dunno, man."

"Yeah, I dunno either."

He offered to buy Wendt a beer. He was a writer, too.

Women. The word vibrated at a sub-audible frequency like a distant ringing in his ears that he couldn't immediately shake. He could not figure them. Not that he couldn't make heads or tails of them. No problem there, and for Wendt that usually meant tails. He had, like a good scholar, tried to classify them, but they were all so different and unpredictable, like mares in a meadow. He'd always figured Catholic girls as just mean and sadistic. Protestant girls were cold and joyless. Jewish girls were neurotic and oversexed. Asian girls were way too pushy, it didn't matter what religion they belonged to. And East European women, whether they were orthodox or godless, were after blood. Their icy blue eyes, white blond hair, sharp upturned noses of ancient ghosts made men despair.

Peg Aziz was a poet who wrote children's books. She had albino eyes that matched her absolute Norwegian blondness, and a hairdo that featured little wings that seemed to protrude out from the sides of her forehead. Even her smile was a sliver of absence. She was married to an exiled

writer who had the misfortune, given the times, of having the name of Saddam. So he was Sid if he knew you. Otherwise he was *Mr. Zees* which he would emphasize, zigging a zag with a well-manicured finger. He was the Arabic correspondent for a London newspaper and taught at the international institute in Monterey. He had dark puddles under his eyes and Wendt didn't think it was make-up. It was as if Zorro's mask had run.

Peg wanted to know how Wendt had liked the reading. He had to admit that he'd come in late, too late to catch the actual reading. She wanted to know if he knew the poets or their work. He knew he wasn't going to come up with the names. It was near impossible to stare down those colorless eyes.

"Jay Hunt, Greg Peck," Sid volunteered.

The names were familiar but he couldn't place them. He knew so many writers, many only in passing, and those names weren't attached to anyone who had loaned him money. That he would remember even if he said he didn't. And if they were younger than thirty, with a few exceptions, he wouldn't have a clue. He bluffed with a nod. Sid's smile of approval exposed his exquisite dentistry and gold caps and the fact that he still couldn't believe he'd landed an ice queen.

Peg pointed an ethereal finger at the now shoulder to shoulder assembly of scribblers. "Do you know Zane Yee?" She was indicating a lanky young Asian in a silvery gray designer waistcoat. Wendt knew him or knew of him, some kind of entrepreneur from down on the peninsula. He also recognized the man he was talking with, Mitchell Tjantor.

"They are evil." She said matter-of-factly and at the same time squeezing in at the bar to order a refill.

Sid's toothsome expression hadn't changed though at one point he looked nervously down at the drink in his hand and then adjusted his tie. He was probably the only person in the bar, besides the bartender, who was wearing a tie. And a vest.

Peg glanced over her shoulder impatiently. "They want to take over the world."

Wendt's interest was mildly piqued. World conquering poets? Or poetry world conquerors. He raised an eyebrow that asked how so and took a closer look at the clique.

"They're creating an exclusive group of poets whose purpose is to marginalize everyone else."

Now Wendt placed the faces with names. Two preppy wannabes from back East. Long on theory, short on style. Hadn't Max Jacob once

said that all writing depended on style and situation? Add, short on situation. Hunt and Peck. Wendt actually knew Jay's brother, Mike, not at all as stuck-up. He also recognized the lone woman among that cluster of elbows and averted gazes, Mira Marks, diminutive but fierce, in a navy blue trench coat and a dark Shirley Temple do that desperately needed redoing. Wendt knew she taught creative writing at State. She'd been a student in Granahan's Introduction to Poetry class right around the time the grannyhand scandal broke. He was almost certain she wasn't a part of that sorority. She always seemed so severe, not the eager worldly type Dick was drawn to. He never understood how she had landed the position right out of grad school. He shrugged. "They can have it."

Martin McGraw aka Marty Graw, a stocky square shouldered Irishman, was the kind of guy who would just as easily knock your lights out as sing you an Irish lullaby or quote from Yeats. He was compelled to be a poet by his origins the way some Irish Catholic kids (his brothers, uncles, cousins) were compelled to become priests. There's an old Irish saying not often heard, a spoiled poet makes a good priest. Maybe he had that backwards.

"Heaven help me," Marty intoned as he muscled up to the bar, "and if that's not possible, then a shot of whiskey." He winked at Wendt and then under his breath. "I had to get away from those two. If he said one more thing about Jim Carroll, I was going to bust his nut." Wendt had seen McGraw talking with William Erickson and Alastair McLews earlier. "That insufferable bourgeois snot." Wendt knew he was referring to Erickson who was also known by the sobriquet of Bill Irkesome. Then Serge La Prairie came cruising by, glad-handing as he went, and sucking the energy out of every conversation. He was not known as "lamprey" for naught. In the parlance of the past, his social transgressions were "not cool." Wendt drained his beer. He felt, as Lester Young might have said, a breeze. It was time for a cigarette.

**Later on when the crowd thinned out,** Wendt found himself alone, nursing a beer paid for with the last of Andy's twenty. Earlier, on the other hand, Geoff Einstein, in a mildly euphoric mood, either drug induced or the early climb into mania, had 'loaned' him two Jacksons claiming that he could get more anytime he wanted because the machine outside the bank down the street just spit them out. He planned to use some of it for a cab back to Balboa. For now he was riding a well-rounded trajectory with barely a tremor, a large bubble in a landscape of fizz, the headache at bay, and resigned that besides the few extra dollars

he had managed to extort, the evening was a draw.

A woman down at the far end of the bar was prattling on about why Thursday nights were best for poetry readings. Apparently Thursday was the perfect day to test the weekend waters. It wasn't the weekend exactly but taking in a cultural event allowed one to guiltlessly get out and yet not necessarily go overboard. She should know. She'd been running the events next door at the Upright since. She paused and sipped her cocktail.

"Seems like you've been doing it a long time." Pierre was trying to be helpful. She was his type. She wasn't Wendt's.

She glowered at Wendt as if he had just suddenly appeared out of thin air. "Well, if it isn't the great Carl Wendt, King of the Male Chauvinist Pigs."

There were two kinds of women that were drawn to Wendt at amorphous minglings of literary celebrity. They were lost souls of one sort or another, punishing their bodies with their neuroses. Some put on the pounds to a self-conscious extreme, and others ate themselves alive to a penitent skin and bones. Wendt was cautious not to encourage them. They so desperately wanted to be encouraged.

Joan Dunn was one of the latter, a brittle stick figure with a no-nonsense convent school set to her jaw. They had crossed paths numerous times. And he had done his best not to encourage her. Sometimes no encouragement is the only encouragement needed.

"So you dislike me. Please step to the end of the line. It's a very long line."

"But I hate you."

"No cuts allowed."

Jo Dunn taught in the Comparative Literature Department at the Catholic university. She had a condo around the corner, fronting Buena Vista Park. He'd been to a party there once before, a book reception for her then lover, Gilbert Novac, the Hungarian writer. She'd once been part of the Feminist collective that ran the series at the Upright. In a masterful reversal of power, Joanie had turned the tables on the three other women who were trying to force her out because she wasn't abstract, Maoist, or feminist enough. She was tough enough. And devious as need be which of course spoke of her strict Catholic upbringing.

She came down to stand at Wendt's elbow. "Have you ever Googled yourself?" It really wasn't a question. She stirred the ice in her cocktail meaningfully with a swizzle stick.

"Not in public. No, wait, maybe once when I was really drunk."

It was a smirk. "I've Googled you."

"You know, I didn't feel a thing."

Once, many years before, in this very bar, they had come close to hooking up. Her desperate blue eyes kept saying "let's go." Wendt had a scheduling conflict. Jo had lost the toss.

"You're not there. Not even on Wikipedia. You have a negligible presence in cyber space. You are nothing, a nobody."

"Despite a whole lot of evidence to the contrary, in cyber space or in the real world, I'm good with that. I'd hate to have to live with the illusion I'm someone I'm not."

Jo laughed. "You bastard." It was said affectionately. She was drunk, and under the right circumstances that made her horny. She let her gaze drift down to Wendt's crotch but due to her heavy headedness overshot. "Oh, look your shoe's untied."

Wendt felt a little uneasy as she bent down to tie the laces of his shoe.

She was smiling when she straightened to look him in the eye. "How come we never hooked up?"

"There was always a long line ahead of me. And you know me, I always show up late."

"Let's remedy that."

Wendt looked down into her long lashed Betty Boop eyes, their moist suggestive narrowing like the pods of a Venus fly trap. At least he was going to save cab fare.

**A raptor's talons gripped his shoulders at the base of the neck**, its great curved beak pecking at the left side of his head just behind the eye. Wendt used his teeth to tear into the plastic wrap of the packaged bear claw, a tub of latte in his other hand. He stood on the platform awaiting the train to Berkeley. He didn't want to go there, but he really had no choice.

He had spent a near insensible night with Joan. She had a liquor cabinet stocked with only the finest of desensitizing substances. If the sex had been great, he didn't exactly remember. What he did remember, though again vaguely, was the litany of her complaints. All the unresolved issues with her ex. Everyone took her for granted. The prima-donna poets she had to put up with at the reading series. She could not trust anyone because they always wanted something from her, there were always strings attached, no one was interested in who she really was. Because of her position at the Catholic university, because of the power she wielded as the director and founding member of the most successful



series in City history. And now her former associates were writing their own account, in memoir fashion, of the series, within the dictates of the Abstract Maoist Feminist dialectic, of course, and leaving her entirely out of the picture. The bitches! The politics at the University where she taught Thirteenth Century Italian poetry and was known as ‘Sahara Dune’ for her parching, brain numbing lectures, were unbearably distracting. Her biggest complaint was about the Jesuits. They hated her, and all women in general, because of her cunt. “Do you think it’s smelly and dirty?”

Wendt chewed the stale papery pastry and washed it down with coffee flavored milk foam. Cunts did smell. It was the aroma that drove men crazy. That’s what the Jesuits were afraid of. And dirty? Not as dirty as their foul holytosis. After all, hadn’t Courbet made it the subject of his painting, *The Origins of the World?* Not hers specifically, of course, but certainly generically. Rodin made a pencil sketch of one and gave it to Stieglitz who was obsessed with O’Keefe’s. And in the end, he was just another guy who had done Dunn, or whom Dunn had done. There was probably a club, a fraternal organization, if nothing else, a debate society, a tee shirt, maybe.

The Richmond train arrived and Wendt boarded with not a little trepidation. Traveling in a tunnel under the Bay made him uncomfortable. It was earthquake country, after all. He wondered if he could hold his breath until the train surfaced into the light on the opposite shore.

Public transportation was immediate social sensory overload. He didn’t question why people shut down on buses and subways. Wasn’t it obvious? There were so many faces to read, so many stories, the damned, the damaged, and the desperate. It was easier to focus on the page of a book, a newspaper, music streaming into ear buds, eyes closed, texting once above ground.

Wendt had to familiarize himself with the stops again, his back wedged against a chrome pole. His headache was particularly irksome and competed with his concentration on the route map on the wall by the sliding doors, taxing a coin shaped blank in the corner of his right eye as if his blind spot were expanding to encompass his field of vision.

At the MacArthur hub seats freed up as passengers departed and others streamed on. Wendt grabbed a spot by the window to get a view of backyards and empty lots, more stories, more damage, more desperation, before the train returned underground. He stepped out of the car at the Berkeley station and was outside the turnstiles before he realized his mistake. He rode the escalator up to street level cursing himself. The stop

he had wanted was the North Berkeley station. He would now have to hike the dozen or more blocks to his destination. He hated walking in Berkeley where even the clouds were big, puffy, white, and smug.

He had just deposited the colossal coffee empty into the overflowing trash container, orienting himself to the direction he would take up Shattuck Avenue when he heard his name called.

The portly woman coming toward him with what looked like a bible in her hand laughed, shook a head of mouse brown hair held down by a large black blob of velvet beret, and bared a mouth full of stubby piss yellow teeth, a left incisor missing. “Jeremessiah.”

“You’re saying I’m the messiah?” He tried not to sound annoyed at having been found out. The woman was Shula, a Berkeley street poet, Shula Raven. She had once been Shula Rabin, Bronx housewife, but now she was poet laureate of the street zombies in the thrall of the mind numbing shadow of the monolithic campus. She’d been around forever it seemed.

He remembered the time he and his friend, Adam “Mountain” Morad, were having coffee at the Med on Telegraph, back when he could still tolerate Berkeley, and Shula had come up to their table offering her book, *Your Sex My Sex Bisects*, for sale, a cheap copy machine fold of pages with a scribbled cover stapled along the spine. Mountain had tried to be polite in declining by saying, “we’re poets, too” as if that was the secret password. She’d summoned an appropriate sneer and retorted “Yeah, honey, ain’t we all.”

He got to know Shula, in passing, from his participation in the all-day poetry ego competitions that used to be held on certain pagan holidays in the park by the Civic Center. Over the years she added to the original version of her book of poems, in the manner of her antecedent, Whitman, and now, perfect-bound and professionally printed, it was the size of a small bible that she hawked all over town, including the University station egress.

“I didn’t think I’d ever see you on this side of the Bay again, Wendt.” Now she was standing in front of him, a dark blue cape with red piping that looked like it might have belonged to a female official of the Salvation Army from days gone by. A shimmering dirt blotched green velvet-reen frock topped a pair of scuffed red plastic rain boots. There was no dearth of bangles, bracelets, rings, and random jewelry in her adornment, either. Shula wanted to be noticed. “Someone might recognize you from your picture in the weekly and then remember the bum rap you’ve given this fair and liberal community.”

“Oh dear, I’ve made a wrong turn and now I’m in danger of being mugged by the politically correct.” Wendt arched an eyebrow. “What was that you said about my being a messiah?”

“No, Wendt, certainly not you. Jeremessiah. Have you seen Jeremessiah?”

“I’m having a hard time understanding what you’re saying.” There was something quite overpoweringly earthy about her scent and Wendt took a step back.

“Jeremy, Jeremiah. Jeremessiah, that’s what we call him. You know, the kid, the North Beach poet.”

“Right,” Wendt agreed reluctantly, “Jeremy. What about him?”

“Have you seen him around? He was supposed to pick up a bundle of flyers to hand out for our annual *Poetry Is The Cruellest Month* event. We had it in Sanazay last year and what a fucking mistake that was.”

There were two things that would not have immediately concerned him. One, the whereabouts of Jeremy, the cracked crackhead poet, and two, that it was time for the annual poetry gathering put on by the Penumbroi. The Penumbroi, and their literary organ, *Doubt*, as an international underground poetry organization weren’t so much secret as invisible, invisible at least to the culture commissars and those in the literary world who believed that only they mattered. That the kid was known among the shadow poets as Jeremessiah plucked a deep bass string of irony and made him smile. “Not like we’re circling in the same gyre, Shula, Jeremy and me, we’re hardly *compadres*, if you know what I mean.”

“Ah, you don’t have to get all literary on me. A simple yes or no will do. Keep it simple, stupid, that’s my motto. You should take that as advice. I’ve read your poems. You’ve got too many gears turning all at once. I keep wanting to say, ‘Let out the clutch! Let out the clutch!’ And I’m not at all surprised to hear you blow Jeremy off as a nobody, so typical of you poetry snobs. The kid’s a genius, a visionary. He’s the next Rimbaud!”

Wendt nodded impatiently and looked away in the direction of his escape.

Shula took a step closer to perhaps block his path. “But let me tell you this, that boy looks up to you. It’s always Carl Wendt this and Carl Wendt that. He thinks you’re a great poet and nothing I say or anyone else says will change his mind!”

Wendt was laughing. “Thanks. I think.”

“If it weren’t for Jeremy this book would never have been published.” She waved the book in Wendt’s face. “He came up with the money that

paid for most of the printing.”

Reflexively, as any author would, Wendt focused on the cover. It wasn't Shula's book. "Wait a minute, is that an anthology?"

Shula's smile was triumphant. "Right you are! Published by Penumbra Press, it's the first collection of real American poets since." She had to think. "Since the thirties, this is Populist poetry not that inbred middle class technocrat horseshit."

"What's it titled?" Wendt was trying to make out the wording on the busy day-glo collage of the cover.

"Urine Year Out." And then as an afterthought, "Too bad, Wendt, you didn't make the cut."

Wendt took a closer look and shrugged. The title actually read *UR In*, *UR Out*. "You know what anthology means, don't you? A collection of flowers. I'm no flower."

"See, that's exactly what I'm talking about!" Shula beamed with spiderish glee.

**The house on Cedar was a few blocks west of Shattuck**, a wide, redwood shingled Arts and Crafts affair with blue trimmed windows. The front yard, artistically overgrown, was accessed by a winding crushed granite path that led to an akilter decaying redwood trellis valiantly supporting a monstrous psychedelically bright bougainvillea partially concealing the weathered, hand painted sign on one of the broad porch columns. The practice, *Ratchet & Pawl, Psychiatry*, belonged to Jerry Pawl and his business partner, Ben Ratchet, pronounced 'rah-shay' though Wendt invariably pronounced it 'rat shit.' Jerry had married his ex, Sheila. Only afterwards did she officially become known as the artist Sierra North. But then Jerry's name had been Pawlowski before he went to medical school. Can two people who changed their names later in life find true love? Apparently.

Carl and Sheila had split the sheets thirty years past. The divorce was nasty and bitter at first, but after a while, mainly through Jerry's efforts, a pact was declared. The fact that Jerry loved art, collected first editions, was extremely well-read, had a keen appreciation of Wendt, and his writing, helped a lot. Over the years, they had built up a trust, he and his ex-wife's husband. They enjoyed each other's company, and Sierra rarely entered the picture.

The small plaque by the door above the brass domed doorbell read *Please Ring*. Wendt ignored it as he had every time before. In the foyer a tiny Bauhaus style rug straddled the polished hardwood floor. The white

painted staircase with red carpeted tread led to the upstairs living quarters. An ornate oval mirror on one wall above a narrow, spindly-legged art deco table at the entrance reflected the large abstract painting opposite. It was one of Sierra's, called *I Scream*, in homage to Edvard Munch, or maybe a comment on her therapy. Tutti-frutti, Wendt mused, and walked down the hallway flanking the stairs toward the back of the house.

There was a ringing in his ears, an alarm. He had set off an alarm. "Hello?" a voice from the back of the house inquired. The voice belonged to the man who appeared in the doorway at the end of the hall. "Hello, can I help . . . oh, hello Carl!" He was as narrow as a breadstick and just as tan. Jerry Pawl came forward wiping his hands on the blue striped apron. "Carl, Carl, how long has it been?" He wrapped a long arm around Carl's shoulder and gazed into the bleary unshaven face with genuine affection. "Carl, you don't look so good."

"Yeah, I'm not feeling that great. I must have stepped in some kryptonite."

Jerry laughed shaking his head. "Come on back to the kitchen, I'm making chocolate chip cookies."

The kitchen, a large space with white, glass faced cupboards and cabinets, had a marble topped island taking up the center. On it were cookie sheets, and on them, regimented rows of little flour egg butter sugar and chocolate blobs. Some, by the aroma, were done with their requisite baking. Jerry was grinning. "Friday is my day off." He turned to the oven opening the door, muttering "these are done," and louder, "but you know that." He returned with the fresh baked batch. "This is *my* therapy."

Wendt looked over the array of comfort food. "So chocolate chip cookies are the miracle cure. I better buy stock in Nestlé. Or Hershey." Wendt reach for one of the browner sets.

"Careful, they're still hot." Jerry was rotating another troop into the oven.

"What is it then, eat two cookies and call me in the morning?" A molten chip burned the edge of his lip as he said it. "Son-of-a-bitch!"

Jerry laughed, "I warned you."

Wendt touched the tender spot with a finger. "I could sue you. Defacing a National Literary Treasure. Now it's gonna look like I've got a herpes sore."

They both laughed and Wendt nibbled tentatively at the still hot cookie. "Are you going to eat them all?"

Jerry shook his head peeling the cooled brown aureoles from the cookie pan with a spatula and placing them on wire trivets. “Not a one. I have them available for my clients when I do consultations. A chocolate chip cookie is a powerful tool in psychiatry though no one will admit it. Besides, I don’t do it all the time.” He had taken the mixing bowl to the sink and rinsed it. “If I’ve had a stressful week or chaotic session, this helps me take my mind off it even though the problem solving apparatus is still going full blast in the background. Here, I’m following a recipe, steps, this, then that. It reestablishes order.”

Wendt tipped his chin in agreement, the flavorful efficacy filling his mouth. “Tough one, hunh?” He scouted another sample among the new arrivals. Hot chocolate chips cookies, childhood memories.

Jerry nodded. “Without divulging any of the details, yes. The insane logic of the crazed. Do you know how impossible it is to convince someone who is crazy that they’re actually crazy? Not in so many words, of course, and if they’re consulting you, they have some indication that something is out of phase and so the question is not ‘am I crazy?’ but ‘can you make me better?’ There is no cure for insanity because it really is a neuro-chemical imbalance that can be addressed by some more or less effective drugs and therapy, which takes a lot of time. I’m an advocate of meditation, but that requires will power and a certain self-confidence that a troubled client may not, most often, possess. My process is to strengthen the will to combat the compulsions, the surges of chemical instruction that enforces negative patterns and lead to neurotic behavior. Once I’ve accomplished that, and no mean accomplishment that, then we can proceed to meditation and extended periods of self-control. But there is always the potential for relapse, as in any addiction, where the pleasure centers override caution and the threat of self-destruction, that the personality, tenuous as it is, will get out of phase again and require realignment.”

“You make it sound like you’re some kind of AA psyche chiropractor.”

“In so many words.” Jerry cracked the oven door and peeked in at the last batch. “What brings you over to enemy territory?”

Wendt didn’t answer, balancing a cookie on the tips of his fingers and blowing on it to cool it.

“Running a little short this month, maybe I can help you there.” Jerry was always an easy touch, a sizable easy touch.

Wendt shook his head and, without looking directly at Jerry, said “More of a medical nature.”

“Carl, you know I’m not an MD. I’m a psychiatrist.”

“You interned, you can diagnose.”

Jerry pursed his lips, “Ah, you know I was never good with the body.” This from the guy whose vibrant aura said ‘sunshine nature boy.’ He picked up a large, blue glaze raku fired plate and ladled a pile of cooled cookies on to it. “Let’s go into my study. We can at least talk about it. Are you going to want milk with these?” And at Wendt’s unenthusiastic expression, “How about coffee then?”

**A black robust roast cut with a modicum of dairy product** in hand, Wendt proclaimed the cookies exquisite and proffered the suggestion that Jerry and his partner get into the boutique chocolate chip cookie business. “Ben and Jerry’s. . .no, wait, that’s already taken. How about Pawl and Ratchet’s? Mmm, no, that won’t work. People will associate the chips with rodent pellets.” Wendt broke another one in half and shrugged. “And you’re probably doing just as well as a head doctor.”

A low table piled with books and academic journals around which were placed some comfortable chairs was set off to one side of the room, away from Jerry’s work desk in the corner by the large leaded sectioned windows letting in a defuse light through the encroaching unkempt foliage. Jerry drank from a glass of water and ice. Wendt savored the mouth filling bitter of the roast beans. There was a pause as they both observed a silence that absorbed their breaths until finally Jerry asked, “How have you been?”

Been? This year? It hadn’t been that long. Month? Maybe longer. Week, day, five minutes ago? But the answer to which Wendt had to resign himself was much more straightforward. “I’ve been having these headaches.”

Jerry nodded that he understood and Wendt continued, “They come and they go. But they are intense when I get them.”

“The worst pain you’ve ever felt in your life?”

Wendt shrugged. “I don’t know. I can’t remember. Pain is like an orgasm. You know you’re having it when you have it but once you’ve had it you can’t recreate the sensation in your mind, only the emotional reaction. It fades from memory.”

“For good reason, too. Imagine if you could re-experience pain somatically, with your nerve endings in full arousal. PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder, flashbacks, recreate those moments, quite viscerally. Is the pain localized or do you get the overall dome effect?”

“Well, I just happen to be on the tail end of one right now.” Wendt

traced the arc above his left ear. “Starts in the back on the neck, goes across the side and then underneath the eye.”

“Stabbing pain or. . .”

“Occupying army. Like a huge growth squeezing everything else out.”

Jerry nodded, now a serious cast to his demeanor. “Ok, that would hurt. Been overdoing the elbow bending of late?”

“No more than usual. Here’s the crazy thing. I don’t get hangovers any more. Besides these aren’t hangover headaches. I wouldn’t bother you with that. In fact, I don’t get drunk anymore! No matter how much I drink!”

“Ah, yes, said the man with the golden liver. So what then, you’ve become immortal and you’re one of the gods?”

Wendt grinned. They’d had this discussion before. Jerry was concerned with Wendt’s habitual tipping and occasional over-imbibing. It had been Carl’s contention that the gods, as much as they drank, did not get drunk or have hangovers. And he had countered Jerry’s argument that what the gods drank was ambrosia, a psychotropic concoction, with “Same thing.”

“The headache you’re having now, is there anything that you may have done recently that could be the cause? High sodium intake? I know how much you like Chinese food. And your diet’s not the best. Any unusual exertions? Drugs?”

Wendt waved his hand as if he were brushing the suggestions away. “None of that. I don’t do drugs. That’s kiddy stuff.”

“I understand. But I’m guessing here. Do you have an idea what might be the cause?”

“Sex.”

“Sex,” Jerry said, trying not to sound questioning, and hid his amusement by sipping from his glass.

“Right, sex. Can’t men can have sex headaches?”

Jerry leaned back in his chair and rubbed his chin along a forefinger. “Certainly. They should. Why shouldn’t they? Yes, I would think men could experience sex headaches prior to sex.” His voice trailed off, reeled back into thought.

“Uh, this would be post-coital, Doc. I don’t have any anxieties in the performance department.”

“Ok, ok, *après la deluge*, in a manner of speaking. Let me check something out.” He rose and went to his desk and faced the monitor. The screen brightened after a few shakes of the mouse.



“You’re going to look it up online? I could have done that at the library!”

“If it makes you feel any better, I’ll pretend that everything I tell you is coming from my vast experience and extensive medical knowledge. Turn around so you can’t see me conjure this illusion.”

“While you read from an online medical reference.”

“I could go down to the basement and get my medical books but I think they’re supporting part of the foundation. I have this subscription to a professional online medical encyclopedia that is constantly being updated with the latest and I never use it. Otherwise, I could just fabricate something and that would likely bring up your mother.”

“Just read.”

*“Men are three times as likely to develop a sex headache as women.”*

“Ah ha! another example of female fakery!”

*“These headaches are due to climax or becoming sexually aroused, whether from solo sex or sex with a partner and oral sex.”*

“Guilty on all counts.”

*“In approximately 70 percent of cases, a severe, throbbing or stabbing headache hits the individual suddenly, sometimes building for several minutes. It can last for hours.”*

“Bingo!”

*“In about 25 percent of cases, the headache starts before an orgasm, building in intensity as sexual excitement mounts. This type is known to start in the back or sides of the head and is more of a dull ache.”*

“I don’t think so. And you haven’t explained why.”

“I’m getting to that. *The best explanation is that the pain is due to muscle contraction and . . . or blood vessel dilation in the head and neck during intimacy.*”

“Should I be worried?”

*“If you have a new, severe headache during sex, often described as among the worst ever, it may require immediate attention. These headaches can be due to the rupture of an abnormal blood vessel.”*

“Fuck!”

“Let me finish reading. *For example, an aneurysm, causing an acute brain hemorrhage or other serious condition. Since the heart rate and blood pressure are elevated, blah blah blah, weak blood vessels may burst or leak during sex.*”

“Fuck!”

*“If you start experiencing sex headaches out of nowhere, you should be evaluated by a physician immediately. While brain bleeds make up only a small fraction of all headaches, this should be handled as an emergency situation. If not treated, they can result in disability or death.”*

“Shit, that sounds serious.”

“I’m not done. There are other factors to consider.”

“Continue. Please.”

“Well, there’s the most obvious, alcohol intake.”

“As I said, I’ve become immune to its effects.”

*“Food or non-alcoholic beverages consumed in the six hours prior to sex. And the size of a pre-coital meal.”*

“That sounds rather arbitrary. Besides the only pre-coital meal I partake in has nothing to do with food.”

“Ok, I get the picture. How about low blood sugar? When was the last time you had a blood test?”

“Longer than I care to remember.”

“We can eliminate birth control pills. How about the little blue pills?”

“I don’t have that problem.”

“Marijuana?”

“Not in more than twenty years. Smoking that stuff only makes me fussy.”

“Possible sinus infection?”

“I like the thought of that. Certainly better than a brain leak.”

*“The timing of the sex. Does it occur only in the morning or just at night?”*

“You forgot noon.”

“I’m trying to be serious here, Carl. That leaves lack of sleep, glaucoma, and anemia.”

“I think I can eliminate the last two, and I try to sleep whenever I’m not awake.”

“Ok, wise guy. Here are some solutions you might try. *Changing sexual positions may help. Standing up instead of lying down, for example.*”

“I’ve done that, pulled a muscle in my lower back. That wasn’t a headache. That was a pain in the ass. And if I remember correctly, my partner at the time thought it was very very funny.”

*“The person with the headache may also find relief in being the passive sexual partner. And as with most health problems, bringing your overall stress level down can help. For some, abstention from sex for a few days is recommended. Sometimes the problem goes away on its own. Sometimes the headaches go away, only to come back months later. In any event, consult your doctor, especially if the sex headaches become progressively worse.”* Jerry looked up from the monitor.

“That’s it? I should stop having sex?”

“I know, asking you to give up sex would be like asking you to quit smoking.”

“You’re saying that sex is nothing but a nasty habit.”

“Not in so many words, but sex has its time and place outside of the merely obsessive.”

“I agree. For me that would be any time, any place.”

“You’re hiding your discomfort with the truth of what I’m saying by making light of it. I’m seeing more and more of that, especially among my younger clients. Porn and comedy have become national fixations. Our public image, our cultural identity used to be doctors and cops. Now it’s pimps and adolescent comedians. We’ve certainly come down a notch in the world cultural hierarchy.”

“Thanks for the sermon, Pawlowski. You make a pretty good parish priest for a Jewish guy.”

“Now you’re calling me a Christian. Should I take that as an insult or . . .”

“Hey, hey, don’t get off subject. What’s the diagnosis?”

Jerry pursed his lips and scratched behind his ear. He shook his head. “I don’t know, Carl, I honestly don’t know.”

Wendt nodded. “And my best friend the doctor won’t even tell me what it is I’ve got.”

**Jerry insisted on driving him to the North Berkeley station.** Earlier, before they left, he had given Wendt two white pills.

“What are these?”

“Aspirin.”

“And you want I should call you in the morning?”

“Sure, why not. Not too early. I like to sleep in.” Jerry could not resist the urge to *nudge* and remind Wendt that he was probably eligible for Social Services and should see a real doctor. “You probably qualify. After all, you have no visible means of support.”

“Ah, *No Visible Means Of Support*, the title of my next book!”

Sierra had poked her head into the den. “I thought I heard a broken muffler.” She had always wanted to look like the women in the yoga accessories catalogues, lithe and tan, and with a relaxed, even enlightened worldliness. She wasn’t Sheila Norberg anymore, all baby fat and anxious energy. In her presence Wendt felt awkward, like something had been left unfinished. Even if she barely resembled the woman he had married.

They had gone to couples therapy. One of the ways they were made to communicate with each other was by using hand puppets. The therapist had an assortment of stuffed animal puppets that the clients would fit on their hands like gloves and allow their inner selves to speak. Cuddly koalas, fuzzy puppies, plush frogs, colorful toucans, furry teddy bears.

Predictably, women picked the dreadlocked porcupine, and men, the woolly gorilla.

Jerry had helped Sheila realize her potential as an artist. “In a good marriage, one must become the loving guardian of the other's solitude,” he'd told Wendt when the subject had come up at their tenth anniversary celebration. She had stopped painting for the most part, producing tapestries, quilts, pillow covers based on her earlier work, and exclusively for interior decorators. It could be disconcerting to be at a function in someone's Pacific Heights home and sit on a couch whose throw pillows were replicas of paintings she had done during one of their more idyllic times together, a time when he would awaken mornings to one of those paintings on the easel at the foot of the bed that shared their tiny studio space with her paints, brushes and canvases, and his typewriter and books. Or even worse, have sex with someone whose bedspread was a quilt based on a painting done during the period they were breaking up, an original canvas he remembered putting his fist through. The chances were good that he would, in his travels, encounter a *Sierra North Creation* in some pretentious parlor, especially in Berkeley.

Had Sheila stayed with Wendt, they would have destroyed each other. She never started anything but could leave nothing unresolved, and there were always so many loose ends, in more ways than one. He was just the opposite. And opposites attract. Until they tire of each other or become too much alike, until they are no longer opposite.

They'd exchanged the usual pleasantries and then she'd leaned over to say something in her husband's ear. Jerry, nodding, looked up at her as she planted an affectionate peck on his lips. Then she was gone. Jerry had waited until he heard her car pull out of the driveway. The bad news was that the cancer had come back. Wendt felt the hurt as a kind of despair.

Jerry slipped him a twenty getting out at the station. They'd been talking about poetry, of all things. Jerry had a knack for seeing past the words. What he'd read of poetry recently had him worried. The amount of repression evident in the semiotic fabric of current literature was an indication of classic denial and anal retentive behavior. Except for what he'd seen of Wendt's.

“You read my poems?”

“Of course. You know my fascination with the deviant id.”

**Wendt lit up as soon as he stepped out at the Powell Street station.**

Going by the hospital and looking in on Dorian was next on his list. Go home, shower, change, and then find out what hospital he was in. Last time it was UCSF. And maybe look in on Val, she had a place in the neighborhood. It was a thought.

A cable car and a small compact with an Asian man standing stiffly by the open door had crossed paths. The ambulance lights were flashing but the EMTs were there just in case someone had been hurt. It was a bright, sun filled scene, nonetheless, after what had been nearly a month of fog and cloud bluster, and he relished the hearty slog up Powell, the underground cable's rumble and clank accompanying him.

The Buddha Pagoda Palace Lounge on the corner of California, not to be mistaken for the Buddha Lounge over on Grant, was known to its habitué's as "Bud's." Bud's was a cabbie, courier, messenger, limo, tour bus driver hang-out. Everyone knew Wendt as Mr. Clean Pee, or just Mr. Clean, for having urine free of any drug residue which he would provide for a fee or consideration.

The way it usually worked was a guy comes up to you, offers to buy you a beer. You suck it up and come time to recycle, you're provided with a little plastic bottle into which you donate your sample. Simple.

The bartender's name was Su, a dark ethnic Chinese with a massive pimp konk and a red Hawaiian shirt. It seemed like he was always on the phone, jabbering in something that Wendt was sure was not Chinese. Jimmy Chan was sitting at the bar, too. Or, as usual. He drove for Eternity Courier which had its offices on Anza over by the cop shop on Sixth Ave. If Jimmy was leaving anytime soon, he'd cadge a ride back to the neighborhood with him. Otherwise he'd find a cabbie he could dead-head with. He'd never had any problem. It was a symbiotic relationship he had with the drivers. He sold them his piss so they could keep on using their shit.

"What's he saying now?"

Jimmy shrugged. "Who know. Some Chinese redneck talk. Hill people, nobody talk like dat. Backwood gangster maybe. FBI, SFPD, dey doan have translator for dat shit. He could be say 'hit dat motherfucker!' Nobody know."

Jimmy was quitting early. It was Friday and he was going down to Woodside to visit his cousin who was 101 years old. "Jade Dragon," he said cryptically. He gave Wendt a lift back to his office and Wendt hoofed the remaining distance in stark Mediterranean blue sunshine whose radiant heat countered the brisk breeze off the Bay. By the time he got to Balboa he was starting to air a sweat. He stood at the base of

the peeling white paint stairs, smoked another cigarette and cooled down, reveling in the glorious light. Some of the trees had started to flower, young tips pierced by the full spectrum highlighting a delicate halo around their shapely contours. Even the traffic noise from the parkway a block over seemed muted in deference to the lightness of the day, and the prevalent exhaust fumes mixed with an ephemeral perfume.

He had a pile of mail waiting for him on the table in the foyer where Angie had also thoughtfully placed the telephone answering machine so he could receive his snail mail and voice mail at the same location. A couple of large manila envelopes, the usual postcards announcing gallery openings or other cultural events, and a few 'hey I'm still alive, how about you?' cards from old friends. He set the collection agency envelopes off to the side. They would be filed, unopened, with his collection of collection agency letters, in the round file. The long legal envelope with the Sanderson Estate Library logo made him smile. "The eagle flies on Friday," he muttered to himself.

Angie had come to stand in the doorway to her office and he held up the envelope with a big grin. "Pennies from heaven! Open the champagne, break out the Beluga!" He had pressed the button on the answering machine and navigated to his mail box. "*Carl. Wendt. You have. One. New. Message.*" it said. Wendt read Angie's body language, though her expression spoke the urgent headline.

"What? You got hay fever? You look like you've been crying."

The voice on the answering machine was Nora's. "*Wendt, why the fuck can't you ever be home when I call?*"

"It's Val, Carl, she's dead," Angie said quietly, the emotion whelming up and making her mouth tremble.

"*I hate to break it to you over the phone like this but you have to be told,*" Nora's voice continued. "*I've already called Angie and talked to her. Maybe she's already given you the news. Val Richards died at 4 am this morning in the emergency room at San Francisco General. I know you're going to take this hard. Give me a call when you get this message.*" There was a pause. "*Please.*" Nora never said please.

Something grabbed him by the throat so hard it brought a tear to his eye. The sigh he heaved weighed a ton. His face melted, not in a dripping ooze, but with a softness, what the French would call *moue*.

He found himself on his back on his bed in his room, the journey up the stairs accomplished in slow ponderous steps as if suddenly the weight of all his demons had come to roost on his shoulders. Angie had offered him a consoling hug, tears streaming down her cheeks. She suggested

that maybe he needed to be alone for now when, rigid with grief, he could barely respond. She had known Val, too, had been her friend when she could.

The news opened a gap in his obsessive self-narration. As if words could salve the loss. That stopping of being, so sudden, so irreversible, so inevitable. But before long the narrative reasserted itself.

He tried to remember things about her but nothing came into focus. She liked to bite. And pinch. Their sex always seemed perfunctory as if it was only the prelude to a shared intimacy of the word, the baring of the soul. She liked *The Story of O*. He didn't know why, and that had always bothered him.

He had met Valerie Richards on the roof of the Art Institute during the break in a literary event at which he and a gaggle of other up-and-coming young and not-so-young scribblers and wannabes had been featured. A full July moon hung over the Bay Bridge in a purpling sky with a spot-lighted Coit Tower in the foreground like an erotic depiction on a suggestive French post card. Willowy, with a continental manner, dark haired, blue eyed, alabaster skinned, and a perpetually bemused expression. His ears had been titillated by something frightfully French that had bubbled giddily from her crimson painted lips.

Val translated American pop fiction into French under the name Valentina Renard, then. They had worked on some French poets together, Rigot, Balthazar, Simone Vitrine, eventually translating and publishing a small volume of her work entitled *Leche-Vitrine*.

Valentina Fox was the name she used in her performances. After she had passed on the poetry scene as being too staid no matter how avant-garde they thought they were. Web collectors, she'd called them, inhabiting niches, dusty corners where there was only room for one spider, everyone else devoured or scurrying off to find a corner to weave their own scene. She stopped wanting to defend the written word, she'd said. She didn't want to read what others had written or write what others would read. He heard her voice. "*I don't want to write any more. I just want to be able to stand up and start talking. I'll say what comes to mind and if I'm any good you'll be enthralled by how mundane life can be.*"

She was a smarty ass, wise and tragic. She'd had a nervous little laugh that belied its supposed joyousness the last time he had talked to her on the phone. How, another time over the phone, she had raged at him about a typo that appeared in one of his columns. But it wasn't really about the typo, the typo was just an excuse to talk to him. That had gone completely over his head.

He remembered the shuddering intensity of their first kiss. She'd exclaimed, surprised, "You're shaking." He bit his lower lip and gnawed the upper as if the memory of hers against his could be so easily recalled. Or erased. Staring blankly at the ceiling, he brought some clichés out of retirement. Today was the day the two women he could actually say he had loved unconditionally had visited him, one with pain, the other with sorrow. His eyes burned. Maybe the headaches had been in anticipation of bad news.

DRAFT



# month

*"Fame is a form of incomprehension, perhaps the worst"*

—*Jorge Luis Borges*

## **"The police are here to see you, Wendt!"**

He'd noticed a flicker of shadow on the wall as she passed in front of the open side door to the basement garage. He had his back to her, rooting through the musty papers and manuscripts in the file cabinet, shuffling through a folder of Val's old poems. They were tugging at his moorings, eyes about to go moist.

"You can't get me with that, Sam. April Fool's Day is past!" He didn't bother to turn around until he heard the footsteps, and then the larger displacement of light that obviously didn't belong to an eight year old girl.

"Mr. Wendt? Carl Wendt?" It was a woman's voice, not Angie's. "Mr. Wendt? San Francisco Police."

Wendt stuffed the file back into the cabinet, furtive for no apparent reason. He removed his cheaters and slipped them into the pocket of his maroon windbreaker. They had finally caught up with him. Bourdieu had warned that being an autodidact was illegal. He wouldn't deny it. He had a well-practiced appeal ready for the judge.

"Mr. Wendt? SFPD, could you step outside, please?"

The shadow retreated as Wendt stepped out into the light. He squinted in the bright glare of noontime Balboa Street. A woman, dark professional pants suit and shimmering salmon satin blouse, shoes too delicate to be a cop's but the six-pointed star badge displayed on the belt of her precisely creased slacks saying she was. And she bore herself like police, attractive oval face of a woman maybe mid-forties in an unreadable no-nonsense blank. Her partner, a man in his late twenties, red and gold team jacket, stood off to the side sizing up the situation. The badge and Glock on his belt saying he was more than just a fan.

She presented her identification perfunctorily, "Mr. Carl Wendt?" And without waiting for him to acknowledge, "Mr. Wendt, I'm Inspector Grace Niklia with SFPD and," indicating the Niners fan, "this is Detective Sergeant Gomez with the Sheriff's Office." And repeated, "Mr. Wendt?" There was no question that she had his attention so she continued. "Sergeant Gomez and I are on what is known as a NOK detail."

Wendt heard NARC and didn't hide the amused surprise. You're barking up the wrong tree. But didn't say it.

"NOK stands for Notification of Kin, Mr. Wendt, not what you think you just heard." Now it was her turn to be amused. The Sergeant remained impassive, a stocky, square shouldered Latino of average height, passable moustache, and a slicked-back old school gangster pate. He was merely her back-up, an observer, hands crossed and cupped above his crotch, ready to step in if things were to get dicey.

Wendt flipped through his mental rolodex of dead relatives. Mother, what eight ten years now, two uncles, both under suspicious circumstances, cousins he didn't think so, his dad a couple of years ago but he had had a second family and he hadn't learned of it until someone mailed him the obit from the Indianapolis Star, and his new set of kids, his step brothers, sisters he had never even known their names. He was drawing a blank.

"We're here to inform you of the recent demise of Jeremiah Beljahr."

The name didn't change Wendt's expression. He returned the detective's querying look with a body language version of "hunh?" And then, down in the deep dark archives, a file drawer squeaked open. Jeremiah. Ok, that could be Jeremy. What about Jeremy?

"Wait a minute. Jeremiah? Jeremy? The kid? The street poet? Jeremy's dead?" He didn't say tweak freak. Why speak ill of the departed. "Are we talking about the same guy?" Wendt put his hands on either side of his head and spread fingers to indicate spiky hair.

The lady cop reached into the tastefully utilitarian black leather bag slung from her shoulder and retrieved a sheet of paper folded in four, holding open the print of a digital photograph for him.

It was Jeremy, a lifeless loll to his features, the harsh exposure revealing every shadowless detail. Wendt brought his gaze up and to the right of the detective's shoulder to stare at the blue recycle containers at the curb, the honey locust off to one side catching the light with its shiny new leaves and casting a comfortable shadow on the roofs of the cars parked there. From his angle, at the bottom of the driveway to the basement garage, he could only see the tops of passing vehicles. And off to one side, Samantha peering through the white painted balustrades leading up into the house, a worried frown disturbing her young brow, and behind her, her mother, Angie, with the same frown, but more practiced, judgmental even.

The last time he had seen Jeremy they'd had that farcical conversation about a serial killer of poets, that alone nibbling at the edges of his

bewilderment. “We were, are, not related. Why are you telling me this? What makes you think we are?”

The detective nodded as if she had anticipated every word. “Mr. Beljhar took his life five days ago. He was a resident of the Powell Hotel. . .”

“In the ‘loin. Header from his window down the air shaft. Thirty feet.”

The lady cop stiffened in surprise which caused the Sergeant to lean a little forward on his toes. “You knew?”

“No. I read about it in the daily. I didn’t make the connection.” Wendt was curious now. “What has that got to do with me? I barely knew the guy. I met him at a poetry reading maybe three, four years ago. Comes up to me, says he’s a big fan. . . I’m a poet,” Wendt added by way of explanation. “He hung around North Beach, the bookstore, Trieste, Vesuvio’s, until I think they eighty-sixed him, ditto Enrico’s, he never got in the door at Tosca, and I think he was eighty-sixed from Spec’s, but then who hasn’t? Giancarlo’s? He was pretty much a burned out crack-head as far as I was concerned. We didn’t move in the same circles, economically or socially.”

The detective’s mouth had clamped into an I’m-dealing-with-an-ass-hole firmness. “Among Mr. Beljahr’s effects. . .”

Wendt wasn’t listening anymore. He had noticed the roofline of a dark sedan pull to a stop at the top of the driveway and doublepark. The doors opened and two men emerged.

Gomez had seen them too, turning his head away to hiss “Shit!”

A stocky white man of medium height approached with a wide grin, wagging his finger. He was accompanied by a tall black man in a brown leather car coat.

“Well, if it ain’t Valentino. And Morticia. I sure as hell hope you two are not jumping my call.” He chuckled in a manner entirely devoid of humor. “I thought you were assigned disciplinary detail to the mayor’s office, anyway.”

“Guess again, Reardon, we’re on a NOK.” The lady cop turned and intercepted him half way down the apron. She spoke in a low voice behind the folded paper while he stared over her shoulder at Wendt with a smug shit-eater. The lanky black cop stood off to the side, alert, and the Sergeant, more annoyed than anything else, stood his ground. They knew a pissing contest when they saw one.

Reardon made to sidestep and she blocked him with a shoulder and made one last impassioned low voiced argument before stepping aside.

“Carl Wendt. Mike Reardon, Robbery Homicide.” He threw a thumb over his shoulder. “Roger Moore, ditto.” They weren’t going to bother with ID.

Wendt had yet to breathe.

“We’re interviewing people who might have known Reginald Meyer, his routine, his social contacts, his friends.” The homicide detective paused a practiced beat. “His enemies.”

When someone is referred to in the past tense by the murder police, it does not bode well for the person in question. This had not escaped Wendt.

“Can I ask you, Mr. Wendt, when was the last time you saw or spoke with Reginald Meyers?”

The lady cop and the sergeant had moved up to stand on the sidewalk, their backs to him, heads bent forward in animated conversation.

Wendt turned his attention to the meat mask facing him. The eyes, in a brazen, unwavering stare, were just a little too wide to be effective, the lips, a little too full to be convincingly severe. But there was a cruelty to the corners of the mouth and flare of nostrils that spoke of a low tolerance for wise guys.

Wendt played it straight. “Couple weeks ago, it was a Tuesday, I think, Megan Twohy’s salon.” His mind raced forward to stop him. He reminded himself that Reg had done his usual ape shit routine, and he had succumbed to the moment and grabbed him by the shirt front. That might easily be viewed as threatening. “So what’s this all about? Are you saying Reg is dead, murdered?”

Reardon squared his shoulders and crowded Wendt’s personal space a little more. “I’ll ask the questions, Mr. Wendt.”

Wendt thought to step back but realized that it could be misinterpreted. “Am I to assume Reg Meyer has been murdered?”

“You can assume anything you want, Mr. Wendt. Did you speak with Mr. Meyer on the occasion of Megan Twohy’s salon?” He said the word ‘salon’ like it was an affront to his manhood.

Wendt saw where this was leading and although he always felt that he should cooperate with the police when his ass wasn’t on the line, this was one of those situations where the fewer words spoken the better. “I think I had better consult with my attorney.” Wendt was bluffing. He didn’t exactly have a lawyer. The only lawyer he could think of was Hugh Klidian, Dorian’s lawyer, and he’d met him only once, years ago, at one of the famous Pillsbury author parties.

Reardon's face lit up like an albino jack-o-lantern. "Of course, Mr. Wendt, your attorney. Why don't we go down to the precinct and wait for him there." Reardon seemed pleased with himself. His partner stepped down the apron to block any attempt at bolt.

"Am I under arrest?"

"Not unless you want to be. Otherwise we would like you to accompany us over to Sixth Ave so we can interview you, if you prefer in the presence of your lawyer. Right now I think that you might be in possession of information material to our investigation."

"Do I have a choice?"

"You have a choice, Mr. Wendt. Get in the car. Or." Reardon indicated his partner, "Inspector Moore will put you in the car."

**The cell phone rang as the sedan** pulled away from the curb. It wasn't Wendt's cell phone. He didn't have one. Nor did he have door handles to hold on to as the white cop jammed on the brakes behind the city bus blocking traffic. Reardon put a square of plastic to his ear and spoke loudly.

"What?" as if annoyed. "Of course I'm fucking busy." He paused, listening, frowning. "Ok, ok, calm down a minute."

The black detective, peppered close cropped wool, gold wire rimmed glasses on a lean North African nose, glanced over his shoulder at Wendt, checking on the cargo.

"He what? Again? I told him what was going to happen. . .no, no, you listen. . .alright alright, calm down. Yeah, ok, ok. Take a pill. . .well, take another one." Reardon rolled his eyes at his partner and muttered "fuck" under his breath. "Just tell me where you think he is." He listened. "That covers a lot of territory." And, "Alright, alright, I'll take care of it!" he spoke with finality to the little square of black plastic. Then to his partner, "We're gonna take a little detour."

The sedan headed west on Fulton, Reardon, with an impatient and practiced hand, cutting back and forth across lanes, in and out of traffic, jockeying for the best advantage to move them forward as quickly as possible. There was no doubt in Wendt's mind that they were heading for the Great Highway. And he wasn't about to protest. The detour had the effect of easing him out of the panic he'd felt when he realized that he might be a suspect in Reg Meyer's murder. He had to understand a couple of things. One, that he didn't do it, and two, that someone else had.

Reg was an equal opportunity offender. The possibilities were legion.

And Jeremy, why had the police come to see him about Jeremy? Next of kin? Not by a long shot. Something about the woman cop. The name? Niklia. Faint glimmer on a past horizon? Attractive shapely slimness, professional demeanor, penetrating eyes, dark but of undetermined color, no third finger left hand bauble, he always checked, that kind of job, mixing with the men, probably lesbian. Reardon had called her Morticia. But it fit, black hair to below the shoulders, parted in the middle, wide intelligent forehead accommodating the high arch of eyebrow. And her partner was named Gomez. Funny.

**Reardon parked the sedan on the Great Highway** between the signs that read *No Parking At Anytime*, the antique sandblasted seawall to Ocean Beach on the right. Without a word he exited the vehicle and strode toward the access stairs that would take him to the beach below, a goodly breeze tugging at his clothing and parting his hair in an uncomplimentary fashion.

The black detective turned slightly and said “teenagers” and Wendt responded with a “yeah” as if he understood. They sat in silence after that. A patrol car slowed parallel to them. The patrolmen knew by the exempt plates that the sedan was city fleet. They were just double checking. Moore flashed his badge to reassure them. The shotgun cop, a woman, mouthed “everything ok?” and he nodded yes and waved them off.

Wendt felt he needed to do something with his hands. A cigarette to calm his agitation. “Mind if I smoke?”

The detective turned and looked at him impassively. “No smoking in city vehicles.”

“How about I step outside?”

Moore showed a little surprise and then shrugged. “Yeah, sure, why not, I could use a smoke, too.” And “Don’t try any stupid shit.”

They stood next to the sedan on the sandy slope that led up to the walkway, itself covered in a fine layer of shifting sand. They each lit their own and then looked away from each other as the first puff of smoke exited their mouths.

“I think I’ve seen you at Moody’s,” Wendt ventured.

The cop wasn’t impressed. “Oh, yeah, you into jazz?”

Wendt nodded and gave a sheepish grin. “Yeah, old school, you know, Miles, Mingus, Monk. . . the three M’s of Modern Jazz. And Coltrane, of course.”

“That right?” The black cop read Wendt a little closer.

“I wrote a piece on Moody’s and Jimmy Gibbs in my column. In the weekly. Did you happen to read it?” It was a long shot Wendt knew.

“Naw, I don’t have time.” The detective had wandered up to the seawall to check on his partner’s progress. Wendt joined him.

The expanse and the glare off the Pacific were startling at first. A gray line of fog had settled on the far horizon as if waiting for permission to come ashore. It was responsible for the heft of the ocean breeze buffeting anything that didn’t lie flat.

Overhead the bright cloudless blue beat down mercilessly with its un-deviating color. The people on the beach below didn’t seem to mind. Wendt noticed the profusion of kites tangling in the sky further down. It appeared crowded for so early in the week. The knots and gaggles of young people, gathered in circles, furtively or not so furtively passing around cigarettes or throwing a football. It all made sense. High school kids on unsanctioned field trips enjoying a gorgeous day at the beach, strutting their stuff, showing off. Some had thought to bring coolers that they camouflaged with blankets.

Wendt could make out Reardon striding toward one group that at his determined approach scattered like gulls before a loping pup. Reardon didn’t seem fazed and headed for another congregation of truants.

“Let me see if I have this right, somebody murdered Reg Meyer?” It had been eating at him the entire ride down Fulton.

The black detective again took a measured appraisal of his charge. He said nothing.

“And you think I had something to do with it?” Wendt realized that it was the wrong thing to ask. Moore smiled ever so slightly, wickedly, and exhaled smoke.

He tried a different tack. “This is all news to me. When did it happen? I should have read about it in the daily.”

Moore shrugged again not wanting to be engaged. “Yeah, I don’t know. Like I said I don’t have time to read the papers.” And then as if tossing a crumb, “We’re coming up on forty-eight so it should be in tomorrow’s edition.”

“So ok, like almost two days ago?” Wendt scanned his internal calendar for the last couple of days: no, no opportunities to bump heads with Reg, or bump him off. He had taken in the print show at the Legion of Honor, lunch with Nora at Cho’s in Chinatown where she had offered him work doing research for a client, mainly chapter and verse on quote attribution and bibliographical verification. Footnote sleuthing, stuff Val used to do. Then the rest of the time he had been by himself in his room

on Balboa working on his Poetry Month columns. “What was it, shot, stabbed? Colonel Mustard in the parlor with a monkey wrench?”

The black cop gave him a hard stare. “China Point. Been to China Point lately?”

Wendt laughed. “If I walk around China Point I’ve got a cruiser tagging my heels in less than five minutes.”

“Who said anything about walking?”

“I don’t drive.”

The detective nodded as if that had answered something.

Wendt took it as a sign to continue. “I was at the Legion Of Honor a couple of days ago. That’s close to China Point,” he volunteered.

“About what time?”

“Late afternoon. You can check with security. I had to show my press pass and sign in on their log.”

Moore produced a small yellow notepad from his pocket and jotted a reminder.

“And why me? I’m sure Reg had issues with more people than just me.”

The detective laughed in spite of himself. “His partner provided us with a list of people, his associates. You weren’t on that list. Until we began talking to Mr. Meyer’s associates. Then your name came up more than a few times.” His hard gaze turned perplexed for a moment. “You poets are a bunch of nasty, finger pointing little bitches, you know that? No compunction at all about dropping a dime on each other.”

“Are you saying that everyone thinks I did it?”

“You and Mr. Meyer had some disagreements in the past, is that correct?” The detective had flipped a page in his notebook.

“Ok, listen, Reg Meyer? I’ve known Reg Meyer since I came to the city over thirty years ago. We were friends once, but Reg doesn’t make it easy to be friends. You’re either with him or without him. It was less of a hassle to be without him, if you get my meaning. And besides, once he got to be book review editor for the daily, he was pretty much unbearable. So I let it go. But he always found ways to snipe at me. I used to write book reviews for the daily back in the day. It was an easy buck. But with Reg at the helm? He would edit the shit out of my reviews and make them read like I was an idiot. So I stopped doing that, too. I tried to avoid Reg but we know a lot of the same people, poets, in common. He thinks he’s a hotshot but really he’s just a put-down artist looking for someone to zing. He is, was, infantile and immature.”

“So you have a history of adversity with Mr. Meyer.”



“Like I said, I tried to keep my distance. He was the one who kept getting in my face.”

“Like the incident at Mrs. Twohy’s apartment?”

Wendt flushed. “Yeah, I guess I kind of lost it.”

“He threatened your livelihood, to have you fired from. . .from the weekly?”

“Yeah, all that was bullshit, a bluff. See, Reg has the illusion of power. He’s not the book editor for the daily anymore, but I don’t think that’s sunk in. He has no clout at the weekly, anyway. So, yeah, I grabbed him by the shirt. He was annoying me.”

“You threatened to hit him.”

“No, no way. I never did.”

“Do you deny saying,” and the detective referred to his notes, “Don’t make me club you?”

“I didn’t!” Wendt laughed, “Oh, ok, ok. No, no that’s not what I said. I said, ‘don’t make me love you.’”

The detective’s expression said “You expect me to believe that?”

“I was being ironic!”

“You and Mr. Meyer were not lovers or sex partners?”

“I’d like to know who told you that.”

“Did you not turn down Mr. Meyer’s offer of fellatio at which he became outraged?”

“No, no, no, you got that all wrong. You wanna know why Reg acted that way and has acted that way whenever we’re within spitting distance of each other?”

“I get the feeling you’re going to tell me.”

“I screwed his girlfriend. She was a lousy lay and I told her so. She complained to Reg. Now, not only had I fucked his girlfriend, but I had insulted her as well. Besides the fact that I had fucked his girlfriend in the first place.” Wendt dropped his cigarette in the sand of the walkway and stepped on it. He could make out Reardon further down the beach making a bee line for another coven of youths who also wandered off at his approach. All except for one. Reardon raised his arms in a gesture of surrender, anger, frustration confronting the lone figure.

“You think he should be pushed off a cliff?” Moore glanced up from his note pad to gauge Wendt’s reaction.

Wendt exhaled wearily. “Tell me he wasn’t pushed off a cliff.”

The detective kept his focus, reading the body language. “Can you account for your whereabouts in the last forty eight hours, preferably verified by at least one other person?”

Wendt realized that it might be hard to do. He'd been under the gun to get his column finished. He'd also spent the last couple of days sorting through boxes of manuscripts and old letters, deciding what had to go and what he would keep in storage in anticipation of Angie moving up the coast. One night Angie had gone to ACT with some women friends from Weight Watchers, and Samantha had been at a sleepover with a school friend. He really didn't have an alibi.

In the distance he could see that Reardon had his miscreant in tow trudging back toward them. The rather rotund boy was not going willingly. Wendt had an idea of how that might feel. "Listen, let me make your job real easy. I had nothing to do with Reg Meyer's death. I have not seen Reg Meyer since that night at Meagan Twohy's. I know nothing about the circumstances of his demise. This is the first I've heard of it. I'm sorry he's dead. I have no idea who could have done it. And you're sure it's murder, not suicide? Or have you talked with his girlfriend? That well may be his motive for the big adios. But if you think I had anything to do with it, you are way, way off!"

Moore laughed and put his notebook away. Reardon and what Wendt now presumed was his son approached the bottom of the stairway. The white cop appeared winded, the boy merely agitated and chagrined. Moore laughed again, this time at his partner's plight. He turned to Wendt. "Relax, you're not a suspect. Though a lot of your so-called friends think you should be."

"Ok, that's a relief, I guess. So did someone really push him off a cliff?"

"More likely dumped. Blunt force trauma. You can understand why when someone reported that you had said 'don't make me club you' that we had to look into it. His car had been towed from China Point as an abandoned vehicle. Then later in the day a maintenance worker at the park found the body over the side."

"So that would make it around the first of the month?"

"The first, exactly."

"Well, well, the cruelest month strikes again."

"Say what?"

"Nothing, just some poet thing, April being the cruelest month and all that. Do you think it could be random? Or do you have a suspect?"

"Oh, we have a person or persons of interest. Proving it is the hard part. That's why we do the interviews. Otherwise the computer down at the office does everything for us."

"A computer solves the murder?" Wendt didn't want to sound

incredulous.

“Yeah, it’s something one of our IT guys developed. A relational database with a social media algorithm. You have to plug in the basic stuff, you know, location of the crime, timeline, vitals, all that, the vic’s name and circumstance of his death. Then you enter in the names and stats on his family and his business associates, his friends, his enemies, field interview data and tie them to the timeline. Once you think you’ve got it all in there, you press the magic button. Of course like anything with computers, it’s garbage in, garbage out. And data entry is a bitch, especially if you don’t spend a lot of time around a keyboard.” The detective shrugged. “The data is sorted, crosschecked with NCIC in case anyone has a record of previous convictions, for violent crime say, and you get a ranked list from the most likely to the least likely, and the majority of the time the killer is in the top five names on the list.”

“No shit, a computer fingers the murderer for you?”

“More like narrows it down to the most viable suspects.”

“And I didn’t make the cut.” Wendt felt elated. “But who did?”

“Now why would I tell you that? And don’t get too cocky, you could move up in the standings at any time based on future intelligence.” Moore had turned to meet his partner at the top of the stairs. “So you caught him, huh? What’s his name? Jesse James?” And then to the boy, an overweight kid who would always wear his clothing wrong, misfit flesh with a close resemblance to his father, the angry white cop. “Hey, Tommy! School let out early today?”

Reardon directed his son to the sedan. “Get in the back!” And then to his partner, “Well?”

Moore shook his head. “He checks out.”

“Ok, Mr. Wendt, if Inspector Moore here says you passed the attitude test, I’m good with that. He’s a human polygraph. He can read you like a cheap paperback.”

Wendt nodded that he understood. “Ok, so I’m free to go?”

“Yeah, sure,” Reardon agreed, walking away, “Just don’t leave town.”

Wendt shouldn’t have pushed it, but he did anyway. “Hey, how am I supposed to get back home?”

Reardon didn’t answer until he’d reached the driver’s side and leaned an elbow on top of the open door. “Such a beautiful day for a walk.” And laughed like he’d said something really funny.

**Wendt saw that he would never make** the Number 5 turning onto Fulton. Instead he committed himself to the slog up to Balboa on the

chance of connecting with transit there. Beautiful day, my ass, he muttered, but having to grudgingly admit that it was a gorgeous specimen despite the much stiffened breeze.

If he was going to make lemonade then he might as well settle into a positive headspace. He would practice walking meditation his Zen buddy, Mal Fein, had told him about, *gyudo*, also known as *kaiho gyō*. He was pretty sure it began with one foot in front of the other and let the body do the rest. The idea was to empty the mind and concentrate on each step as unique in itself. The problem with Wendt was that clearing out the clutter only made room for more clutter. Clutter and dust. Dust the clutter. And what old, dead, and forgotten fragments of memory did those microscopic motes represent?

Looking on the bright side, despite the absolute strangeness of the last hour, the trudge back to Balboa was an opportunity to organize his ideas for the April Wendt-athon.

Once a year, in April, for the past five years, Wendt had devoted his four, sometimes five April columns to National Poetry Month. And once a year, the weekly allowed him a feature arts article on poets and poetry. The feature paid triple his weekly column rate. He'd decided on a tribute to Val, a eulogy of sorts. He still had to collect all his thoughts but he knew where they were filed, physically in the file cabinets in the garage, and mentally, in the still unspoken memories in his brain case.

Her family had her cremated and her ashes were returned to New Hampshire. She always said that there was never anything 'new' in New Hampshire. Just that thought disturbed his concentration. He lit another smoke pulling himself out of his head for a moment.

Lower in the avenues he would cut over to Geary and look in on some long neglected watering holes like Flo's Tonic Room and El Salamambo. And cruise into the Red Hen before the final leg back to Balboa. He had plenty to think about.

Why had the police come to see him about Jeremy? The lady cop had been just about to tell him when the murder police showed up. A serial killer of poets. That had possibilities as a column. *Who is Killing Our Poets?* What had once been merely speculation, a question, was now a title, a headline, a subhead if nothing else. And on the front cover of the weekly, a real grabber. Maybe he'd write a little piece on Jeremy as well, give notice to his poet regeneration theory.

One column entirely of payback was a given. As he did each year, he would praise all the contributors to his lifestyle, such as it was, for keeping his particular poetry flame alive though always on the verge of

guttering into extinction, a wizened black wick in a pool of red candle wax. De rigueur as well was a column on the best of and worst of poetry books published in the last year. Predictably, as it had every year, the list raised howls of laughter as well as indignation.

He was still deliberating into which category to place Shula Raven's revised edition of *Your Sex My Sex Bisects* with the added section of poems entitled *Clit Oration*, her lesbian feminist poems. When he had expressed surprise that she was a lesbian, she admitted that she had once played for the other team, back in the 90's when it was the thing to do.

But Reg, poor Reg. He never thought he'd think that. Dead, murdered? That seemed so farfetched. But then, maybe not. Reg was nothing if not prickly. So he pissed off the wrong guy. Poet? That was almost too silly to contemplate. But he wasn't exaggerating when he'd told the detective that Reg was pissed at him for fucking his girlfriend.

Reg's girlfriend was a narrow neurotic Latina, Octavia Vejillòn, also known as "Garbo" because someone had punned on her last name, "I want to vejillòn" though she liked to be called "Tavi." They had met at a literary evening at Gale Stringer's, the hearsay columnist for the daily. It could have been the particularly potent rum punch as Tavi suddenly developed very friendly hands in a secluded corner of the kitchen which was how they ended up in the closet in the bedroom where it was even more secluded and she could do what she wanted to do. One thing led to another and when he showed up at her apartment a couple of days later, she practically tackled him on the couch. Wendt had not objected to skipping the prelims but it was often nice to start with a drink, even a "hello." She was all over him like a rubber sheet. She had pulled a pink tee-shirt off over her head to reveal her tiny pointy mounds. Unbuckled, she had his pants off as if she were competing in time trials. Wendt had been in a little of a shock by how quickly things had progressed and was in need of inflating. Tavi quickly set to work on the hand pump. After she had shed her own loose fitting pajama bottoms and straddled him it was only a matter of time, a very short time, and she was done. Wendt was left wondering what had happened. It may have been an all-time record for a quickie. But it was far from over. Phase two included more rubbing and snuggling as well as purring and licking and occasional tonguing, all of which for some reason had made him very uncomfortable. He reminded himself of an appointment he didn't have. She tried to hide her distress by burying her head in his lap for a bit of snorkel diving. To no avail as the snorkel had other places to be which was anywhere but there. She'd asked for it. She'd demanded to know. He

told her. She was a lousy fuck. It was going to be the only way he was going to extricate himself from her emotional quicksand. Again he momentarily pitied Reg, but then some people get what they deserve, and Reg deserved some kind of Hell.

There was another reason, actually the real reason why Reg was so berserk with him. Not that he had fucked his girlfriend and told her she was a lousy fuck, but that, in one of his columns, Wendt had pointed out the cozy relationship Reg, who at the time was still book editor for the daily, had with a certain East Bay publisher and always gave that publisher preferential treatment. Wendt's comment had been to the effect of "It is truly a shame that not one of the dogs recently published by Sand Candle Press has been nominated for the Mongrel of the Year award considering the personal grooming Reg Meyer has lavished on them." He had also connected Reg to the Transbay Poetry mafia, a group of mainly Berkeley intellectuals *cum* poets, and suggested that Reg, as the book editor for the daily, had picked a reviewer publicly hostile to the poet she was reviewing to curry favor with that particular in-group. Wendt had pointed to Reg's collusion on the hit piece of a venerable old poet who had, after many years in obscurity, published his collected works. Wendt was not a fan of the poet's old school style but felt that the criticism was totally gratuitous and had said so in print. "This trashing of a venerable and acclaimed poet only serves to illustrate the reviewer's ignorance and the editor's own complicity in a cheap shot." Not long after his column appeared, the daily phased out the book editor position and relegated the literary reviews to the rosy back pages of the Sunday puzzle supplement.

Bright day glare glanced off the pastel flat surfaces of boxy buildings and squat apartment blocks. It had been a while since he'd wandered the west end of the Richmond District. Business signs and names in the calligraphy of another language echoed in adequate English. The lack of pedestrian traffic, eerie, and accenting the De Chirico angles and planes. He stopped to let a red late century Nissan make a right at 40<sup>th</sup>. Across the avenue, a Chinese grocer shuffled the produce in the wooden bins. Wendt took a big drag and then let the smoke out, slowly.

But why was he a person of interest, who had fingered him? Numerous people had been at Twohy's when he had grabbed Reg by the shirt. The police had also talked to Lynel and Dottie. Dottie, at any rate. Another instance of his bad behavior had made the rounds. It might have been anyone, even someone who hadn't even been at the salon. "Yeah, that Wendt, he's an animal." It wasn't something he was going to talk

about except in passing admission. Nora? Well, Picasso had ratted out Apollinaire.

**Wendt came up the steps with a full head of steam.** It was early evening and he had made the requisite stops in his meander back through the avenues. And he had to get ready. He paused by the answering machine in the foyer, the pulse of the tiny green light announcing a new message. He deliberated pressing the play button. The last message had been from Julie, Dorian's assistant, threatening that if he did not return the copy of that rare edition she was going to report it stolen to the police. She knew he had it because Henry Croft had called inquiring if Dorian would be interested in acquiring the Lucian Graff. He would return it. There was no question of that. Maybe he was just holding on to it while Dorian was still in the hospital. And Julie's insistent badgering got his back up.

Besides Dorian hadn't mentioned it when he'd gone by to visit him at the hospital, but then they had him mostly sedated, hooked up to a machine that assisted his breathing. And since he was in the neighborhood, he'd gone by Val's apartment on Parnassus, someplace he should have visited more often, though it would have been painful, and he was a coward. Val had started at the top, literally, a bay windowed two bedroom apartment on the third floor and slowly worked her way down to her last apartment, a converted boiler room studio at the back of the building.

Old Madame Yu was the mother-in-law of young Madame Yu who owned the apartment building Val had lived in practically all her years in the city. Young Madame Yu walked around like she had an egg beater up her ass. Old Madame Yu was more down to earth.

"Is that you?"

Old Madame Yu sniffed. The skin on her face was mottled and freckled yet smooth even at her advanced age and her teeth protruded slightly over her lower lip. She had her hair tied up in a white rag, large yellow rubber gloves on her hands. A blue bucket and sponge mop were propped near the small kitchen sink, the brawny tang of disinfectant crowding the already small space. There were boxes in the walkway filled with the debris of Val's life. She pointed to the empty sitting room off the open kitchenette. "You not come."

"No, I had to."

At his obvious misunderstanding, she repeated her words in a different tone. Then Wendt got it. "Yes, it's been a while." He stepped over

a few boxes to the center of the room. Someone was packing up Val's possessions. There didn't seem to be anyone else but Madame Yu. Wendt pointed at the boxes, "Family, relatives? Who?"

Madame Yu indicated that whoever it was had gone "café coffee" and pointed, arching her arm to indicate distance. Wendt guessed the Starbucks a few blocks over. He looked around the room not knowing what he was looking for, poking, lifting, rummaging. Anything that had been written on, notebooks, journals drew his attention. What was likely a diary he slipped under his jacket and into the ripped lining.

The flyer tacked to the fridge with a Seurat magnet announced Marva Kleinwood reading with Gelma Znear at the Vivisection Lounge, a bike messenger and diesel vampire hangout south of Market. The date was circled. Lillian Belfry, MC. He folded it and put it in his pocket.

On his way out he ran into an older woman, thatch of auburn and gray distractedly coifed. A navy blue sweatshirt advertised Martha's Vineyard and she held a large signature coffee in a collared paper cup with a plastic lid. She resembled her daughter in such a striking way that it had made his heart skip.

She had been startled by him, too, flustered. He introduced himself and offered his condolences. He could tell she was confused, overwhelmed by her daughter's death but wearing a brave face. Then another woman appeared behind her, a younger woman. It was Val's sister, Vivian. He'd seen pictures, a younger, 20 pounds heavier, three kid, junior executive version of Val. The lively one as her name suggested.

"Honey, this is a friend of Valerie's," Mother spoke, and then searching her recent memory, "Charles. . .Charles Wright?"

Vivian smiled as Wendt extended his hand.

"Carl. . .Carl Wendt."

Her smile crumbled and she shrank back with an intake of breath. Her eyes narrowed as her mouth grew taut. "I hate you!"

**Wendt depressed the play button on the answering machine** and listened to Dorian rasp, "I'm out of the hospital. Come by and see me. And bring that book back if you're finished reading it. Also, Tjantor has withdrawn the manuscript from consideration. You may as well return that, too."

Sam had run down the hallway from the kitchen at the sound of the machine and stopped at the edge of the foyer. She stayed in the shadows, her mother coming to stand behind her.

Angie pointed to the gray bundle on the floor by the telephone table.



“The woman, the police woman left that for you.”

Wendt prodded it with his toe and then lifted it. It was an old paper boy’s canvas bag. Creased, faded, barely legible words read *Detroit Free Press*. It was stuffed with rolled and folded spiral notebooks.

“She left her card. That’s it there next to the machine.”

Wendt picked up the business card with the SFPD logo and read the name. *G. Grace Niklia, Inspector, Special Operations Task Force*, and an office and cell number.

“She said to give her a call if you had any questions.”

**“Help, help, a black window spider is after me!”** said Jade or Jolie and pretended to cringe in fear while being chased by her sister, Jolie or Jade, with claw hands and bared menacing teeth.

The twins had greeted Wendt’s arrival at Charlie and Clarissa’s tiny apartment over on Coleridge with gleeful hysteria the last few times he’d come by for dinner. They screeched and ran circling him as he stood in the entryway and then demanded all his attention once he was parked on the sofa in the dining living room. They had just turned four, their jet black hair tied up in a bushy knot on the top of their heads, one with a green ribbon and the other a red. Their big black eyes took him in like an oddity, tiny chins quivering in determined innocence. Jade or Jolie began a demonstration of finger play, a classic, *The Itsy Bitsy Spider*, opposing a thumb and forefinger to mark the spider’s path up the water spout. Wendt’s attention to Jolie or Jade had prompted Jade or Jolie to transform into a black window spider.

“Black window spider! Your girls are poets!”

“Carl, don’t tell me that.” Clarissa, a large woman with an angelic face, stood in the doorway of the kitchen. She handed him a Red Stripe, and then muttered, “I’ll put them in a gunny sack and drop them into the bay.” Laughing with him, she asked, “Has Charles told you the good news?”

Wendt tipped the bottle and wet his whistle. “Yeah, he just said something big was up.”

“I’ll let him tell you, then.”

Charlie appeared in the doorway with the open laptop in his hand. “Hey, Wendt, I heard the girls screaming so I knew it must be you.”

“Or The Beatles.”

“Yeah. Want a beer? Ok, already got one.”

“What’s this good news Clarissa won’t tell me about?”

Charlie frowned like maybe it wasn’t all that good of news. “Oh, yeah,

great news, actually.” He darted a glance at Clarissa. “I got a job teaching journalism.”

Wendt’s expression was a big grin and raised eyebrows. “City College?”

“Actually, Carl, it’s up in Benicia, Solano Community College.”

“That’s still in California, right? Northern California?”

“Yeah, yeah, up 80 on the way to Sacramento.”

“Ok, I guess I know where that is, I’ve been to Sacramento.”

“And the money’s pretty good.”

“We’ll be moving up to Fairfield,” Clarissa added. “We’ve been looking at home prices. We might just be able to afford a house of our own. Once Charles gets settled in.” She sounded thrilled. “A yard for the girls, a garden for me.” Ecstatic.

“So the gig with the weekly. . . .”

“I’ll be giving my notice at the end of the month. I have to get up to speed for the fall semester.”

“Well congratulations, the both of you!” he toasted with his bottle. Why does someone else’s good news, Wendt mused, always turn out to be bad news for me?

**Clarissa asked Charlie to put the laptop aside** once they sat down to eat. It wasn’t so much a request. Charlie frowned at the screen before selecting an option. “You know that last piece you submitted, *Ed Dorn Meets Adorno, a Godzilla Love Story*?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m going to change it to *A Godzilla Love Story*, and subhead it *Ed Dorn Meets Adorno*. Though I don’t know if that’s even necessary.”

Carl said nothing.

Charlie knew Wendt didn’t like his words messed with. “Here’s my thinking on it: few people know who Adorno is, even fewer have read him, and no one knows who Ed Dorn is. Godzilla, everybody knows.”

“Charles, do you mind? We’d like to eat?” Clarissa threw him such a look and extended her hands to one of the twins and to Wendt so that they might be joined for the blessing. Once everyone’s hands were linked she intoned, “Almighty Throb, that we may share in the bounty of your Reverberation. Om.”

“Om,” echoed the others.

**“Would you like a drink with your meal,** Carl, another Red Stripe? Ginger beer? Ting?”

“Got any Big Bamboo Irish Moss?”

“Carl, the last thing you need is an IM.”

Wendt looked down at the dinner plate of black beans, shredded beef, jerk chicken, rice and plantain. “Just like momma used to make.”

“I don’t see any sauerkraut, Carl.”

“You’d have been right if you’d said corned beef and cabbage.”

Clarissa had made rice pudding for dessert. Wendt eyed the plate of *gizzidas*. And since he and Charlie always conducted business over lunch, they easily fell into talking shop. Wendt outlined his next couple of columns, and his idea for the feature. Charlie nodded, and grinned, and frowned, and laughed, and agreed, and frowned, and shook his head in close attention to what Wendt was telling him. Carl seemed particularly excited about his updated taxonomy of poets.

“Ok, you might have heard some of these before. There are the spiritual poets who are obviously held down by the gravity of their lofty world saving aspirations. And there are the poets of history who catalog the march of time in the broader strokes of saga and epic. You’ve got your clever poets who specialize in anecdotes and limericky jokes, and the portrait poets who sketch the psychological shape of this or that personage, famous or otherwise, in the dull gray wash of sentimentality.”

Charlie nodded that he was following.

“All right, then your landscape poets also known as nature poets for whom every bug and bee is worthy of catalog and for whom vistas, vast of course, remind them of their significance in recording, in altogether inadequate language, what they think they see.”

Charlie chuckled.

“The pet poets who dote on the anthropomorphic antics of their animal companions be they dogs, cats, canaries, turtles, goldfish, potbellied pigs, but stopping at the dark significance of the beast within. The body poets, also known as the narcissists, who revel in relating the minutia of bowel movements, menstruations, ejaculations, orgasms, and ingrown toenails—in general, the narcissism of their pedestrian suffering. And of course the poets of conquest who tally their triumphs in the bedroom, in the public stall, the closet, the backseat, the kitchen table, the subway, and pew. There are also feminist poets, gay poets, ethnic poets, in general, political poets, whose narrow-minded diatribes seek to correct the misguided conceptions of humanity, the them-versus-us factions, in so many words.”

Charlie blinked, maybe as a signal that he was falling behind.

“One kind of poet specializes in personal confession, another in the lexical trappings of fashion. Each has their own style, their own approach with which to distinguish themselves from others, though it would take a micrometer to gauge the difference. The minimalist sketches, the florid flourishes, the typographer experiments, the haughty moralizes with a holier than thou stance that masks the insubstantiality of the verse, the catalogers of mannerisms, mannerists themselves, the woe is me, or humanity, sentimentalist, the idealist, the realist, few in number but loud of voice, and the miniaturist who needs only a few words, sometimes just one, to express the entire bandwidth of consciousness. Each strives with his own trick, a spectacular specialness to an untouchable uniqueness, and thus, with the vagaries of fad, reputations are made. And unmade.” Wendt added a diabolical snicker though it wasn’t necessary.

The twins, dark eyes wide with wonder or horror, had stopped, spoons of pudding held in midflight. Clarissa looked horrified. “Carl, please, you’ll make the children cry!”

**Michel Brazon found him** at his table in the Caffè Trieste. “Tell me you didn’t do it!”

Wendt looked up from the daily over the top of his cheaters. “I didn’t do it.”

Brazon sat down easing the empty espresso demitasse to one side of the small round table. “Dang, you are the man! Whacked the Squirrel.”

“I didn’t do it.”

“Yeah, but everybody thinks you did and that’s just as good as doing it.”

“A little early for hero worship, don’t you think? I’m not the gunslinger everyone thinks I am.”

“City Hall is considering you for a commendation.”

“Just doing my job.”

“You did do it! I knew it!”

“Mike, if you’re gonna be stupid, you’ll have to go sit at a different table.”

“The cops talk to you?”

“What do you think?”

“You threw them off the trail. Good, good. You give them any names?”

“Yeah.”

“Who?”

“You.”

“Fuck you, Wendt.”

Wendt, laughing, folded the paper. Michael McArdle and Gary Simmons had been sitting at a table nearby and got up to leave. It appeared that McArdle’s wife had knit him a new scarf. Simmons wagged a chin in passing and McArdle offered, “How’s it going, killer?” without waiting for an answer.

“Now you’re gonna be infamous.” Brazon grinned after the departing poets.

“Oh yeah, does that come with a paycheck? I could use some steady cash.”

“You and me, both.” Brazon’s eyes widened with his conspiratorial grin. He leaned forward, confidential-like. “There’s been another BK sighting.”

“Kaufman? Where this time?”

“Top of the Kearny steps.”

“The ghost of Bob Kaufman. How many is that?”

“I told you I thought I saw him in Kerouac Alley, right? With mine, six, I think.”

Wendt chuckled. “The dead just can’t stay away. They want to be mist.”

The pitch was high and outside, but Brazon took a swing at its intent all the same. “Oh, yeah, sorry to hear about Val Richards, man, I mean I know you and her were, I mean, you know.”

“Yes, I do. But not totally unexpected.” Saying it that way felt like a betrayal, a taste in his mouth like it was someone else’s tongue doling out the cynicism. “Tell me, what do you know about the kid, Jeremy? He’s known as Jerimessiah sometimes.”

“I heard about him taking a header. Yeah. He was a good poet.”

“I don’t think I heard you right.”

“No. Yeah. He was a good poet. I was gonna use some of his poems in the next issue of my magazine.”

Wendt wondered if the next issue might be any time soon as Brazon had been touting the next issue of his surrealist inspired literary magazine for the last couple of years. “Good how? Crazy-fully-formed-from-of-the-head-of-the-muse good?”

“Yeah, I guess. I heard that he was supposed to be the next Rimbaud. But then they say that about all the poets who die young.”

“I ended up with a bag full of his writing.”

“No shit, that paperboy bag he lugged around, all those notebooks?”

You got all that?” Brazon’s wheels were spinning if his eyes were any indication. “You read any of it?”

“Naw, I haven’t had the time. Been working on other things.”

“He’s good. Somebody ought to publish a collection of his stuff.” A light went on, “Hey, maybe I’ll publish a special issue of the magazine, just of his poetry. Hey, that’s a good idea!”

One way ticket to obscurity, Wendt mused. “Yeah, from what I could tell it was mostly handwritten, a few typescripts folded in with the notebooks. You want them, you got them. Come by my place on Balboa. Before the end of the month. I have to be out of there some time in May.”

Brazon nodded, “Ok, I’ll do that,” and followed Wendt’s glance at the wall clock. “Waiting on a client?”

“Let’s call her a friend.”

Brazon stood. “I can take a hint.” He made to leave. “And hey, how come nobody asked me to read at Ian Blake’s memorial? I knew the guy. He was an alright poet. Kinda stuck up, I thought.”

“Yeah? I’d never heard of him.”

“See, that’s what I mean, and you’re one of the featured readers!”

Wendt shrugged. “I’m probably not going to do it if that makes you feel any better.”

“You’re not?”

“Naw. Tell you what. Why don’t you read in my place? When they call my name, you just go up and read.”

“What do you mean? People will know I’m not you.”

“Well, not everyone knows who I am or who you are, and to those who don’t, they’ll never know the difference, and to those who do, they’ll just think it’s another of your Dada performances pieces. Brazon, that brass ass! Gotta keep your rep up, bro!”

Brazon’s expression indicated he was weighing the stunt’s potential for notoriety. “Yeah.”

**Everybody has a story to tell, a book they want to write.** And they want to do it well. Wendt was often asked for his advice. There was always a manuscript someone wanted him to read. The bartender or the barista or the waiter. Anyone serving the public has stories, that’s a given. The bookstore clerk, the postman. Unfortunately for fledgling authors, Wendt was brutally honest. And to avoid any nasty incidents and alienate potential contributors to the KWAF, the *Keep Wendt Afloat Fund*, he had to establish certain ground rules. He made himself available in a public

place, usually the Caffè Trieste, for a manuscript consultation, for which a reading fee of \$20 was charged. He usually didn't provide that service for friends—it was a good way to lose them.

The worth of a manuscript was easily adduced by reading a few sample poems. Or in the case of fiction, the first page, the last page, and maybe a page in the middle, if absolutely necessary. Usually the first page, or the first poem for that matter, was all that was needed to generate an opinion. Pass a judgment, some claimed.

His customers were informed of the disclaimer as the money changed hands. They were warned that they might not like what he had to say about their writing, that they might not agree with what he had to say about their poems. Nevertheless they were paying him to tell them what he thought of their writing, not what he thought they might like to hear. It wasn't personal, though it always seemed that way. Nor was he being paid to couch his opinion diplomatically. That cost extra, and most likely would not be much different with the exception that he might consider not using words like "suck" or "garbage."

Monica was only fifteen minutes late. She placed the folder on the table between them. "Do you want another?" indicating the empty demitasse.

"Yeah, double, if you please."

"Thanks for saying you'd look at my thesis. I really appreciate it." She tried on an adorable pout. "I decided on Dickinson after all." She shed her jacket over the back of the chair. "How've you been? You're all over the internet, you know."

Wendt frowned. "I didn't do it."

"What are you talking about? The video went viral."

"Video?"

"On YouTube? Haven't you seen it? It's that interview you did for a documentary on Kerouac. From what's her name, Gillian, no, Katje Marsh, her video zine. You're talking about Kerouac. It's amazing. What you said. If Kerouac was a woman, I'd be doing my thesis on him!"

Wendt was a little self-conscious about his cheaters and kept taking them off and putting them back on, all the while explaining to Monica what was good about what she had written on Dickinson and what was questionable. He suggested further reading. Alcott, Emerson. The Bronte sisters, Helen Hunt. He encouraged her to choose just a few of Emily's poems that spoke directly to her rather than try to encompass the entire sprawling oeuvre. "Try connecting Emily to Gertrude Stein. Create a Dickinstein, an American poetry monster."

“Yeah, right, like that would fly.”

“You know that if it hadn’t been for the illicit affair Dickinson’s brother, Austen, was having with the wife of the astronomy professor at Amherst, a ménage à trios in fact, her poems would have probably never seen the light of day. The astronomer’s wife’s, Mabel Todd, championed Emily’s work to the point of laboriously typing up the poems on an early version of the typewriter. Thanks to her we have the collected poems of Emily Dickinson. Or most of them. They keep popping up like mushrooms in old trunks in New England attics.”

Monica placed her beautiful long fingers to her temples as if to lift the top of her skull to make room for all the new information, and frowning, closed her eyes. “No, this is too much. She was sexually repressed and her brother was a satyr?”

“That sounds about right.”

There was a long silence as she gazed at the pages scattered on the tiny table in front of her.

“If it helps even things out, Gertrude Stein didn’t think Hitler was all that bad. At first, anyway.”

“God, sometimes I think I’ll never get this thing done!” She beamed at him imploringly, “I’m leaving for Portland in a couple of days. Can we get together before then? You could help me so much.” She was desperate. “I’d even pay you. And, um, you know. Tomorrow? Please?”

Wendt shook his head. “Can it wait till you get back from Oregon? Tomorrow’s a bad day for me. Friend of mine just died. His funeral is tomorrow.”

**Wendt was juggling ideas for the Poetry Month** feature which was now going to be a tribute to Dick Granahan’s memory as well as Val’s. Why does funeral start with ‘fun’? Interesting that a funambulist is a tightrope walker. Because it’s fun to ambulate across the abyss on a length of rope? Also someone of great mental agility. That would be Granahan. Fundus, the greater curvature of the stomach, or the earth. The pregnant belly of Gaia. His gut. But funeral, from funus, which is related to the Old Norse deyja, to die. Wouldn’t then ‘déjà vu’ mean ‘to foresee one’s own death?’

“Interesting place.” Peter Cairo, P. Cairo, as he signed himself, was a Levantine author and world traveler. He had a perfect peanut shaped head and the kohl caved eyes of the perpetually weary. He sat across the table minding his coffee.

Wendt nodded, “Ray Jay’s? Yeah, poetry bakery. Not many of them



around.”

Rae Jean Oh owned Ray Jay’s where Wendt and a few other literary lights had gathered to await the ride down to Holy Cross Cemetery. Sue Prolix had driven up from LA and Cairo had flown in from New York City. They were among some of Granahan’s oldest friends. Rae Jean had been one of Dick’s students at State and had once desired to be the one to put the *O* in poetry. Her success was as a baker. And her establishment was a rarity, poet-friendly. She even named some of her sandwiches and pastries after poets: the Catullus, The Dryden, The O’Hara, The Ber-rigan, The Champion, the Homer, an epic foot long sub, and so on. Poets could also purchase pastry with original verse. They had to be recited before the entire bakery, but a clerihew, for example, was rewarded with a ginger snap.

There was a signboard with the baked goods-poetic form equivalents on the wall above the door that led to the restrooms. An alexandrine would get you an apple turnover, a ballade was equal to a bear claw or a square of baklava, a croissant for a cinquain, éclair for elegy or ode. Ep-igram, haiku, doggerel, limerick also merited a ginger snap. Sonnets garnered a maple bar, fudge brownie, jelly-filled donut or cinnamon roll. On the chalk board on the wall opposite was written the daily quote. That day it was *I should be sorry if I had any earthly fame for whatever natural glory a man has is so much detracted from his spiritual glory. I wish to do nothing whatever. I am quite happy. Wm. Blake.* Rae was closing up shop to attend the funeral. She would follow in the bakery van.

“Place in New Orleans. Cyran Oh’s. Basically the same concept. But they hold readings, too,” Cairo added.

“New-Oar-Leans. Ed Glider still around?”

“Ed passed, maybe a year or two ago. He was near ninety.”

“Old slippery Ed, finally got caught.”

Cairo didn’t like being in Frisco. Bad memories. He’d been beat up outside The Black Bird, a jazz club. All those years living in Paris, Milan, London, Madrid, New York, never anything like that. But Frisco? It shamed him even though it had all been a misunderstanding. “All I did was quote Adorno,” he’d said in his defense, to which Wendt had replied, “That alone would guarantee getting your ass deconstructed by a size thirteen.”

That had been years ago. Still Cairo held a grudge. “This town is a museum piece. At least New York City is vibrant. It actually vibrates. Alive with potential connections, like a giant brain. People come out here to be alone. It’s the end of the world, the land of sunsets, gorgeous

granted, but,” he sighed, “you’ve seen one, you’ve seen then all.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t miss enwhysee where a pack of smokes costs ten bucks.”

“Nobody in New York City pays ten dollars for their cigarettes, Carl. Unless they’re tourists.”

“And I suppose you’re gonna tell me you can’t enjoy a blade of grass unless there’s a subway nearby, or a deli, which these days is almost the same thing!”

Cairo shrugged. “You’ve read Foucault, of course.”

“Of course. It’s like hitting yourself on the head with a 2x4. Only a special kind of masochist reads that stuff.” Wendt laughed at himself. “And only a special kind of sadist writes it.”

Sue Prolix was giving them a ride in her rental. She was all smiles these days with her Hollywood whites. It made her look ten years younger. As did the boob job. The first thing she did after she was awarded the Guggie was go under the knife. She never tired of calling attention to them. “I turned my mailbags into hand bags. Feel ‘em, they’re firm like, like grapefruit.”

**People you never expected to see again**, people you thought were dead, show up for funerals, Wendt mused. The fog had decided to remain the rest of the day, a reminder of last month’s chill March uglies. He wandered over to the stand of cypress, the de facto smoker’s zone off to the side of where a large canopy and chairs had been set up.

The memorial followed directly on the heels of the interment. Jane, always the practical one, wanted to get it over and done with as quickly as possible. Father Russo had officiated. Dick’s son, Austen, stood on one side of his mother, and Dick’s daughter, the flamboyant lesbian porn queen now calling herself M, on the other. Father Russo had declaimed the virtues of the man in the box they were going to lower into the trench. “A loving father and a caring husband,” he intoned.

“I’m afraid I’m at the wrong funeral!” Irma, at Wendt’s elbow, had whispered loud enough for those in the immediate vicinity.

Father Russo concluded the ceremony by sprinkling the coffin with holy water as it was lowered into the ground. Someone behind Wendt commented in not so much of a whisper, “That’s an awfully big seed. I think he needs to use more water.” Once that was done, Father Russo exited stage left. It was a dangerously sinful gathering.

“Good thing Dick didn’t live to see this circus, it would have killed him all over again,” Cairo said offering Wendt a smoke. “They’re Zenos.

Greek cigarettes. Fine Turkish tobacco. I get them from a Montenegrin smuggler in Trieste.”

Wendt nodded, letting go with a stout shapely cloud, unlike that of anemic American brands. “Like a robust Gauloise.”

“The first one’s free.”

The sound of a PA being tested turned their attention to the podium at the head of the canopy. The testimonials, memorials, and poems were about to begin. Bill Bright, to some Bill Dim, and to others Bill Dim-and-then-some, had a problem and there wasn’t anything anyone could do about it. He was effusive in an open-mouth-insert-foot kind of way. And because he had been an old friend and colleague of Granahan’s at State, Jane had asked him to officiate.

“Hello everyone, for those who don’t know me, I’m William Bright, professor emeritus at State, and a long-time colleague of the dearly departed and severely missed Richard Granahan, known to most of you as RG.” Bright’s voice broke due either to a faulty wire or a faltering emotion. “I’m sure that RG would be delighted to see you all here.”

A bewildered silence followed. Bill was presented with a dilemma. Tangle with what he had just said or keep going and ignore it as if someone had just broken wind. Because of his years of academic podium thumping and discursive bullying, and because he was a proper man, Bill would never have even considered the second option. “I mean, if he wasn’t dead.” Again, a fork in the road.

Mercifully, the cemetery was in the flight pattern for SFO, and a seven somethingorother roared over with an ear splitting screech and low enough that it seemed that any one of them might just reach up and touch the sleek aluminum skin. Certainly it was loud enough to wake the dead.

Wendt had tuned Bright out anyway, scanning the crowd for faces he knew. And not so surprising, a few who had condemned Granahan as a sex pervert now tearfully dabbing their eyes. On the other hand, they might have been tears of joy. At last the old bastard was firmly planted in the ground.

Pat Richian, an old faculty friend of Dick’s from State as well, craned his long neck to get a gander at who was where. Or maybe saving a seat for a late-comer. Kitty Columbus, a street poet who had actually stalked Granahan when he taught at NAIF, wept. Enke Phalin, the Swedish author, but he always appeared sorrowful. Long Sung Song, aka Lucy, who was married to Ryan “Sonny” Spann, the Music Dept head at NAIF. Lane Curry, the black author Wendt had gone to high school with in

Indianapolis. Steven Whippoorwill, one of Carl's profs at UI, translator of Greek, Chinese, and Hebrew, who had retired to the Castro with his longtime partner, William Wonk. Or Wank. Becky Gilchrist. Alston Brown, a renowned LA poet and old friend of Dick's, totally unknown in the Bay Area.

Nan Traybo, not a particularly good poet but exceptionally good looking and stylish so her unusually bad verse was overlooked. She'd once accused Wendt of trying to get into her pants. Wendt denied it, claiming "I was in the wrong line!" Chandra Lopez and her sad-eyed seeing eye German shepherd.

Taking up chairs in the back row or standing were various literati including Paula Stein, Sid Sherman, Sarah Zul, Ray Green, Stan Gold, Pipi Wein, Perry Stone, and the transgender performance couple, Ms. Ann Trope and Ms. Ann Dray.

Joan Dark leaned forward in her folding chair, muffling her sorrow, and what might have been a breast could have easily been mistaken for her elbow. Gonda Lear, the exotic dancer Dick had taken up with after the divorce. And a Berkeley contingent consisting of Abby Synia, Cliff Howard, and Allan Whetstone. Wendt hadn't seen them in a while. They retained their dignified aloofness though they had grayed and shriveled considerably.

Tom Morrow. Seemed like he was at every funeral. Lon Murphy and his sycophants on the periphery, fluttering like black birds at the leavings of a carriage trail. Lon, receiving supplicants and dispensing favors. From behind, it appeared as if Mitch Tjantor had bowed and kissed his ring. Who would have guessed, two weeks later he would be dead. Lon was attended by his right hand hit man, Roman Ackley. Also there to be seen, Diane McCracken and her event horizon entourage, she herself a modest energy sink in a sea of bristling egos though undoubtedly she saw herself as someone much darker and thus more influential.

The distinguished poet Alfred Jewel flanked by two young men who were probably nameless and preferred it that way. Even Ellen Van Deller, who had been keeping the English Dept chair warm with her fat ass and hot air for way too many years, had deigned to come. Could he forgive a woman with a fat ass? He liked them narrow as a pencil. He was a writer, after all.

**Bill Bright had tapped him to say a few things.** He'd purged the usual platitudes. *Welcome to your dress rehearsal.* *Lame.* *Maybe: I hope you're taking notes.* *It will be on the final.* *The final final.* Try sincere. Ok, get back to that

later. He considered talking about the last time he'd visited the old guy. Dick had weakened considerably, didn't even have enough energy to squeeze the toothpaste tube. On the other hand, he seemed quite lucid.

"Sex is a young man's game, an old man's preoccupation." He'd spoken low because the returned Filipino hospice worker, Paloma, was fussing nearby. "If I have any regrets it's that I could have had more pussy. Not that I haven't gone to the buffet table and buttered a muffin with genuine gluttony more than once. But at one point in your career you realize that no one wants to publish you and to make matters worse, you're not going to get laid anymore." He'd given Wendt that old Granahan canary eater, like he'd put something over on him. "You also come to the realization that your entire *raison d'être*, the reason for your being, you've been holding in your hand at least once a day for most of your life. And that the only time in life that you can be truly happy is when you've got your dick in your hand."

"I guess you must be doubly happy, then."

"It's the curse of being a sperm delivery messenger. Anything else is ancillary and happenstance."

"Those your final words of wisdom? Gonna have that carved into your headstone?"

"If I had a choice in the matter. I had an epitaph, but Jane vetoed it. Can you believe that? After we've been divorced for fifteen years, she still gets to step in and say what I can or can't have on my stone."

"What would you have liked to have had?"

"*Here I Am Where I Ain't.*"

"Um, that's alright. I guess. How about *Done Been Done Gone?*"

"Has an urban cachet."

"Or *Wordless, I Am Finally Free.*"

"You think? For a poet? Along that line, though, have you heard this one? *For Lack Of Anything To Say, Here I Must Stay.*"

"You could go with something really simple like *Get Me Out Of Here!*"

"How about *I'll Be Back.* Vaguely Messianic as well as Terminator-ish. *Don't Look Back*, I like. Orphic in nature. Appropriate for someone who's about to be reduced to compost by worms."

"Yeah, but kinda morose. How about *You Must Be This Dead To Enter?*"

"*Tres noir.* However I have an affection for that old chestnut, *Asbes to asbes, dust to dust, what's a sweater without a bust?*"

Paloma had given Wendt the Tagalog evil eye, attracted by their giggling. She adjusted the blanket on the skin and bones of his old friend.

He'd watched as she pulled the covers over the yellowed desiccated feet, cracked and chipped like those of a plaster saint.

**Bill Bright had to call Wendt's name twice** before he came out of his reverie and made his way through the gathered nominally grieving. He thanked Bright with a nod, and at the lectern addressed the mourners with as doleful and impassive a look as he could muster. Assembled was a somber though volatile mix of prickly writers of one stripe or another, as well as old friends and family who had nothing to do with literature or education even though some of them appeared to be well-educated, or at least well-off. They took up most of one side of the first row. Somehow Tom Presley had landed a seat on the end in his plaid sports coat and white sneakers.

Tom Presley was a novelist, though Wendt didn't hold that against him. They were old friends dating back to the days when Wendt had first arrived in the city. Tom had gone through three wives in that time. Wendt had recently been on the receiving end of an unfortunate incident in his current arrangement.

Tom was always good for dinner a couple times a month and his fourth wife, the writer slash philosopher Elle DuBlevay, author of *The World As I Have Found It*, had accepted an understanding that was a carryover from the previous wife. Usually the fare was sumptuous and lavish, and included big meat, veggies, roasted or baked potatoes, salads, and dessert. Tom thought of himself as a gourmet but he just liked to eat. He was a big guy to begin with, and as he would say "the bigger the furnace the more room to burn." It was also Wendt's habit to stuff himself as he was never certain when or where he would be eating that well again.

Tom was partial to a civilized pre-dinner scotch, and maybe this particular evening he had imbibed in more than just one. Ellie had had enough of his sarcastic jollying at her expense and the meal, while delicious, was a tad Spartan compared to the usual robust fare, and which had incited Tom to make a few snide comments. Ellie understandably took umbrage and a bicker session of accusations ensued. Wendt had wisely kept out of it while mentally tallying score. At one point, Bill said something particularly cruel and Ellie fell apart into tearful quivering.

What had prompted him to speak defies the limits of logic. At Ellie's protest that Bill was a no-good sonofabitch and that she would not stand one more minute being insulted in front of a guest even if it was only one of his free-loading friends, Wendt had inquired with as much

innocence as he could muster, “Does this mean there won’t be any dessert?” The plate of clam linguini in garlic sauce then appeared not so magically in his lap.

Ellie was still with Tom, it appeared, and kept her eyes averted. She had on a lavender outfit that suggested that perhaps they were attending festivities *après la mort*. Next to her was Henry Croft in his usual brown suit but this time with a tie, offset by his trademark English farmer’s hat, appropriately sweat soiled. He gazed longingly and a little gape mouthed at the front of Ellie’s revealing low-cut neckline. Like all good English gentlemen everywhere he wanted to fuck somebody else’s wife. The somber attired, like beads on an abacus, and then three oddballs, Henry Croft, Ellie, and of course Tom holding the post position.

Wendt raised his eyes and gazed over the tops of heads that belonged to quite a few he knew. It was nice that they would honor the old fart. And was it any surprise that there they were, standing shoulder to shoulder at the very back edge of the assembled, the Sisterhood of the Gran-nyhand?

The way Dick had told it, Alice Kerr instigated it. She was one of his students and she realized that she didn’t get or particularly like poetry, but needed make-up units to graduate. Dick had been taken by her honesty, he said, and didn’t object when she proposed a solution. It didn’t have to be a blow job. Then word got around.

Last anyone had heard of Alice she was a housewife in Topeka married to a long distance trucker. Or runner. Couple of kids. No chance she was going to show. But Pat Angeli, lithe and leathery, was there. She had dropped poetry to become a yoga instructor. Kelly Moore in a black sheath that looked painted on. Sue Fonetag, publisher/editor of *Clowntown Traffic*, a literary magazine with a national reputation. Jeanne Croy, with the husband named Ted, and a kid. She had toughed it out, put her hand where her mouth could have been. Rae Jean, an edge of white apron showing below the oversize black suit coat she had borrowed.

Marguerite “Kay” Sayrah looked away when he glanced in her direction, prim as ever, if not more so. She was not standing with the rest of the sisterhood. That would have been admitting too much. She had thrown a crying fit earlier and had been consoled by the short hairy gnome in a black suit, black shirt, silver gray tie, and orange Converse high tops. At least he assumed he had a sense of style.

The women in the sisterhood were characteristically strong self-assured types, not what he’d call victims, but aggressive opportunists who had grabbed the bull by the horn, so to speak. He couldn’t imagine any

of them being the one who blew the whistle, so to speak, on old Granahan.

Wendt planned to start with Blake's "If life is thought." And he lifted his chin to say the words. He paused. He focused on a woman standing off to one side, dark pants suit, alone, almost as if she were being shunned. He recognized her. Grace Niklia, the police inspector. Her presence at the funeral disconcerted him enough to derail what he was about to say. He felt compelled to say something, but it was as if a giant foot had jammed against his windpipe so that his voice squeaked out an octave higher. He then became very self-conscious about the big blank space between his ears. Finally he blurted, "Dick was a great poet, a tough old bird who'd been through a lot of adversity and still survived with his sense of humor intact." He felt thick in the throat like a melon had grown to replace his Adam's apple. He choked out, "He was one helluva guy. No matter what, you have to hand it to him."

There was a noticeable titter among the assembled.

"He was my friend. I expect I'll be joining him in the energy pool one of these days. We all will." Wendt bowed his head as much to honor Granahan as to hide his emotion. When he looked up, the police inspector was gone.

Bright came over and patted him on the back, "We'll all miss the old devil." He was looking at his clip board and the list of people who had signed up to say something in Granahan's memory and perhaps Wendt's minimalist eulogy was just the ticket to keep things on track. "The less said the better" he said, and then intoned Tim Finnegan's name.

Wendt made his way to the back of the seating and through a clot of mourners gathered there. Paul Gogang, the Samoan Chinese poet blocked his path. "You'll pay for what you did to Reg!"

He placed a forearm on the big man's chest and pushed past him, showing him his fist. "Oh yeah? Talk to my accountant!" Then he ran smack into Mac who collared him by the lapel and brought him back to where stray members of the funeral were milling about on the periphery, grabbing a quick smoke or a moment of private conversation, the years to catch up on since the last funeral of a mutual friend, gossip to share, assignations to arrange.

Mac wore a wide mischievous grin. It complimented the angular black satin thing that featured an appendage that was either a cowl or a cape. In the brisk overcast day her lips seemed unusually red.

"What are you doing here?" He wasn't unhappy to see her.

"I go to all the poets' funerals." She threw her teeth at him in a laugh.



“Besides you invited me, remember?”

It was possible. They had been pretty well lit the last couple of times they had managed to get together, the last, a day or so previous, at the Marriot. Mac had a booth in the lingerie show at Fort Mason. He remembered thinking he could get used to widescreen TV.

She rubbed her leg against his and pulled him closer as if to smell his neck. “Know where I might find a good poet?”

Wendt chuckled. “The only good poet is a dead poet.” Her closeness had aroused him.

Mac’s hand found its way under his suit coat and rubbed his lower belly. “He doesn’t have to be a good poet. In fact, a bad poet will do. . .if he’s naughty enough.” And she lunged at his jaw as if to bite it.

Wendt was distracted by the whiskey voice coming over the PA. “Wait, I want to hear what Finnegan’s got to say. It should be good.” He had to crane his neck to get a glimpse of Finnegan’s sparsely thatched pate barely topping the podium, and heard the familiar brogue, amplified through the speakers.

“. . . was a poet of the people. A plain upstanding man. Do you understand what I mean? Head and shoulders over the whole bloody lot, brain box going the whole time. Not a poet in the world could hold a candle to Mr. Richard Andrew Granahan. Not a man. Or woman was fit to stand beside him. I’d back him to win by a length against the whole bloody lot of them.

“Do you know what I’m going to tell you? He was a man who could give the lot of them a good scare. He was a man who could meet them, and meet the best, and beat them at their own game, now I’m telling you.

“I know what I’m talking about. He’d be up at the bell with a poem a yard long, a bloody lovely thing that would send your nice men, and women, home in a hurry, with their bloody tails between their legs. I’ve seen his poems, and I’ve read them, and do you know what I’m going to tell you, I’ve loved them. I’m not ashamed to stand here and tell you. I’ve known the man and I’ve known his poems and loved the two of them, and loved them well. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Someone behind Wendt whispered loudly, “Is Finnegan coming out of the closet?”

“Please, put him back in,” the man with him retorted.

“Do you know what it is, then?” Finnegan queried semi-rhetorically. “I’ve met the others, the whole lot of them. I’ve met them all and know them all. I have seen them and have read their poems. I have heard them recited by men that know how to use their tongues.”

“Oh my, now I’m all aflutter,” purred another man.

“Men that couldn’t be beaten at their own game. I have seen whole books filled up with their stuff, books as thick as a ship’s plank and I’m telling you no lie, where the sail hits the yardarm there was only one poet for me.”

“Don’t tell me, let me guess,” cracked someone else.

“And that one poet was a man, as sweet a singer in his own way as you’d find in the bloody trees of a spring day, and that is a fact. The dear darling boyo was an upstanding man, a man who could write poems that you can read all day and night and keep reading them to your heart’s content, stuff that you never tire of. And the name of that man is a name that could have been given to any of us, a name that won’t shame us.”

Irma had pushed through the crowd and stared at Wendt and Mac in faux disbelief. “Now I’m sure I’m at the wrong funeral.”

“And that name is Richard Granahan, Dickie to his good friends.” It sounded like ‘Dackie’ when Finnegan said it. “Do you understand what I mean? It’s not for nothing that I call me self a pal of Dickie Granahan.

“I”wasn’t more than a week last I paid my dear old lad a visit and him at death’s door, hand on the handle, yet cheerful as the day is long. Do you know what I’m saying? Cheerful as if it wasn’t him had the grim reaper’s calling card on the bedside table, and grinning like a death’s head himself. Oh, it was a sight to see. It was as if he was already hearing the sweet voices of angels, but more than likely it was the morphine. Yet, darling man, he was lucid, clear as the purest of water blessed by the Holy Father himself, if you know what I mean. He spoke freely about the nature of poetry and he even recited poems, new ones I’d never heard before, poems he had just then been inspired to make. I worried he might get agitated as his breath was about being labored and he did admit in the shyest manner of the shyest man on earth, and one of its greatest poets, that he was a trifle parched and would I hand him his mug of hot cocoa from the bedside table. And certainly said I, but now tell me, will you, what would be the purpose of these little blue pills? Well then, says he as innocent as a lamb with its first breath of clover, if you know what I mean, ‘The cocoa helps me get to sleep and the blue pill keeps me from rolling out of bed.’ Do you know what I’m saying?”

In the deafening shocked silence that followed, Paloma’s voice could be heard denouncing the joke. “Mr. Dick nice man!”

By then Mac was leading Wendt further away from the crowd. They were intercepted by Dale Dillinger, an old State crony, who once had the misfortune of posing nude for a calendar of hot young poets. Dale was

certainly a good poet, that was never in question, but the fact that he possessed an unusual endowment meant that his literary merits were hardly ever discussed. "I can't believe she showed her face!" At Wendt's questioning look, "Gigi! She has some nerve!"

Mac wanted to know, "Who is Gigi? And why should I hate her?"

Wendt had to explain, "She was the one who turned Granahan in for, you know, the grannyhand."

"What's she look like?"

Wendt shrugged, "I've never met her. That was after I'd stopped hanging out with the college crowd. The younger students were beginning to think of me as some kind of creepy campus fringe intellectual."

Dale laughed. "You and me both. You say you never saw her? She hasn't changed all that much. Tall, long dark hair." They could look down into the parking area from where they were standing and Dale pointed. "That's her there, getting into the gray Honda!"

Wendt had to smile. He retrieved a business card from his wallet. "Mac, let me use your cell phone."

She reached into her purse and handed him the rectangle of plastic. "Who're you going to call?"

"I've got a hunch." Wendt looked down at the phone. "Ok, where are the numbers?"

Mac reached over and tapped the screen. "Touch each of the numbers and then press this one."

Wendt put the phone to his ear and heard a facsimile of a bell ring. The voice answered, "Grace Niklia, Special Ops."

"Uh, yeah, Inspector? My name is Carl Wendt. You left a bag of notebooks that belong to Jeremy? Jeremiah? I forget his last name, at my place over on Balboa? A week or so ago?"

There was a long silence. Wendt could look down into the parking lot and see the woman Dale had pointed out as Gigi with a phone to her ear. "What can I do for you, Mr. Wendt?" she finally spoke. Now she was looking up in his direction.

"You said I should call if I had any questions."

"I'm off shift right now, and I'm taking the rest of the week off. Can your questions wait till I get back?"

"Will you have a drink with me?"

There was a soft but hearty chuckle from the other end. "I don't think that's possible."

"Listen I know who you are. And I'd like to talk to you about it. Maybe you can tell me why you did it."

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“This is a long shot, I know, but come to a memorial reading I’m giving next Wednesday at Golden West Hall. It starts at 7. No strings attached.”

“I have a previous engagement.”

“Think about it.”

Mac snatched the phone from his hand. “You’re not using my phone to make a date with another woman I hope.”

**Val came out of the shadows.** He took her arm. They walked up the steps. His room looked different. The bed was made. That made the room larger. And brighter. Big enough for the Laz-e Boy. He didn’t own a Laz-e Boy. He might not have noticed but it was occupied by Dorian resembling an older Mitch Tjantor. Cairo came out of the bathroom. He had a gun in his hand. A younger Reg Meyer came out of the closet. He wasn’t empty handed either.

“Did you set this up?” he asked Val who was there as Mac.

“Well, well, Mr. Wendt, this is a fine situation,” Mitch Tjantor with Harry Croft’s greenish pocked physiognomy intoned Britishly. “There’s the matter of the Lucien Graff, isn’t there? You stole from me. You are the worst kind of thief, sir. A book thief.”

Cairo snuffled like Granahan. That wasn’t a gun in his hand. “That’s worse than what I did! What kinda person does that?”

“I don’t care you fucked my girlfriend, just give me back my book!” Reg shrieked shrilly with a voice belonging to Jeremy. Actually, he was Jeremy. He wanted his manuscript back only it wasn’t his manuscript, it was Tjantor’s. The bag slung over his shoulder bulged with rolled cahirs. Or bowling pins.

Mitch Tjantor had become very large, a Dutch boy wig akilter on the wizened bald head. A helium-filled Mylar balloon was tethered to the oxygen tank. Mac as a four year old Nora bounced on the edge of the bed but as Shelia in an old black and white photo he remembered seeing.

“You murdered me, angel,” he heard himself say. “And for that, you’ll hang.”

Reg Meyer was wearing Julie’s nose. “I wrote that book! It belongs to me!”

He saw that he had turned his back to them, wearing an Augusta green sport coat. He knew there was a crest on the breast pocket but it wouldn’t come into focus. The manuscript and the book, the manuscript

book in the lining of the coat, he had to get rid of it! A rush of panic overcame him. He gasped for breath.

A voice was talking low. Wendt was immediately conscious of the weight of the covers and the warmth of the body in bed next to him. He squeezed his eyes open and took in the darkness. Slowly it became grayer. The suite at the Marriot. Mac was talking. He heard her ask, "Where are you now?" And then, "Why don't I meet you downstairs. We can have coffee, breakfast."

Was she talking to him? He turned his head and made out the curve of her bare back.

"Ok, ok, let me just jump in the shower. I'll be about fifteen minutes." She listened. "Don't be ridiculous." She rasped a cruel laugh. "Besides, why should you care?" She turned to face Carl setting her phone aside. "You awake?"

Wendt grunted. "Sorta."

"That was my husband. He's on his way up."

**Angie had to consult with a real estate lawyer** down on Montgomery and asked Wendt to keep an eye on Samantha while she took care of business. He needed a ride to that part of the city anyway. There was a Jolly Juice down on Sansome he liked to frequent. The staff knew him well.

"Hey Wendt!"

That surprised Sam. "They all know you."

The employees were dressed like clowns. That might have been why he felt so at home. "Well, besides being famous, I come in here when I'm feeling flush, and get a Wendt Special."

"You don't look flush."

"Flush, meaning I got jingle in my jeans, some bank to my roll. Money, honey."

"You talk funny."

"I'm a poet, I get to."

They took a little table by the window. One of the girls came from behind the counter. "Hi Carl! Who's your young friend?" She looked straight at Sam who shied at the attention.

Wendt chuckled at Sam's frown. "This is Samantha DeNotti, soon to be princess of Mendocino."

"Really, where's that? A magical kingdom?"

Sam answered, "Up near Bum Feather Egypt."

"Oh really?" with askance amusement.

“I’ll have my usual, Kickapoo Joy Juice, extra kale. And Sam? I think Sam will have the strawberry orange creamsicle fizz.” Sam had turned to face the large window onto the busy thoroughfare. “That ok with you, kid?”

She turned, crying.

“Ok, you can get whatever you like.”

“I don’t want to live up in Elk. I want to stay on Balboa.”

“Ok, ok, I get the picture.” He beamed his most benevolent smile, one that he reserved for special people, and Samantha was one of them. “Yeah, I understand where you’re coming from. I have to move, too.” Now the tears were rolling down her cheeks like large rain drops. How small you feel when you make a little girl cry, Wendt mused. “But, change is often for the better.” Who was he kidding? “Angie is doing the right thing. You’re gonna get away from the nasty dirty city and be living near the ocean and all that fresh healthy country air, near the beach where you can ride horses.”

Sam sniffed at a tear that clung to her tiny now red nose. “Mom said I could get a pony.”

“There you go. And you’ll meet a lot of new people and make new friends. Angie’s probably going to have a big garden and grow lots of fresh vegetables. Corn, you know how much you love corn on the cob. You’ll probably see deer and raccoons and maybe even wild cats. You’ll have to get a dog. Anybody who lives in the country has to have a dog.”

“A puppy,” she said smiling. Now the tears were merely remnants of a passing shower.

“Hey, you can go boogie boarding or surfing. Those country kids know how to have fun. And you can always come back to the city for visits, to the museum, the ballet. It’s not that far.”

Sam frowned. “Five hours,” she said with a dark pout.

“Then when you do come for a visit, it’ll be extra special.”

“Will you come up to Elk and visit, Wendt?”

“Oh, yeah, I’ll come up for a couple of days to hang out, go to the beach, that kind of thing.” Wendt tried to sound convincing, but he knew that there was no way he was going to seclude himself in a country way. “And you’ll have to come and visit me when you come back down to the city.”

“Where are you going to be living? How will I find you?”

Wendt chuckled. “I’ll be staying with friends at first until I get myself a nice little apartment, maybe out in Noë Valley. I’ll be staying in touch with Angie so don’t you worry.”

Their drinks arrived. Sam eyed his vibrant green concoction curiously. “What’s that?”

“The elixir of youth, ambrosia of the gods, the staunch to the thirst of mortality.”

“Can I have a taste?”

“How old are you?”

“You know! Eight!”

“You’ll have to wait fifty years.”

“Fifty years?! You’ll be dead by then!” She giggled as if it were a really funny and at the same time a really awful thing to say.

Wendt gazed at the large plastic cup with a baleful eye. “Then why am I drinking this stuff?”

**Lorna ran the Vivisection Lounge.** She was a large woman with *Biker Bitch* tattooed in gothic script on her inner left forearm. And she was the only person Wendt knew who actually looked good in a crew cut. He remembered her from when she’d been the bartender at Puss ‘N Boots, the biker dyke bar in the Castro. He had asked if she knew Val and when was the last time she saw her.

“Yeah, shame that. Lipstick doll, a real heartbreaker with that crooked smile. Yeah, I remember her. Why you asking?”

“She’s a friend of mine, was a friend, and I’m writing a piece on her for the weekly.”

“Yeah, I thought I recognized your mug. What’re you gonna write about her?”

“Kind of a memorial and a tribute to her talents.” Wendt indicated a refill on the shot. He unfolded the flyer and pointed to the name. “Know how I can get in touch with Lillian Belfry?”

Lorna lifted the phone on the back bar and stabbed a number. She spoke into the arcane handset. “You’ll never guess who’s out here askin’ after you?” She listened with a wince. “Alright, alright. What’s his name, the guy you read in the weekly?” She motioned to Wendt with her chin, “Wendt?” and Wendt nodded back. “Yeah, that’s him.”

Lorna poured the shot as Lillian Belfry flew out of the door that read Employees Only. “Well, if it isn’t Carl Wendt, poet killer.”

“Hey, hey, I had nothing to do with Reg Meyer’s untimely, or timely, as the case may be, demise.”

“I’m not talking about Reg Meyer.” She stood at Wendt’s shoulder and he met her eyes. “Val Richards, that’s who I’m talking about. You killed her, Wendt, you killed her with indifference.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I know you’re gutless. I’m woman enough to know you’re missing a pair. You coulda gone into that burning building and saved her.”

“I’m not a fireman.”

“You’re barely a man!”

Wendt glanced at Lorna who beamed a smile of great satisfaction. He turned back to Lillian whose head appeared to have been transformed into a giant long eye-lashed gape mouthed cartoon of a dime store goldfish. He nodded, understanding that Val intended to haunt him with memories of his churlishness and cowardice. “I’m writing a memorial as a feature article for the weekly. That’s why I’m asking around. Who did she see last, what was she doing? That sort of thing.”

“And you think that because you’re writing this memorial it’s going to absolve you of any guilt for your heartless neglect?”

Wendt nodded and stared at the shot glass in his hand and then put it back on the bar untouched. “Yeah, something like that. I feel guilty I didn’t do more even though I knew there wasn’t anything I could do, nothing anyone could do. You know that as well as me. Something got off track and that happened long after. . . .” he said with a wave of his hand to indicate what would remain unspoken. “The whole performance thing, I mean, it was spectacular, but it took its visceral toll. She should have stuck to poetry. She would have been just as miserable, more obscure, and maybe not as dead.” He shrugged and knocked the shot back. “But what the hell do I know?”

Lillian fixed him with a gaze that had lost some of its harshness. “She always loved poetry, you know, that never changed. Ever wonder why she threw that whole poetry thing over, Carl? Think about it. She was in love with you. And she was a better poet. She knew that you couldn’t take the competition.”

“That’s crazy talk.”

“Really, Carl? Didn’t she change her name to Valentina Fox soon after the publication of *Book Of Pain*, her first collection of poems? Which, I might add, received unprecedented critical acclaim for a first book. All of a sudden she didn’t want to be a poet anymore. You were there then, Carl. What happened?”

“It was an esthetic decision. I had nothing to do with it. In fact, I supported her.”

“Less competition.”

“We were drifting apart. I wished her well. I mean, I knew something was wrong, the pills, and the lies, the lies and the pills. You can deal with



one or the other, but not both, and most of the time, they don't come alone." He shrugged, "And she was in the process of changing her sexual preference."

"That hurt, didn't it?"

Wendt screwed up an eye like he was considering the comment. "Actually I have a tendency to turn women toward lesbianism. I'm part lesbian myself."

**Some people have a sense of humor** about their unorthodox proclivities, and it's usually dark. Wendt should have been knocked off his stool lying flat on the floor for that crack. Instead Lorna poured another shot. Lillian didn't quite put away her hostility but at least she coughed up some info. Val liked to come by and be part of the reading scene which, considering the moderator, was heavily femme.

"If she was on something, she'd be quiet, unassertive and sweet. If she were coming down, she'd be agitated and heckle the poets. But at least she was participating in the scene again. People would buy her drinks to try to get in bed with her but when she was drunk she was like a sopping wet dish rag and all she could talk about was this famous poet she knew and how she had written the best book of poems ever and how he had never said anything good about it except 'that's nice.' She went ballistic if someone even said 'that's nice' to her."

Wendt was familiar with that particular flash point.

Lillian indicated that Val was writing poetry again, but it wasn't for herself. "She was hustling this guy who wanted her to write poems that he could publish under his own name, and he was paying her. So she said. Kinda like a poetry sugar daddy. Her and the kid who I guess is the one introduced her to this *patron* of the arts. Well, you know, with Val, you were never sure of how firm a grasp she had on reality."

"Ok, back up a bit there. A kid? Who was this kid?"

"Some street monkey, a crackster I'm sure."

"Get a name?"

"Messiah?" She glanced at Lorna for confirmation.

"Yeah, something like that, Messiah. I had to boot him. He was creeping people out."

"I think he was writing poems for this guy, too. That's the impression I got, anyway."

"Jeremessiah?"

Lorna nodded. "That's it, frickin' freak is what I say."

"You know him?"

Wendt sighed. "It's a long story."

Lillian looked at her watch. "And I've just run out of time."

**"Yeah, third floor, three ten.** You from the paper? The weekly? Yeah, he said he was a poet. What do I know? I thought they was all in the schools. You writing something about him? Funny critter. Used to call me his corn-sage. That means apartment manager in French. He said he could speak French. He tried some out on me. But what do I know. Come on in."

Gray limp hair hung from her surprisingly small head like unraveled yarn. Her shoulders were broad, and her arms jutted out in installments from the garishly bright orange and yellow sleeveless dress. She'd forgotten her teeth. "scuse a min." She came back shortly with her smile. The widescreen TV seemed out of place in the cramped shabbiness of the tiny room. The sound was off and the images flickered disconcertingly without context. "Funny that when he was alive he hardly had any visitors. Now that he's. . .you know, there's always someone asking after him."

"Oh yeah, like who?"

"Well, cops, for one."

"Woman cop?"

"Yeah, yeah, but she come later, after the uniforms got done taking statements."

"Anybody else?"

"A guy. I think I seen him with Jeremy once, before. . .you know."

Wendt nodded. "What did he look like?"

"I dunno, big guy. Looked like he ate well."

"Young, old?"

"Younger than us, I'd say, older than the kid."

"You talk to him?"

"Only once, after the. . .you know. Wanted to look in the room. I told him the cops took everything."

"Say what he was looking for?"

"Books. Notebooks. Said the kid had some of his books."

"Notebooks?"

"I showed him these over here in the corner." She pointed to a bundle of spiral notebooks on the floor next to the chipped and dinged white nightstand. "They're still in the shrink wrap. He didn't want them though. Had to have writing on them. I said he could have them anyway. They're brand new. You want them? You can have them. I ain't gonna

use them. They was Jeremy's. He'd just bought them. Figured he wouldn't need them and I could give them to the neighborhood kids to do their homework. That's something I didn't know."

"What's that?"

"Kids don't do homework anymore."

Wendt pulled his attention away from the dancing shapes on the flat screen. "Think he had a girlfriend?"

The corn-sage said "I did see him with a woman," when she finished coughing and laughing. "Didn't think she was his girlfriend. Older. Red-head. Dyed red, you could tell." And without prompting, she blurted, "He give me that TV so I ain't gonna say nothing bad on him."

"Nice TV. New?"

"Said he come by some money and just had to have it. Impulse buy, he called it. Didn't matter. Said he'd be getting more money soon. He had a deal with some guy to write for him. Said I could borrow the TV anytime I wanted. So when he. . .you know. . .I figured that it would be as good a time as any to borrow it seeing as how he weren't gonna ask for it back."

When Wendt said nothing she insisted, "He said I could borrow it!" He didn't care about that. Why would the kid buy new notebooks if he was going to take a dive? Another impulse buy? Or maybe the euphoria of the moment when possibilities seem infinite.

**Wendt also thought to check some old trap lines** among the margin dwellers. Apollinara and Jacob, known to everyone as Polly and Jake, were an East European couple in their 70's whose apartment was on a block south of Market scheduled to be demolished to make room for more parking garages. He remembered that Val had a special affection for them because they were so old world, and she was particularly fond of old world. Polly was a papier-mâché artist while Jake was a junk artist.

"So much more junk in America! My art improve one hundred percent!"

The walls and ceiling were covered with papier-mâché stalactites and odd organic protuberances painted a variety of colors but giving off a slime yellow-green aura like the inside of a giant gut. Jake's repurposed found objects were niched and incorporated into the ever-changing irregular surroundings.

"The things people throw away would make a man rich in my country."

They were always busy creating, Polly tearing strips of newspaper, a

cigarette permanently lodged in the corner of her lipstick rouged mouth, one eye squinting from the trickle of smoke, a ratty blond wig on her head, thin diaphanous kimono thrown over narrow bony shoulders, a stained satin slip showing underneath, and when she paused, one hand on her hip, to take the cigarette from her mouth to blow a cloud of smoke and consider the progress of her latest creation, she resembled a bad parody of Marlene Dietrich.

Jake, a tall stooped man always attired in the same suit coat and matching brown trousers, a perfect crust of day-old white whiskers clinging to the hangdog jowls, mouth a liver red smear beneath cavernous nostrils and, despite their inflamed sockets, blue eyes twinkling with glee, joy, and mischief.

A constant stream of people passed through the small two room apartment, mostly neighbors, druggies, conmen, common criminals, and street toughs. No one ever overstayed their welcome for fear of becoming a part of the incessant collage going up around them. And it was because of one of Val's drug connections that he had first been dragged down the dead end alley and up the short flight of creaking wood steps.

"What's the matter these people? They don't have memorial for her friends should honor her?" Polly squeezed the life out of a tea bag that had seen better days into a cracked tea cup missing a handle. "You want sweet? We got pink and we got blue, no real. Just like political party, yes?"

Wendt examined his own cup and tried to discern color in the liquid. Was it darker than hot water or was that just a shadow?

"She come here with skinny crazy boy who must always talk not so long ago. Looking for Gordo." Polly shrugged. "Each their own."

"Just her and the kid? Anyone else?" Wendt noticed Jake eyeing the used tea bag on the saucer as if it had a numinous presence.

Polly carefully emptied two packs of the pink sweetener into her hot water and then set them aside with the pile of used pink and blue packages that would eventually be collaged to a section of wall.

"Fat man." Jake said looking up from the tea bag. It sounded like he said 'fete' man.

"Fat man?"

"Last time she come with fat man." He made a slope shoulder gesture with his arms held away from his side.

"He was money," Polly added.

"How do you know?"

She shrugged. "Because Valentina say so. Gordo come, they get big

score.”

“I guess I’m gonna have to talk to Gordo.”

“No good. Hit run.” She waved a nicotine stained hand toward the outside, relegating it to another world. “In hospital, maybe die.”

**Wendt now considered *City of Assassinations*** as the title of his feature on Granahan, Val, the kid, and now something on Ian Blake which would also serve to announce his presence at the memorial, and maybe Morgan Tilson. Both of them had been associated with NAIF as adjuncts. He figured he could glean enough background from Stoddard Leary.

Mikhail, the bartender at the Backed Inn a block down from the NAIF campus, had said “regular as clockwork” and at three on the button, Stoddard pushed in the door and momentarily reveled like a man in the desert suddenly happening upon an oasis. He didn’t object when Wendt offered to buy him a drink.

They touched glasses. “I thought I’d see you at Granahan’s funeral.”

Stoddard made a face and waved a hand in dismissal. “My ride never showed up!”

Wendt knew this was bullshit as Nate Silveri had complained to him at the funeral that he was late because he’d waited around for Stoddard who never showed up at their agreed upon meeting place.

“Shame. Wasn’t he instrumental in getting you the position at NAIF?”

Stoddard looked at him like he had just uttered nonsense. “No. . .,” he shook his head slowly. “As a matter of fact, he had recommended someone else. I got it because the provost at the time was Joel Fischer, an old classmate from Iowa. Granahan, if I remember correctly, wanted you to take his place.”

Wendt nodded, receiving the memory like a bad odor. He’d missed the interview. It had something to do with a woman and too much to drink or a drink and too much woman, either way he didn’t want to think about it. “Ah yes, the Iowa connection.”

“You’re just jealous.”

“Doesn’t IOWA stand for *Inbred Ontologically Witless Assholes?*”

Stoddard chuckled. “You could be describing any writing program in the country. But, yeah, Iowa is certainly the model. Need I remind you that Valerie went to Iowa.”

“For less than six months. She said the sexual predation was disconcerting. And provincial.”

Stoddard toasted Val, another painful memory. “Here’s to a sweet angel. She will be missed.”

Wendt raised his glass before knocking it back.

“And to Reg Meyer, who won’t be missed.” Stoddard called for another round. “Are congratulations or thanks or commendations in order? You did the world of literature a great service.”

Wendt shook his head. “I didn’t do it. On the other hand there’s no shortage of people who would have done it. I didn’t realize he grated on you, too.”

“He was after my job!”

“No kidding? Reg?”

“Yeah, Reg. He didn’t have any idea how unpopular he was with the board of directors. It may have been that lawsuit he filed against the school a couple years back. Remember that? It was a nuisance suit. Corporations have very long memories.” After a belch, he added, “They’re called databases.”

That was neither here nor there, what could he tell him about Tilson and Blake.

“They both wanted my job!”

“What do you mean? At NAIF?”

“And they didn’t stop at stabbing in the back whoever was in their way. Of course they aren’t the only ones. There are others. Everyone wants my job. It’s the perfect poet’s job. The pay is decent and you don’t have to do anything except talk about what you do to a bunch of cross-eyed trust fund morons.” Stod had the bartender bring over another setup. It was as if he were preparing to go to work, the work of getting obliterated. “It does have a price, though. Who would have thought that it would be so soul negating. It’s not the art. It’s the people you have to deal with. Vampires are real, my friend, they drink a figurative literary blood. And when they’re done with you, you’re about as useful as a burnt out match.”

“They’re dead, you know.”

“Yeah, I know. I just wish there was a way I could thank them.”

“No love lost?”

“The Blake kid was alright. He had a lot of energy, and it showed in his writing. But when you’re the cute up-and-coming literary property and make a point of being seen at all the correct occasions and then act like that somehow gives you some kind of privilege, it can be a pain in the ass.”

“What about Tilson?”

“He was an alien.” Stod savored some of his drink. “A walk-in. Maybe even a robot. I could never connect with the guy. Totally devoid of viscera. His method was interesting, but not the end result. And very ambitious. They both were. Now they’re just a boring subject.” He turned his attention to finishing his drink and hunched his shoulders like he was done for now.

Wendt signaled the bartender for another round. “C’mon Stod, don’t clam up. You got me curious. Who else do you think is after your job?”

The bartender removed the empties and Stoddard moved the new setup into position. He didn’t want to be bothered.

“Like three of the people who were after your job are now dead. Is that just a coincidence?”

“I can’t help it if I’m lucky.”

“With luck like that you don’t need friends.”

Stoddard shrugged. “I heard your friend from Kansas is angling for the job, too.”

“Lynal Pauk?”

“And Charles St Charles.”

Wendt shook his head. “No way. St Charles is old school University material. Where’s he teaching, Yale, Princeton? He’s not going to go after something at a barely accredited diploma mill. That’d be like putting a brass doorknob on a beaded curtain.”

Stoddard giggled. “Where have you been, Wendt? Don’t you know? The old guard is being sloughed off like last season’s exoskeleton. There’s a new breed of insect, of climbers on the bricks of academe. Ruthless untutored young pups. And they’re pushing the old dogs out. St Charles is out here looking over the prospects.”

“If I hear he’s met with an accident I’m going to get real suspicious.”

“How come you haven’t queued up to stab me in the back, Wendt? Waiting for the field to narrow down?”

“Lack of experience more than anything else. Impatient would be another.”

“You’ve got the rep though. That’s all the kids want, to have some of your name rub off on them. Then they can say, I studied under Stoddard Leary. Or Carl Wendt.”

“Quite a few can already say that, but it has nothing to do with poetry. I’m not a teacher.”

“You’d be good, Wendt, I’d even consider passing the baton to you if I didn’t have rent to pay. But you’d still have to contend with Mitch Tjantor and his asshole friends.”

“Tjantor? Who are his friends?”

“Greg Peck, the Hunt brothers. Tjantor has Berkeley sewn up. He has his shadow, Mira Marks, at State poised to jump into the head job at Mills. Hunt or Peck would then move into that vacated position, and the other would be looking to slipping one between my ribs.”

**Wendt laid out Jeremy’s notebooks on his bed.** Some had been curled, tube-like, for so long they looked like the Dead Sea scrolls. The newer ones were merely creased down the middle. Jeremy didn’t date his entries but he did date the beginning and end dates on the cover of each spiral bound. Wendt ordered them and then discovered that some notebooks were copies in a better hand rather than random jottings, drawings, scribbles and notes. There was a method to the madness but it would take an archivist to figure it out. Among the notebooks were typescripts, some from a typewriter and others, by the faded script, the product of a computer printer low on ink. They were certainly more legible. Wendt freed a page from a folded sheaf and read.

*The radical question posed by poetry is circumscribed by the interest linked to membership in the literary field, that is to say, the very existence of this field and its corresponding censorships. That field is an historical product of the labor of successive poets who have defined poetry by forcing on it commentary, discussion, critique, and polemic. But the problems, theories, themes, or concepts which constitute objectified poetry impose themselves as a sort of autonomous world on would-be poets who must not only know them, as items of culture, but recognize them as items of belief—failing to would disqualify them as poets. All those who profess to be poets have a life or death interest, as poets, in the existence of this repository of consecrated texts, a mastery of which constitutes their specific capital. Thus, short of jeopardizing their own existence as poets and the symbolic powers ensuing from this title, they can never carry through the breaks which imply a practical suspension of the existence of poetry — that is, a denouncement of the tacit contract defining the conditions of membership in the field, a repudiation of the fundamental belief in the conventions of the game and the value of the stakes, a refusal to grant the indisputable signs of recognition—reference and reverence, obsequiousness, respect for convention even in their outrages—in short everything which secures recognition of their membership.*

Interesting.

Wendt found that one of the notebooks was stuck to the back of another by the syrupy residue of spilled soda. Separating the two he saw that Jeremy had written a long Ginsberg style poem *a la Howl* entitled *Bay*. It was dedicated *In Memoriam Angel Headed Hipster*, and began *I am the beast mind of my generation, wool in sheepish clothing. . . .* Wendt chuckled



and read a little further then gave a brow raised low whistle. “Well, hello Rimbaud.”

Disquieting were the names on the inside cover of an apparently newer spiral notebook. They were a list of dead poets, very old dead poets whose names underpinned literature, as well as the obscure though remarkable in their day, and more recent names that meant something to Wendt personally. Paul Simon Legris, Dee Dee Wrell, Cornaio Gibaldi, Mark Broms, Dick Granahan. Morgan Tilson, Ian Blake. It saddened him to see Val’s name. Reg Meyer. Andy Porter’s name had been penciled in. That didn’t scan. As was his.

**Wendt arrived late for the Ian Blake memorial** reading at Golden West Hall. A young woman in pink transparent framed glasses sat self-consciously at the display table set up by the door to the auditorium. She had a nose ring that by the throbbing red halo looked new and an accommodation to hipness. There were a few other youngsters standing around in the foyer affecting nonchalance, the men with baby face beards and goatees they had yet to grow into, the women with multiple piercings and tattoos that would eventually be regarded as immoderate. Why can’t they just take up watercolors, Wendt mused, forget all this Bougnik-hipster-superhero-chic crap. Of course, he was the one out of step in his natty silk Armani jacket, the gold chain, the gray microfiber collared shirt, the pressed faded jeans and tasseled oxblood loafers. He sighed. A shaman will be clothed in a garment that is a comment on the apparel of others. That didn’t make him feel any less conspicuous or out of place.

On the table were books for sale by the poets who were slated to read at the memorial with a placard explaining that a portion of the proceeds were going to fund the publishing of a posthumous collection of Ian Blake’s poetry, *Ode To Sunset*. Obviously they had been unable to dig up copies of his own *Synthetic Lament*. Obviously, because the press had gone bankrupt shortly after publishing the book and who knew what had become of those thousand printed copies minus the bundle he’d managed to prize out of the printer who was probably still waiting to be paid. There was a stack of Irma Maurice’s selected poems, *As If*. Irma was due for a new selection or even a collected. Her name was one he immediately recognized. The others were vaguely or not at all familiar. There was also an assortment of arty broadsides, one of which was of Ian Blake’s title poem, *Ode To Sunset*. It was dedicated *in memory of Carl Wendt*. Wendt looked at it again, bringing it close to his nose to make sure he was reading it correctly.

“That’s a limited edition handset letterpress broadside from Ian’s soon to be published book.” The young woman seated at the table said it with an expression that looked like she was apologizing for having to explain it to him. It was the condescension that the young have for the old. Paybacks are a bitch. “They’re twenty dollars each.”

“Can I get one signed?”

Now the look was one of mortification. She sputtered a bit trying to match her indignation. “Don’t you know. . .this is a memorial. . .for Ian. . .who was killed. . .”

“Oh good, Carl, there you are!” Courtney LaRoche appeared at his elbow. “David will be so relieved. He thought you weren’t going to show up.”

“I’m here. I didn’t say anything about reading. Not until I see some currency.”

Courtney gave her signature pout and glanced at the young woman at the table who now, if anything, appeared confused. “Jenny, this is Carl Wendt. He’s the featured poet reading tonight.”

“But. . .” She was looking at the broadside Wendt had set down.

“Yeah, Courtney, clear up the confusion before this young lady starts believing in ghosts. Why does the dedication say ‘in memory of yours truly?’”

Courtney pursed her lips which seemed to have the effect of making her face turn red. “That’s just a huge misunderstanding, Carl. It’s the printer’s fault.”

“It’s always the printer’s fault, isn’t it?”

“David gave him the copy of the poem to typeset, it was a rush job and he didn’t have time to proof it. He just assumed that the printer knew not to use the dedication, that you weren’t dead.”

“But Ian Blake thought I was dead?”

“No, no. David explained it to me. Ian’s humor could be dark at times. It’s just a joke.”

“That must be why I’m laughing.”

“David will explain it to you, Carl, don’t be such a prick about it.”

“I’m only a prick when I’m surrounded by cunts.”

**Maybe the real reason Wendt had stopped** giving readings was that they attracted all the same poetry deadbeats, dead heads, and brain dead. And the women who attended were mostly his age or older, usually the wives of his friends, fans, and or patrons. Not that that ever made the slightest difference. Or the occasional neurotic grad student with

absolutely no social skills, and awkwardly sexual besides being an angry feminist covering for sexual timorousness, insistent that she be respected for her brain, not her pussy. The retort could have been “listen honey, I’d fuck your brain but my dick is too big to fit in your ear hole.” He wasn’t that crude or ever that drunk. Well, he’d never be Dashiell Hammett.

Wendt dreaded pushing open the auditorium door. Empty folding chairs in a cavernous space were always bad news. Slowly, as the evening progressed, the empty chairs would become emptier. For now there were clots of listeners scattered throughout to give it the air of being well attended. Fifty or more pairs of buns perched uncomfortably on metal ledges. Divided by the number of poets on the bill, it averaged out to about three and a quarter persons per poet. There was a stage and a podium, as might be expected, and most of the light in the cavernous acoustic nightmare was focused there. He stood at the back to let his eyes adjust. That’s where Irma found him.

“You’ve actually made it to a reading.” She hooked an arm through his. “That’s an event in itself.”

“When do you go on?” Wendt stared at the person at the podium trying to remember his name.

“I opted to get it over with early. That way I can listen to the poets without stressing about what I’m going to read.” She gave a pained smile. “Though I don’t know why I get the feeling that at large readings like this I’m committing public hari-kari.”

“Sorry I missed it. Self-evisceration can be quite a spectacle.”

“Carl, don’t try to be polite, it doesn’t suit you.”

In spite of himself, Wendt’s concentration focused on the reader. He wasn’t tuning Irma out. That would be impossible. She could be counted on to provide a running commentary of the reading and the readers.

The pace at which the poem being read, stately, metered, languid, sonorous with a clinical monotony as if it were being methodically inserted into the listener’s brain which required intense concentration from both the poet and the audience, was all too familiar. If he’d learned anything in his nearly forty year experience as a public reader of his own words, it was that the poem spoken is comprehended differently than read silently on the page. Sense wins out over meaning. Words passed without immediate understanding. Sometimes the pace and the rhythms were oceanic, hypnotic, leaving the listener comatose. On the other hand, the random soundscape of experiment was too often littered with the

ponderous boulders of self-drama. Some poets tried to read their poems with a tone approximating the neutrality of the page or with stentorian bombast brow beat the listener while others believed that approximating a hacksaw cutting through sheet metal was the best way to inculcate the masses. And yet still others, linguistic sadists, used words as turnbuckles. Fortunately every so often there were those who rose above the drone and caught the ear with their liquid colloquy, a honeyed speech being just that. Regrettably, the level of amateurishness was embarrassing. To an outside observer foolish enough to wander into such an event, there could be only one conclusion: they'd stumbled into a nest of losers.

The poet walked off the stage to a scattering of applause.

"Tom Rowley's chatty poems are ok. They're clever in a brain tweaky sort of way," Irma opined, "but afterwards they always leave me feeling a little cheap between the ears."

David Bloom, the MC, thanked the preceding poet and announced the next reader, a name Wendt was not unfamiliar with.

"Ugh," Irma grunted, "Norma D'Monde! Her poems are so bad she'll probably end up as the head of a writing program someday. And can you believe that dye job?"

It only took a few poems to prove Irma right, clearly writing program verse, anecdotal with barely a hint of music, labored wisdom, false epiphany, no chances taken, no surprises.

"That's not poetry, that's high fructose sentiment," Irma's snorted elegantly. "I was over at a friend's apartment and I guess they ran out of cinderblocks because they were using Norma's trilogy to prop up a corner of the bookshelves."

"I'd read it as much as I'd read a cement brick" she answered to "Did you read it?"

And so it went, poet after poet, poem after poem: quasi-surreal cross-culture wake-up calls, declamatory lists accumulating momentum and achieving crescendo but then dropping off into bottomless illogic.

According to Irma, the next reader, Ann Tacit, author of *Approval* and soon to be published long poem entitled *Earn*, represented the catalog school of poets, which, as she explained, "contrary to what one might assume are not poets of compilation but poets who appear in slickly produced small press catalogs to create their own web of snobby literary assumptions. They're also known as the California Cuisine School of Poetry—nice to look at but there's not much there."

"Ah," Wendt breathed in comprehension, "overeducated middle class twits."

There was never any quickness of mind. Some poems were like being stuck in a traffic jam of mirror images reflecting endlessly speculative details of what could have been done or was done or not. *Woulda coulda shoulda* as the old Indian chief used to say.

He knew Wallace Tabor from years before, still beating the drum of his associations in poems about meeting various famous poets and what he said to them, and they to him, most of them now dead and unable to contest his allegations. The halting sly wit of Ben Gunn's dignified decrepitude and the desire to be present and accounted for overshadowing any regret. He was someone who reveled in anonymity and wrote a poetry to enforce it. Then Celia Thornbush, which, according to Irma, was an appropriate name for a feminist, and married to Bruce, a severe aesthete with a perpetually pained expression, but "should one wonder as he's given his name to a woman who exemplifies, figuratively, the image of *vagina dentata*."

It may have been a city ordinance that any multi-poet event had to include on its lineup a harangue with saxophone hipster staccato post-beat jive. Enrique Hermanos, aka KK, so his poem stated, offered the notion that music had returned to poetry in the form of a back beat. He was followed by Reggie Sides and some hip hop revolution poetry.

One of the readers, a woman rather elegantly attired but with the nervousness of a novice, read some surprisingly good poems which caused Irma to remark "she has a chin like a bottle opener." Irma was never one to hold back from casting aspersions on the competition. One line unfortunately undermined all the poet's good intentions. "*The centrifugal force of the poetry whirl flings me to the periphery.*"

"That's not poetry," Irma scoffed, "that's just posturing." And after Art Penn's reading, "I know so many guys like that whose psychic turmoil makes for great poetry but really shitty lives."

"It's not a vocation for the insecure."

"Yet they're drawn to it. Moth, meet flame."

"One does with what one has."

"Who said it, the life of a poet, less than 2/3ds of a second?"

All the poets for the most part had that lean and hungry look of those who desired more than anything else to take their place in the spotlight and be the center of attention for even the slightest and most insignificant fraction of their allotted fifteen minutes of fame. He'd come to the conclusion that however well-intentioned, most poets belonged to the dissociative school, not that you could call it a school. More like a shark tank. "What was it William Carlos Williams said?" Irma asked, reading

his mind, “There are a lot of bastards out there and most of them are writers.” Their factionalism and social ranking was tiresome. That was another problem with poets. They always want you to choose sides.

The next reader was Savannah George, real name Christine but Savannah was revealed to her during a trance. This was only after she had married the university economics professor whose last name she took. She held touchy feely writing seminars for women. Her own writing, homily laced pseudo-epiphany and gratuitous portraiture of women in history, was pedestrian at best. She was, on the other hand, one of the nicest people, saintly in some respects, with a wide-eyed intransigent innocence, nice and warm like the glow of coals but barely a flame above a flicker. Still, people like Savannah made him uncomfortable. They were like lampreys, psyche suckers. She was followed by a handsome young gay man. Funny how, among poets, it was the gay men who were physically appealing, the women mostly homely and severe, Irma and Val being among the few exceptions. His prancing O’Hara-esque faux camp preceded Taz Stevens (not to be confused with Cat or Wallace), an old snake oil salesman who crooned, with deep English sonority, signifying a pulpit gravity, the laments and lessons of an intemperate man.

“Yuk!” Irma exclaimed, “Flypaper poetry!”

Wendt had been thinking of when and where he’d first run into old Taz. Probably at the Blue Unicorn open readings back when any of them had to shave only a couple times a week and were still wet between the ears. Hadn’t changed his tune much since then. “Say again? Fly what?”

“Flypaper poetry. And poets. You know, the feel-sorry-for-my-sensitive-soul, pleas-for-attention school. Crass manipulation of emotions, sticky self-serving self-satisfied cloying sentimentality. Nothing is more boring than a poet left over from an era people have already forgotten.”

Wendt laughed. “Don’t hold back now, let it all out.”

“Did you know his wife ran off with one of her former kindergarten pupils? She’s like twenty five years younger than her!”

“Alright, now you’re just going to make me feel sorry for him.”

**Finally Wendt’s name was announced** and Michel Brazon who had been sitting in the front row of chairs bolted up onto the stage and strode to the podium. Wendt smiled. So he’s gonna do it after all.

“What’s going on, Wendt? Are you pulling a fast one?” Irma regarded him with a mix of dismay and delight.

“Hey everyone, I’m Michel Brazon, and Carl Wendt, who couldn’t be here tonight, asked me to stand in for him.”

Chickenshit. Wendt shook his head. David Bloom had moved from the wings and was about to intervene just as Brazon launched into his oft recited oldie and only goodie, *Popeye and Bluto Beat the Shit Out of John Ashbery*.

A few people got up to leave. One of them was Grace Niklia, the police inspector. Wendt caught her at the door. "Hey, leaving so soon?"

She looked surprised to see him. "But he just said. . ."

Wendt thought he could detect a little disappointment. "Naw, that's just part of an act we do. Hang around, this is where I go down and interrupt him. Kinda like an old vaudeville routine."

Grace nodded and stood off to one side of the exit ready to scam if it got any more tedious. Or serious.

Wendt strode down to the stage and announced himself by saying, "Oh, wow, Michel, thanks so much for covering for me! I thought I wasn't going to make it." He thumped up the steps to a tittering and general murmur, waving a hand like an arriving celebrity which, if truth be told, to this crowd, he actually was, sort of.

Brazon was shocked, mute in wide-eyed disbelief. Finally he gasped, "What are you doing, I thought. . .?" and trailed off unsure now of what he thought. By then Wendt was at the podium with his arm around Brazon's shoulder.

"Dada lives!" he said into the microphone and then smiled at the other poet. "Brass ass Michel Brazon, the Tristan Tzara of North Beach! Yeah! You are wild, my man!"

Brazon perceived a knife sinking to its haft in his back. He sputtered, "But I didn't even. . ."

"And I want to thank you for stepping in for me. I'll always be grateful."

The hand on Brazon's shoulder now pushed him gently aside as Wendt took his place in front of the lectern, "Michel Brazon, everyone! Editor of the surrealist magazine, *Ton Trou*. What's that mean, by the way? It's French, right?"

Grace Niklia at this point would have been convinced that it was indeed a vaudeville act. Brazon seemed dazed, a deer in the headlights. He answered absently, "It means *Heavy Truth*."

Wendt reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and extracted a folded sheaf. He looked out at the audience, a bunch of people who thought they knew all about poetry or were with someone who thought they did.

“I’ve written a poem so long that it’s almost a novel.” There was an audible gasp from the assembled. “But I’ll only read the prologue. It’s a poem about one of my favorite subjects, entitled *Procreation*.”

**Afterwards, Wendt accompanied a gaggle of celebrants** that included Courtney and David, looking very pleased with themselves, to *Candide*, a hipster dive on McAllister. When he entered the bar there was a collective cheer of “Wendt!” Not that he didn’t deserve it. But it was still a little unsettling.

Starry eyes, he hated starry eyes. They surrounded him. Another shot appeared before him, and another hand thumped him on the back, another pretty face insinuated with her limp surrendering hand in his, eyes fluttering in servile sincerity. It made him uncomfortable. He had engaged a whole new generation and it was scary, one of those what-have-I-done moments.

“Wendt, you’re a genius,” was the general tone of the congratulatory handshakes that accompanied the demands of “Let me buy you a drink.”

“Thanks, and rest assured your assessment is entirely correct, and will be deemed prescient by future generations,” was the autograph he signed in the convivial air. It had been a while since he’d had such an enthusiastic reception. Suddenly his words had edge. People seemed to want to hang from them. But they were the same words he’d spoken so many times before. Or reasonable facsimiles. And the realization on some faces that now they most likely would have to rethink their assessment of him, much to their dismay, was sweet irony.

Andy Porter and his girlfriend, Marta, strode up, he with a big face splitting grin and she with a demur smile. She didn’t really approve of Wendt because he didn’t fit the bourgeois template of what was acceptable as success.

Wendt shook his hand. “Hey, thanks, glad you could come.”

“That was amazing, Carl, new work I haven’t heard before?”

“Just a little something I’ve been tinkering with. By the way, we’re still on for the apartment sitting, right?”

Andy shot a quick glance at Marta. “Uh, yeah, yeah, I need to talk to you about that.” He indicated the commotion. “Let’s do it sometime next week. Bebop Café ok?”

Someone else queued up to offer congratulations and Andy and his girl drifted away. If he glanced over in the direction of the shuffleboard table in the corner he could see a faction from the Iron Hat Works looking a little too authentic for this crowd. Cleve had already come by and



clapped a big bear arm around his shoulder and breathed his beery breath into his face. "Sorry I missed your reading, buddy, but I showed up for the drinking, and that's all that counts!" And every time he swung his gaze a little further to his left, there was Brazon giving him the finger. Ah, well, he'd get over it.

Yet there were also those who would never approve of him or what he did. Kara Pace was one of them. He'd never noticed her pincer-like hands and her stubby little turtle feet before. She frowned, disturbed as much by the ruckus as by Wendt. "You are such a male chauvinist pig. Your poem is an insult to women. We have rights to our bodies!" With a body like yours, Wendt thought, you're welcome to it, but let her continue her tirade. "How dare you come down on the side of the anti-woman creationist! You and your Neanderthal thinking are passé, Wendt!"

He wondered what she had against Neanderthals. "Whoa, whoa, what are you talking about? My poem is hardly anti-woman, let alone creationist."

"Your title says it all. *Pro creation!*"

"Ah, one of those. Heard the title and immediately went brain dead. It's about creation, Kara, the creative act, whether it's slapping paint on canvas, writing a sonnet, making music or fucking. All of which you know very little about, apparently, particularly the latter. Get a clue, Kara, I'm pro *creation!*"

"This silly bitch bothering you?" Mac back from the ladies room had caught the end of the conversation. Kara glared at her and then huffed away through the throng milling around Wendt's stool at the bar. Mac had assumed proprietary rights to him and jealously guarded access.

Over the heads of the closely packed and increasingly drunker entourage of well-wishers, he caught a glimpse of the lady cop with a drink in her hand, alone, standing by the door ready to skedaddle at a moment's notice. She had accepted his invitation, much to his surprise. Now he had to figure a way to ditch Mac or at least distract her and get a few words with the policewoman.

Mac gasped as if she were choking on her drink. "Omagod! it's Rod!"

"McKuen?"

"No, you ass, my husband!" She distanced herself quickly, saying, "I'll call you later."

Once again the fates have intervened, Wendt mused. He caught the detective's eye and smiled.

**They left the hubbub of the bar** and headed a few blocks over to Masonic, and Crepe De Sol, a 24 hour pancake joint.

“That was an amazing performance. It was almost worth sitting through all the mind mush that came before it.”

“The operative word being ‘almost’, right?”

“No, I’m serious. You were very very good.”

“Hey, don’t let the cape fool you. I’m only human.”

There was an empty booth by the wide window onto the night street. As the detective scooted across the bench on her side of the table, he couldn’t help but notice.

“Anybody ever tell you you’ve got a nice smile?”

“I don’t use it much at work so I guess I’ve got some saved up.” She showed him more teeth and the bow of her mouth emphasized the symmetry of her face. She wore a touch more make-up than when he had first seen her. Her long hair, still parted in the middle was held back by a large glittery silver clip and exposed the delicate shells of her elfin ears.

Wendt was pleasantly dazzled. And the effects of the celebratory alcohol lapped at the edges of his immortality. “Lucky me.”

The waitress came to stand by his elbow. “Hi Carl, start you off with coffee?” She stared at Grace and waited for the answer to her unasked question.

Grace put the laminated menu down. “Do you have herb tea? And maybe the crab crepe.” She questioned Wendt with a tilt of her head, “You’re not having anything?”

“I’m surprised you stuck around. Not everyone goes in for poetry.”

“Oh, I read poetry. On occasion.” The smile was hesitant. “Though I can’t say I have a lot of time, what with my job and all.”

Wendt had not forgotten. “Geez, I totally forgot, you’re a cop!” then looking around and over his shoulder, “Oops, did I say that too loud?”

“No big deal, I’m used to it.”

“Well I’ve never had crepes with police before. I’m impressed. You’re a woman, obviously, and you get to pack heat.” Wendt smiled as the waitress dropped off the napkin rolled utensils and slid the coffee cup in front of him saying to Grace, “I’ll be back with your tea.”

“Is that the proper term, packing heat?”

“I guess it is if you’re writing a detective novel. Mostly if you’re sworn, you’re armed.”

“And dangerous.”

“Oh yes, dangerous. As much a danger to ourselves as to others.” She smiled like it was an inside joke. “Caution is advised. It’s not a TV

show. Some cops are more dangerous than others. For me, that weapon strapped to my hip weighs a ton. Civilians have a fantasy about being armed. They have no idea of the responsibility that goes along with it.”

“Are civilians the only ones? I do read the newspaper.”

“Most cops are good people, but yeah, some let their fantasies, their prejudices cloud their judgment. Most of them are men who grew up playing cowboys and indians and haven’t let go of their juvenile self-righteousness. The pack mentality of little boys, bullies.”

“But not you.”

“The big secret about this job is to understand that it is just that, a job. And one day, if I’m lucky, I’m going to walk away from it with a minimum of damage to my psyche. And a nice pension. It’s not exactly a job that makes you feel particularly good about your fellow humans. There are bad people, and I know that’s a generalization, but people who are desperate enough or damaged enough to think that laws and civil codes don’t apply to them. Those are the people I come into contact with almost every day. I don’t often have the opportunity to talk with a writer or a poet. I have friends, but they’re mostly into family, sports or reality shows. After an eight or ten hour shift sitting at a desk, answering calls, and doing paper work, the last thing you want to do is sit around and read.”

“But you read poetry.”

“My sister wrote poetry so I’m not afraid of it. I was exposed.”

“Exposed, yeah, like to radiation.” Wendt chuckled and sat back against the booth, tapping his upper lip with a finger, gaze fixed at the steaming coffee in the beige cup and the chipped formica edge of the table. Pieces of a puzzle he didn’t even know he was solving were arranging themselves into a pattern. “What’s your sister’s name?”

“Gabrielle. Why?”

“Also known as Gigi?”

The waitress passed an empty cup to Grace and set a small green ceramic teapot next to it. “Your crepe will be here soon. Anything else?” Wendt shook his head as did Grace whose smile had yet to dim.

“Yes, Gigi, at times. So have I, but I never took to it like she did. It’s because of our initials. She’s Gloria Gabrielle and I’m Gloria Grace. I took to Grace because I’m such a klutz.” And as if it were necessary, “we’re twins.”

“Wow, double whammy! Is she a cop, too?”

A cloud crossed the inspector’s brow and shadowed her smile, now bravely tensing to stay that way. “No, no, she. . . .” Her eyes narrowed

searching his face for indication she could trust him. “She’s. . .challenged. . .emotionally. . .she’s like a four year old. . .in a middle aged woman’s body. . .”

“But she writes poetry. What kind of poetry does a four year old write?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“I think I would. I’ve been a poet for. . .well, more years than I care to remember. . .I think I would understand. Give it a shot.”

The waitress hesitated as Wendt finished and then placed the plate in front of Grace. Wendt’s eyes went down to the crepe just as the aroma hit him right between the eyes or slightly lower. “You know, Krishna, I think I’ll have what she’s having.”

**“So, you from here, California?”**

“You know, only people who are not from California ask that question.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

“Yep, born and raised right here in the city in a house over on Ulloa, just off Sunset. I still live there.”

“So old blood California, gold rush émigrés. . .?”

“Nothing so romantic. My great grandfather was from Greece. He opened a dry goods store over in Oakland in the late 1800’s. He then moved the business to San Francisco, like a week before the earthquake. . .”

“Let me guess, he didn’t have insurance.”

“They lost everything and had to flee to the country which back then was mostly what became Golden Gate Park, and live in a tent.”

“Kind of ironic that the homeless to this day still use it for that purpose.”

“You’re funny.” She meant it, and he knew he was falling. “Anyway, they relocated up to the country, to Sonoma to live with some relatives. . .”

“Where they invented the grape and wine was born!”

“You’re trying too hard,” but she was laughing. “They eventually moved back to the city and restarted the business from scratch. And great grandpa Niklia built a house out in the country close to where they had been homeless. My granddad took over the business when he came back from the first war. And lived in the same house, the house where my father was born.”

“And that’s the house you live in now?”

“No, my father sold the house when he married my mother. She didn’t like it. Thought it was a firetrap which it probably was and wanted something more modern. By then grandpa’s mercantile business had gone bankrupt. The Depression. My dad went to school on the GI Bill and studied to be an engineer. My sister and I were born there, on Ulla.”

“Home birth? That’s pretty progressive.”

“It wasn’t on purpose.”

**“Look before we go any further** I want to ask you about Dick Granahan. Did you turn him in? It doesn’t really matter to him now that he’s learning to be dirt.”

“If it doesn’t matter to him, why bother?”

“I was his friend, I’m curious. Humor me. Why pick on a harmless old poet?”

“Like you said earlier, poets are only human.”

“Not necessarily all of them.”

“One thing I’ve learned in my years on the force, humans are not harmless. They’re either harmful to themselves or to other humans, often both.”

“Ouch,” Wendt spoke to the cup he was bringing to his mouth. It had a bitter acrid taste, the afterhours blend, strong enough to wire a house. “Does that mean you’re not going to tell me?”

“I’ll tell you this, I didn’t drop the dime on Granahan.” The smile was gone, the eyes, alert and intense, were no nonsense cop eyes. “If you’re so curious, your friend had a sexual harassment complaint filed against him. Word was that the English Department tried to sweep it under the rug. They wouldn’t get away with that today, but this was, god, how many years ago?” She shook her head. “I don’t know if I’m ready to go back there.”

“You enrolled in one of his classes, Advanced Poetry, if I remember correctly. You understand I’ve heard this story from the other side. To get into Advanced Poetry at the undergraduate level you had to submit a work sample for evaluation. The poems you submitted were of superior quality. And a sharp mind like Granahan’s would know if they were plagiarized. There’s more of that going on than you think, by the way. Plagiarism, I mean.” He paused for her rejoinder. She kept silent, amused. “In fact, he was so taken by your poems he had them published.”

“It was all a big mistake. I didn’t realize that they were that good.” Grace peeked under the teapot cap and then added more to her cup. “I

was a Sociology major with a minor in Administration of Justice, a law enforcement program, to keep my options open. Some other women in the AOJ class were talking about it in the cafeteria and saying how it was a cover-up. And while we were talking, I got it in my head that I would do something about it. Practically everyone knew but no one was going to do anything. So my sister had these poems lying around in her scribble books. That's what she called them. I copied the ones that appealed to me and handed them in as my own."

"Did you visit Granahan in his office?"

"Yes, I did, quite a few times."

"Did he ever touch you inappropriately or ask you to touch him inappropriately?"

Her humor had returned and she gave a small embarrassed laugh. "Uh, no, he did not."

"Really, why did he want to see you? Correct your spelling? Expose you as a fraud, a plagiarist of your own sister's writing?"

"He had some questions, suggestions, about the poems, and wanted my permission to publish them as a little chapbook. He had a friend in Berkeley who would print it. I didn't want to because I wasn't there to attract attention to myself. I wanted him to approach me and ask me to do what had been claimed in the complaint."

"Slap his banana. I get it. Why do I get the feeling you're going to tell me he didn't ask you to whang his thang?"

"He didn't. He was obsessed with getting that damn book published. I have to say that he became very fatherly and protective of me. It bordered on creepy."

"You never got him red handed, if you'll pardon the expression."

"No, I never did. I could tell by some of the conversation and comments that there were other girls, women, in the class who were getting preferential treatment in return for. . .their manual labor."

"How could you turn him in if you didn't have any evidence?"

"I didn't turn him in. Someone else went to the provost. There was an investigation. Granahan was allowed to resign, got to keep his pension."

"What I don't get is how you ended up taking the fall for bringing him down."

She shrugged. "There was a lot of finger pointing as to who it might have been. I'd been to see him in his office. Then word got out that I was enrolled in AOJ courses and suddenly I was a narc."

"Really, someone fingered you? Who was that?"

“I’m not going to forget the little bitch’s name. Myra Marks.”

Wendt nodded. A piece of the puzzle slipped effortlessly into place. “But you finally agreed to let Granahan publish your little book.”

“Yes, I thought I’d do it for Gigi. That was the name I was using in class and it was published under her name, Gigi Niklia. I thought she’d be thrilled to see her name on a book of her poems. I even titled it after something she always says to me. *You Again*.”

“Was she thrilled?”

“No, not at all. She said they weren’t her poems. Her poems were in her scribble books and that that was the only place they would ever be.”

“That must have been a letdown. What did you do with the books?”

“I burned them. I was going to give them to friends of the family. It was a small edition, a little more than two dozen, hand set type. It was really quite a beautifully printed pamphlet, a little bigger than a wedding invitation. The title was printed in big blue letters.”

“I’ve seen it. Granahan kept a copy for himself.”

“Did you read it?”

“Yeah, I probably did.”

“What did you think?”

Wendt stroked his throat with his hand and looked up at the ceiling. “You know, that was a while back. I really can’t remember what I thought.” There might have been a little disappointment in her cop eyes. “But if Granahan said they were exceptional, that’s good enough for me.”

**Grace excused herself.** Left to himself Wendt surveyed the restaurant. He recognized a few regulars. Some working girls. What’s the story with the guy with the half closed eyes? Dating the woman with teenage kids. Some kind of smug, self-satisfied sanctimonious look. Maybe he was just projecting. And a quartet of all overweighs except for the skinny wife who couldn’t get fat no matter how much she packed away, and despised for it.

**“Enough about me, what about you?”** I’m going to assume you’re not a native.”

“Yeah, grew up inside and outside of Indianapolis. Parents divorced when I was just a babe in arms. Old man was a drop-out before it became the cool thing to do.”

“It was never a cool thing. Just another way to avoid responsibility.”

“Now you sound like my mother. She wasn’t interested in living on

a commune. Shared-guilt she called it.”

“Married?”

“Not for many many years.”

“Oh? Wasn’t for you?”

“Apparently. Being a poet takes up all the attention I might give to someone else. Or words to that affect.”

“No girlfriends?”

Wendt shook his head. “No, not at the moment.”

“What about the Rubenesque redhead?”

Wendt smiled. “Mac? A companion, a friend, and a fan.”

“I didn’t realize that there were poetry groupies.”

“Oh, there are, though they’re mostly dumpy and dour, and take themselves much too seriously. Or they’re young and unsophisticated, seething with neurotic potential.”

“Sounds like you’ve got it all figured out. How did you end up out here, all the way from Indianapolis?”

What to tell her? And how? He had his usual spiel, a pocket biography he rolled out whenever someone wanted to know his history. Different versions for different situations. If he was on the make, he included the outrageous anecdotal highlights. Get a woman laughing and she’s halfway under the sheets. If it was professional, he emphasized the accomplishments that gave him the most credibility. Or the amusing stories he told in the company of friends and acquaintances. He didn’t want to tell her anything but the whole truth. “I suppose I could give you the easy answer, this then that. But if I really think about it, I’d have to say I ended up out here by chance.”

“Was that good luck or bad luck?”

“Right now I’d say it was good luck.” Wendt gave a rueful look. “But it wasn’t always that way. Sheila, my ex, had been accepted into the graduate art program at Mills. We were living on the lower Eastside in New York City at the time. It was pretty rough and both of us were working at shitty low paying jobs. It was like escaping to another planet.”

“Really, like Venus or Neptune, Pluto?”

“Yeah, Pluto, even if it’s no longer officially a planet. A cartoon planet of bright colors and goofy logic. At first I thought the natives were fools, space cadets, flakes. It took me a couple of years to really understand that it’s the pace, the rhythm, that’s what’s different, an awareness of unfilled moments and no compulsion to fill them.”

“So you moved to the city?”

“Berkeley first, then after the divorce. . . .”



“No kids?”

“Not even.”

“You’re just a free soul with nothing to do but wander the streets and write poetry.”

“As if that were all there was to it. On the surface it might appear quite carefree. I haven’t slept in any doorways. I’ve come close. I get by with writing, and grants, fellowships, what have you. The kindness of strangers,” he added with a sheepish grin. “It’s not a profession, it’s a way of life. I’m not affiliated with any academic institution. Or school. In a sense I’m just a committed amateur.” He thought to trot out the spiel about being an amateur he’d perfected over the years: how an amateur is someone who engages in painting, music, sport, science, without the spirit of mastery or competition, someone who continually renews their pleasure since the word come from the Latin, *amator*, which means someone who loves and loves again, not some self-created hero or performance artist. How amateurs establish themselves congenially and ask little recompense for their gestures as the definitive substance of their art. Their practice involves no theft of the object for the sake of its attribute. Ephemeral, they hardly ever show up on the bourgeois radar and subsequently can never have their spirit co-opted. But why sour the mood with something showy and unnecessary. Besides she’d already picked up the thread.

“Oh, kinda like a . . .samurai, the masterless kind. . .what’s it, um. . .ronin, that’s it!”

What I love about the West Coast. . .totally in tune with Asian culture, Wendt mused. “Something like that,” he smiled.

Grace laughed, setting her fork aside. “I worked with a couple of guys when I was a patrolman. They were all into that, all they talked about. It was kind of forced on me.” She looked at him brightly. “Didn’t think I’d ever be having a conversation with a masterless samurai poet.”

Wendt couldn’t help but feel warm and fuzzy all over. “Ah, yes, a knight in lacquer armor.” He felt the urge to inch his hand over to hers resting comfortably on either side of her plate and touch the tip of her finger, the finger that had undoubtedly pulled a trigger. “Being a poet is pretty meaningless. It’s what you do with it that ensures whether you’re going to survive or not. Some don’t, as you well know. The jobs available for poets are pretty limited. You can teach, generally at the college or university level but then you have a job and the attendant hoops to jump through, and you have to be a poet as well. One will always take

precedence over the other. You can work in publishing, as an editor or a bookstore clerk. I've done some of both. It's not a guaranteed income. You can get a regular job, say with the Post Office. It's only bound to make you cynical. Eventually your best bet, to remain a poet, unsullied by the drear of employment, is to have a safety network of friends and acquaintances that you cultivate and who are, if even only marginally, concerned for your wellbeing."

"Kind of like a personal charity."

"Very much like that, but totally unregulated and unofficial. It doesn't help to have everyone know about your fund raising activities. That way they can actually feel like they're contributing uniquely. And feel good about contributing to the arts that somehow doesn't involve a corporate entity and filling out a square on their tax forms and thereby accruing a kind of secret self-satisfied rogue altruism."

"Sounds a lot like a ponzi scheme."

"It is. A non-profit poetry ponzi scheme. No one is getting rich off of it. And it allows me to write, unencumbered by the worry of subsistence."

"You're not on food stamps?"

"No, too much paperwork."

"What about medical. What do you do when you get sick? Or injured? Go to emergency?"

"No, don't get sick. Or injured."

"That's awfully lucky."

"You're right. The city is my lucky place. Kind of like Br'er Rabbit's laughing place. I've been all over this here briar patch."

"Ok, you lost me there."

**"Getting back to your sister, your twin,** she wrote poetry, how come you didn't? I thought twins did things together."

Grace shrugged. "She was the one with the verbal skills." And smiled. "She always said what I thought. There was no need to add anything."

"Ah, the silent partner."

"We always assumed she was the talented eccentric one."

"Then one day. . . ?"

"Well, it happened over time, but after a while she even stopped making sense to me."

"Even in your secret twin language." A friend of Wendt's had been a camera man on a documentary about the private language of twins and

had essentially related the entire film over drinks at the Red Hen late one night.

She shook her head, “No, we weren’t really cryptophasic in the strict sense. I think that all close siblings have a secret language before they become socialized. Then you use the language of the community. We still retain some of our nicknames for ourselves and pet names for things. I don’t think that goes away. They’re like toys in the attic, you bring them out in moments of nostalgia.”

Wendt gaped. He couldn’t remember ever being struck dumb in this way before. It could only be one thing. He was in love. Her smile dazzled like she knew she’d said something really smart.

“What made you suspect something was wrong?”

“We were surprised at her conversation. She would repeat what someone else said, in the same rhythms, but change the words so that most of the time it was a completely intelligible but totally off conversation.”

Wendt nodded. He recognized the symptoms, the Ashbery Syndrome, but didn’t say anything. “What did you think was happening?”

“Well, she’d always been nutty and exuberant, often inappropriate. It took us, my parents, a while to understand that she was spinning in her own little echo chamber. For me, it was frightening. And I knew that I would have to become her caretaker, her guardian.” Grace’s frown made her face serious. “She hasn’t a clue, of course. She’s caught up in her pursuits on whatever planet she’s on. But she’s become more and more withdrawn to the point that she hardly leaves the house.”

“Agoraphobia.”

“Among other things, but yeah. I heard that it means fear of the marketplace. That’s so weird, *the marketplace*.”

“She’s not in a facility?”

“No, I care for her. I have someone who stays with her when I’m at work.”

“That can’t be easy with cop hours.”

“It’s not. My parents were still alive when I was on the street beat. When I made Inspector my hours became a little more manageable.” She paused, troubled or saddened by what crossed her mind. “After they passed, I became her sole care.”

“Who’s watching her now?”

“I have a friend. She steps in to give me a break sometime.”

“You got a babysitter to come to my reading?”

He was getting used to her shrug. “I try to have a life. And I was

curious. Don't let it go to your head. Up until you got up to do your poetry, I had serious concerns about staying awake. I was about to go find a nice little place to eat and go home early."

"And here we are in a 24 hour pancake joint frequented by hustlers and night owls looking to score."

"Funny how things turn out. Anyway, I'm off the clock. I can three monkey it."

"Three monkey it. That's almost poetry. Some of your private twin language?"

"No, the three monkeys, you know, see, hear, speak no evil. Cops call it that when they want to ignore something illegal that is either too much of a political hot potato or will get a sneer from the DA, like we're not prosecuting that kind of crime in this administration."

**The waitress came by with a refill for Wendt's coffee** and inquired if Grace wanted more tea. She had removed their crepe plates the last time she passed their booth when she dropped the bill off, placing it on the table equidistant from both of them. Grace shook her head and glanced at her wristwatch. She was feeling the constraints of time. It was getting late.

Wendt crinkled one eye closed like he did when he reached a conclusion. "Would I be wrong if I guessed Gigi has aphasia?"

Grace nodded. "You've heard of aphasia, good. My sister has what is diagnosed as primary progressive aphasia. It started with what's known as conduction aphasia, and what I'd call re-phrasia. There's a French term for it, *conduite d'approche*? I don't know if I'm pronouncing it right."

Wendt smiled and nodded. He was so beguiled by her that anything she said was surrounded by an aura of correctness. "Yeah, sounds right. A rough translation would be something like 'behavior of approximation.' Something like that."

"You know French, too?" There was fascinated eagerness and a touch of envy to her question.

He felt a little embarrassed, the embarrassment of privilege. "I spent some time bumming around Europe when I was in college, France mostly. I picked up a little."

"I would so love to travel." Grace looked down at her hands in silent reflection for a moment. "But yes, in that type of aphasia it's like she was continually trying to approximate the appropriate word or phrase. Some of the stuff she came up with was hilarious. I wish I could remember the things she used to say. Oh, and beautiful things, too. Poetry."

“I get the impression she’s not. . .making poetry anymore?”

Grace shook her head and stared out of the wide dark window fronting the shadow squelching amber lighted street. “No. She’s pretty much lost all her verbal abilities. She hardly speaks anymore. And when she does, it’s really difficult to get what she’s saying. The words are all jumbled up, unrelated, and don’t make sense. It’s frustrating. For her.”

Waves of sympathy coursed through Wendt and he felt like he might cry. “Hey, I’m sorry to hear about your sister. It must be tough.” Val came to mind, and he didn’t know why. Maybe it was a contiguous sorrow. He wiped his nose with a napkin.

Grace acknowledged his sympathy, “It’s no fun. But I’ve been doing it for a while so I’m kinda used to it, you know.” She gathered up her purse and picked up the check.

“Hey, I can’t let you get that. Let me. . .” Wendt wasn’t sure what had come over him. Gallantry? He never contested paying the tab.

Grace smiled as she stood, reaching into her purse for her wallet. “No, no, I’ve got it. Consider it a contribution to your underground charity.”

**Outside, he waited while Grace called a cab from her cell.** “Judy, Grace Niklia, is Marc on shift tonight?” She smiled at Wendt. “Good. I’ll be out in front of Crepe De Sol on Masonic. Thanks.” Then to him, “Do you know Marc? He’s a poet, too.”

Wendt’s mind was a thousand miles away from cab driving poets as if any major city couldn’t claim a dozen or more. “Maybe. I know a lot of poets though few are cab drivers.”

Grace smiled again. “Well, I guess this is good night. Thanks for an unusual and interesting evening.”

He didn’t want it to end, but how to get past the first date standoff. He could make his move but by doing so stood the chance of destroying the rapport they had forged in the pancake house. “You know, there was something I meant to ask you.” He’d stepped closer to her as the light changed down the block and a herd of vehicles bellowed past making normal conversation difficult. He brought his face close to hers and gathered her scent. It made him dizzy and delirious. He took it as a good sign that she didn’t seem to mind his closeness.

“Oh, what’s that?”

“Why did you bring me Jeremy’s things? His notebooks and stuff. Why me?”

Even in the harsh amber lighting Grace’s face seemed to take on the

darker color of a blush. She hesitated. "I'm not really at liberty to discuss the case. But what I can tell you is that you were the designated recipient."

"He left a will?"

"Not exactly. More of a note."

"What did it say?"

Grace looked at him, her mouth a thin line, eyes, unfathomable, official. "I'm sorry I can't tell you that. It's an ongoing investigation."

"Ongoing investigation? What's to investigate? The guy takes a header from the third floor. Looks like he slammed the door on himself and said the big adios."

"Yes," Grace answered with the hint of a smile. "Let me just explain that the city is very sensitive to deaths in SROs, especially suicides. There's been a spate of them recently, suicides, and the Mayor's office wants to make certain that that is all they are. Your friend. . ."

"He wasn't my friend."

". . . was just one of a half dozen deaths we're looking into. Just crossing our t's and dotting our i's. You wouldn't believe how much of police work is also paperwork."

"So the note says 'I leave all my worldly possessions to Carl Wendt someone I barely know'? I'm really having difficulty getting my head around this, Grace. I mean, if it's an ongoing investigation, shouldn't you be hanging on to the notebooks as evidence of some kind?"

Now she was frowning. "Carl, don't push it. It's police business. I've probably told you more than I should. It was my personal decision to bring you the bag of notebooks as per Mr. Beljahr's last request. Otherwise they would have probably been incinerated as soon as the coroner's report was finalized."

Wendt pointed to the row of newspaper boxes lining the curb, one of them with the weekly's logo under a scrawl of graffiti. "I don't suppose you read my feature. *What's Killing Our Poets?*" He yanked open the spring hinged door and brought out a copy. He'd argued for *Who's Killing Our Poets?* but Charlie had dissuaded him saying the boss thought the greater generality would attract more readers.

Grace looked at it like it might be infected and then took it from him with the tips of her fingers. "What's it about?" She wasn't sure that she actually wanted to read it.

"Poets are being killed or dying under suspicious circumstances. It's all in there. Someone or something is killing poets."

Grace smiled warily. "You're joking, right? What reason would

anyone have to kill poets?”

“The last time I saw Jeremy he had this theory. . . .”

“You said you didn’t know Jeremy.”

“I didn’t. He knew me. That’s the difference.”

“If you say so.”

“Anyway, Jeremy had this idea that there was a serial killer of poets. I didn’t take it seriously, of course, but the more I looked into it, the more plausible it became.”

“You mean like someone is targeting poets, a kind of Jack, The Ripper?” Grace’s expression showed a mixture of disbelief and disdain. It wasn’t the most flattering look.

“Think of it. You’ve got Jeremy. And Morgan Tilson. And Ian Blake. And Reg Meyer. Val Richards. I could name more, but these are just the recent deaths.”

The dark shape of the cab eased to the curb and Grace gave the driver the high sign. “I don’t understand why anyone would want to kill poets specifically. That doesn’t make sense.”

“Let me give you a capsule summary of what I wrote,” he insisted as Grace put her hand on the door to the cab. “Poets are like starved dogs. Throw out a little scrap of food and they pounce with fangs bared, ready to kill. In the poetry world there are so few bones and so many dogs that the competition for survival immediately turns them into back stabbing creeps just to get their names in print. The literary world, especially the poetry scene, is one of tormented and agonized beings who contrive to exist by devouring each other. Every ravenous writer is the living grave of thousands of others in a chain of painful deaths in which the capacity for feeling shame decreases with continued willfully blind ambition.”

Grace hesitated. “All that’s figurative, right? I mean they’re not using actual knives. It’s social competition, hierarchal jockeying. What’s the big deal? Everybody does it, even in the department, cops vying for promotion are not above social sabotage. It’s human nature.”

“Homicide is also human nature. You know that as well as I do. Sure, as you say, it’s mostly figurative. The halls of academia run with metaphorical blood. Professors and other assorted educrats engage in conspiracies and walk around with sharpened knives just looking for a back to plunge them into. It’s a way of eliminating the competition. But what if someone started taking that literally?”

Grace shook her head. “Carl, I don’t think so. It’s all a little farfetched.” The smile she gave him said she pitied him, like maybe some of the respect she had for him was slowly fading.

“Grace,” he said, catching her by the elbow, “Forget what I just said. I would seriously like to see you again. I’ve never met anyone like you and I’d like to get to know you better.”

She placed a firm hand on his chest. “You have to understand that can never happen.”

Wendt liked the clarity of her language even if it did make him feel desolate and abandoned.

**On the slog back to Balboa, the fog had wrapped itself** around the line of horizon like a big gray breaker. He stood at the top of Geary and considered stopping in at the Red Hen, but it was late and he was tired. His conversation with Grace replayed itself and he engaged in the correcting of his mental transcript. What he should have said, what he could have said, what he would have said if only she had said. His figurative heart ached. As blasé and as cynical as he normally was, Grace held his attention, an object of unattainable desire. He wanted to know her with a kind of intimacy that transcended the physical. It had been a while since he’d felt that way. He’d always played it safe, his assignations generally brief and for the sole purpose of self-satisfaction. He’d been hurt before. And if he’d admit it, he was a coward. Sheila, Valerie. Even Danni. What rejection did to his self-esteem, crippling. The apprehension of pain darted through the amygdala, the pain of regret that still made him flinch, twitch with a deeply etched cerebral tic. How and what would he have done differently. That was the kind of speculation he rarely indulged. Yet Grace. He would open himself to all the possibilities of love and affection as well as rejection, heartache, unknown and untold pain. For her.

Think positive, he told himself as he paused at the curb before striding across to the other side. The traffic noise distracted him and he gave his attention to the near day-bright illumination of the boulevard islands and passing headlights, the storefronts, shuttered by grilled gates hung with pendulous chains and locks, coffee shops and bars and restaurants minimally busy for a Wednesday night and buzzing faintly like stunned bees.

Maybe he shouldn’t have played his hand so soon. It betrayed his eagerness. That rarely happened. The mountains came to the Poet, not the other way around. Grace was different, smart, sharp, intelligent, sexy, sexy intelligent. Nor was she part of the inane literary scene. She was a whole new world, a new world he would gladly step into and leave all else behind. What could he do to gain her attention, to win her respect?



He was out of his element in the real world of competition for jobs and wages. He was a fucking charity case, he'd admitted as much to her. Smug in his skin of teeth survival as what, a literary dandy, a fop, a swell, a coxcomb, a toff, a macaroni, a blade, a buck, a fribble, a popinjay, a carpet-knave, a dude? A flaneur without a pot to piss in and soon no window to throw it out of? He had to face it, he was a participle dangling poseur, an idler, a lounge lizard. What could she possibly see in him?

But she, she was a melody, unforgettable, bound to bore its way into every thought, a maddening musical loop to accompany the memory of her laughter and her perfume. It started above the right ear. *Bah dab—badab da da da dadab*. And then above the left ear. In stereo. The Quintet. But actually they started it with a little downbeat. *Ba do dum ba do dum bad do dum* before Dizzy gently unfurled the melody line over the solid comp of Bud's keyboard and Mingus' bass, Max tickling the skins and Bird testing the spaces in between. *All The Things That You Are*. A sentimental favorite, particularly this version. Sometimes it left him on the verge of tears, riding a great swell of indiscriminate emotion. The melody recalled pervaded him and he hummed it, remembering the trilling of Bird's alto playing with the line and the way the rhythm section knocked against it, Mingus finding places for big thumps and Bud's sparkling notes splashing out as languid liquid flow. He allowed his breath to tumble over his lips in a bare approximation of the saxophone's improvised peregrinations. His pace on the sidewalk keeping the beat as he added recalled nuances, not in any particular order, now going back to the melody for his own purposes because that's what got to him, the sweet lyric of that phrase, all the things that you are. Now back to bleating it out louder above his breath and flattening the sounds like that of a deeper horn. Wondering what the genius of J. J. Johnson would have done with that particular riff. Of course he'd listened to that track often enough to remember Dizzy's high register trills attempting to squeak them out between his pursed lips on the dark night street amid the roar and rush of fouling engines, smiling at Dizz's riff punning on the *Grand Canyon Suite* in the middle of his solo, and the wrap up change of tempo upbeat crescendo into a Powell classic, *Dance of the Infidels* he was pretty sure, to bring it all to an end washed in the static of applause. But he could always bring it back to the head. *Bah da badat dadadada belioo bang boom zee-toon-do badab*. It was love.

Or something like that, something he had no time for. His present situation tentative as it was. He was the bear about to be evicted from his lair after a long hibernation. From dream to waking as in the solemn

attendance to death, a period of activity, a rebirth as with spring. Oh furry Persephone! Should he also consider himself a wandering Ulysses, not to get too Joycean, caught in the maze of islands of the eternal city, though that was more like Dante, all his friends shipwrecked or eaten by Cyclops, nightly, frequenting Polly Famous' CAVE (Cabaret And Variety Entertainment) in the Castro, realm of the one eyed snakes, or turned into pigs, the majority of them, and he trying to return to Penelope who is the muse, his ex-wife, old girlfriends, his new love, all women kind and unkind. Should he consider the city a labyrinth, that he was Theseus? *And* the Minotaur? How do you go from believing that all women desire you to thinking that the one you desire most could care less? The rebuke in her lovely face, almost too hard to bear.

**Wendt flicked his cigarette end into the gutter** before stepping off the curb. That saved him. He'd made a right from Geary heading to Balboa through the neighborhood. He was stunned, brushed back by the black car, jacket sleeve caught in the wake of the close call. The brake lights flashed red and rear wheels spun in reverse toward him. He stepped back away from the curb and considered his next move should he have to duck for cover. The black car now vaguely familiar stopped even with him and the driver's side window drifted down.

"Carl?" It was Wendy. "Carl, oh Carl, I'm so so sorry." And burst into tears, her hands to her face, shoulders shaking.

"Wendy? Hey, what's going on? What's this all about?" Carl bent to look in on a distraught Wendy. Over almost running him over? He didn't think so. The dam had burst and he just happened to be there. "You ok?" Another car turning in behind at the corner and blocked by Wendy's gave a perfunctory beep. Wendt motioned it around and looked back in on Wendy. "Why don't you pull over. . . ." Like there was going to be parking on the block this time of night. ". . .over there in that driveway. We can talk."

Wendt slid into the passenger's seat and had Wendy turn off the engine. Her usually well-arranged hair hung disheveled down her back and across one side of her face as if she had been tearing at it. "Hey, hey, what's going on?" She turned her face away and he touched her shaking shoulder. "You gonna be ok?" She was a casual friend, a neighbor, though he wasn't quite sure what part of the neighborhood she lived in.

"I'm such a fool." She sobbed and slammed the heel of her hand against the steering wheel, the activated horn echoing the sob. She turned to look at Wendt and even in the dark of the side street, he could

see that her mascara had run and exaggerated the hungry desolation of her red rimmed almond eyes.

“Alright, what’s this all about?” He reached across her shoulders and gave her a little tug of a supportive hug. She didn’t resist and fell against his chest, exhausted and bereft.

“Do you think I’m good looking, Carl?”

“Yeah, of course, but what’s going on?”

“Bastard!” she spat and he felt her go rigid as she righted herself behind the steering wheel. “Men are such bastards!”

“Ok, ok, take a breath. Tell me what’s going on,” Wendt said, now relieved that he needn’t take it as a personal attack. It wouldn’t have been the first time.

“You know TJ?” She spoke the initials as if she were pounding them with a hammer.

“Uh, TJ? Lemme guess, the bartender. . . .”

“Where I work. Him. He’s a motherfucker!”

Wendt had a picture of TJ, young, handsome, self-absorbed, a hustler, a con artist, a player, possible psychopath, vocal about his likes and dislikes but chameleon in his stands. He played to the customers, especially the lonely old dames who lived up on Telegraph Hill. Wendt knew a hustle when he saw one and could understand what women might see in the kid although he was incredibly shallow. It was obviously the packaging. “I always thought he was gay.”

Wendy tittered then hissed “fool!”

“Ok, don’t beat yourself up over this. Tell me what happened. The guy break up with you?”

“I wish.” Wendy leaned on the steering wheel and stared out the windshield. “We never even. . .hooked up. He asked me to have a drink with him when I got off shift. I mean, I know he plays up to all the women who come in the bar, but I figure he’s just being a good bartender and hustling tips. I thought he felt different about me, that I wasn’t one of those. . .old women.” She threw herself back against the seat and let out a growl, “Oh, I could just kill him!”

“Hey, come on, it’s not that bad,” Wendt said leaning over and placing a hand on her shoulder, smiling into her face.

Wendy’s arm snaked around his neck and leveraged her lips to his in crushing desperation, a sensual heat palpable as she pressed herself against him. It wasn’t one of those situations he ever resisted. He responded in kind and engagement was made. The ice, thin to begin with, broken, they were ready for step two, explanations.

“So I get my things, punch my time card, count my tips and go to the bar and find him with this woman who is twice his age, dripping with jewelry, made up like a professional, and he says that he had forgotten about this other engagement with his old friend, the blonde antique, and then tells her that he thinks of me as his kid sister and all that stuff.”

Wendt nodded sympathetically. “He deserves to die.” Then they both laughed and she kissed him again.

**Wendy’s place was on Funston**, he now realized, right around the corner from his on Balboa. Wendt thought that she must have been doing ok for herself as a waitress to live in a high end two story duplex until he realized she was living with her parents. The most obvious indication of that was her mother meeting them at the top of the stairs in a kimono once they had entered the foyer and taken off their shoes. She had bowed and, with a finger to her lips, said in a whisper, “Your father sleeping.” She gave Wendt a nice smile considering that he was there to plant his ginger root in her daughter’s hot wasabi hole. It made him a tad uncomfortable at first but taking a good look at the entryway and the space beyond, he was pleasantly distracted.

The interior had been made to resemble the entry to a traditional Japanese home, down to the polished wood floors and sliding door panels. The dark wood of the hallway gleamed in the subdued light from soji styled sconces. Growing up with a father who was a cabinet maker, he’d learned to appreciate fine wood and craftsmanship. The lines were simple yet elegant, and as they padded down the hallway to her room, a sliding door partially open to a parlor revealed the traditional tatami flooring and the tasteful simplicity of uncluttered space. He was inexplicably reassured by the elegance and pushed aside his initial reservations.

They ended up in bed as if it were fated by the stars. That’s how she put it. She had a lot to say about destiny and coincidence and serendipity. A flag had gone up but he’d ignored it. Not a real good intuitive idea of how guys work, either, but not all that uncommon, she continued to retell the story of how she had been stood up, disrespected, and basically shit on in public. Hindsight was microscopic and she’d ticked off every little indication she had missed that TJ was a real subhuman rat, and Wendt, seeing the potential for spiraling into certain mental splat, and not wanting to get splashed, continued to console and keep up a steady meaningless jibber jabber to prop up her tenuous self-esteem. It worked up to a point, but then she said, “Why couldn’t he be more like you, Carl?”

He could have said, well actually we're very much alike, but merely made a note of it and placed it next to the first flag.

She covered him with her small body, her blouse already open to the waist to reveal a frilly white bra, and buried her tongue in his mouth with exaggerated passion. It had the desired effect, especially once she snaked her hand down into the front of his trousers and found what she was looking for. Hurriedly undoing his belt and tugging his pants down below his knees, she greeted his erection with a wicked little grin, and in a teasing mincing way got to her feet. "I'll be right back," she said.

A small unobtrusive Ikea lamp on the bed stand next to the futon lit the tiny bedroom space with an insubstantial light. On the wall opposite was a large poster of Kiss, the rock band, and a larger theatrical poster announcement for *Cats* and one for *Phantom of The Opera*. Cast off clothing was piled in a heap next to a half open sliding closet door where a blur of bright colors hung in disarray. Wendt perfunctorily scanned the DVDs, mostly gash and gore chillers and some animé on a set of compact Ikea shelves that also displayed small blue figurines of a popular children's cartoon. A stack of CDs of bands he'd never heard of, though from their names and album titles likely loud, were stacked next to a laptop on a desk, Ikea again, in one corner, open and displaying 'cute kitten' wallpaper. He was staring over the edge of a generation gap, maybe more than one. Just that thought had an effect on him, and an eerie prescient chill crept among the tiny hairs at the back of his neck.

His curious turn toward unraveling the original meaning and etymology of the word 'misgivings' was interrupted when the door to the bedroom slid open just enough to let her pass through. The reddish glow of light from the hallway cast its highlights on the shiny raven's wing of disheveled hair that crossed obliquely the paleness of her cheek. A brightly patterned kimono open at the front and draped across her shoulders, she fixed him with a sidelong evil eye gleam, reminding him, chillingly, of Yoshitoshi's hungry ghosts prints, or maybe Kuniyoshi's young woman possessed by a fox. But that passed quickly when she turned to face him and the glimpse of her sparse feathery pubes brought him to attention. Now, as she squatted to straddle him, he was reminded of one of Kunisada's shunga prints and relaxed in anticipation of the singular pleasure of entering her.

She was as dry as a loofah. The downstroke paralyzed him, eyes snapped open to their limit, tears whelming, and a gargle of a scream forming in his throat to pass between his gritted teeth. "Urk!"

"Wait for me, baby." And Wendy hurried the up and the down

strokes in quick succession.

He arched his back to somehow ease the barbed shredding and let out an audible groan that peaked with a squeak of pain.

“Oh, baby,” she breathed in his ear and about then her natural lubricants bathed her insides and she was soft as mother of pearl silk. After that, moist, she rode him close, pitty-pat mud pies, like a derby jockey to the finish line where she shrieked a little victory cry and gave a few pleasurable grunts before tumbling off him, breathless.

Wendt bolted up and stared between his legs. His boy was an angry red. In the dim light he thought he could make out little tooth-like abrasions. “Son of a bitch.” he rasped as if to throw off the last of the stinging. He scanned the room. Something to soothe the burn. “You got a washcloth? Ice? Handiwipe?”

Puzzled, Wendy rolled on her side and reached into her handbag. Her hand came back with a couple of small packets. “Handiwipe,” she said, flipping him one.

It landed on his bare stomach and he grasped it. “Catsup? This is catsup!”

“Oops, sorry. Here. Handiwipe.”

He tore the packet open with his teeth.

“What’s wrong?” Now she looked concerned, alarmed.

“You were a little rough.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry. Guess I got excited.”

Wendt groaned, gingerly dabbing himself with the moist towelette. “Not a good idea to skip the preliminaries. That way everyone is on the same page.”

“You gonna be ok?”

“Yeah, I’ll be alright,” Wendt lied. The fissures on his shank appeared neon, but none were blood deep.

“Good, because now I’m going to lave you.”

Wendt heard ‘love you’ which did nothing to assuage his feeling of dread. When she started licking him like a cat, he understood what she meant and if anything it took his mind off the source of tingling ache. He wasn’t quite sure whether he was enjoying being tongued like an old piece of shoe leather by an obsessive pet. When she licked the environs of his naval it served to arouse him and also remind him of his recent trauma. But when she skipped the obvious target of all the lapping and went for the hollow behind his knee, he decided that this could get annoying real fast. And when she made to lick between his toes, it was downright creepy. He grasped her shoulder and pulled her back to him.

She interpreted that as his desire to further osculate and planted her tongue in his mouth depositing the taste of the sum total of most of his epidermal surface area.

Wendt grasped her tightly by the shoulder and held her against his chest. “Ever hear of Johnny Coltrane?”

Wendy looked up at him, puzzled by the question. “He was an old blues guy, right?”

“Naw, this is Coltrane, John Coltrane, one of the greatest saxophone players that ever lived.”

“Oh, Coltrane, right! My friend Tina had a black cat she called Coltrane. I always thought it was like ‘coal train,’ you know, like on a railroad, but she explained who he was, her dad used to listen to him all the time when she was a kid.”

“Ok, then, listen up, I’m gonna tell you a story about John Coltrane and the blind drummer, and how Coltrane discovered his style.”

“A blind drummer?” Wendy’s expression said she wasn’t too sure she wanted to hear the story, but Wendt held her firmly.

“Just listen. The Coltrane and blind drummer story takes place in Philly when Coltrane was just starting out. He’d had a fight with his girlfriend and was out walking the street when it started to rain. He ducked into a night club he was not familiar with even though he was no stranger to this part of the neighborhood. Now as it turned out the music act at this club consisted of a bass player and a drummer who happened to be blind. Occasionally someone would sit in on the piano or sometimes a horn, trumpet or sax, but it was usually just the taciturn bass player and the blind drummer. The drummer in fact had started out as a tenor saxophonist but where he was from, Chicago, tenor sax players were crawling out of the woodwork, but drummers, good drummers, of which he was one, were hard to come by. And having played sax he knew all the tricks horn players used, all their clichés and comps and fills and trills which made up their repertoire when they weren’t feeling particularly inventive or because the club was empty or they hadn’t scored that evening and so the motivation to perform or even be playful was waiting for that rush of inspiration or the energy an audience might provide as a warped mirror of self or the blahs that accompany the bring down that leaving off, even for a short time, the momentary high of a drug could bring. So the drummer would play in such a way as to trip up the horn players and perhaps make them work and deal with the time changes, the drum rolls, cymbal splashes, bass drum bombs, snare pops he would throw at them. This could have been the contributing reason to the fact

that not many horn men joined the drummer in musical exploration. Coltrane's reputation as an inventive player even then was known to the drummer though they had never met. Coltrane on the other hand had never heard of the blind drummer. He listened distractedly to the music as he sat at the bar thinking about the fight he had had with his girlfriend. At the end of the set, the drummer made his way through the empty tables to the bar where he was greeted by a few of the regulars who chided him for not having anything to offer except that tired ass off beat drumming and why didn't he have a regular compliment of musicians that would at least vary the thumping of the bass and the banging of the drums. The drummer of course had heard it all before and as usual issued the invitation and challenge to any of them who could play an instrument to join him on stage. Coltrane had been listening with half an ear so when he heard the challenge he turned his attention to the blind drummer whose condescending smugness irked him as well intrigued him. Someone, it might have been the bartender, spoke up and said that the reason no one played with him was because he overpowered all the other musicians with his interminable drum solos, in fact his whole act if you asked him was just one long drum solo occasionally punctuated by a bass solo but never for very long. The blind man retorted that his drum solos were no more interminable than a horn solo by all the wannabe Charlie Parkers and Dizzy Gillespies and any real musician he emphasized could work with him it was just that he was surrounded by a bunch of amateurs. That had silenced most of the critics and the drummer was drinking his beer with a haughty superiority when Coltrane spoke up and said that he would accept the challenge except that he didn't have his axe with him. The drummer offered him the use of a horn that he was holding as collateral on a loan. When Coltrane opened the dusty battered case he saw that it was a soprano sax, an instrument he rarely played. Undaunted he took to the stage. The drummer and bass player launched into an upbeat version of *My Favorite Things*, and as Coltrane soon found out there were very few spaces in the dense syncopation laid down by the rhythm section. He attempted little trills and fills when a space opened up but the upper register of the soprano sax was unfamiliar to him. He was reminded of the fight and his girlfriend's voice. He could barely get a word in edgewise in those fights and he was having the same feeling on the bandstand. The drummer and bass player were presenting him with a rhythmic argument that wasn't allowing him his eloquent retort. But at one point a space did open up as if the drummer and bass player were taunting him, and he took advantage of it. Coltrane spoke



his mind, his musical mind, in the higher register. And now the bass player and the drummer could only follow along. Every time the drummer tried to reassert himself, Coltrane beat him back with another melodic improvisation. The patrons at the club were cheering him on. The rhythm section worked themselves into a frenzy. It was an incredible jam, and when it was over the crowd was cheering for more, the drummer was smiling, the bass player was talking, and Coltrane had a grin from ear to ear. The blind drummer approached him with a canary eating smirk. "Two things," he said, "You alright. And. I'm glad I ain't your girlfriend."

Wendt looked down into Wendy's peaceful sleeping face, right hand tucked under her chin, a fluttering breath crossing a lank lower lip. His arm under the weight of her body was starting to fall asleep as well and he had to try to extricate it without waking her. Extricate. Now there was a word. To free from a difficult situation by stealth or ingenuity. From the Latin, meaning to remove a trifle.

**"Yeah, sure I remember.** But I always heard your name as Chris Alice."

"No, it's Salas."

"Any relation to . . .?"

"I don't think so. It's a pretty common name in the valley. My family's lived there like forever. BG."

"Bee Gee?"

"Yeah, Before Gringo."

Wendt gave an appreciative chuckle. He hadn't heard that one before, nor did he really remember the man sitting across the table from him, Christopher Salas, Nora's hot new literary sensation.

"I'm surprised you remember me."

"Oh, yeah, you were a young hotshots on the literary scene. . . ." The guy Wendt remembered as Chris Alice was a chubby, baby faced, neurotic twerp, a green litterateur with an insinuating manner chewing up the edges of the poetry scene, not the distinguished dark haired man in his late forties with trim graying goatee, lively brown eyes, Hollywood smile, and the polished red cheeks of a man who liked his drink. Tan besides, he was jacket photo ready.

"But you, you were like a god back then. I saw you read at the Hipper Than Thou once, with a jazz combo. And at Glide a couple of times. With Irma Maurice, I think."

"That sounds plausible."

“And that Chinese poet, I forget his name. . .”

“Master Wei-lin.”

“Right, and you were part of that scene of what I thought of as ‘the older poets’.”

Wendt laughed, remembering. “That was more than twenty years ago.”

“Yuri Khasid, remember him, the Chechen poet?”

“He’s gone on to the misery of fame, fortune, and fatwa.”

“Ann Ahmoly. Now that was one sexy Hungarian intellectual. I tried having a conversation with her at a party once. I got this incomprehensible stare. I don’t think I was that drunk.”

Wendt nodded. “You probably were, and that stare was as deep as it got. It was all a pose. If you hang out with a bunch of talented creative types, people are just gonna assume that you are too. She was also known as Ann Nomoney or Miss Ann Action.”

“And Valerie Richards!”

Wendt winced at the mention and felt the tightening in his windpipe. “Yeah, Val.”

“You guys did a lecture together at New Arts Village, geez that was a while ago, on early Twentieth Century French writers. I won’t forget that. I made a list of everyone you mentioned. Cendrars, Reverdy, Rousset, Queneau. I was particularly impressed by Rousset, I remember. How a play on words could suddenly change the direction of the narrative, right in the middle of a sentence!”

“Yeah,” Wendt agreed, bored and way past nostalgia. He mentally reviewed some of the questions he was supposed to ask this now successful author, questions Nora thought appropriate. Well, if he got around to them.

“I was in Richard Granahan’s Advanced Poetry class at State, too. He spoke highly of you.”

Wendt shrugged. “We were friends.” He wondered if it was the same class Grace Niklia had been in.

“I heard he just died.”

Just died, Wendt mused, more like death became him. But he was losing focus. He needed to regain control of the conversation. “Yeah, but what about you? Everyone was talking about how Chris Alice had a rocket in his pocket. Then you just dropped out of sight.”

Salas smiled with the ease of nice teeth and shrugged. “I had my fill of the city, the scene. After a while, what I was doing, my poetry, my writing, all seemed meaningless, you know?”

He nodded sympathetically. “AIC, Artistic Identity Crisis. How old were you then?”

“Mmm, late twenties. I’d seen it all, done it all, you know. Published in all the right magazines, The New Yorker, The Nation, read at all the hip venues, like The Project, The Poetry Center, Beyond Baroque, the Y. Had a selection of poems published by OMFG Editions. . . .”

“I remember that press, always thought that stood for Only My Friends are Great, and your book was titled. . . ?”

“*Pull My Finger.*”

“That’s why I remember.” Wendt look down into the possibly one swig’s worth of red wine at the bottom of his glass and wished that it was whiskey. He glanced at the waiter knowing that they had reached Nora’s two bottle limit with the meal, her stipulation for footing the tab for him and her client at the fabulous Washbag on Powell. He had made short work of the rack of lamb though Salas had seemed perplexed by the half roast chicken in lemon sauce, and picked at it dissolutely. He wasn’t hesitant about the wine Wendt had selected, a pinot grigio and a hearty Zinfandel, both from the Sonoma Valley. If he had learned anything from his Monday dinners with Dorian, it was how to select wines.

Wendt leaned forward in confidence. “A lot of people have come up with that as a tentative title for their poetry selections before.” He paused. “But no one ever had the guts to use it,” reflecting that *impetuosity* could easily be substituted for *guts*. “Offending bourgeois conventions is a young man’s game.”

“I was going to call it *Preparation H* but there were trademark issues.”

Wendt winced. More asshole humor.

“Anyway, according to the reviews, and it didn’t get many, it was sophomoric, ill-advised, crude, and déclassé.”

“Doesn’t sound like they read more than the title.” Not all that farfetched as Wendt had reviewed books of poetry with only a glance at the table of contents and the title.

Salas shrugged. “In hindsight, I don’t know if I really blame them. No one wants to pull the finger let alone open a book whose title suggests that you do. Bookstores, even used bookstores wouldn’t carry it. The ones that did carry it shelved it in the humor section.”

“Ah, but you were a *succès de scandale*! In the poetry world that’s often better than actually being any good.” And as assurance, Wendt added, “Present company excluded. Besides, you made a splash and got people pissed off at you. What more can a poet ask?”

“Still, it left me feeling empty.” Salas held up the bottle of Zin. “This

is almost gone, mind if I finish it?”

“No, go ahead. But you realize that what you say can and will be used against you.” He said it with a show of teeth. He was referring to the piece he’d been asked to do on Salas for the *Pacific Rim Institute Quarterly*.

PRIQ, as it was commonly known, was a slick, high end arts and culture magazine published both on the West Coast and in a Chinese language edition in Shanghai. They were gold plated and Wendt could count on placing something with them at least once a year. Connie Chin, the editor, was an old friend. Not to mention that the magazine was funded in part by the Holbrook Foundation on whose board sat Dorian Pillsbury, and at one time, Nora White, his so-called agent. She was now, not so coincidentally, Chris Salas’ agent. She’d dropped a hint one day when he ran into her at the Caffe Trieste. “Did Connie from the Quarterly get in touch with you?” He’d been remiss in checking his phone messages and email. “Maybe you should give her a call.”

His assignment, were he to accept it, and he never shied from a puff piece if the money was good, was to profile Christopher Salas, and his politically incorrect novel, *Third Brain, The Story of a Man and His Penis* which was causing much consternation, apoplexy, and denunciation among feminists, literary circles and book reviewers. Nora’s one sentence synopsis had been “A man has visions of future events while holding his penis. Make of it what you will.” Though Wendt had not yet read the advance copy Nora provided him, he couldn’t help but remark on the irony. Granahan would probably have enjoyed reading it. Or writing it. It was a subject he was quite fond of.

The waiter came to take Wendt’s plate and looked inquiringly at Chris’ half finished chicken. “Was everything all right?”

Salas looked down at his plate. “Yeah, it was fine. Guess I wasn’t all that hungry.”

“Dessert? More wine?” The waiter was just doing his job.

Both Salas and Wendt shook their heads, Wendt saying “I think we’re done. Bring the bill and I’ll sign it.” Wendt enjoyed playing the bon vivant especially if someone else was paying. And then, as an aside to Salas, “Why don’t we continue the interview at the bar?”

**Salas picked up the first round.** And the second. He fleshed out his earlier introductory back story, explaining that he’d had plenty of time to write being Mr. Mom to his two boys while his wife, an administrative lawyer for Marin County, brought home the Lucky Charms and Froot Loops. He’d written a couple of novels in that time, but had been

unsuccessful in placing them with a publisher or an agent. Then someone, it might have even been his wife, suggested he try his luck with a local agent rather than the New York City set. He'd dug up a city phone directory and gone down the list. He didn't want to go with AAA Literary Services or Ace or Best, with their advisement to *see display ad on same page*. The very last listing was the unpretentious White Literary Agency. Nora loved the novel, Salas recounted, said it was the best dark humor she'd read in a long time.

"I thought you were a poet." The tone wasn't accusatory.

Salas shrugged and signaled to the bartender, circling both their half empty glasses with a finger. "I started out on poetry but soon hit the harder stuff."

"You think prose is harder than poetry?"

"Not prose, per se, but fiction, yeah."

"So you've given up on poetry?"

"Aw, I could probably get back into it if I wanted to. I find that I use a lot of the same techniques in my fiction. Symbolism, extended metaphor, and so on. It was the vacuous social scene that really turned me off. So high school. Who's in, who's out."

Wendt nodded to the bartender as she poured his Jameson and placed the glass of beer next to it.

Salas continued, "I've come to think of the poetry scene as a nasty little playground. There are the fortunate few playing king of the mountain atop the play structure, but otherwise it's a string of endless lunatics staking claim to their corner of the sandbox, getting into turf battles, fueled by booze, pot, crack, meth, junk, and sociopathic egos carrying on 24/7, bitching, yelling and screaming empty braggadocio, taking offense at the slightest perceived slight, punching each other out or threatening to, crying over the spilt milk of their contrived ill-conceived verse, marrying their students, getting knocked unconscious by their much younger wives, and shitting themselves in public. This is simply the literary life, sub-genus American poet. Gregory Corso once said, or so I heard, 'Poetry is great—it's the poets who fuck it up.'"

Wendt rolled his eyes and laughed. "Yeah, I think I heard that one, too."

"I liked your paraphrase of that from back in the day much better. 'There are no bad poems, only bad poets!'"

"Did I say that?" Wendt smiled wryly. "I must have been quoting someone."

"Anyway, as a novelist, people expect you to be anti-social. Point

Reyes is just far enough away that I was out of the loop of all that petty bullshit, and I had my kids to look after. That's pretty time consuming."

"Sounds like you had the advantages of woodshedding."

"I don't get what you mean."

"It's a jazz term. When a musician sequesters himself and practices his chops he's said to be 'woodshedding.' It can be applied to artists who drop out to develop their style, painters, writers, before reemerging into the public eye. Probably an old down home expression used by black musicians whose only privacy was had out in the woodshed."

Salas smiled. "I've never heard that. Guess you might say that that was what I was doing."

"It does have its disadvantages though. Some guys get a little too comfortable with their seclusion and forget that the aim of what they're doing is to polish up their act, not become a hermit."

Salas favored vodka drinks and stirred the ice thoughtfully. "I always thought of it as being in a bubble. Or a cocoon. A fog cocoon, especially where I'm from."

**"So what genre does your novel fall into? Magic realism? Surrealism?"** Wendt realized that Salas was on his way to getting sloshed so now would be the time to trot out some of the lame questions Nora had prompted him to ask.

Salas took a while to answer. "I'm not sure I know the difference. What I'm saying is that they're practically the same thing. But the word surrealism is associated with the grotesque and the darker side of the psyche thanks to artists like Dali. The acceptable term now is magic realism which is kind of a misnomer because it is neither magic nor realism."

"Why *Third Brain*? What's the second brain?"

"Right brain, left brain, third brain." There was just a hint of defensiveness.

Wendt tilted his head trying to get an angle on it.

"Of course if you're into homeopathy, the gut is the second brain, some would argue the first."

"You learn that living out in the country?"

"Oh yeah, it's a whole different world out there."

Wendt nodded "I'll bet" and sipped tentatively at his beer. "What's the premise again?"

"Ever wake up in the morning with an erection and a full bladder?"

"You mean a piss hardon? More often than not, yeah."

“Well, your tumescence has nothing to do with the urge to relieve yourself. It is merely the coincidence of two factors. One, your bladder is reminding you to empty it of the overnight urine accretion as part of the normal biological process. And the engorgement of the instrument for fulfilling that urge is due to a particular phenomenon associated with dream sleep.”

“You lost me. I got the part about needing to take a leak, but. . . .”

“Most men associate their morning lumber with the urge to take a honking piss. In point of fact it is due to their coming out of a rapid eye movement dream state during which the short arm is saluting thanks to a neurological similarity between the dream experience and sexually stimulated arousal.”

Wendt narrowed his eyes in consideration. “Ok, I’ll put a down payment on that.”

“Sleep researchers call it the dream antenna.”

“That’s the premise of your novel?”

“Actually it’s more of the device. The premise is a take on that old saying that men think with their dicks. Thinking, after all, being a bodily function. As Merleau-Ponty said, ‘To perceive is to be present to something through the body.’ Ergo, the location of the third brain.”

Wendt flinched and rolled his eyes mentally. Who used ‘ergo’ anymore? And what was it about guys wanting to talk about their peckers? First Granahan and now Salas though he could remember back to the days when writing a poem about one’s salamander was quite the thing which of course paled in comparison to women’s depictions of their pudenta and graphic menstruations.

“The erection is residual like the fading mental images of the dream. Sometimes we try to hang on to those images because of their cerebral uniqueness and we also don’t want to let go of the physical sensuality of the boner. In the novel, Henry Miller. . . .”

“Wait a minute, your protagonist is named Henry Miller?”

“Yeah, no big deal, it’s a pretty common name. Check the phone book. There are two pages of listings for Miller and at least half a dozen of them are Henry.”

“But Henry Miller. . . .”

“It just gives it a little literary resonance. A hook is a hook is a hook to paraphrase la belle Stein. I’m guessing you haven’t read the novel yet.”

Wendt nodded. “I didn’t want it to prejudice my first impression of you. Before the interview.” Wendt was hoping for a suspension of disbelief on that morsel of fiction.

“Anyway,” Salas continued, eager to spill the beans, “Henry finds that by clutching his joy stick he can hang out in his dreams a little longer and the images he retains in that semi-waking state relate to the future. At first it’s all very general and random. But as he continues to act on his visions of the future they get more specific and consistent. He starts by handicapping sports events and moves on to the stock market and subsequently becomes very rich and the target of scammers and tax collectors. Along with the untold riches comes a grandiose view of himself which leads him to believe that he shouldn’t be paying taxes in the first place, render to Caesar, et cetera, and so starts his own religion, anointing the scammers as his high priests.”

“What, no sex?”

“Oh, there’s plenty of sex. It becomes the great complication, the enmeshment, the net that catches everyone and undoes them. I mean the guy is definitely oversexed. He gets aroused just looking at a paper towel. The sex is presented as satyric romps as might be depicted in frescos on the wall of Pompeii.”

Wendt nodded thoughtfully, thinking of Granahan. “No masturbation?”

“Only in the Balzacian sense of ‘masturbation of the brain.’ Otherwise, physical masturbation breaks what you might call the spell, that tenuous engagement with the bodiless psyche. It’s not real sex after all. It can never offer the psychic interchanges that love making offers.”

“There’s got to be a downside to this story.”

“Pretty much the downside is that notoriety is in itself a kind of power, an attractive power. Add exponential wealth and it becomes a magnet for all kinds of bugs and buzzards. Then there’s the corrosive effect of power. It eats at the edges of your being until it has consumed all your energy in the form of your personal autonomy, your authenticity, so that you end up transparent, riddled with holes, and light passes through you as if you were inconsequential lace.”

You can take the novelist out of the poet but you can’t take the novel out of the poetry. No, that’s not it. You can take the poet out of the novel but you can’t take the poetry out of the novelist. Ok, you can take the poetry out of the novel but you can’t take the poet out of the novelist. Something like that.

“Ouch! That’s gotta hurt.” Wendt was commenting on the bartender bumping her head after stooping to get something out from under the bar. Loose change?

Salas responded as if was directed at him. “It’s deadly.”



Wendt looked over his elbow at his drinking companion. “That’s what kills him, power, fame?”

“Actually, no. He can afford the best of lawyers. It’s internal dissent that brings him down. All those women and all their kids fighting for a piece of him.”

Wendt nodded. He understood. “It’s the idea that the most visible becomes a target while extolling the value of anonymity.” Philip K. Dick type paranoia. Fantasy sci-fi. “Let me put the shoe on the other foot. What do you think of your novel?”

“I think it’s great, but that’s not very objective.”

“Objective is overrated.”

“I guess what I’m saying is that I love every stinking word in a way that no one else can. I am the novel’s mother and father and what I’ve written, what I’ve created is an imagined offspring. As bad as it may be, I can’t see its faults, and as far as I’m concerned it’s perfect.”

“Do you think your relationship to your writing changed once you published the novel?”

“Yeah, you might say it has. Once the novel is published, it’s viewed from numerous perspectives, from the average reader to the professional critic. You never know what the average reader thinks except yea or nay by book sales. The critics on the other hand will tell you in no uncertain terms according to their particular bias what they think and a lot of the time they are so off the mark you have to wonder if they’ve even read the book. I think there’s a lot of envy involved in reviews, a kind of ‘this is how I would have done it’ Monday morning quarterbacking. Or they get into the author hasn’t paid his dues so he can’t be any good kind of attitude. Or he belongs to the wrong crowd. Or not aligned with the latest fad aesthetic. It’s a faux objectivity and another way of getting your name in print on someone else’s dime.”

That wasn’t exactly the answer to what he’d asked, but Wendt gave a mental shrug and pressed on. “How did you come up with the idea for your novel?”

“Changing diapers on my youngest. I noticed how his tight little scrotal sack looked like a tiny brain. And while I was rounding up a dry diaper and letting his crotch breathe, he’d be grabbing himself and gleefully babbling away.”

Wendt again was reminded of Granahan, as at birth so in death, that primal instinct for pleasure, expression, and distraction.

“How has your first published novel changed your life?”

“I’m not quite sure. Being successful, which I suppose publishing a

novel, a controversial one at that, comes with certain kind of triumphant satisfaction. It's recognition of something accomplished, good or bad. The biggest change so far is in people's attitudes toward me."

"Oh yeah, how so?"

"Well, I've noticed that certain people I know don't like their perception reversed or altered. Their original impression will always linger in the background and affect their rationalization and judgment of my success. There are people, friends, other writers, who are thoroughly put out by what they call my 'luck.' I've changed position in the hierarchy. The security of their place is now in question. It's making them crazy with envy and the realization that they might have been displaced."

"How does your most recent work compare to your previous writing?"

"That's a really hard question to answer because I personally don't make comparisons of that sort. Writing is a process that can have a narrow scope or an unbridled vision. You knew me when I wrote poetry almost exclusively or that was my public face."

"How do you feel about that now?"

"It was time well spent. I was able to locate a tradition in which I could operate as a creative artist. Poetry provided that milieu."

"Did you come to poetry first, as opposed to, say, fiction or non-fiction?"

"As a writer you have to be open to all possibilities. Poetry provided me with a social life, such as it was, and exposed me to the neurosis of the truly sensitive. And as is the case with that mental inclination there's always some sort of transference, a situation where the inmates take over the asylum. Prose is a skill, and fiction for me was always an option. However, it is not conducive to socializing."

"How long does it take to start any particular writing project?"

"That part is instantaneous. That's why it's called inspiration."

"Does your writing initially come quickly, or is it a slow process?"

"By the time I begin to compose, everything has been ruminated over, either consciously or unconsciously. When the opening line presents itself then I'm off to the races."

"Do first drafts appear looking close to their final shape, or does your work come out of copious notes?"

"Sometimes I have the big picture in mind but mostly it's a vague outline or an idea of the direction I want to proceed. I always leave room for the unexpected. It's never a paint-by-numbers exercise. Writing fiction is a time consuming life consuming endeavor and sometimes the

most mundane of things, a play on words, a picture in a magazine, something overheard in line at the supermarket or on the radio will be the seed for a particular development. I am compelled because of my involvement in the creative act of making a fiction to note it down even if it turns out to be a whim or a dud and not in any way germane to the final result.”

“Where does a novel usually begin for you? Are you an author of short pieces that end up combined into a larger project, or are you working on a book from the very beginning?”

“It depends I think on what you’re trying to accomplish. It’s like building a maze. There’s only one way in and one way out, but there wouldn’t be much to it without the little side galleries and dead ends. Also, are you telling a story, examining the mundane to get at an epiphany, or working within the constraints of a concept? In my limited experience in finishing two novels, the book, so to speak, presents itself as a piece that will eventually become more than the sum of its parts. That’s the goal anyway, that the work will succeed in being more than wild words and ornate phrases but resonate and have a gravity that exceeds the sheer math of the number of pages and word count.”

“Does your novel have a message?”

“If I wanna send a message, I’ll tweet it.”

**The bartender came down to check on them** and Salas indicated a refill on what they were having: Wendt, Jameson, draft beer back, and he, vodka Collins. Wendt made an offer to buy he hoped would be refused.

“Your money’s no good,” Salas insisted

Wendt didn’t mind lending a ready ear confident that he had laid enough of a base to handle as much of the Irish whiskey he planned to consume at his companion’s expense. He pointed to the thin head of his beer when the bartender placed it in front of him. “This draft looks a little flat.” He sniffed it. “Smells sour, too. End of the keg?”

The bartender shrugged. “I dunno. Could be. I’ll check.” She opened the cold case below the taps and gave one of the barrels a shake. She nodded. “Yeah, you’re right, getting down to the dregs.” She took his beer glass and poured it out. “I’m going to have to change out the keg. It’ll take a while,” she said looking down at the other end of the bar and the new anxious faces giving the impression that they were dying of thirst. “How about a craft brew?” And when she caught Wendt’s hesitance, “On the house.”

“You said the magic *voids*.” He did his Groucho eyebrow lifts but

they went over her head. Wrong generation.

A tall skinny gal with a blond pixie cut, her tiny gold name tag said she was *Cole*. She placed the bottle in front of Wendt so that he could examine the label.

“New Albion Lager?”

“Yeah, boutique brewery from up in Mendocino County. I’ve heard nothing but good things about it.”

**“Sounds complicated. What’s it called again?”** Wendt asked feigning interest and casting a glazed eye at the array of bottles reflected in the back bar mirror. The bartender stood in front of the display not unlike in Manet’s *Folies-Bergère*. Wendt demurred on another whiskey. He had taken a liking to the lager. It had enough pep to maintain that edge of lucid high he particularly enjoyed.

“Uh,” Salas paused, taken out of the narrative flow of his summation and having to flip back to the title page. “*The Road To Sunset*. I was going to call it *Don’t Look Back*, but Dylan had already used it for his documentary.”

Wendt nodded. He had misheard. *Road*, not *Ode*. Salas was insisting on giving him a synopsis of his second novel, a sci-fi thriller based loosely on *Blade Runner*, soon to be published, possibly with a Hollywood option. The protagonist was a private eye psychic in the mode of Castaneda’s *brujo*, Don Juan, who like many shamans, retrieved the dead from the netherworld. The whole idea, he explained, was a peripatetic chase that led through different worlds and states of consciousness that the Don Juan character accessed through various mind altering substances, chants, rites, and rituals.

“The final ordeal the shaman shamus, a Chinese detective named Fu Queue, has to endure to bring the young woman, Marilyn, back to the land of the living is finding his way through a portal that opens up very briefly at sunset, a kind of green door that you pass through to a timeless domain.”

“Ah yes, the green door to Marilyn’s chamber. Kinda like Orpheus going after Eurydice.”

“Exactly!” Salas grinned and gave Wendt a congratulatory slap on the back.

The after-dinner crowd was starting to occupy the length of the bar and he was nudged by a powerful perfume and the young woman wearing it who was extremely easy on the eyes. He gave his patented ‘how you doing’ smile but to no avail.

Salas had kept his hand on Wendt's shoulder in a comradely manner. "How come you haven't written a novel or a tell-all memoir, Carl? I'm sure you've got some stories." The question came with naively raised interrogatory eyebrows.

Wendt looked down at his foam edged beer glass. Disheveled and tattered, it still had body, a good brew. "Yeah, I started writing a memoir once. I got as far as the part where the three wise men come looking for me. One of the wise men said, 'your life will never be interesting' and I had to agree with him."

"Oh no, that can't be true. . ." Salas started to protest and then it hit him. His guffaw was more of a snort as some of his drink had gone up his nose. He slapped the bar with the palm of his hand. "Ha! I get it! Three wise men!" Frowns of concern were sent their way and the bartender had turned to adjudge the commotion. Salas made a face. "Be right back. Call of the wild."

**Chris came back looking like someone** with something on his mind. His step was a little uncertain and he steadied himself with a hand on the top of his barstool not bothering to seat himself just yet. He had something urgent he had to tell Wendt. "You know what really pisses me off is the guy who totally misinterprets what you've written and then gets his feelings hurt when you tell him he's wrong." There was swagger to his stagger now that he'd come to the bitch part of his drunk.

"You know what I really hate are people who read what you've written and then tell you how they would have done it. Then, you know, there's the guy who buddies up to you only to ask you if you can help him get published. Or introduce him to your agent. I tell 'em, do what I did, let your fingers do the walking." Smugly, with a self-righteous nod of the chin, he mimed his fingers walking.

"Or someone you know thinks that you represented their life or their circumstances in your writing. Ever hear of coincidence? Or you're not the only one who's been in that situation? Or something that's the most implausible in your fiction has to be autobiographical. They don't think that someone, especially someone they know or think they know, could make up something like that! They obviously have no concept of the imagination. They filter everyone's motives through some misunderstood pop-Freudian convention and don't get that sometimes a cigar is just a cigar!"

Wendt nodded. "Yeah, like Eric of the Animals said, 'Oh Lord, please don't let me be misunderstood.'"

“Right! Finally someone who gets it! As a writer what you’re doing is creating masks that, because of theory of mind, elicit the desired psychological responses. You draw on your specific past experience to give the right tone to a generalized situation. It’s hardly autobiographical. An actor does the same thing, draws from a remembered emotion to enhance the psychology of the character he’s portraying!”

**Belying up to the urinal** Wendt considered his girth, an old man’s bulge punctuated by what was no doubt an enlarged liver, and belly fat so typical of over-the-hill white guys. A mere outcropping however, compared to the shelf the guy in front of him had in line at the sandwich shop earlier in the day. That was a veritable workbench! The guy musn’t of seen his cock without looking in the mirror. In decades. No matter how hung he think he was.

Now there was the beginning of a standup routine, and not so coincidentally since he was standing with his cock in his hand, channeling the ghost of the recently departed Granahan, but not seeing the future apparently as the stream came to an end with a few tentative dribbles splashing on his pant leg. Wendt paused awaiting a message from the pump room to indicate that he had indeed offloaded the requisite amount to allow his bladder to breathe a sigh of relief. Continuing with the routine, as he zipped up and headed for the lavabo, now something happens to a guy’s cock, that’s funny. A chick’s cunt? Not so funny. That’s the baby tunnel, don’t wanna be messing with that.

The faucet had a motion detector offering ablution at the pass of a hand. Was there a lesson to be learned? Every man’s penis and every woman’s vagina have the same and singular purpose and that they are the source of pleasure reflects the importance of that purpose.

Over the roaring whine of the hand drier it occurred to him, there are restaurants that are all cleavage and clams based on the premise that the sight of a woman’s breasts or camel toe will make their mostly male patrons horny and who will then overcompensate by overeating and overdrinking. So that’s funny in a sad commentary kind of way. And the coy embarrassment of a breast exposed wardrobe malfunction that can be laughed off.

Or earlier, having his pre-dinner drinks at the Red Hen, repeats of Seinfeld had been on the box and it was the one where Elaine says “I don’t know how you guys can live with those things” and George is screaming about shrinkage. Funny. But it’s not the same kind of funny as a guy taking a shot in the balls, and it’s a universal, every man with a

pair can feel it. For some reason that always gets a yuk.

Standup comic. Now there was a path not taken. And then heading back to the bar, maybe Salas did have a point. He considered the possibility that perhaps he had been one of those people who had reacted negatively to the success of others, Val's, and to Sheila's before that. He had to face it, he didn't care to be the off center of attention. And what was it that old Buddha had said? *Heaven above, earth below, it's all about me.*

**“My wife, my wife, my wife,” Salas intoned** and stared into his glass of high octane bubble water as if he were calling up her image to appear in the frosty cylinder. Or maybe expecting a hologram of his wife dressed as a princess saying “Help me obese Juan Canopy.”

“My wife told me she was glad that she worked under her family name rather than our married one because she didn't want to end up defending my book, especially one she didn't get or approve of. And my boys? Couldn't be bothered. The one's just started college and gives the idea that I've published a novel lip service because he knows who's paying his bills. And the high schooler? Well, it's not a video game or a smart phone. Even my sister Ruby who for all intents and purposes is ultra-hip and runs a truck stop in Lawrence, Kansas, even she gave me a non-committal 'that's nice' and 'I'm not in it, am I?'”

“Ruby?”

“Yeah, real name Rebecca, but she had it legally changed to Ruby Slippers when she moved out to Kansas, right about the time she got her first tattoo. Pretty successful actually, until recently.”

“Oh, economic downturn?”

“Not exactly. Gonorrhea.”

“Am I missing something?”

“She caught it from. . .you might know the guy, a writer, teaches at UK, Lionel something.”

“Lynel Pauk?” Wendt went on to imagine Lynel informing Dottie that he had the drip. She would have ripped his head off. Probably more like he waited until she came down with a pussy pussy and blamed it on her. “Yeah, I know him.”

“That's the punk. The way I heard it he goes down to Nogales on a dope run and comes back with a couple kilos and the clap. Pretty soon some of his students are complaining of fiery piss. And my sister, too. She's always been a sucker for the literary types.”

“I don't get how that affected her business.”

“That particular strain of genital applause is now traveling the

Interstate along with some really crap weed. People put two and two together. It's one thing to be louche but this, well. . . ."

"So Rebecca Salas became Ruby Slippers. Well, at least she didn't have to change the monograms on her towels."

Salas nodded emphatically as if he were acknowledging a greater truth. "I know, man, you can't make that kind of shit up!"

**"All of a sudden I've got a load of new friends.** But I guess it's up to strangers to discover you."

Is there such a thing as new friends, Wendt wondered. Salas' whining about the drawbacks of his good fortune was starting to wear. Maybe the only friends you have are the old ones. And by the paring down of their ranks through disaffection, distance, and death, there are fewer and fewer each year. New friends just can't hold a candle to a history of camaraderie even if they do spring for drinks. In the literary world the margins are almost too narrow for friendship.

"People I've known for years, they've already got me tucked away in a dusty little corner of their tiny minds. And they bring their familiarity with me as someone they think they know to the reading of my words which invariably skews their take so they can't resist indulging in lame-ass parlor psychology. Strangers don't have that problem. They either take me or leave me at my words, nothing more. Their willingness to suspend disbelief is not bogged down by all the baggage someone I know might bring to their reading. The irony of it all is that it's the opinions of my friends and cohorts that I value most. But they're never going to tell me what they're really thinking. I might have their grudging regard but mostly it's their sober reservations. You know, like it must be some kind of trick, sleight of hand, some kind of mistake. . . . I should have that. . . whatever it is. . . luck."

Bald faced envy, professional jealousy. A lot of that, Wendt mused. Not very professional. Besides, he felt like telling him, you'll never be appreciated by your contemporaries—you're competing for the same attention.

"Because they think they know me they think they own me." It was almost a growl. Salas was hardly as lethal as a jellyfish though his posture seemed to indicate that he was becoming about as boneless. He still had a few barbs left but they were hardly worth the sting. And his mumbling complaints were becoming slurred. "May'shme wonner if aven ban han-nin out wissa rong peopple 'alf mlife."

Wendt was going to have to call him a cab.



“I’m a cab,” Salas repeated affably.

**It was obvious to Wendt** as he sucked in the cool evening air at curbside that Salas was already resenting what fame would do to him. But this was always what he’d wanted, yearned for in his little rural hideout on the edge of the big waters, the attention of strangers. Now he was going to regret it for the rest of his life, however long or short that might be. What did Freud say? *“To the writer, immortality evidently means being loved by any number of anonymous people”*? The familiar people, his friends, and his wife to an extent, insisted that success itself was valueless. That he had sold out. By addressing a wider world he had made more of himself than his personal community was ready to handle, put himself beyond their reach. He was viewed by kin and friends in a particular way that could never be generalized which is why distance gives advantage to an understanding that is rooted in the deeper knowledge that everything’s the same. But that’s the way it was. And it had nothing to do with the quality of his writing. As soon as he became successful he became the enemy, the target. The spoor of fame was attached to him and the hounds of hell were on it. He was dead meat. There was no escape because the sycophantic jealousy of his friends and contemporaries kept him from believing it was true. He would be lied to in order to maintain an illusion that there is no such thing as reward for just being who he was. But that was the reward, he got himself. No money changed hands. He hadn’t realized that yet, if he ever would.

Wendt leaned into the open window on the passenger’s side. Digger was behind the wheel. “He’s staying at the Rexroth. You can just pour him through the keyhole.”

Digger gave him a look. “Where you been, Rip Van Winkle? Nobody uses a key or a hole anymore. It’s all plastic and magnetic tape these days.”

They both turned at the sound of retching at the curb by the rear wheel of the cab.

“At least he won’t be doing it in the back seat,” Wendt opined.

“That better be the last of it.” Digger frowned and handed Wendt a half sheet flyer. “You might be interested in this. The big Penumbroi shindig coming up at the old Reed Hotel.”

“I thought they were tearing that place down as unsafe for human habitation.”

Digger shrugged and turned to watch as Salas crawled into the back seat. “Still standing last time I looked.”

Wendt glanced at the flyer, the design reminiscent of the old Avalon Ballroom handouts, a pillar arch of words at the top reading *Cirque de Penumbroi* and the motto “*your walls, our shadows*” under which was a double column list of names of participants in the full day of poetry and art happenings. He turned it over. It was blank. “Got any more of these? I can always use a little public stationary, or as Marx would say, the people’s stationary!”

The words to *Poor Butterfly* came to mind as the cab drove off. Whose version was it? Sarah Vaughn’s, Sinatra? Probably Vikki Carr’s. That was the one his mother used to sing around the house. He lit a cigarette. What’s a novel anyway? Lists of things and dialogue. And besides, nowadays novels were being turned out like housing tracts.

A car alarm lashed the orange tinged dark with faux desperation. From a distance, his exhaled cigarette smoke obscured his features in a momentary white cloud. A car horn sounded and he looked in that direction. His heart sank and as it did gave a little moan that only he could hear. It was Wendy.

**The TV above the bar had the sound off.** No one was paying it much attention, as if it were a window on the bus to nowhere passing monotonous or too familiar scenery. The closed captioning unfolded across the bottom of the screen like so many domino tiles reporting the jocular jowly man’s monologue: |STOP ME IF| |YOU’VE HEARD THIS| |ONE PICASSO WALKS| |INTO A BAR| |APOLLINAIRE| |IS THE BARTENDER| |HE HAS| |A BLIND DATE WITH A FAT| |GIRL HER LOVE LETTERS| |ARE LIKE STRING| |CHEESE AND SHE| |HAS A FETISH| |FOR ODD CONDOMS| |ONES THAT ARE| |MADE LIKE BUGGY| |WHIPS OR DOOR HANDLES| |OR EGG| |BEATERS THAT PICASSO| |IS SUCH A CAD!|

**He had just stepped out of Bud’s** on Powell for a smoke. A gaggle of tourists were gathered near where he was smoking. *I’m an artist, honey. It’s my job to do nothing and to do it well.* Wendt said it to himself in answer to the curious stare of a young woman who was part of the tour group disembarking from the cable car. They were all women, younger women, and from their musical chatter he could tell that it wasn’t English. French. But of course! For the French, it’s April in Frisco. Their outfits were worn with too much panache to be native. He had picked out a tall strawberry blond and her friend, possibly a bottle blonde but with the fine facial features of a thoroughbred. The one had the long freckled Modigliani face of a French actress he liked and the other, a wide upper

lip and overbite whose smile could crack ice. She caught that he was watching them. From ecstasy to despair in the wink of her eye. An abyss of regret spawned of a universe of desire. He gazed at the young women, instruments of his lust, and was hit by the Baudelarian frappe, that his time had come and gone. It was like a slap to the face that he felt in his gut which translated to a weakness in his knees as if he were seeing the ghost of his former self shimmer and fade. Hoisted by his own impertinence.

He had been plagued by more than his usual allotment of ghosts of late. Stopping at the newsstand on Market on the way over and picking up a copy of the weekly, it was just a picture on the cover of a fashion magazine clipped to the rack. A woman. A celebrity. With Val's smile. The way the eyes crinkled at the corners, the perfect bow of her lips, her well-shaped teeth. Then Eve showed up at his elbow as he was crossing Union Square. She was a blonde now, and a grandmother. She ran the Cosmetics Dept. at Macy's. She was wearing a bronze colored collarless jacket with matching skirt, gorgeous as usual. He hadn't seen her in nearly a dozen years. She was on her lunch break. She had a question. Did he think she was deep? Before he answered, she interjected that she thought he was the devil.

**Did it matter he thought the part just before Coltrane's solo** in Miles' version of *Round Midnight* was the most beautiful, understated, lyrically anticipatory prelude to a solo in modern jazz, and Coltrane's solo, do they even make silk that smooth anymore? Why did he have a tiny yellow post-it square in his pocket with the number six on it? Or was that a nine?

**A patrol car was parked at the curb,** light bar pulsing blue. A young cop stood with his fists to his hips while Shula Raven, in what looked like an old Girl Scout uniform a dozen sizes too small and a tube of orange material that made a funnel atop the slack hemp of her mane, gave him what for. Wendt watched from a distance. He was familiar with the Reed Hotel, the "seedy Reedy" as it had been known in the day, right around the corner from the old Greyhound Bus Station on Seventh. He'd never stayed there but he had friends who had, though, come to think of it, they were mostly Val's friends. Jake and Polly's place was part of that block scheduled for demolition to make room for high turn-over rental slots. Parking spaces were not even close to the hassle of live tenants and the profits were immeasurably more.

He stood on his butt end and strode to the entrance blowing out a stream of cigarette smoke. The doorway was partially blocked by a large well used drop cloth that someone had graffitied with fat bubble letters, **CIRQUE DE PENUMBROI**, and below it in astonishingly precise block letters *Your Walls—Our Shadows*. A battered construction sawhorse created a barrier as well. Someone had scrawled with large black marker pen on the crossbar *Hope abandoned all who entered her*. Behind the barrier stood a crusty old guy in an orange safety vest, a white hard hat, and a clipboard.

“That’ll be twenty bucks,” he said as Wendt approached.

“I’m on the guest list.” Wendt looked over the man’s shoulder into the dim interior and the source of the noise passing itself off as music or worse, poetry. He was having his doubts about crashing the event.

“Name?”

“Carl Wendt.”

The man gave Wendt an attentive look that meant the name had prompted a glimmer of recognition. “Right.” And scanned down the list of names and on to the next page as well. He shook his head. “Doesn’t look like you made the cut, Carl.”

“Hey, I write for the weekly.” He dug out a square of laminated plastic from his wallet. “Here, here’s my press pass.”

The doorman had a longish face creased with the folds of a few chins onto which it appeared tufts of white hair had been randomly glued. He turned a baleful eye to the examination of the card and then with increasing incredulity at Wendt. “It just says *Press Pass*.”

“That’s because that’s what it is! A Press Pass!”

“Hey! Wendt!” The shout came from inside. Michel Brazon hove into view out of the interior dimness. “Wendt! Hey!” He slapped an arm across Wendt’s shoulder and led him inside. He was high on something. And he’d been drinking. “You made it. Just in time. I’m going on in about twenty minutes.”

“Enjoy it while you can,” the doorman shouted after them, “the cops are gonna be closing this clusterfuck down real soon!”

“Sheesh, get a new doorman.” Wendt went along with Brazon, curious but cautious.

“What doorman?” Brazon glanced back at the entrance. “That’s just some homeless guy trolling the unwary. Man’s gotta make a buck.”

“Listen, you’re not still pissed about the stunt I pulled at the reading the other night, are you?” Wendt wanted to know where he stood before he went any further.

“Naw, you know my motto, *friendship is those thousand tiny betrayals overlooked.*” Brazon said it grandly as if it were up in lights.

He felt slightly chagrined. If Brazon considered that a tiny betrayal then he might have to start feeling sorry for the guy.

“Besides I wanted you to hear the address I’ll be making.”

“I didn’t know you were one of the Penumbroi.”

“I’m not. I’m here in the capacity as interim regional secretary for IFIRP.”

“Did you just hiccup or was that a word?”

“IFIRP, the *International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Poets.* Vince Crane was the regional secretary until they found him swinging from a rafter in his A-frame cabin up in the Sierras.”

“Really, Vince Crane? The punster poet, joke a minute, leave ‘em laughing Vince Crane decided to cash in?”

“Well, if it’s any consolation, the suicide note was a hoot. *I heard the angel of death dancing on the roof and decided to join her. Why am I still hanging around?*”

**Brazon hailed someone else** he knew and disappeared into the shadows of the dim lit lobby. Wendt sized up the situation with a quick glance. There was no overhead lighting, air thick with plaster dust from the first phase of demolition as if he were underground in a mine. Placed strategically around the lobby were arrays of halogen work lights on bright yellow tripods. A steady undertone of engines hummed distantly as almost a vibration. The dust seemed connected somehow. Under or near the halogen lights, vendors had set up tables using their own auxiliary lighting schemes ranging from battery powered camping lanterns, merchandise highlighted by ranks of tiny LED reading lights or personal headlamps and colorful fluorescent glow sticks. They were selling books, DVDs, CDs, T-shirts, buttons and bumper stickers, all with poetry related themes. A lot of the local small presses were represented which surprised him since he always considered the whole Penumbroi scene just a bunch of poetry sewer rats. Apparently they were well organized sewer rats. A large banner-sized portrait of The Buk, the Penumbroi’s patron saint, hung near the entrance to what had once been the hotel’s bar and restaurant and now the site of the main stage from the kinds of amplified verbal hubbub emanating from inside. Another Chairman Mao-ish portrait of Chinaski hung over the stairway leading to the upper floors.

One booth in particular stood out from the rest because of the professional brightness of its display. Wendt thought he recognized the vendor, a woman. The name on the banner hanging from the edge of the display table reminded him. Djuna Hardwicke of Hardwicke Press. Still the same parrot feather hairstyle and beak to match. Wendt scanned the display as she greeted him.

“Carl?”

“Hey Djunie, surprised to see you at this venue.”

The other vendor, a tall skinny man with narrow face and serious demeanor, had come to stand by Djuna. “Carl, do you know my husband, Bob Bobson?” She kept her expression blank as she made the introduction, a what-happens-in-Vegas-stays-in-Vegas kind of blank. “Carl Wendt,” she said, tone flat and nonchalant.

“Hello, Carl.” Bob Bobson extended his hand. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Wendt watched Djuna hold her breath. “Nothing good, I hope,” he said with a reassuring laugh. He wasn’t about to blurt out that he’d had a night of blistering hot sex with Djunie a few years back at her apartment on Stanyan Street while her husband, assuming it was the same guy, was away at a book faire in the Midwest. “What gives with the lighting? You have to provide your own?”

Djuna shrugged, “No power to the whole building. Nada, not a spark. We knew that coming in.” She looked at Bob like it was his turn. Bob’s voice was a quiet rumble. “We’re used to extreme conditions because we do Burning Man, too. Although out there we use solar panels. But here we have to use these government surplus high efficiency batteries that were used in Iraq and Afghanistan for satellite communications and with these LEDs. . . .”

“What Bob’s trying to say is that our little operation here is energy self-sufficient and very green. . . .”

“Except for the batteries,” Bob interjected the footnote.

Djuna narrowed her eyes. “Right, and like I was saying, we were told up front that there would be limited power and to come prepared. The Penumbroi have a bank of generators for the general lighting and such.” She pointed at the halogen tripods, “But everything else is on us.”

“Hope it’s worth it for you guys.” There didn’t seem to be many customers at any of the tables.

“Oh, the lobby fills up during the breaks. We carry many of the poets reading here today,” she said pointing at the book display. “We do quite well at these kinds of extreme events.”

“Last year’s Penumbroi Poetry Fest was held on Mt Umunhum in the South Bay. One of our best selling venues yet,” Bob assured.

“You’d be surprised how passionate people are about picking up souvenirs. We don’t sell that many books, but the bumper stickers and performance DVDs. . . .”

“And the dolls. . . ?” Wendt had noticed the arrangement of small figurines in period appropriate costumes. “Ok, I’m gonna guess that’s Oscar Wilde just from the hairdo, but who is that?”

“E. M. Forster,” Bob said reverentially.

“Alright, old Walt, right? Either that or an aging Chia pet. Is that Poe?”

“They also come in sets. The Surrealists, The Objectivists, The New York, School, First and Second Generation. This is the Bloomsbury group set.” Djuna pointed at each of the figures, “This is Lytton Strachey, Virginia Woolf, Duncan Grant, Roger. . . .”

Wendt had picked up the Woolf figurine. “These are just repurposed Barbie dolls if I’m correct.”

“Well, yes, but the clothing is sewn to period and wigs made. I had to do a little plastic surgery on her nose to make it more aquiline.”

Wendt didn’t know if he approved. “Poetry action figures,” he said turning Virginia Woolf upside down and looking up her skirt. “Are there any literary bedroom sets?”

Bob and Djuna exchanged glances. “Limited editions, for private collectors, of course,” Bob explained. “And Djuna has almost all of world literary history represented by little figurines such as these on display all over our house.” He added, “Some in very compromising positions.”

Wendt laughed. “Really, do you have one of me?”

Red-faced, Djuna shook her head closing her eyes. “I only make them of poets who have died.” She seemed to be emphasizing her words by pointing to the white on black bumper sticker that read *American Poetry Is Not Dead—It Has Simply Been Mised.*

A young couple had wandered over, the man with a backpack slung over a shoulder, looking at the book display, the woman struggling with her English. Wendt ran his eyes over the sayings and slogans. *Wallace Stevens is for Grannies.* Maybe, if he had a car. *Professional Poets Are Oxymorons.* Naw, what if a professional poet pulled up behind you in traffic. There you’d be. *What Poem? What Poet?* Overused. *For Poets There Is No Reverse.* Good one to have on a rear bumper though it might get you pulled over for defective equipment. Well, just being a poet would warrant that. *The Wasteland Is Anal.* Finally, somebody figured that out. *The*

*Muse is not Amused.* Too bad there wasn't a lapel button, he'd wear it.  
*Official Poet Laureate Vehicle: Stops At All Bars.* Follow that car. *Caution:*  
*Free Verse.* He was beginning to succumb to lame meme overload.

*I've Got Your Poet Hanging* (also available as a CD, DVD, and eBook).

*Write a poem, go to jail.*

*Poetry! There's An App For That!*

*Make Poetry, Not Politics.*

*The Price Of Immortality Is Death.*

"Hah! Ya, you are Carl Wendt?" The young woman pronounced his name the way it used to be spoken in the Black Forest. "I take picture you, ya?" She had her phone poised at arm's length and a little strobe flashed in the corner of the rectangle.

Wendt didn't hide his surprise. "How did you recognize me?"

It was the young man's turn. He brandished a fat well-worn green paperback. "Ve haf guide buk." He'd flipped it open. "You picture," and pointed to the square photo next to the text. "Frisco poet," he said with the pride of an ornithologist.

Wendt bent closer to examine the photo. He had a moustache back then, and his hair was considerably darker. "You recognized me from that?"

The young woman smiled and pointed to Bob Bobson. "And he saying so." She had her wallet out and had produced a wad of cash, laying down three Jacksons and getting a Lincoln in return along with a square gray volume that he immediately recognized as his book of poems, *Synthetic Lament*. She held up a pen and the book and demanded cheerily, "You sign."

Wendt inflicted his usual scrawl on the title page as she captured the moment with her phone. He turned to Bobson after handing the book back to the pretty poetry tourist. "You got fifty five clams for my book?"

Bobson looked puzzled. "Didn't you know? This is a very hard edition to come by."

Wendt thought about the box full of *Synthetic Laments* under his bed on Balboa. "I was at the auction," Bobson continued, "after the printer went bankrupt. Harry Croft bought up the remainder of the edition that was not distributed beyond the initial release."

Wendt nodded impatiently. He knew that. The publisher, Terry Smallville, of Poetrytown Editions, was a friend and a fan. In the presence of the gods, some people have a tendency to overcompensate. Terry packed his nose with coke and said good-bye to the planet. And the few dozen or so copies he had managed to charm out of the printer's



assistant-probably-mistress were now worth more than the occasional calling card memorabilia for his casual encounters. He might be sitting on a gold mine. But Croft, too, sitting on a pile, gambling on a postmortem surge? Probably waiting for the next book to spike demand for the phantom edition. And the bastard never even mentioned, after all the years they had done business together, that he had a reserve of his books. Of course they'd probably be worth more if he was dead. What still pissed him off more was that when *Synthetic Lament* was published it was totally ignored, no friend praised it, no foe damned it. Now because there were so few in circulation, a copy could go for three times the cover price.

**The lights hit him in the back like the high beams** of a small pickup truck. A camera crew, filming, bore past. A young woman with clipboard and headset trailed in their wake and was in turn followed by a statuesque blonde in a gray flight attendant's uniform.

The half a dozen beers Wendt had uploaded at Bud's beforehand were becoming a burden. A line snaked through an exit door at the back of the lobby area to an alleyway and a couple of blue graffitied porta-potties. He hated standing in line for anything and was casting about for an alternative, a shadowy corner, anything.

"You look distressed." It was the flight attendant. She had a pair of wings pinned to her lapel. The airline logo had been replaced by the word *Muse*.

He immediately sensed a problem. She was taller, a Viking girl with pale blue eyes, straight lustrous blond hair and a pale, perfectly proportioned small featured face. Taller women made him uncomfortable. He had no problem with shorter women or women his height. Then the whole sexual dimorphism thing was still operating. A woman, even a few inches taller, shifted the balance. He couldn't decide whether he wanted to fuck them or fight them.

She held out a hand to him. "I'm Allison Gary. You look like someone who needs some help." As he took the hand she added, "You can call me Allie."

He looked up at her. "Allie Gary, nice to meet you. I'm Carl Wendt."

"Oh, I read your column all the time. You don't look anything like your picture."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"Oh, should I not have said that?" Now it was her turn to show distress.

Wendt was coming down on the side of sex over combat. “Not to worry, I get that all the time.” He gave a benevolent smile. “There’s got to be more than those porta-potties where a man might conduct his business.”

“Oh,” she sniggered behind a lithe blond hand, “I get it.” She pointed to the ceiling. “Upstairs in the VIP lounge, there’s still some working plumbing. But it’s off limits to the public. Performers and poets only.”

“I’m a poet.”

“That’s right, you are!”

“Shouldn’t I be entitled to take a wiz in the poets can?”

“Only if you don’t write some horrible nasty thing about it in your column.”

Wendt scratched his neck, considering. “Snarky maybe, but probably not horribly nasty.”

“Sometimes I think snarky is worse.”

Allie Gary led the way up the stairs under the large banner portrait of The Buk, patron saint of underground poets, aka St. Buk or St. Chuck or St. Chinaski, St. Hank of Chinaski, St. Hank the Factotum, St. Charles of Bukrania. She used her phone to light the way up the dark steps. “Watch your feet.” A pile of litter had accumulated in the corner of the stairwell. The light played on the heap of Styrofoam cups, food wrappers, old newspapers and bits of torn clothing mixed with indistinguishable dust and dirt. Each item appeared to have an aura carefully spray-painted around it.

“This is an art installation, entitled *Halos of Debris*, by Darrell LeGris, one of the many street artists represented here today,” Allie spoke doctently.

Wendt was more interested in the twin humps straining at the rear of the tight stewardess skirt. “So, Allie Gary, are you a poet? Or an artist? What’s your connection with the Penumbroi?”

“No, I’m an explainer. I have a lot of friends who are artists, and poets, writers. I got in the habit of telling them what I thought about what they were doing. I often have a better idea of what they’re doing than they do. I can explain it. Some of my friends are film makers and they’re shooting here today. They’ll be interviewing me at different locations in the event explaining what is going on here. That’s why I’m wearing this getup. I’m supposed to represent the muse.” She shrugged her broad shoulders and gave a smile that dazzled with a sweet vulnerability that was just hot.

**On the second floor, doors and door jambs stood unattached.** Outside walls were bared to brick where some clumps of lath and plaster clung like unintentional art. Interior walls stood alone, skeletal in part, demarking where rooms and hallways had once been enclosed. A combination of rooms formed a larger suite lit by natural light from windows, many with casements missing, banks of led lights, and large raggedy cloud shaped holes in the ceiling revealing the partially naked interior structure of brick and girders of the floor above open to the elements. A fair representation of performers milled about in the ambient noise of their social interaction, waiting to go on, and as well those who had already used their allotted time and were now making themselves stupider with drink and drugs. A widescreen TV offered the image of Yuri Khasid. Bands of pixilated noise broke up his features at regular intervals, interrupting the illusion of presence. His voice was a blurry buzz with a Russian accent. He had shaved his head and wore a monocle, the dark shadows of his trademark leather Gestapo trench coat readily identifiable. He was in hiding disguised as Max Jacob dressed like Fantomas. Unless his pursuers were familiar with obscure early 20<sup>th</sup> Century French poets or French pulp villains of that era, his was a perfect masquerade.

Allie pointed down at what had once been a hallway to the door at the end. “Through there and make a right.”

“I thank you, my bladder thanks you. Don’t go away, I’ll be right back.” The sex option appeared to be the winner. Over her shoulder he caught a glimpse of Igor, the tech savant in orange Converse prowling around the wires near the TV with a lap top. He’d only ever seen him in the company of Kay Syrah and he knew that she would never deign to be a party to this party. He was wearing a black IFIRP tee shirt with the slogan *Take Back The Word!*

In fact, Wendt didn’t think he’d meet anyone he knew at this shindig, yet here was Ray Panta, plumber turned poet, author of *Shit Flows Downhill* and *If You Stepped In It Once, You’ll Step In It Again*. Ray was exiting the door Wendt was about to enter.

“Hey Wendt, they add you to the bill?” And as if his question had been answered by Wendt’s non-committal expression, “A lot of people bailed when they saw the condition of this place. Not to mention that they have to recite their poems through a bullhorn.”

“Yeah,” Wendt agreed, “Not a lot of bullhorn poetry being written these days. I think that went away with the 60’s. Now there’s rap. Who needs a bullhorn when you can be on the radio, right?”

“Yeah, well, whatever you do, don’t flush!”

“Whadyamean?”

“Problem with the plumbing. It’s complicated. I had to jerry rig something to keep the shit flowing. Who else was gonna do it?” He glanced at his hands wrinkling his nose. “Now I gotta go find some place to wash these. Let that be a lesson to you, Wendt. You can’t escape your past. Once a plumber, always a plumber.”

Wendt made to pass through the door.

“And remember, don’t flush!”

The room was not empty. A clump of people grouped around a tall skinny man who spoke in a low resonant drone. Wendt frowned at them thinking that it might be another line, but no, to his right was a door upon which someone had drawn a circle with uterine cross and phallic arrow combined. Wendt tried the knob. “Ocupido!” a weak voice claimed. Of course.

He didn’t have much choice but to focus on the assembled and the man addressing them. He recognized him now, Regent Snore, also known as the Black Finn and sometimes the Whispering Finn, for his barely audible sandpaper rasp. He was an old philosopher poet, wire whisk of waist length hair and matching beard to his chest, famous for his ‘seven chakras of poetry’ theory. He spoke around his sole remaining tooth as if in italics and Wendt had to tilt his head to the right to make out what he was saying.

“. . . *sentimental naturalism governed by hard facts and brass tacks, reactive, in the grim grip of ignorance, the dull zeal of simple being—here I am here I stay.*” The old poet held up two fingers and scanned the attention level of his audience like a practiced mesmerist. “*A pathological obsession with sex, the body, and all its functions. The purpose is sexual conquest through the clever device of double entendre. . . .*” He spoke the phrase with the appropriate accent. “. . . *saying one thing yet meaning another as the dual violation of mind and body in a masturbatory cycle of desire and regret.*” Now with three fingers, “*The will to power, to dominate and conquer, through ruthless pathological vengeance by any means, including sex, human sacrifice, psychic cruelty, in the annihilation of the other. Self-conscious self-righteous goal oriented competitive predator.*” The one tooth managed a knowing smile. He held up a hand, fingers splayed, thumb tucked into the palm. “*Freedom, the sound of one hand clapping, the hum of the void, of singular unity. I am not you, this is not that, dream state in which the poet is unaware of his creation. Self-illuminating, the now, the undifferentiated consciousness, the stem cell of being, the silence that is before, after, within, and surrounding each syllable with peace and bliss.*” Then the arresting Buddha leaf hand and a brow of seriousness. “*The point of no return, eternal childlike innocence, non-judgmental*

*acceptance of the illusory nature of poetry. Shout loudly many pleasing and displeasing words and observe their pleasurable and unpleasant effects and realize that all words are as illusory as echoes in a dark cavern.”* Then joined by the thumb of the other hand. *“The state of continual poetic awareness. Yet where there is me there it is. Poetry is love and those who love poetry are poetry as poetry loves them. The poet as poetry has nothing in common with anything and is nothing to anyone.”* With an intake of breath to emphasize the fullness of his body, the glow of which he seemed to want to emanate, *“A bath of light in which there is no membrane separating the poet from the poetic. Yet this is voicelessness, a divine aphasia in which words are unnecessary and the poet is one with poetry. A poet is poetry’s way of making a poem and a poem is a poet’s way of making poetry and poetry is a poem’s way of making a poet. . . .”*

There was more but the door opened and Marci Duchamp, author of *Round Trip*, in a very skimpy outfit and peroxide fright wig that looked like an explosion in a shingle factory stood on the threshold trying to decide which foot to put forward. Her face was as white as a boiled sheet.

“You ok?” Wendt offered.

She looked at him with large unfocused red rimmed mascara spider eyes. “Yeah, something I ate. Or drank. Or smoked.”

“Ok, as long as you’re ok,” and squeezed past her.

A gray tarp hung over the opening along an outside wall missing half-way down where the tub or shower had been and shifted alarmingly in gusts of wind from off the Bay. On the back wall a large hand written sign said *Do Not Flush*. Another sign with an arrow pointing at the commode read *Shit*. Wendt didn’t have to get any closer to believe the truth of what it said. Another sign above the shower drain said *Piss* with an arrow pointing to the little lake of urine in the depression in the floor.

Wendt stood at its shore and gazed down at the space between the tarp and the half wall of obviously unstable masonry and thought why not. He let go a high arc to splash and dribble against the tarp and gather at the gray edge before raining down the side of the building. He heard shouts and craned his neck to look over the edge. He was directly above the line to the porta-potties in the alleyway.

Jimmy Price, author of *Regards & Regrets*, was next in the line that had formed. He didn’t recognize the woman behind him, and was relieved that Price didn’t recognize him, especially after the unfavorable rating he had given his selected poems in the best and the worst poetry book ranking in his Poetry Month column. That had been a few years back, but as

he knew from past experience, poets have short attention spans but very long memories.

Back in the hubbub where street poets mingled cheek and jowl with pretentious literati, Wendt recognized P.J. Maas, poet laureate of Daly City. Patty Jane looked like she was wondering why she was there, a pink chiffon scarf tied loosely around her neck, tasteful gold earrings and frosted curls to match. Maybe it was the business attire and the rigor of her pale red lipstick smile that radiated her discomfort like a beacon. That and the fact that she was being ignored by the elite little clusters that congeal at these kinds of affairs. He looked around for the Viking flight attendant. He had become very interested in getting over his fear of flying and wanted to arrange for lessons.

She was holding forth in front of a camera. She caught his look and smiling came to stand at his side when she was done. "What are you so smug about?"

"I just couldn't help but notice the startling similarity of this gathering to the nine circles of poetry hell. They're all here, the back-stabbers, the frauds, the psychopaths, the deluded, the angry, the envious, the excessive, the horny, the waiters."

"Waiters?"

"Not food servers. I mean those waiting in line for their turn at the brass poetry ring. As Ted Berrigan was supposed to have said, 'American poets think you wait in line to get famous.'"

"I don't think I follow you."

"Being a poet is like playing the lottery, but obsessively so, and hoping for the big score that will set you up for life. Otherwise you can find yourself on the trading floor and sweating the rise and fall of your literary stock. Most poets who think they've made it are actually in a kind of limbo. They've seen the promise of fame and critical acclaim but will never be on the receiving end."

"That must be discouraging."

"It is a kind of hell. Everyone's caught in a never-ending daisy chain circle jerk of treachery, fraud, and greed. Lust is its own special category because it conveniently covers not only sexual obsession, but the insatiable desire for money, fame, and power."

"You're saying all of that is represented here, by these poets." Little furrows accented the space between her pale eyebrows like exclamation points. "Don't you think that's a little negative? There must be some redeeming qualities represented here."

"You mean like altruism?"

“Sure, doing something good for its own sake.”

“First of all, altruism is often the lair of the sanctimonious spider. Take Gilda Narrenschwann, for instance.” Wendt indicated the short lithe woman, author of *Mushroom Cloud Alphabet Soup*, in the peasant blouse and multi-colored ankle length skirt made from old cravats talking with Mandy Airhat, author of *The Crimson Cap*, a long poem with Freudian overtones, also about mushrooms. “She claims to be a poet of ecstatic vision. Now you might think from talking to her or reading her poems that she’s a goody two-shoes from all that syrupy politically correct sentiment she gushes as the wishful thinking of an enlightened naïveté. She’s actually a two-faced bitch and if you don’t fall in line with her way of thinking you are obviously subhuman and will be eliminated from existence in her rosy universe.”

“Sounds like you’ve had some personal experience.”

Wendt had a yen for a cigarette but obviously it was a smoke free environment though certainly not dust free or drug free or alcohol free. “Ah, that whole holier-than-thou earth mother routine gets old after a while, especially when you realize that she’s just as self-serving as anyone else and not the least bit shy about self-promotion.”

“You must know everyone here.”

Wendt scanned the room. “Surprisingly, I do.” With that admission came an unease, until then dormant, that somehow he was out of the loop, that he had not been included in the festivities, such as they were, as the most visible flaneur poet of the city’s bohemian culture, that his hipness and savoir faire were a little threadbare and worse for the wear, that he was a has-been. But looking around at the clashing egos and seething aggression, did he really need to feel shabby or miffed or piqued or take umbrage or irritated or sulky or resentful or pout or chafe or fume or foam or hurt or rankled or brought down or worked up or indignant or peeved? What did Virgil say? *Tantaene animis coelestibus irae*, how can so much animus reside in the minds of the gods? Yet a shadow of doubt was evident in his consternation.

“I’ve crossed paths, and swords, with most of these poets at one time or another. Some hate me for my stature as a published, prize winning poet and critic. Mainly as a critic. Otherwise it’s just the usual ambivalence and envy. I’ve attained something they wish they could, but then, as Heraclitus said, if wishes were fishes the oceans would be overpopulated and we’d all be on a sea food diet.”

“Did Heraclitus really say that?”

“I’m paraphrasing.”

Samantha Bahdra, author of *Yab-Yum Yum-Yum*, sauntered by, a raised delicately drawn eyebrow and come-hither purse to her lips.

“Someone else you’re surprised to see?”

“Oh, Sam and I go way back. She tries for that sacred profane Kathy Aker blood thirsty Kali priestess persona. She’ll fuck anything on three legs—pardon my proto-Indo-European.”

Allie Gary flicked a set of polished nails. “I know what a three legged fuck is,” and gave Wendt a meaningful look.

“She writes a sonnet for each of her liaisons but under the guise of some famous historic or literary personage.”

“What oldie but goody is she with you?”

“I’ve managed to stay out of the dustbin of her histrionics. Otherwise I’d be just another jaded skull strung on her metaphysical necklace.”

He watched Bahdra buttonhole Gil Gamic, publisher of Inky Dew Press, a short man with a fleshy bulbous schnozzle and a hipster fedora. He was in a group of writers that included Poetry Dude Art Wrytic, author of *Kayak Angst*, Luce Cannon, author of *Out Of Control*, and the Vietnamese poet Vo Erh, author of *I like To Watch*. He recognized blogger Kay Passeau among the set, a member of the Barracuda School of Poets aka the Snarkacudas. She was at the periphery of the circle talking with Harris Tottle of the successful poetry blog, *Tottle Along*. Wendt really didn’t get blogging. He had to ask himself, when the world of discourse is paved over with soap boxes, what do you stand on to make yourself heard?

“Do you really think they all hate you or bear you ill will?”

Wendt examined Allie’s expressionless face to gauge if she was toying with him. “Well, to quote Pound, ‘the vendetta of imbeciles is endless.’” He surveyed the scene. “Poetry is a crowded room. Someone’s toes are bound to get stepped on.”

**Toot Lememe, poetry mime and part-time phrenologist**, author of *Read My Lump*, Tom Mahoque, poet with an axe to grind, author of *Flying Off The Handle*, Judy Hoyt, known to all as Hoity-Toity and author of *Anecdotal Evidence*, Moroccan poet Al Frah’d Jeri, author of *You Be Ram*, with his girlfriend, Patty Fishsticks, poetry voluptuary and performance artist, Andy Mattre, the experimental (emphasis on mental) poet, author of *Chance Operation*, and Donna Matrix, author of *These Boots Are Made For Wanking*. He knew them all. They were part of a group that he had once dubbed The California Roll School of Poetry, or the Sushi-ists. And wild eyed poet Lyman Rossi, author of *Ode to Wall With Men* (about a



bathhouse) cruising the edges of the crowd looking for an opening. And there too was Bobby 'Rubber' Ducken, recognized for what he had attempted rather than accomplished, best known for his unfinished epic *Do Little*.

"What you have here is a veritable Postmodern potpourri self-devouring feast, like the worm Uroboros, spinning into an ever tightening circle, trying to bite their own tails, spiting their faces, and those limber enough to accomplish the feat know soon enough the smell of shit.

"Most of the poets in these little cliques are made up of FOPPS, Friends Of Poet Professors, who get taught or touted to clueless students and night school housewives which then leads to incredibly incestuous and inbred in-crowd behavior hence the name of their anthology, *Fusion*, known to some with a sense of humor as *Confusion*, though a more appropriate title would be *The In-Breds*. It just serves to underline the fact that MFA programs are for those who can't read or read with any discernment or are too locked into their view of themselves that they can't make sense of anyone else."

"But what about the avant-garde? Have they been co-opted, too?"

"The problem with the avant-garde is that those who claim to be at the leading edge of art are really the après-garde. You'll never know about the avant-garde until it's already history. Then I guess you might call that realization a post-modern epiphany. Take conceptual poetry or Flarf. They say they fight the power while at the same time hoping to be assimilated . . . it's a very gay, the mother revered reviled kind of thing."

"I'm not familiar with Flarf."

"Flarf I think stands for Fluffy Art Federation, mostly bored middle class twits playing with refrigerator magnets. They'll eventually drift back to dungeons and dragons or their game consoles and masturbate in their socks. As for conceptual poetry, it's like the guy who gets into the ring with himself as his only opponent and starts punching himself in the face with his fists. . . there will be blood, but never a knock-out."

"Do you agree with Ellen Mudhen when she says 'Poetry is a very stupid thing to be good at'? That poems are basically like dreams, something that everybody likes to tell each other but nobody actually cares about unless it's their own. And which is why poetry is apparently a failure of the intellectual community."

Wendt laughed. "I don't know who Ellen Mudhen is, but it sounds like she has a point. Now those guys over there might be a perfect example of what she's talking about. Al Bebak, the author of *Why Me*, and Sam Maritain, author of *Any Qualia*. Denis Winkle wrote a collection of

anecdotes titled *Name Your Poison*.” He indicated the cluster of dour intellectuals. “I reviewed Holly Grail’s *Simple Sample*, and Claire Del Ulna’s *Exaggerated Misery*. Favorably, I might add.”

“So you’re not affiliated with any of these poets, you don’t cotton to any of their notions?”

“That’s one way of putting it, but no, I don’t belong and I like it that way. And that scene, like most scenes, is way too church for me. By ‘church’ I mean pious and narrow-minded.”

“You enjoy your cutting sarcasm, don’t you, Carl? I mean, that’s why people read your column, isn’t it? You’re the representative sarcastic prick for the city.” Allie gave him a tight smile, the kind that comes with reaching a conclusion. “You know, Carl, sometimes we attribute our own worst faults to others. You might call it theory of mind with extreme prejudice. Problem with smart people like you is that they feel obligated to demonstrate their superiority no matter whose feelings are hurt. I suppose when you consider yourself vastly superior to anyone else and you’ve cultivated that critical acumen to such a sharp edge, you’ll ultimately cut your own throat to reveal a total and irrevocable incompetence at anything but waving the flag of your over-inflated sense of self. And I mean that in a nice way.” She glanced down at the smart phone in her hand. “Oops, sorry, gotta go, I have more explaining to do.”

Wendt watched her walk away. Yeah, he could probably kick her ass.

**A buffet table had been set up** near the large video screen with a live feed from the reading on the floor below. He wandered over and noticed that the wine bottles all appeared to be dead soldiers and whatever food was left had been thoroughly picked over. Not very appetizing, if it ever was. The poet peering at the assembly of green glass corpses for any signs of life or vino was Horace, Horace Kopes. Wendt had once said a kindly word about his book of poems, *Astral Winks*, an obvious cop from the Van Morrison album of similar name, and now they were friends for life. Horace took his poems from the daily astrology columns in the various newspapers around town. He claimed that he could write a poem a day for a year, every year. The poems were cutups of that particular day’s forecasts or predictions. Horace was a deft editor and had a sense of humor. But his method might have been too much of a good thing. And they would never escape the fact of being other people’s words. “I’m afraid the oasis has been drunk dry,” he said, addressing Wendt’s searching gaze. Under the table in a large tub once filled with ice a few diet beverages bobbed like flotsam, of no interest to even the thirstiest.

Wendt turned his attention to the big screen. Shown in the harsh halogen lighting, a skinny fey man wearing a powder blue wig spoke his poem in a bullhorn which oddly enough gave it resonance and authority. He queried Kopes who was peering down the neck of a wine bottle. “Who’s that?”

“Uh, I think that’s Francis X. Finitivity, the defrocked Jesuit from Dublin.” Kopes directed his attention to the reading on the flat screen. “And he’s only got one good poem. That one, *Eek, A Homo!*”

Well, nothing to see here, Wendt mused, move along. He located the entrance to the stairway down and started in that direction. He passed two men engaged in a heated discussion. One was a professor at the University, Franklin Rydell, author of *Fortune, Opportune*, and a selection of translations, *Importune*. Wendt had called him ‘Fiddle’ in one of his columns and the name had stuck. Some people were under the impression that his name was actually Franklin Fiddle. What gave the truth to his sobriquet was that Rydell obsessively revised and rewrote his work. In actuality he had written only a handful of poems. Most of his works were variations on those same few, rearranged and reordered and reconsidered. His translations as such were numerous variations of the one extant poem by an obscure Latin poet, Fluxus Refluxus.

The other man was someone he only knew as Stu, president of SPU, the Street Poets Union (pronounced “spew”). Stu was saying, “Poetry’s first purpose is to say fuck you to people like you. What you need to know is that we’re the bad boys, the rude, the purposely uncultivated, lacking in couch outlaws, outsiders. We take somebody like Kenneth Rexroth and hold him up as an example of what we are or would like to be. Owing no allegiance to any academy, hermeneutic, autodidactic, and not the least bit polite about it. We adhere to what Diogenes said about Plato’s carpet to be indicative of our attitude toward the insufferable academic toadies who are merely gatekeepers for the inanely conservative status quo. Action prompts reaction, conservative against radical on the culture frontier. We are the gunmen, the assassins of a misguided respectability. What disturbs you most and threatens your grip on your much vaunted correctness is what we are. I wipe my ass on tradition because I just shit on your ideals.”

Wendt would have stayed to hear Fiddle’s rejoinder but he spotted the white haired pompadour, craggy crazy leprechaun face, full length deep black almost purple leather trench coat and make-me-taller lifts of Lon Murphy who was accompanied by his usual contingent of sharp shouldered, narrow-assed churls cruising for a back to stab or posterior

to osculate. Right at the moment they were engaged in some polite chit-chat with Lu Sacke-Shoen, another disagreeable person, and needless to say, British, author of *You Couldn't Possibly Be Right*, but, as Wendt could attest, great in bed, her body accepting what her mind denied—even more incentive to vacate the sulfurous atmosphere.

In the lobby some of the vendors were beginning to pack up. Men in hardhats, some white, some red, were directing people toward the entrance. It looked like the cops or the fire department had come up with an exit strategy. Wendt ducked into the main arena just in time to hear Michel Brazon's name bellowed over a bullhorn. His image arrived before he did as a large screen had been set up as a back drop and the feed from the camera at stage center was projected larger than life. Brazon looked quizzically at the bullhorn he'd been handed as Wendt made his way close enough to hear the MC, Bruce Roberdeux, aka Bruised Rubberducky, author of *Blood Seed*, instruct him to "just pull the trigger."

Brazon liked that. He spoke into the mic end, "***Testicle, testicle.***" Pleased by what he heard he began, "***Poets of every stripe unite! I'm Michel Brazon, acting secretary for the International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Poets, and I can say without exaggeration that never has poetry been menaced as seriously as today!***"

A smattering of benches and odd chairs fronted the elevated stage mostly occupied by a similarly odd though tentatively attentive audience. The further away from the stage area the less dutiful the interest paid the speaker. Wendt drifted toward the back where conversations were more important than what was being said over a bullhorn.

***"Today I see world poetry united in its historic destiny reeling under the blow of academic departments armed with an entire arsenal of post-modern terminology. I am by no means thinking only of the poetry wars that draw near. In a time of crass unversed superficiality, the position of poetry has become untenable!***

***"In so far as it originates in the poet, in so far as it brings into play poetic talents to create a poetic which brings about an objective enriching of poetry, any poetic advancement seems to be the fruit of precious chance!"***

Wendt made the mistake of listening. The words and Brazon mouthing them struck him as highly unlikely and incongruous.

***"That is to say, the manifestation, more or less spontaneous, of poetry. Such poems cannot be slighted. I cannot remain indifferent to the anonymous conditions under which poetic activity takes place. Nor should I fail to pay respect to those who break the laws***

*which ostensibly govern poetry.*

*“In the contemporary world I must recognize the even more widespread conditions under which poetry is impossible. From this follows, of necessity, an increasingly manifest degradation not only of the poem but also of the specifically poetic personality, the poet. The regime of the Ivy League, led by Harvard, now that it has rid literature of all those writers whose work expresses the slightest sympathy for the imagination, has reduced those who still consent to take up the keyboard to the status of hired help of the post-modern establishment, whose task it is to glorify its own stink, according to the worst possible anachronistic conventions. If reports may be believed, it is the same at Stanford where Thermidorian reaction is now reaching its apex!”*

A familiar unmistakable laugh erupted from the crowd. Whether it was directed at what Brazon had just said or simply a reaction to a snide comment from a companion, it announced the presence of Gary Parsons-Snow, also known as GPS, as his location could be immediately determined from his high pitched horse whinny.

*“It goes without saying that I identify myself with the currently fashionable battle cry, fuck a bunch of post-modernists! A slogan which frightens the literate elite and leaves them clinging to the tattered remnants of the demoded metric past!*

*“True poets are not content to play variations on ready-made models but rather insist on expressing their inner needs!*

*“True poetry is unable not to be revolutionary! Not to aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of poetry!*

*“I recognize that only the poetry revolution can sweep clean the path for a new poetry!*

*“I reject all solidarity with the establishment now in control of sovereign English precisely because it represents not poetry, but it’s most pernicious enemy, the writing prompt!”*

Wendt wandered among the self-satisfied, none of whom were too involved in what the man on stage was saying. So typical of poetry events. Attended not so much to hear the presentation, but to see and be seen at a potentially random historic occasion.

*“The academic regime, working through the so called poetry journals, reviews and blogs it controls, has spread over the entire world a deep twilight hostile to every sort of spirited poetry, a twilight of conceptualism and cronyism in which, disguised as poets, they subvert the purpose of the art!*

*“They, who have made servility a career, of lying for pay an institution, of the palliation of censorship a source of pleasure. The official poetry of the Anglo overlords, with blatancy unexampled in history, mirrors the effort to put a good face on their disingenuous professions.*

*“The repugnance which this shameful negation of the principles of poetry inspires in the poetry world should lead to an active and uncompromising condemnation. The opposition of poets, one hundred thousand strong, is one of the forces that can usefully contribute to the discrediting and overthrow of academic totalitarians who are destroying, along with the rights of the poetariat to aspire to better poetry, every scintilla of human dignity and privilege!”*

He spotted someone he knew, little Liz Hornet, a diminutive poet with a stinging wit in her familiar yellow jacket, long black scarf looped around her neck and over the shoulder *à la* Isadora. He was just about to greet her when a laugh and cheer went up from the audience.

*“The poetry revolution will not be televised! But it will be readily available on You Tube, Facebook, and any number of revolutionary holdouts as long as there’s a breath to blog!*

*“The poetry revolution is for the fearless who realize that the role of the poet in a decadent poetry society is determined by the conflict between the individual and various poetry institutions hostile to them! This fact alone, in so far as they are conscious of it, makes the poet the natural ally of revolution!”*

Smiling and shaking his head at the foolishness, he opened his mouth to comment when Theresa Bull wedged herself between them and started in on him about his long poem, “Procreation”, as yet unpublished but apparently making the rounds as some self-righteous and primarily scurrilous word of mouth. Terry, wearing a T-shirt proclaiming *Sylvia Died For Ted’s Sins*, was the editor of the lifestyle magazine and blog, *Modern Lesbian*, known to all as *MoLes*. She was accompanied by her partner Dee Liberate, the radical black feminist author of *Think Again*, *Heat Loss*, *Fess up*, *Zero Out*, *No Wonder*, and *That’s What I Meant To Say*. If anyone had back, Dee certainly did. She possessed a load wide enough to warrant a warning beeper whenever she put her ass in reverse.

“You are an absolute scum bag asshole!” Terry was close enough that Wendt could feel her breath on his cheek. She was a big woman of the broad shoulder broad hip variety. And she was crowding his space. He felt a momentary helplessness, like he had walked into a trap.

***“The need for emancipation felt by the individual poet has only to follow its natural course to be led to mingle its stream with this primal necessity, the need to emancipate all poets!”***

“You wrote a poem that disrespects women, and denigrates reproductive rights, and you’re of the opinion that women are merely breeding stock, soulless vacuous cows meant only for reproduction.” At the ratchet of each accusation Dee’s face got meaner and meaner, and if possible, darker.

***“The conception of the poet’s function is worth recalling. The poet naturally must make money in order to live and write, but should not under any circumstances live and write in order to make money. Poets, by no means, look on their work as a means. It is an end in itself and so little a means in their eyes, and that of others, that, if necessary, they sacrifice their existence for their work. The first condition of freedom of the poetry press is that it is not a business activity!”***

There were cheers and foot stomping as if a large truth had just been revealed.

“What do you have to say to that, you fucking cock!”

Wendt could have sworn Terry’s eyes were spinning, the corners of her mouth flecked with spittle. He laughed defensively. “You need to step back with your paranoid unfounded *bull* shit, Terry!” He said it in such a way as to emphasize the similarity of her name to bovine flop. “I don’t know where you got any of that toxic off-the-wall hearsay crap but you are way off your obsessively pierced shaved head nut. That poem, if you were ever to actually read and understand it, is about the necessity and wonder of creation whether it be making children or works of art! It’s an ode to creativity, not the negative horse pucky you’re trying to make it out to be!”

***“In the realm of poetic creation the imagination must escape from all constraint and must under no pretext allow itself to be placed under the purview of political correctness. To those who urge me whether for today or for tomorrow, to consent that poetry should submit to a discipline I hold to be radically incompatible with its nature, I give that flat refusal, Fuck you and the horse you rode in on!”***

A unanimous cheer and roar of approval greeted the last as Wendt met Terry’s unbelieving steely gaze. Just like a woman, he mused, once she’s got her mind made up, no way was she going to back down and admit she’s wrong. Perversely, he considered quoting Aristotle, by way

of Bruno the Nolan, that women are intractable, frail, capricious, cowardly, feeble, vile, ignoble, base, despicable, slovenly, unworthy, deceitful, harmful, abusive, and disloyal, not that any of that was the exclusive trait of any one gender, but why stir the shit when it's already roiling. He cast about for a way to extricate himself from the current no-win situation. His savior came in the person of Stan Olsted, author of *Something And/Or Other*.

***“I recognize of course that revolutionary poets have the right to defend themselves against the counterattack of the MFA’s draped in the mantle of higher education. But there is an abyss between those enforced and temporary measures of revolutionary self-defense and the pretentiousness of giving direction on poetic creation. To develop poetry, an anarchist regime of individual liberties from the first should be established. No authority, no dictation, not the least trace of orders from above! Only on the basis of friendly cooperation, without constraint from outside, will it be possible for poets to carry out their tasks, which will be more far reaching than ever before in history!”***

A rehabilitated Yeti with a bad haircut and a bent nose with a bent for hooch, Stoli, as Stan was known, was a big guy to begin with, and with his large ego, he could really crowd a room. He wandered innocently into the event horizon of Terry’s venting singularity and draped an ape long arm around Liz’s shoulder practically engulfing it. In that company, it was exactly the wrong thing to do.

***“It should be clear by now that in defending freedom of poetry I have no intention of justifying poetic indifference, and that it is far from my wish to revive a so-called pure poetry which generally serves the extremely impure aim of poetry reactionaries. No, my conception of the role of poet in our epoch is to take part actively and consciously in preparation for the poetry revolution. But the poet cannot serve the struggle for acceptance unless he subjectively assimilates its social cost, unless he feels in his very nerves its ambiguity and freely seeks to reveal his own inner world in his poetry.”***

Terry turned on Stoli like a viper held by the wrong end. “That’s sexual harassment!” she exclaimed self-righteously and stabbing an accusing pointy claw finger at him.

Stoli was clueless. What he had done was standard operating procedure for him. Find a woman with whom he was acquainted, or barely acquainted with, wrap an arm around her and dispense a crotch felt hug



while cooing smooth gigolo pleasantries. “What?”

“What you’re doing would be grounds for the filing of a sexual harassment suit in any workplace, private or public!”

“What?” Stoli asked again tentatively. “I’m just giving my old friend Liz here a hug. What’s wrong with that?”

“First of all, a hug, as you call it, is a covert sexual advance. By giving someone, whether a member of the opposite sex or the same sex who is not a member of your immediate family, a hug, a relic of a so-called liberated era, you are violating a social boundary that preserves the integrity and personal space of that person. The notorious hug of the sixties was just a ploy by shaggy headed horn dogs to cop a feel under the guise of brotherly love!”

Balefully Stoli looked at the arm draped across Liz’s shoulder as if it were not his own.

“What you are doing by placing your arm around her in such a fashion is staking a claim, however symbolic, of possession, like she was a piece of property you could own. . . .”

***“In the present period of the death agony of poetry, modern as well as post-modern, the poet sees himself threatened with the loss of his right to write and continue writing. He sees all avenues of poetry choked by the strangle hold of a politically correct lexical dictatorship.”***

Wendt backed away cautiously. Both Terry and Dee were too intent on whacking Stoli on the pee-pee to notice him fade into the shadows. None too soon as they began to berate the Yeti for being an insufferable egotistic lecherous alcoholic Lothario. Wendt was more than passing familiar with that label.

***“It is only natural that the poet should turn to academic institutions that hold out the possibility of escaping from isolation and poverty. But if poets are to avoid complete demoralization, they cannot remain there. Why? Because of the impossibility of delivering their own poetry and the degrading servility which these institutions exact from them in exchange solely for certain material advantages, that’s why! Poets must understand their place is elsewhere, not among those who betray the cause of the revolution and poetry but among those who with unshaken fidelity bear witness to the poetry revolution! Among those who, for this reason, are alone able to bring it to fruition! And along with it the ultimate free expression of all poetries of human and inhuman genius!”***

Wendt hadn’t wandered far when he ran into the poet known as

Grumpy Old Dude, usually referred to simply as GOD, author of *Fuck That*. A previous selection of his poems had been entitled *Fuck This*, and he was notorious as the editor/publisher of a literary magazine in the days of the mimeograph revolution called *Fuck Entropy*.

A competing bullhorn coming from the street outside issued a warning to those illegally occupying a building under demolition that their being there constituted a violation of city health and safety codes.

***“The aim of this appeal is to find common ground on which all revolutionary poets may be reunited, the better to serve the revolution by their poetry and to defend the freedom of that poetry itself against the post-modern usurpers!”***

“Hey, Wendt,” GOD greeted, “wild Luella was in town. Did you catch her reading at the University?” At Wendt’s shake of the head, “She has a new book out entitled *Ab!*”

***“I believe that aesthetic, philosophical and poetical tendencies of the most varied sort can find common ground!”***

“*Ab?*”

***“I know very well that at least hundreds of thousands of isolated poets scattered throughout the world, whose voices are drowned out by the loud choruses of well-disciplined MFA poetry toadies!”***

“*Ab!* With an exclamation point.” GOD held up a finger in illustration.

***“Hundreds of thousands of small poetry magazines and blogs are trying to gather youthful forces about them, seeking new paths and kickstarts!”***

“That makes all the difference,” Wendt chuckled snidely. “So what’s GOD been up to these days?”

***“Every progressive tendency in poetry is denigrated by post-modernists as degenerate!”***

“I’ve been learning to avoid the seven don’ts and the eight defects while practicing the three styles, the five principles, and the eight modes.”

The competing bullhorn repeated its demands that everyone immediately leave the premises in an orderly fashion.

“That’ll keep you busy.”

***“Every freedom is called anti-poetic by the entrenched academics in the pay of an imperial Anglo hegemony!”***

“You know, I don’t get this whole ‘community of writers’ thing. It’s just an opportunity for backstabbing and wife stealing. Fuck that.”

***“Independent revolutionary poetry must now gather its forces for the struggle against reactionary publishers and institutions!”***

“And what’s with this genius grant thing? Too late! I’m already a genius! I don’t need a grant to be one!”

Determined men wearing serious demeanors, hard hats and badges circulated through the audience in an attempt to herd them toward the exit, one of them signaling Brazon to come down off the stage. Brazon, to his credit, ignored him.

**“Poetry must proclaim aloud its right to exist!”**

“So this guy I never heard of, some university incubated clone, gets a poetry prize for a hundred large.”

**“Such a union of creative forces is the purpose of the International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Poets!”**

“From a fucking trust fund foundation I never heard of. What’s up with that? And, need I add, his poetry sucks? Honest poets are being pushed out by the eggheads.”

**“I urge all friends and defenders of poetry who cannot but realize the necessity of this appeal to make themselves heard and while they’re at it, to make a small donation at the IFIRP booth near the entrance.”**

“There’s just no shame.”

**“I address this same appeal to all the editors and publishers who are ready to participate in the federation of independent revolutionary poets!”**

“Tell me about it. Taking money under false pretext, so typical of bourgeois writers.”

**“Our aim: the independence of poetry – for the revolution!”**

“I think it’s a trend.”

**“The revolution – for the complete liberation of poetry!”**

“Fuck that!”

A rowdy enthusiastic cheer was followed by a spasm that shook the Seedy Reedy, causing a shower of powdery plaster dust to rain down from the ceiling. A rumble accompanied the moaning groan of timbers under stress. And a loud noise, too soft to be an explosion but certainly attention getting, punctuated the *oh shit* silence before the screams and shouts of panic.

Wendt was big enough to easily push his way through to the entrance. He had no intention of buying it in the rubble of an antique hotel no matter how historic it was supposed to be. Poets were jumping down the steps from the upper floor two and three at a time, some falling and sliding and being stepped on. The official bullhorn urged calm to no avail. A short stocky man careened against Wendt as they cleared the

entrance out to the street and the flashing lights of emergency vehicles.

“What the fuck was that?” Wendt demanded following quickly behind him.

The man turned his head as he continued running for the ostensible safety beyond the barricades. “Somebody flushed!”

**Wendt hurriedly stepped over the charged hoses** snaking out from the pump bays of fire engines and made his way to the opposite side of the street, turning to look back at the crowd spilling from the building, many of whom took up positions next to him to pause and look back as well, and thank their lucky stars or deities. TV news crews stood on the periphery, reporters gripping mics and speaking into them with earnest professionalism. Allie Gary was being filmed pointing to the old hotel. The building had emptied itself in an amazingly short time. Only a few stragglers, a woman who appeared to have injured her leg being helped by two firefighters, remained to get clear of the street area in front of the Reed Hotel. One of them was Michel Brazon.

Wendt caught his eye and waved him over. “You all right, man?” Brazon’s clothes and hair were covered with a light patina of white dust.

“Yeah, yeah, everything’s cool. False alarm.”

“False alarm?”

“Yeah, somebody flushed and however that toilet was rigged, the pressure just blew the pipes out, knocked a few bricks on top of the porta potties below and sprayed shit down on whoever was standing in line.” He grinned, “It’s a poetry event, what do they expect?”

Wendt nodded. “Nobody was hurt? What about that woman I just saw being carried off?”

“Aw, she just twisted her ankle. Caught her foot in a pile of debris in the stairwell.”

“Well, good thing no one was hurt. I don’t think the Penumbroi can afford a lawsuit.””

Brazon turned the conversation to more important matters. “Hey, whajathinka my sermon?”

“Impressive. And very familiar. Wasn’t that the text from the Trotsky /Breton/Rivera thing. . . ?”

“Right, *The Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art of 1938*, yeah. I did a Ted Berrigan word substitution on it, tweaked it a bit here and there.”

“Good job. But isn’t that plagiarism?”

“Yeah, well, what isn’t these days?”

Wendt laughed. “You’re right. And there’s always room for a good hoax.”

“Hey, come on, a bunch of us are going down to the Asylum on Howard. You can buy me that drink you owe me for being such a dick at the Blake reading.” Brazon grinned like he had an ace in the hole.

Wendt ruefully agreed. “Yeah, I might drift down there in a bit.” *Not*, he thought to himself. The Asylum, not the actual name of the bar, was known for its crazies and rough trade leather boys.

The police extended the perimeter and began herding the growing crowd of gawkers further away from the site in either direction on Mission. Wendt went with the flow, reaching into his pocket for the last cigarette of the pack. Beyond the confusion of whirling colored lights and patrol cars and ambulances and ladder trucks and powerful search beams even though there was still enough of twilight left to illuminate the potential catastrophe, he stopped to apply flame to tobacco. Blowing out the first mouthful, he chuckled to himself brushing plaster dust off the sleeve of his jacket. No doubt. Hell is other poets.

The refugees from the Penumbroi event added a parade of pedestrian traffic to a normally busy thoroughfare now blocked by the aftermath of the near crisis. A crowd had gathered out in front of a liquor store on the corner of Sixth, a safe enough vantage that provided a view of all the excitement and a place to talk about how any one of them had just barely made it out of there alive. Wendt eyed the opposite corner as the clearest unobstructed route back to Powell and Bud’s.

But he’d have to pay the troll before he did. Lon Murphy stepped in his path followed by a gaggle of his goose-steppers, all of them attired in one or the other of the fifty shades of black.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Gonewiththe Wendt, author of *Splenetic Cement*.” Murphy was pleased with his little joke and looked to his coterie for their nods of chin wagged approval.

Wendt eyed the clot of writers and wannabe writers who were all for the most part clueless stick figures, some like Lon’s second, Roman Ackley, leering with self-righteous condescension. He could have taken any or all of them, but why bother, a passel of clowns if there ever was one. “Murph the Smurf. And his shitbirds. Did somebody forget to lock the gate to poetry fantasyland?”

The smurf tag always enraged Murphy and inevitably his face turned a purplish shade of blue. “You are in a shit load of trouble.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“When a man makes a social *faux pas* like you have, it’s known as stepping on your dick.”

“That must be hearsay to you, Lon, because you’d have to be a man and have a dick to actually know that.”

“Your p-p-poem,” he sputtered threatening to go entirely mauve, “is an insult to women, to every woman poet in the city, an offensive patriarchal Victorian throwback of ignorance and arrogance!”

“Yeah, what poem is that? Unlike you, I’ve written more than one.”

“Why should I care what it’s called? It’s that abortion everyone is talking about. The product of a perverse sexist mind! You know the one I mean! That reactionary tract!”

“You mean the poem no one has ever read, and maybe half a hundred people, if that, have heard only a portion of. The infamous phantom poem?”

“Face it, Wendt, no one likes you. You are just not a very nice person.”

“I’m not losing sleep over what you think of me, Lon, and if I’m such a bad guy maybe you should worry about what I think of you.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“The world is full of assholes, I’m not going to sweat that I’m the only one.”

“You’re a sellout.”

“It has always been my intention to sell out. I would have preferred one big honking chunk all at once but apparently I’m on the installment plan.”

“I’d like to know how you went from hustling open mics in North Beach dives to where you are now, supposedly a respected poet and authority on poetry as you claim in the byline bio of that seething cesspool of hostile disgruntled self-righteous passive aggressive lies and conjecture you call a column!”

Wendt looked down at Murphy’s bulging eyeballs and gritted teeth. Obviously, another fan. But the worst kind, an angry, slighted fan. “Well, good looks count for something, and yeah, if you have to know, I made a pact with the devil. I opted for the bargain package, though. I only get the knowledge, not the power that goes along with it.”

“You’re a fake, a phony with your post Beat quasi second generation New York School Pacific Rim pseudo intellectual pop primitivism!”

Wendt was a little taken aback by the vehemence of Lon’s vitriol. “Does this mean you don’t love me anymore? Should I be crushed?”

“You’ve got nothing, Wendt! You are nothing! A charlatan, a con artist, a poetry snake oil salesman!”

Wendt shrugged. What about my purity of intent, he could have asked, but this had gone on long enough. There was a beer with his name on it waiting for him up at Bud’s. No one there would be disrespecting him, and even if they did, it would be in a language he didn’t understand. “I might be concerned if I thought you knew what you were talking about, Lon, but since you don’t, why should I give a fuck what you think?”

Lon was literally hopping mad, checking Wendt as he stepped off the curb to cross the intersection. He looked about to explode. “You killed Reg Meyer!”

Wendt stopped in the middle of the street, Murphy circling him like a rat terrier. He feigned a yawn, sidestepping and holding up his palm, and spoke, “Whatever,” in a tone of arch indifference and weary disdain, “Talk to the hand.”

That was the button. Murphy sprang forward and shoved Wendt with the force of both hands. Taken by surprise, Wendt turned and stumbled back a few steps, catching a heel on the curb, completely losing his balance and falling with a smack onto the sidewalk, his right hip taking the brunt of the impact. The sound alone hurt.

In almost instant and divine retribution, a dark shape roared past, sideswiping Murphy, sending him ass over tea kettle to land head first against the pavement with a sinister melon splitting crack.

Wendt groaned to his feet as Lon’s claque and the odd bystanders drawn by the histrionics rushed to see to Murphy.

“No, no, that’s alright, I’m ok. I only broke my hip,” but the last word died on his lips as he saw that Alonzo Murphy was in much more serious hurt, a red pool oozing around his head like the liquid filling of a fractured chocolate covered cherry.

Immediately the accusations started flying. “I saw him! He pushed Lon right into the path of that car!” Roman Ackley pointed a finger at Wendt. Even if it did challenge the perception of what they actually witnessed, Murphy’s sycophants took up the howl. “He did it! He pushed him!”

A young patrolman who happened to be close by was almost immediately on the scene. He herded the bystanders back onto the sidewalk away from the body, called for assistance and an ambulance. He glanced at Wendt holding his hip. “Sir, were you struck by the vehicle?”

Ackley repeated his accusation. "He pushed him!" And some seconded, "Yeah, he did it, he pushed him." Now a couple more patrolmen worked their way through the gathering crowd of onlookers.

"All right, we're going to have to take statements from witnesses," an older cop with a triple chevron on his sleeve announced. That had the effect of thinning the crowd some. Wendt tried standing but the pain in his hip shot the length of his leg and made him gasp. He leaned on the nearby light pole.

"Sir, you're gonna have to sit down and take the weight off your leg," the young patrolman directed. "EMT's are on the way, they'll check you out."

The third policeman got up off one knee after having held a finger to Murphy's neck checking for a pulse. "Nope," he said shaking his head, and addressed the crowd, "Anyone get a license plate? Make or model of the vehicle?"

"I took a picture of it with my phone." A tall bearded prematurely balding young man in a brown suit jacket and red and yellow scarf stepped forward. Then he pointed at Murphy. "This man pushed this man." He indicated Wendt. "If he hadn't, this man," Wendt again, "would have been hit by the car."

"Ok, give your information to the officer here. What was the license plate? We'll call in an APB."

The man regarded the device in his hand and flicked the image with his forefinger and thumb. "Uh, it's kind of fuzzy but it looks like 1-H-8-P-0-8-5."

The young patrolman jotted in his notebook repeating the information into his radio mic, "Won, henry, ate, paul, zero, ate, phiver." He glanced at the image on the man's phone. "Hard to tell what make that rearend belongs to. Could be a Mercedes or a Hyundai."

Wendt peered over the man's shoulder. "That could be an S."

The patrolman looked at him. "What?"

"The five, that could be an S."

The young cop wrote it down, shaking his head. "That's not your standard license numbering. Must be a vanity plate. We'll get him. Hit and run."

"No," Wendt said, "I think it was deliberate. The plate reads '*I hate poets*'."

**Wendt cooled his heels in the back of a squad car.** That's what he got for playing Mister-Detective-Sherlock-Holmes. He should have kept



his trap shut. The patrolman said that someone from Robbery Homicide was going to want to talk to him. There was a faint odor of urine and vomit rising from the floorboards and he sat partially out, the door open, feet on the pavement wishing he had a cigarette as the passing crisis tourists viewed him as a questionable sideshow.

“Well, well, Mr. Wendt, one of my favorite heteroclitics.” He recognized the detective, Mike Reardon, hands on hips and a smug smirk creasing his mug. “You might wonder how an ordinary working stiff like me might know a word like that.” He paused. “Someone gifted me a desk calendar that has a new word for every day of the year. I don’t pay attention to most of them. What do I need new words for when the old ones work just as well? But I remember that one. Heteroclitic, one who deviates from the norm or the rules. I run into quite a few in my line of business.”

Wendt said nothing, staring at the cop and waiting to hear what he would say next.

“So another dead poet, and you, Mr. Wendt, in close proximity. And a witness saying you pushed the deceased into the path of an oncoming vehicle?”

“You can probably find more than a few witnesses who’ll say that *he* pushed me.”

Reardon wasn’t listening. “Is that a coincidence? You should know that I don’t believe in coincidences. The poet body count is adding up to something sinister.”

Wendt should have shut his yap, instead he said, “When a poet dies two more are born to take his place.”

“That’s a disturbing thought.”

“In this case they’ll probably have the intelligence of a fruit fly.”

“You think this is funny, Mr. Wendt? A man, it doesn’t matter whether he was a poet or not, might have been deliberately killed.” Reardon let that sink in. “This poet on poet violence has got to stop. Is there some kind of poetry war going on?”

Wendt nodded his head acknowledging what Reardon was saying. The poetry war was a never ending war, but no one had taken it to this extreme before. Sure Catullus capped on his contemporaries, and Diogenes did the dozens on the steps of the Acropolis. And ages before that shaman poets dueled with competing praise song epics, but apparently the last poet standing was a guy name of Homer, everyone else who ever plucked a lyre was infinitesimal dust. Sappho and Archilochus merely echoes of their eras, everyone else drowned in bottomless Lac Cuna.

Dante ran with poet gangs in Florence, and Cyrano would run witless opponents through with his rapier wit. Victorian sissies and fops bitch-slapped each other with their kid gloves over some imagined literary slight. Roving claques of misguided French aestheticians rioted like common football rowdies. And now in Frisco someone was systematically offing poets.

“That hit was meant for me.”

“Well, of course, it’s all about you, isn’t it Mr. Wendt. How many poets have to die before you get what you want? Fame, fortune, king shit at the top of the heap?”

“Hey, I didn’t do anything.”

“I think I’ve heard that before, on more than one occasion.”

“Just minding my own business. Murphy’s the one got in my face.”

“Like Reginald Meyer got in your face, Mr. Wendt?”

Wendt shrugged. Ironic, or maybe it was just that people who disliked him had a habit of doing him a favor and offing themselves. He figured he was just lucky. “How’s that investigation going, by the way?”

“We know two things for sure. He’s dead, and it wasn’t a suicide.”

“So you have no clue.”

“Oh we have plenty of clues. We’ll get the guy.”

“You think it’s a guy? Why not a woman? Like I told your partner. His girlfriend. She has motive.”

“Naw, she’s accounted for. We’re looking at his professional contacts.” He gave Wendt the benefit of his shit eater.

“Good luck with that. They’re all bound to be guilty of something, but homicide is a stretch.”

Reardon answered with a stare prompting Wendt to demand, “Am I done here? Do you need to take a statement? I’ve got some place I want to be that’s other than here.”

“Relax. We’re waiting for the wagon. We’re taking the lot of you down to the precinct to sort this out. You’re not going anywhere.” Reardon looked over the top of the squad car and addressed the uniform. “Wagon?”

“They’re on their way.”

“Well, this is bullshit,” Wendt said mostly to himself.

“You’re a poet, Wendt,” Reardon said after a moment’s silence, “And you don’t look or act like a fairy.”

“I’m not tiny and nor do I fly around on gossamer wings, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

Reardon gave him a look like he was reconsidering his assumption.

“Tell me something. My kid thinks he’s a poet.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, he’s always writing poetry. Or jerking off. As far as I’m concerned they’re pretty much the same thing.”

Wendt had to think for a minute. “Yeah, you’re probably right. They both manifest as a sense of profound self-awareness at being the center of creation. Only problem is one will get you arrested if you do it in public. No law against mental masturbation, though maybe there should be.”

“So if my kid writes poetry, does that make him a faggot?”

“What makes you say that?”

“He’s always leaving poetry books lying around by people with faggoty names like Percy, or Pierce. Lance. Randy, Peter, Dick, Johnson, Vlad, Woody, Dirk.”

“I get the point.”

“Wang. Dong.”

“Dong?”

“Chinese, I think. I never know.”

“Does it make him happy?”

Reardon shook his head slowly in consideration. “Naw, he’s not a happy kind of kid. His mother says he’s just sensitive.” He gave a derisive sneer. “I got his sensitive hanging. Anyway, he keeps filling up notebooks with what he calls poems. He’s got issues.”

“You may have a problem.”

“You’re saying my kid’s queer?”

“I don’t know about that, but he might be a poet.”

The Black Mariah though in actuality a large square dark blue prisoner transport backed into the blocked off street with an attention getting warning pulse. The blue light on the roof strobed lazily. “Ok, let’s go,” a uniform directed him.

Wendt called to Reardon as he was led away, “You know Grace Niklia?”

The puzzled look was not Reardon’s most flattering expression. “Yeah? What about her?”

“What’s the story with her? She really have a twin sister?”

“The weird sisters? One’s crazier than the other. They’re both loony.” Reardon snorted a laugh as it came to him. “You and Niklia? Not a chance! She’d chew you up and spit you out like a bad taste!”

**He was late partly due to Angie.** She had to get ready which meant that after she was fully clothed, she had to dress her face. She was heading to South City to look into long term storage options and agreed to give him a lift to City College and the morning class. Then finding the classroom on a campus he'd never been to before took more time. The security guard was only a little more familiar with the layout than he was. Finally it was determined that the class was being held in a basement classroom in the Science Annex.

Russell Kennston was pacing outside the room in a poorly lit green hallway chewing his cheek.

Wendt didn't bother to explain as Kennston hurriedly opened the door to the achingly white artificial light of the windowless classroom. "You have my fee?"

Russell frowned and rummaged through his soft case and extracted a number 10 envelope. "As we discussed," and handed it over.

Wendt peered inside to ascertain the amount. He nodded his approval. As he'd explained to the young professor over drinks a few days earlier, anything that involved explanations was extra. If it was just a poetry reading, he'd charge his standard hundred bucks an hour, but since he'd be explaining shit, it would cost more.

He turned to the class as Russell called for their attention. "Everyone! This is Carl Wendt!"

Everyone was less than a dozen youngsters, some barely out of their teens, only a few trying to look radically different than their peers. A white guy with a mop of unruly curls slouched in a desk near the front with an I-don't-give-a-shit smirk of skeptical nonchalance. Three girls, their desks close enough together to signify that they were BFF's, the girl, woman, with the cobalt dye job in the center of the triad doing nothing to hide the mischievous sly smiles she cast his way. A couple of young guys, nondescript black and or Chicano, looked like they'd made a wrong turn at Riordan High. An Asian woman, girl, sat in a row toward the back, furiously and seriously copying down every word her professor was saying.

"Mr. Wendt is a well-known poet, author of numerous books of poetry, most recently, *Synthetic Lament*, and a critic who has published many articles on literature and esthetics in some of the top literary journals in the country, internationally, in fact, including *Poetry Now* and the *Pan-American Review of Literary Esthetics*, and in such collections as *Reconsidering Language*, *Examining the Puritanical Roots of American Literature*. According to another well-known and respected poet, Mitchell Tjantor,

someone whose views on poetry we were discussing just last week, Carl Wendt and his work have had a significant influence on the poets of the younger generation. You may know him from his weekly column *Gone With The Wendt*, a running commentary on the rich and sometimes scandalous art and literary scene in the city. As a young poet very close to your own ages now, he was chosen by the legendary editor and publisher Dorian Pillsbury for the prestigious Singled Out Foundation Award, also known as SOFA, and the publication of his first book of poems, *Pay Attention*.”

Wendt had stopped paying attention. Done checking the student fare, he let his gaze drift across the professor’s desk. There were two books among the scatter of stapled handouts and assignments, one, a thick poetry anthology he assumed was a reference text for the class, Advanced Creative Writing 1B, and another smaller volume sprouting numerous colorful page markers.

“Please welcome our guest, Carl Wendt.” Kennston swept his hand toward him, yielding the floor. “Carl, it’s an honor to have you here.”

“This book!” Wendt held up the slim volume, *Nonsense and Stuff, How To Read Modern Poetry?* He glanced at the cover. “By Bertrand Stephens! This whole book is total bullshit! Do not believe a fucking word this asshole says about modern poetry or poetry in general!”

Russell stiffened as if he’d been stung. “Wait, he has a PhD!”

Wendt waved a dismissive hand. “A PhD is like a prison tattoo, stay in an institution long enough and you’re bound to get one.”

The white guy gave a loud guffaw, everyone else suspending judgment, not sure on which side they were going to land.

“And this anthology, edited by the same guy, *PoMo, Hybrid Poetries at the Beginning of a New Century?* *PoMo* stands for postmodern or in this case, postmortem. These clowns are dead and they don’t even know it.”

Kennston, still aghast that the recommended reading was being so summarily criticized, interjected, “But he teaches at Harvard!”

“Every time I hear the word ‘Harvard’ I reach for my mental spray can to tag it, Americano style, *con safo*. The English Department there is bent on ruining American literature.”

The young Asian woman now visibly incensed, partly due to her affection for her professor and partly because she perceived Wendt as being rude, blurted, “That’s better than you could do!”

Wendt laughed. “Hey, look at that, someone’s awake.” The outburst had the effect of easing the formality and tension.

“Alright let’s get this straight. First of all, Pomo are a Northern California indigenous peoples, not a collection of sanctioned poets picked by a self-appointed committee. This boat anchor is more of a directory than an anthology, and if anything, acts as an annotated bibliography for the commercial purposes of those listed. The notion that it is in anyway representative of the art at any one time is sadly mistaken. Political concerns always trump esthetics.”

“How come you’re not in there, Mr. Wendt?” It was the white guy.

“Good question. Actually mediocre question, but what can I expect, this is a friggin *junior* college. However, the very good, actually excellent reason I’m not in that anthology is because I’m a Marxist Lennonist. Groucho said ‘never belong to a group that would have someone like yourself as a member,’ and John said ‘love is all you need’. In other words, I don’t need to be included in no stinking misleading misnomered employment list of poets to know that I am a poet. The middle class definition of which, incidentally, implies being employed.”

“I got another question. I know the Lennon Beatle dude, but who’s this Gaucho, er, Groucho?”

If he hadn’t noticed it before, the immensity of the generation gap hit him across the face like a wet flipper. He paused a beat as a few late arriving students found their desks, a large black woman who sent a myopic frown in his direction, a skinny black woman, actually café au lait with incredibly straight hair, and a young man of the same beige complexion with a head of dreadlocks, his half closed eyes and sheepish grin saying *LOADED* loud and clear.

“So you think you wanna be a poet. Well, you’re gonna need a toolkit, because being a poet depends on your tools and how you use them. Out there in the cold cruel poetry world, and let me emphasize *cruel*, it’s just you and your toolkit on the way to the job. Except for most of you going to a job is like putting on a suit and goosing the receptionist at the office.”

There was an uncomfortable chuckle from the class and Russell cleared his throat.

“Or a skirt and being goosed at the office. On the other hand, being a poet is like gearing up to go spelunking, it’s physical, you’re going to sweat, it’s mostly dark and close, and it can be dangerous which is why you need to have the right toolkit.” He cast a glance around the classroom to make sure they had followed him thus far.

“In case you think I’m pulling monkeys out of my ass, let me remind you that it was Wittgenstein who said ‘Think of the tools in a toolbox – there’s a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw driver, a ruler, retractable or fixed,

a glue pot, nails, screws—the functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects.’ Experience, of course, is important, as long as it doesn’t make you careless. It provides you with content. Personality is no less important as that is the source of your wit. And intelligence provides the form, how you actualize your wit and content. It’s a formula, P plus I plus E equals PIE. The formula for being a poet.

“Everyone has access to these tools. A poet, unless he’s a minimalist, and nothing wrong with that if don’t you mind having orange crates and cinder blocks as your literary furniture, has to learn the use, and practice the use, of necessary tools, in this case, parts or figures of speech.

“Let’s start with the basics, simile and metaphor. Simile is what the name implies, similarity, the comparison of one thing to another, animal, vegetable or mineral. I could say this class room is like a dungeon.” The class snickered, rasta-head giving a loud guffaw in spite of himself. “And you are obviously seeing the similarities that are essentially square, windowless, and enclosed. The handy thing about a simile is that it doesn’t have to be perfect, you’ve got wiggle room. Unless you’re a sphincter tweeker, and that’s largely a matter of personality because some things always don’t line up, specifically. Dungeons are generally thought of as tiny, dark, and dank, and primitive. This classroom is not small, nor is it dark, and only a little fetid. More like a cell or an interrogation room, but still generally confining. And there I’ve added more similes by my further comparisons. We use similes every day, all the time, to express general ideas to more easily relate what we hold in common.

“The downside of simile, particularly in poetry is that they’re too easy, cheap, common, and eventually too formulaic. A good simile is a needle in a haystack. And what I just said is a metaphor.” He paused to gauge their attention. The stoner was going to nod, that was a given.

“I could have said *like* a needle in a haystack but in this case the fit is a little tighter, not as much wiggle room, and I’m not making a comparison, I’m equating an abstract concept, a figure of speech with a physical object, the needle, and by placing it in a haystack, a collection of similarly shaped yet unlike objects, I am emphasizing its rarity and at the same time capitalizing on the assumption that you’ve heard the trope ‘as difficult as finding a needle in a haystack.’ Like similes, a good metaphor is hard to find. A good metaphor will have the reverberation of a brass bell, a shimmering presence for as long as it’s contemplated. Similes are basic arithmetic in that the ‘like’ serves as an equal sign. Metaphors, depending on their resonance, are a more complex calculus. Metaphor

attaches a picture to meaning, and simile invites a comparison, subjective at best”

He stopped and looked out at the scattered desks only sparsely occupied, essentially by children. He might as well have been singing a lullaby. One of the BFF’s, the one with the bad complexion and numerous facial piercings, had dropped her eyes to the watch on her wrist. There was a thick silence in the large airless classroom crowded with stale personal scent, off the shelf deodorant, and someone’s half-eaten salami sandwich saved for later.

“Why is metaphor in poetry essential you might ask? One way of focusing on our lives is through metaphor—we do it every day. Something is always compared to something else, and how closely the match is made is how its intrinsic value is established. Symbolism is an attempt to synthesize or institutionalize metaphor which is essentially a spontaneous act of consciousness available to every conscious being. The vitality of poetry relies on its ability to remain spontaneous. Metaphor is what we place between ourselves and the mundane to renew experience. And from this you get the satisfaction of the straight forward, the unwavering line drawn by analogy.”

He could never be a teacher. Not that he didn’t have the chops and an autodidactic insatiability. He certainly knew what he was talking about. It was that other thing. He didn’t care enough. A good teacher gives wholeheartedly the requisite knowledge and delights in the comprehension when it blossoms in self-realization. He wasn’t interested in giving anything. He’d heard it said before, he was a selfish son-of-a-bitch. Interest, curiosity would lead to discovery, that’s the way the game was played, and he had no desire to spoon feed a bunch of unformed psyches into thinking that they were poets. You’re a poet when you know you’re a poet. Advanced Creative Writing 1B wasn’t going to change any of that.

“Now what I just said, you could easily find online. It’s all there. That’s the advantage over having to physically search through books, page by page, looking for what you want to find or think you want to find. Metaphors and similes are known as parts of speech because we use them every day, without thinking. The same goes for most literary or rhetorical devices. And writers teach themselves how to organize these parts of speech on the page so that it sounds like someone talking to you when you’re reading it, trying to convince you, convert you, instruct you, dissuade you, entertain you, lie to you, make you laugh, make you cry, jump for joy, drop into the abyss.



“Metalepsis, antonomasia, hypallage, catachresis, metonymy. . .not monotony, that’s what’s going on here. . .metonymy is like when you say *uniform* when you refer to a cop, or *suit* for a businessman, and maybe somebody in upper management as *corporate*.” Wendt shrugged. “Well, you get the drift. And there’s synecdoche, not a place in upstate New York as a certain film maker would have you believe. Litotes and antiphrasis, pleonasm, hypotyposis, and lest we forget, hyperbole. Nothing like a little exaggeration to make a body feel good about themselves.

“A poet’s job is to learn these components, these rules, and how they relate to their sense of language and twist them, pervert them, turn them upside down, maul them, mangle them, stretch them, ignore them, and then break them. Wittgenstein was full of shit about the tool box after all. You think you’re gonna build a poem with a hammer and saw? Sure, a novel, maybe, but not a poem. A poem is a house of cards, you need a steady hand, a cool reserve and the understanding that the entire thing could collapse at a moment’s notice.”

A hand shot up, the young black woman who had come in late, and Wendt nodded his assent. “Don’t you have to be, like, really smart to be a poet, I mean. . .?”

Wendt shrugged. “It doesn’t hurt to be smart or educated as long as you don’t let it get in the way. Poets don’t need smarts, really. A poet needs guts and the determination to stick with it. Like the great Frank O’Hara once said,” he paused looking for glints of recognition, but nada, “‘you go on your nerve.’ Your generation unfortunately is at a disadvantage because you’ll never be as smart as your phones.”

One of the post high-schoolers asked, “Why did you become poet?”

“Because it’s the most dangerous thing, in all existence, that you can do and requires nothing but your nerve, like walking a tight rope. Without a net. From the tallest building in Frisco. To the tallest building in El Fuckin’ Ay. Naked. A poet needs perfect balance to survive. To fail is to fall. That’s why some so-called poets can’t do it without a safety net or the assurance of a zipline harness. By safety net, I mean a nine to five that has nothing to do with the art of poetry, and a zipline can be equated to a teaching job or professorship at some university which is like the ultimate dream job for wannabe poets.”

The Asian woman. “How does that translate into success?” The pen in her hand pointed accusingly.

“The successful writer is of a class, mostly middle, educated in the better schools, and with a world view that really has nothing in common with the real hard scrabble world, and everything in common with a

privileged point of view that is entirely self-serving. There are other writers, actually great writers, who are self-taught either because they couldn't afford better schools or would have little patience with them in the first place. You may never hear of them unless you are, or someone you know is, an intrepid scholar and go looking for them. The assumption of privilege is what success is all about. There are two avenues open to what you might term success, the public and the private as a means of gaining entry into the poetry world. The government will fund those who can or will fill out the necessary forms in triplicate and have the connections, i.e., name recognition as a social gadfly. One can eke out a "living" in poetry by constant application and tenacity, and an undeniable belief in one's own worth. In other words, you get a job at a college or university or you live by your wits.

"And it is for this reason that the role of the ecstatic, the real poet, will always be marginalized because it is essentially an antisocial role. We tend to forget that poets are descendants of shamans. They practice the techniques of ecstasy, and are basically eccentrics, off center so to speak. What writing classes like this one, and workshops and writing programs, attempt, and which you will encounter if you continue in this course of study, is the socialization or the normalization of the ecstatic experience which, because of its individualistic character, can't be done or done without destroying or diluting that ecstatic quality or nature. Much of what is done in the name of literature is self-advertisement. It has a purpose or aim beyond the function of the art, and that is to promote the poet. Once poets cum artists achieve acclaim they can slough off their art like a snake with its skin.

"Poetry is not a means, it is the end, a practice, and in many respects, it is the ultimate end, that's to say the terminal point of sentience, death itself. A true poet should always be on the verge of literary suicide. The achievement of poetry is self-negation through the discovery of self, through an understanding of self that leads to a point of vanishment. Know yourself to the point of no point and integration with everything visible and invisible, as an ecstatic oneness."

The café-au-lait student with the strait hair raised her hand. "What if I don't want to walk a tight rope to LA naked? What if I just want to write poetry?"

Wendt smiled at the question. Someone was paying attention. "Poetry is the most inclusive form of thought yet devised. It is a conscious call upon those resources which underlie all language and all thinking. If you are involved in any working system of thought, recognized or not,

then poetry, identified by your somatic complicity, is in fact nearest to reality. Poetry, metaphor, mythology are highly realistic and down to earth. It is logic and mathematics which are the imaginative and fantastical exercises. Besides, being a poet means that you believe in yourself in a very basic way, that you have faith in the unknown.”

If he listened carefully he could probably hear the cosmic microwave background music above the rock bottom glassy-eyed silence. He gave a quick glance at the clock above the whiteboard at the head of the class. A little more than a quarter hour had passed. That was probably enough.

“Alright,” he clapped his hands in a clasp, “I’m good, how about you? What say let’s go get a drink? I seem to remember a friendly neighborhood bar around here, The Kit Kat Club?”

Some of the students frowned not sure if he wasn’t exceeding his authority by dismissing them. Others got to their feet tentatively, wide grins that class had been dismissed, looking for confirmation from their prof who, leaning back against the front edge of his desk staring at his shoes looked like he didn’t know what hit him or that he’d made a huge mistake by inviting Wendt to speak to his class and was momentarily unable to respond.

“That place still open?” curly mop wondered aloud.

“Yeah, I think so, but you know it’s kind of like a dive,” one of the *chingroes* offered.

“Then what a better place to continue our discussion on the merits of poetry!” Wendt declared with triumph at the obvious. “Like Orpheus we must descend into Hades in hopes of winning the release of our fair muse, Eurydice!”

The large black girl with the bright yellow backpack and matching plastic eyeglass frames sitting at the back of the room joined her classmates gathered around Wendt. “I don’t know what the hell he just said, but I’m with him. I wanna know more about this *eerie dis* in hell.” Then as an aside to the skinny black woman, “Sounds kinda like my life.”

The flirtatious one of the three BFF’s proffered her smart phone. “Look, my friend just wrote a poem on her phone and texted it to me!”

He glanced at the device and read the future of poetry.

**Wendt nursed a bowl of world famous clam chowder** at *Chow’s Chowder Hut* conveniently situated near the entrance to the trail to Sutro Baths and Point Lobos. The menu posted on the wall behind the counter made the ‘*world famous*’ claim. It was a tourist trap, an old railroad car that over the years had expanded from when it was *Conroy’s Clams*, then *Sutro*

*Seafood* to its present incarnation of brick carapace and enclosed patio area which on a day such as this, socked in by a bone chilling fog as thick as their chowder, was still packed with *ausländers* hunched over steaming overpriced bowls. There wasn't much clam in the chowder but plenty of heavy cream and salt that made it the soup equivalent of French fries.

He'd been sitting there for close to twenty minutes and the buyer still hadn't showed. The waitresses had already made a couple of passes to ask him how things were. Had he not been sitting on a stool at the counter they might have been a little more aggressive about him taking up space. Just about all the tourists were waiting for booths or tables on the patio. He could see into the kitchen through the service window and the crew was hopping, the waitresses looking at each other with weary acknowledgement that it was indeed a wickedly busy rush. Every so often a Chinese cook in a chef's white coat would come out of the kitchen to answer the yellow wall phone on the yellow wall near the large antique double boiler coffee percolators. He would frown with the receiver to his ear and then hang up, returning to the kitchen shaking his head. This occurred several times while Wendt sat there. They certainly weren't taking to-go orders. Perhaps an obscene phone call replete with heavy breathing. Or just a persistent wrong number. It was a repeated pattern in an otherwise seemingly chaotic atmosphere and it caught his attention. The clock on the wall above the cash register had his attention too. Now he had been sitting there twenty two minutes, waiting.

All because of a phone call. He'd been helping Angie and Sam with packing up the house to go either to storage in Daly City or set aside for the move up to Elk. So it was really happening. And he too had to think seriously about moving, getting his life in order and portable. Things were not on as solid a footing as he had assumed. His pal, Andy, was having second thoughts about his house-sitting offer while he was away in Shanghai, thanks to Andy's girlfriend. And now fucking Lon Murphy was being hailed as a selfless hero for saving the life of his friend and literary associate, Carl Wendt. The new managing editor at the weekly likes the publicity but, per Charlie who was wrapping up his last days as the copy editor, says that the column has to become a blog if he wants to continue it, and that the column will no longer be in the print edition, gotta make room for more ads, and the worst of it, he's supposed to do it *gratis* as a service to the arts community. Or something. Also he has to stop with the free plugs of various businesses for which he essentially received kickbacks, in the form of discounted or free meals at restaurants, for instance, like his favorite grease pit, KFC, Korean Fried

Chicken, though after a couple of corporate lawyers marched through their doors, they changed it to MCKFC and claimed that it stood for *Mo' Crispy Korean Fried Chicken*, and apparently they were getting away with it.

He'd been in his room, standing at the foot of the bed. He had to decide what was going and what was staying, what would be packed up and what he would need to carry to his next residence. How much do you pack if you're going to be living under a bridge or in a doorway? It was becoming a little overwhelming, the boxes of books, the clothes in the closet and in the small dresser, the laptop and the Webster's Unabridged, Val's diary sitting in plain view on top of the record crate, ignored by his every glance. He'd paged through it enough to realize that it belonged to an earlier crazier time when their relationship had been threadbare and sadly transparent. That had been, what nine, ten years ago? He was about to pick it up again when Sam came into the room. "Someone's on the phone for you, Wendt," she'd intoned, pouting, still mad at her mother.

They'd had a mother and daughter throwdown in the midst of packing the boxes in the parlor. Angie had to be extra careful with the tall full length convex glass framed antique photo portraits of her ancestors, grandmother Giordano and great granny Vico, time capsules from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. And she also had a collection of plush stuffed animals that were part of her office décor as well as mementos from her own childhood, like a ratty blue plush bear that doubled as a music box. They had been talking about the toucan and the porcupine as if they had a backstory, with him punning on the names, "Alan Toucant" and "Porky Pineapple" to amuse Sam who had lost interest in packing almost from the start. They were about to talk about the beaver when Sam gathered up a pile of stuffed toys and declared with the epitome of petulance, "These should all be mine!" When Angie tried to be understanding as she had been trained, Sam became abusive.

"You're not a kid any more. These are toys, toys are for kids. You're too old for toys! They should all belong to me!"

Angie's insistence on reason only made Sam more intransigent until mother finally lost her cool and they both began screaming at each other. That's when he checked out and headed up to his room with an if-that's-what-having-kids-is-all-about-count-me-out shake of his head.

The phone call was from Harry Croft. He had a buyer for the Lucian Graff. Was it still for sale? He'd had to seriously consider it. Technically it didn't belong to him. But Dorian routinely gave him books to resell, comp copies that arrived at his doorstep by the truck load. Of course the

Graff was hardly a comp copy. "I have someone eager to buy. And cash," Croft had insisted. He agreed to bring it by. He was going to need the money the way things were going. "I'm not in my shop. I'm calling from Palm Springs. The buyer will meet with you. But it has to be today."

Dorian would understand. The letter from Dorian's attorney, Hugh Klidian, was puzzling. He'd only met him once, a large panda of a man in an ill-fitting suit, tie askew, hardly the image of a successful top rated attorney. Takes all kinds. He doubted that it was about the Graff, but he'd been asked to call and make an appointment. Well, here was an opportunity to ask for a loan, maybe an inside on a grant from one of the many arts foundations Klidian was connected with though they were mostly performance and music arts. He could perform if the price was right.

On the chance that house sitting for Andy fell through, and it had been temporary at best, he'd have to hunt up Aaron Shone. Aaron Sidney Shone lived on a boat in Mission Bay. It would be cramped because Aaron was not the most organized of fellows, in fact, a borderline hoarder, subsisting on SSI and odd jobs. He was a writer of sorts, poems and songs. Staying with him was also only a temporary option. And he would have to move on. It was difficult to shake the sedentary comfort of staying in one place for so long. He'd been there before so it'd be like getting back on a bicycle but not without a few wobbly initial false starts, bumps and scrapes. No doubt he was getting a little old for couch surfing.

And there was Wendy. Staying with her was not an option. In fact cutting her loose was the only sane choice left. She had become just too possessive, demanding of his time, needy, clingy, and an all-around pain in the ass. Besides, the sex was not all that great to begin with. What could he say that would not totally destroy her? Well, he'd been there before. And Mac was involved in some really bad domestic business with her husband. She'd sent an email using a friend's account saying that her husband's cop friends were harassing her, hacking into her phone and email accounts. She was going to keep a low profile, and she'd be in touch when it all blew over. And he thought of Grace Niklia. He'd tried Grace's phone, got her voice mail, left a message, not the second time though. He was hoping against hope there.

Plus it was the end of the month and things were already squeaky and tight in the cash flow department. Bumping the deadline on the Sanderson job, he'd already spent the advance, now he had to work up the enthusiasm to get it done. He had a tentative title, *The Cartoon Effect, 19<sup>th</sup>*

*Century Japanese Hanga, Mid-Twentieth Century Comic Books, and Contemporary American Poetry.* All he had to do was fill in the blank. Yet he kept coming back to the future. Where would he be in six months' time, besides at a de rigueur Frisco Halloween party? That weighed in for consideration. This was a steeper slope of uncertainty than he he'd encountered in a while and it was giving him gas.

He'd considered the possibility that he might have to live elsewhere, somewhere other than the city, Oakland, or the shudderburbs. But no, that was impossible, the city was his living space, and he was its flaneur, an original jazz-soaked hipster, imperturbable, the epitome of West Coast cool, in the groove, in the zone, as his home, the city, allowed him to be. He was predisposed to certain parts as anyone would in their own home, a tendency to hang out in the kitchen rather than the formal dining room. If there's a patio, a deck that's where he'd be, sucking down a margarita or a craft beer. The city was his domicile. Restaurants his dining rooms, libraries and bookstores his study, and though he had slept in many bedrooms, his little retreat on Balboa was his den, his safe haven, his cave. Now that was going away.

He could tell the yellow phone was ringing without really hearing it over the din of the diners. The cook was ignoring it, dismissing it with a wave of his hand. It kept ringing until one of the overworked waitresses paused long enough to stick a pencil in the knot of hair held at the nape of her neck and flick a stray gray blond strand from her forehead and put the receiver to her ear. He followed her eyes around the restaurant until they came to rest on him. She nodded and spoke into the phone before hanging up.

"You're Carl Wendt," she said standing at the counter, "I thought I recognized you."

"Lemme guess, from my picture in the weekly."

"No, I was in one of Professor Granahan's classes at State, the one he liked to hold at the off-campus pub. You used to join us." She shrugged, "You probably don't remember me. There were a lot better looking women in Advanced Poetry than me." And as an afterthought, "Sorry to hear he passed."

Wendt took a closer look at her and drew a blank. A few pounds maybe, the haggard stoicism of someone of long experience on their feet. Her blue eyes were still lively and perhaps enjoying his discomfort. "Yeah, sorry, that was a while back. What's your name?" And looking at her nameplate pinned to the faux corsage, "Amy?"

“Yeah, Amy Roy.” She lifted her eyes over his head. “Your friend is tired of waiting for you in the parking lot across the road. I couldn’t tell if it was a man or a woman but they sounded real upset.” She said this with a smile.

Wendt turned and looked out the wide window onto busy Point Lobos Ave. The parking lot and entrance to Sutro Heights Park on the other side was partially obscured by the drifting fog and illuminated by the vague greenish glow of light standards. Wait, he was the one who was waiting! He could have sworn Croft had said “meet at Chow’s Chowder Hut.” Maybe he should have asked for GPS coordinates. He slapped a twenty on the counter. “Yeah, Amy Roy, now I remember,” he lied. “What time do you get off? We can talk over old times.”

**He waited at the curb for a pause in the traffic flow**, particularly dangerous given the low visibility, and scuttled across,. He scanned the rows of cars from the vantage of the berm overlooking the lot, and walking down between an SUV and a BMW, looking both ways, he reassured himself of the bundle under his arm. He was still undecided as to whether he was actually going to sell it. But he was curious as to who might be interested. A rare book collector? A Lucian Graff fan? No one was signaling him with a wave or flashing headlights. He headed towards the end of a line of cars and the edge of the parkland. He heard the acceleration just as the headlights hit his back. He jumped sideways between two parked cars as the vehicle sped past him, swerving to nearly brush the back bumper of a fat assed Chrysler.

“Asshole!” he shouted as he followed the car with his eyes to where it squeaked to a stop at the exit, the backup lights blinking white once, and then the dark two-door shooting out into traffic making a left. Crazy motherfucker gonna get himself killed. And still no sign of the prospective buyer. He was about to let himself get annoyed. He lit up and inhaled the first draw feeling the rasp in his lungs. He stared at the tip and mused, this is what is gonna kill me.

Something, maybe the squeal of tires, an angry horn blare, made him look back over his shoulder, an orphic faux pas of the first order. A dark car had turned into the entrance to the parking lot. There are a lot of dark cars out there, not so unusual, he told himself. But not all of them, as he gaped in incomprehension, were racing down the row of cars toward him.

He made a run for the edge of the parking lot. In his mind beyond that was no-car land and safety. Besides, the maroon Mercedes parked



there would block the oncoming car. He hadn't run that fast in a while. Not bad for an old guy he thought and it looked like he was going to make it. But *thunk* as his toe snagged on the top of the concrete wheel stop, catching air, being oddly aware of the coins in his pants pocket slowly inching toward the opening, and flashing through his thoughts that morning's horoscope: a speed bump launches you to new heights (for you) before you fall back down on your head, then *thud*, the flesh numbing scrape brutal shock knock of a face plant, heels overhead roaring freight train of blackness rushing to overtake him. He pissed himself.

DRAFT

# year

*“Fiction has a truth exceeding that of history”*

– Aristotle

**It all started with a trip to Bolinas.** Irma had invited him out to spend a few days. She'd even arranged a ride. The driver was Grendel. Or Gretel. Hungarian, she said. Or Czech, her thick accent convincing, blond showing dark at the roots, in her late forties, good looking in a world weary sort of way, but much too animated for him, even after a second latte. She'd never been to Bolinas before but the map showed Highway 1 up the coast as the way to go. What did he know? Except that Irma had taken a different route, by way of Fairfax, the only previous time he'd been out, saying something to the effect that no one in their right mind took the scenic drive.

The car, a filthy green rust bucket, sagged at the right rear like it had been in a dog fight and lost. It belonged to an acquaintance of Gretel Grendel's who was letting her borrow it for the day. She'd claimed to have driven everywhere in Budapest. Or Prague, from where she had flown several weeks earlier, on a whim, quit her job, withdrawn all her savings, to fly to San Francisco, and now had to get to Bolinas to meet up with a friend of an old friend who might help her out because her purse had been stolen so she was broke and desperate, all of which she'd related with the air of maniacal cheerfulness.

There'd obviously been no traffic when she drove the streets of Budapest, or Prague, because she seemed intent on hitting the multitude of fenders and obstructions that confounded her attempts to steer in a straight line. He applied the phantom brake so often that he'd ended up with a cramp in his good leg.

Maybe in Eastern Europe you can drive and sightsee at the same time, but on the West Coast the drivers are very serious about getting to where they are going, and you did not slow to a crawl to marvel at the fact that you were crossing the Golden Gate Bridge. Not to mention that he'd felt like he was on a guided tour. *Of her life!* That made her all the more erratic of a driver because at times the vehemence of her account required that she remove both hands from the steering wheel.

He felt relieved when they'd left the freeway and joined a slow moving stream of traffic taking the twisty climb up the wooded hillside, and

relaxed a little, trying to wrap his head around whatever possessed him to accept Irma's offer. Things were not that bad, or as bad as she'd heard. But by the time Grendel Gretel became uncontrollably excited at catching flashes of the sparkling blue Pacific on the horizon and they'd entered the switchback curves descending into Stinson Beach, he began worrying again and, pretty soon, fearing for his life.

More than once he thought they were going to fly off the cliff onto the rocks and crashing surf below which might have also suddenly occurred to Gretel Grendel by the way she'd gripped the steering wheel. He had suggested that she "*use the brakes!*" at the top of his lungs just to make sure she heard him and fully appreciated the extent of his panic. Fortunately she was open to suggestion and they made it safely to Irma's where he had to be pried out of the passenger's seat.

Now, several days later, he was hitchhiking on the shoulder of Highway 128 outside of Cloverdale, a small burg in Northern California, putting his life in the hands of strangers again. In a silver gray sharkskin suit over a lime green polo shirt, he was, however, no one's idea of the tin man. He'd been forced to quit smoking, and that made him even more of a son of a bitch.

A logging truck lumbered by. From where he was standing on the dusty pullout at the side of the two-lane country highway, he could see the yellowing hillside and its dark green crown of live oak. Behind it he imagined the main drag where he'd stepped off the bus. He was heading west, to Elk, and getting there wasn't going to be easy.

The County Transit driver had been helpful. "You can't get there from here, not with public transportation." He'd just missed his connection with the MTA up to Ukiah, a place he'd heard of only because backwards it spelled *haiku*, and he was partial to things that read backwards. He was handed a printed schedule that told him that the next bus through was due in about four hours. "Or you can try what just about everyone else does, hitch a ride."

He'd slogged north along the boulevard with the understanding from the driver that it was a walk, meaning a distance. The early May sun had heated up midmorning just enough to make him sweat. His left shin, broken in two places and held together with pins, had yet to be put to an extreme test, and he'd lost his cane, somewhere, in his travels. By the time he got to the Burger Ranch Drive-in, a landmark the bus driver said would be near his destination, the tingling in his toes told him that his foot was about to go numb. He'd stopped to rest at one of the outdoor picnic tables, dropping his shoulder bag carefully to the ground between

his gray dress shoes, loafers actually, not exactly made for walking distances.

Angela had given him the old leather laptop bag when they'd finally packed up the house on Balboa. It held, among other things, his notebook computer, the smart phone he regularly kept forgetting to charge and presently dead, or unconscious, a copy of Ian Blake's recently published *Ode To Sunset*, the medical encyclopedia's printout of the symptoms to his still incompletely diagnosed condition, a letter from a law firm in Cleveland, Ohio demanding the return of an advance, and two amber plastic pill bottles of medication, only one of them being for pain.

The pill was finally kicking in and a warm buzz blocked the throb of ache in his shinbone. Cars whizzed by like he was part of the scenery. He was beginning to feel like part of the scenery, a silver milepost, flashing a thumb at approaching vehicles. No one even slowed down, a few drivers giving him the curious onceover.

He was stressed enough to think that he could really use a cigarette. To be encased in the fuzzy cocoon of the pain killer and chill with a nicotine stick. Yeah. But the doctor had told him, "You're at the edge of emphysema. Keep it up and your lungs will be useless." That had been the second doctor, no, there was a doctor before that, the third doctor he'd seen after leaving the hospital. Doctor Darcy D'Mise, her name could hardly be more ironic. That was now almost six months ago.

He watched the tall figure scoot across to his side of the highway and approach at a youthful trot. He made out a young man with a mass of dreadlocks and sparse beard, small backpack slung over one shoulder.

The youngster seemingly in a hurry passed with a nod. "Been here long?"

He shrugged. "Probably not. Just feels like it." He hoped he didn't sound too stoned.

"Cool," was the response, and continuing down the road a couple hundred feet, the kid stopped and faced the oncoming traffic, hitching, too.

He never imagined he'd be thumbing rides again, *au pouce* as the French would have it. He'd done a bunch of that after his second year at IU. He was attending a summer program at the university in Pau, ostensibly to learn French. That summer turned into six months of bumming around Spain and southern France, not officially dropping out, but a serious consideration. He'd fallen in with some friends from the university and one day, out of boredom and excess energy, they ended up

catching a boat to Palma. That was where he met Sheila. It seemed fated, and he'd been planning to visit Majorca anyway.

Then, as now, his survival depended on his selfishness. That hadn't changed. He'd been on the island to breathe air in the same space that Robert Graves once had. He was broke again and the cash infusion, after a desperate call to Indianapolis, was slow to arrive.

He'd hooked up with Sheila at the bar of the Saratoga Hotel in Palma. She was there with a group of minor literati led by the puckish Brit, Adam Sanders, painter among poets. The way she'd looked at him from across the packed hotel bar was an invitation to come talk to her.

Someone in the group had procured some Turkish heroin. They were all going to go up to the room, discreetly in ones and twos, and get high. Sanders and the guy with the stuff went first.

He knew that if she followed and got stoned, he would lose a temporary lifeline. Temporary, until he got the money wire, long enough not to be evicted, and someone whose generosity he could count on. They were the last of the set at the table mainly because much of what had been going on had not reached into the depth of their conversation.

He'd leaned forward and kissed her, a little awkwardly, not that it was unanticipated. "I have a better idea," he'd said.

"Let's go up to my room," she'd said.

**A pickup truck angled off the road** behind him and raised a large plume of dirty beige dust. He turned to watch as it braked to a stop. The kid loped toward the vehicle, an older model, battered cab, pipe frame and mesh protecting the rear window, modified flatbed, utility box bolted against the rear window and attached to it by a long chain, a large, tawny brown mastiff. The passenger door swung open and an arm waved and beckoned. He started walking toward the pickup, the discomfort of his leg hobbling him.

The youngster paused with his foot on the step-up to the raised cab nodding in assent and then turned to say, "Sorry, man, no more room in the cab."

A head, a teenage girl's, peeked from the cab. "Sorry. Unless you want to ride in the back with Lupus."

The dog's lowered head, bared teeth, and alert posture were not very welcoming.

"Ok, no problem."

One of the stickers on the square pipe that served as rear bumper caught his eye. He'd seen it before. *Question Authority*. The truck left a

cloud of dust in its wake.

It might be productive, he mused, if more intelligent and thoughtful people questioned authority, but it's likely to be some dumbass and his equally dumbass girlfriend, and their dumbass friends, otherwise known as The Stupid Revolution. That was the extent of his disappointment.

He knew hitching was mostly luck of the draw. You were either stuck in the middle of nowhere for hours or first ride, best ride, straight to your destination. Like poetry, random, each poem its own journey, its own diversion, its unique ride. *"Sometimes you get it right the first time and then spend the rest of your life proving it to yourself."* He couldn't remember who'd said that, not that he was all that intent on playing *Author! Author!*

The time his car spun out in a snow bank on his way home for winter break. The snowfall had turned into an ice storm, jackknifing semis on the Interstate. He'd ended up hitching from Bloomington to Indianapolis in the middle of a blizzard. No one would stop and he was frozen stiff like he'd been bitten by an ice snake. Hitchhiking into the past. "Tangled up in blue, how truly alone are you?" He was making some of it up. "That shadow is my shape where I used to stand."

Bright sun hid behind a pile of cumulus momentarily, the clouds separating and joining much as ice flows in the Arctic Sea, light leaking along edges, the meandering masses of white on a vast field of blue. At my age, he mused, I should look at loneliness and acknowledge it instead of denying. Look back to the past. Can it offer any reassurance that I will not be forever alone? This was years in the making. What, if anything, had changed?

### **"Lousy poet."**

That was all he remembered before the pain took over. That and "She's my wife." He couldn't help wondering if it was literary criticism or just a prejudice against poets.

Wendy crying and repeating "I'm so sorry, Carl, I'm so sorry." But that was later, the blinding white light in the emergency room, her woeful face, and he might have dreamt that.

He'd been surprised, touched by Courtney's offer to provide a place for him to convalesce after he was released from the hospital. But then they were almost family, going way back to when she was a little girl, the daughter of Sheila's friend from Princeton, the painter Sally Laroche, née Mander. Sally had settled in Oakland, on Broadway near the old Treadwell Mansion where the College of Arts and Crafts was located. Courtney was four or five when she'd declared that she intended to marry him. Of

course everyone thought that was just darling but why a rogue like Carl Wendt? Back nearly twenty five hazy years. He realized finally, or it was pointed out to him, that there were unresolved feelings and father figure fixations, particularly evident in the stormy relationship with her mother.

Her father, who had divorced Sally when Courtney was just a baby, had over the years become very wealthy as a developer of architecturally unique communities, most famously as the designer of the tornado proof home, an idea he'd come upon while contemplating a plastic champagne cork.

The concept and subsequent development outside of Oklahoma City had been slammed in the local press as glorified bunkers and prairie dog settlements until a Finger of God monster cut a mile wide swath through the area and shredded everything in its path except for the shiny concrete and glass mounds built by Eugene Laroche.

Laroche assuaged his abandonment guilt by showering money and expensive gifts on his daughter which essentially turned her into a confused spoiled brat. Then that time, she was probably sixteen, drunk, at one of her mother's frisky art crowd parties, she tried to seduce him, going so far as to stick her tongue down his throat and grabbing the pump handle, and which he fended off with a conscientious aplomb he hadn't realized he possessed. Around that time, he still recalled with regret, he was on the outs with Sheila and the inevitability of separation hung in the air like a bad odor. Courtney, after that rebuff, always seemed a little uncomfortable or awkward around him, not that he saw much of her as his orbit, more and more, revolved around his engagements and interests in the city.

Sally died of an aneurism while Courtney was away at the university in Santa Cruz. He'd seen her at the funeral, thinking how much she resembled her mother, bright but troubled. The jet-setting architect was too busy to make it that day so he'd never had a chance to meet the guy and tell him what a prick he was for abandoning his daughter.

Laroche probably figured the generous trust fund he had set up for her was enough. Fortunately there were old family friends. He knew that she'd lived with Sheila, Sierra by then, and Jerry for a while. Occasionally he would run into her at the odd art show or literary function, and one time, very drunk but keeping her hands and tongue to herself, she announced to him that she was writing. Poetry, some criticism. He had been caught by surprise, vaguely but not over-enthusiastically congratulating her. She never offered to show him her work. And he never asked to see it.

She'd prepared the spare bedroom that had been her office for him. It had a foldout couch. She was living with David Bloom in a little house on Russell. "Just down the street from where Jack lived with Neal and Carolyn," she liked to remind him. David Bloom got the teaching job at NAIF. Stoddard was out.

**Maybe that was the problem.** Actually, there was no maybe about it. That was the problem. Bloom was an autocratic little egotist, a citer of rules, definitions, proprietary or otherwise, a walking encyclopedia of arcane and irrelevant trivia that posed as scholarship, hardly a breaker of rules. What good was it if you had a photographic memory but couldn't interpret what you were remembering? Short-sighted, what Woody Allen had already said about intellectuals, totally brilliant but clueless.

Sure, Stoddard was a drunk, but he also had an intuitive feel for what made great literature. As a poet, his efforts resonated, workman-like, with an understanding of his lineage and craft. Drink was destroying his ability to represent that unique sensibility. There's that warm glow and instant gratification of alcohol versus the slow and intermittent doubt plagued appreciation of having perfected the art. After a while, spirits alone fuel the feeble flame as sole and soul consolation. He understood that quite well. He had said as much in his article, *Failure of Nerve in the American Literary Landscape*, published in *JOAN, The Journal of American Nephrology*, a venue Nora had suggested as having deep pockets and a no-brainer for someone with his rep.

What was it his own doctor had said, "Your liver's got more scars than a knife fighter"? That was one of the reasons he'd gone off the sauce, unimaginable as that was, because the medication he was taking impacted his liver functions, and combined with booze, would effectively destroy it. He didn't think his love of drink should be suicidal. Then Bolinas happened.

The problem, the real problem, was the unflattering, nay, vicious, review he had written of *Ugly & Disappointing*, David Bloom's so-called guide to modern poetry published by Knopf.

The review had appeared in an obscure online literary journal, *Boiling Point*, edited by a young woman who was an adjunct professor at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, so he had no idea of who might even read it. It was one of the many miscellaneous literary sites whose stock and trade was the indie book scene publishing self-congratulatory puff pieces by beardless pretenders and MFA grads. It came as a fawning request for an essay on poetics, a book review, even a poem, anything



with his byline. And it paid, an honorarium, but money all the same. He'd been desperate.

The unfortunate set of circumstances included the request for a review arriving around the time he'd picked up a comp copy of Bloom's book at Nora's, always his backup mail drop when he was on the fly, so to speak, and for six months, including all of that summer and early fall of the previous year, loose as a goose on the loose, he had had to avail himself of a variety of places to bed down, and in one of those temporary layovers, he'd found time to read the purported guide to modern poetry and, given his humor, such as it was due to his circumstances, it had struck him as narrow minded and shallow, as if it were the retread of a graduate thesis, and he had vented his spleen in no uncertain terms nor had he minced words, and, this being before he got his own internet connected device, hit the send button on the computer in Nora's office, not thinking twice, only remembering with annoyance Bloom's leveraging him into a reading he hadn't particularly wanted to do, though had he not he might not have hooked up with the heartbreaking ball-busting Grace Niklia which was either a good thing or bad thing depending on the day he thought back on that particularly intense time in his life, and had all but forgotten about the hit piece he had written on Bloom's book until sometime after the first of the year when *Boiling Point* finally got around to publishing it, and by then he was well ensconced in Courtney and David's home. Nora, who'd read it over his shoulder while he was writing it, had warned, "That's going to come back and bite you."

**Bloom didn't take it too well.** There were points of contention, of course. He had not held back, one of his visceral skills being cutting invective. Titled *Caveat Poetae* he started by stating the warning. *Anytime one comes across a book that purports to be a 'guide to modern poetry,' as this turd does, alarm bells should sound and the snake oil detector should be flashing Beware!*

Questioning the author's credibility only twisted the knife.

*Once into the text of this depressingly uninformed self-nominated guide, it becomes immediately evident that the author knows very little about modern American poetry or modern poetry, in general. There is no substantive grasp of the complexity and depth of the modern (putatively post-modern) artistic trend in poetry.*

He should have left it at that and not enlarged the compass of his displeasure.

*The poets cited are American Kennel Club breeds who sniff and tag within an exclusive poet park made up of friends and associates from academe, sycophants, and professorial recommendations.*

And, as was inevitable when the vitriol came to a boil, he took his hobbyhorse for a ride.

*The fog shroud of New Criticism envelopes academic thinking about American poetry to this day, entrenched and resistant to the obvious revolution that resonated through the early decades of the last century and reanimated by the recognition of a counter-culture of the post-war era, a revolution that effectively dislodged the Anglo boot heel from American Literature's metaphorical throat to allow the voicing of a unique native gestalt. The literary oligarchy has been demeaning that reality ever since in the guise of maintaining some sort of literary standard based on the misguided presumption of Anglo superiority with its championing of Eliot clones. They are in denial that a linguistic and cultural drift has occurred, particularly evident the further one is removed from the thrall of the ivory towers of the East. The effects of this shift are apparent in the distinctive American poetries emerging from diverse language origins whose grounding esthetic is no longer under the thumb of the imperial glot.*

Then, as a disgruntled elder bemoaning the gullibility of the younger generation: *A degree in literature, an MFA in writing is merely the platform upon which to build one's education. The real education begins once all that has been put behind as necessary but not entirely useful. Yet some authors who pass themselves off as some kind of authority on modern poetry have not moved on to discover the genuine American poetry written outside the purview of academic institutions, and whose undereducated opinions carry with them the stale closed air of the classroom, the seminar, the workshop. Class and privilege allow access, and the iron ivy of the Anglo-American hegemony is pervasive in inserting its stooges in positions of erroneous and biased punditry.*

Never did the thought enter his mind that he'd end up living in close quarters with someone he'd eviscerated in print.

*It is vain and ignorant to think that one can encapsulate the breadth and depth of modern poetry in a volume of less than 200 pages replete with extra wide margins. This vacuous cerebral foam is merely a prop giving the illusion of substance, essentially a dreary, tediously long essay that treads water but does not do a lot of actual swimming. Perhaps the only section of any interest, which should have been titled "Poets Behaving Badly," is one that winks at the prevalent cronyism among poetry contest judges as if that were the only grounds to be distrustful of elitist cliques. The world of practicing poets is a byzantine labyrinth worthy of Dante's circles of Hell. Poetry fortunately is unaffected by the scrabbling self-devouring narcissism of the engines of its creation. It may take years, centuries even, for the truly great examples of poetic psyche to be considered or reconsidered.*

He had pulled his punches in the wrap-up, considering the gutting he had inflicted in the body of the text. At least that was the way he saw it.

*The reliance on tradition is a useful stage from which the contemporary can tap into the greater underlying consciousness and perform the poetry of the future in a guise that is timely. No one really goes to a performance and says "great proscenium!" This ostensible guide to modern poetry unfortunately lists only the stage hands and producers, the actors are hardly ever mentioned.*

He regretted that what he had written was an indiscretion, not so much because of what he had said, but how it affected the atmosphere in the cramped quarters on Russell.

**His armpits had begun to pool**, a trickle down the ribcage. He slung the silver suitcoat over one shoulder, and nonchalantly showed his thumb to the passing traffic. Maybe it was the arresting synthetic green of his polo shirt. A dusty blue older model four-door tentatively found the shoulder of the road a little ways past him and pulled to a stop. He had been right in the middle of a train of consideration that, as a poet, his expectations should be no less: that people give him money, and women throw their pussies at him. Or that strangers stop and offer him a ride.

Opening the passenger side door he peered at the driver, cartons and boxes piled in the back seat indicating that he was a salesman of some sort, and said "Thanks for stopping."

"I'm going as far as Booneville. Where you headed?" He was a round headed man with a little nub of chin, in his thirties, maybe, a smudge of mustache over a set of full lips, hair neatly parted on the right, possibly Hispanic though light-skinned.

"I'm trying to get to Elk." He waited for the man to remove a sales binder and papers from the seat.

"Well, I'll get you part of the way at least."

Once he was belted, the car shot out onto the highway. The driver side-glanced, "Car breakdown?"

"Uh, no, I caught the bus as far as Cloverdale."

"Oh yeah, a lot of people do that. Usually kids. Though I did pick up an old lady once. She must have been in her seventies. An old back-to-the-earth type, hippie. There are a lot of them hiding out in the woods in these parts. Pretty harmless, most of them. Unless they're growing dope and then you never know, probably packing. I've picked up guys reeking of weed, stink like a skunk or something." The driver shook his head and took a bite of the ice cream bar he was holding. There was a

box of them in the center console, and as evidenced by the empty wrappers, he'd gone through about half the box.

"Some of them will even give you blow jobs. The hippie chicks, I mean." And a further qualification: "So I've heard." The driver licked his fingers of the ice cream's sticky residue, his glance expecting a reaction.

Wouldn't you know it, there's always somebody who wants to sniff out your sexuality. He had been there before. Hang out in bars long enough and it was bound to happen. And Frisco? As Johnny Mathias used to sing, "*Chances are. . .*" When he was younger, hardly a day went by when he wasn't hit on by men, and women, regularly. But never in a car, and by the driver. The predictability of the next few moments was a familiar *déjà vu*.

"Do you like men?"

"Not intimately, no. Do I look like someone who does?"

"I'm only asking because not many people in these parts dress the way you are. Or carry a purse."

"It's not a purse, it's a bag. I use it to carry my stuff. I don't have a car that I can just toss my things in the backseat or in the trunk."

"Got a gun in there?"

"No, but I've got a book of poems. That's just about as deadly."

"Poems?!" The driver spit as if he'd spoken a dirty word. "You read poems?!"

"Yeah, I'm a poet, you pretty much have to. I mean, some poets don't read poetry and still they write it, but it shows."

"Is that so? A poet. Are you sure you don't like men? That's what I heard about poets."

"No, there are actually some poets who prefer the split tail."

"What's your name?"

"Carl Wendt."

"Never heard of you."

"Oh, do you know a lot of poets?"

The driver frowned calling a mental effort to the fore. "Nope." Then with a quick sideways glance, "What kind of money do you make doing that? If you don't mind my asking."

"From writing poetry? Zilch. It's being a poet that makes you the money, but you have to have a good hustle. You have to make your living off your rep."

"Oh yeah? How do you do that?"

“Any number of ways. One is by being outspoken or doing something outrageous so that people will remember your name. There are grants, and awards, and residencies, lecturing to college classes and writer’s retreats, teaching writing workshops, speaking at Rotary luncheons. And poetry prizes. I was awarded the 2009 Pillsbury Prize just this last January.”

“For baking?”

“No, for my contribution to American literature.” He thought to add “such as it is” but it was a personal cynicism he needn’t inflict on anyone.

“No shit? They have a prize for that?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty common. There are all kinds of prizes for that kind of thing. Some poets, that’s all they do is go after prizes. It keeps them so busy they hardly have time to write poetry.”

“Can’t be much competition, I mean, who writes poetry anymore?”

“You can’t imagine what the competition is like, even in your most extravagant moment. It’s a blood bath. Poets turn into back stabbing creeps just to get their name in print.”

“Seriously? I always pictured poets as a bunch of guys with limp wrists bitch slapping each other.”

“Like cats, they’ve got claws. Two things you need to be a successful poet, a knife to stab people in the back, and knee pads for the amount of time you’ll spend kneeling in front of someone’s crotch. And bad poetry? You’ll never step into that endless shit stream twice.”

“Eeeuw! Why’d anyone want to be a poet then?”

“For the perks.”

“Perks? They better be good.”

“Sex. Unlimited opportunity for getting laid.”

“Really?!”

“Oh yeah, I know guys who claim to be poets just for that reason. They write a handful of poems that makes them sound like they’re the sensitive type. Women in particular fall for that shit. It has nothing to do with poetry and everything to do with the ulterior motive.”

“So, ah, you must have got your fair share,” the driver said peeling back the wrapper of another ice cream bar. “I mean, just sayin’, you know?”

Once, years ago when he lived in New York City he’d attended an open reading at St. Mark’s Church. It had been a free-for-all. One guy even got up and read his wallet, driver’s license, social security, business and membership cards, the like. And he got laughs. Another poet, this one with obvious name recognition, got up and read a poem titled *Poets*

*I'd Like To Fuck* which included the names of well-known contemporary poets, both male and female, as well as a few mighty ancestors. It was a very funny shtick and he had the poetry audience, mostly friends and cohorts, some of them poets named in the list, in stitches.

He had borrowed the concept and improved on it a bit. He would declaim the alphabet and pick a woman's name that started with the particular letter in sequence and improvise their sexual experience based on what the name suggested. And there was always some woman after the reading who would express interest in joining the list. Although the last time he'd used that routine, titled *Twenty Six Women I Have Slept With*, was a number of years ago, and the reception had been coolly correct. It had done nothing to dispel the rumor that he was a male chauvinist pig.

Yeah, can't complain." The driver wanted details but that wasn't going to happen. Still Franny came to mind, a nurse he'd met when he brought a friend who'd been stabbed outside a bar on Second Avenue into the ER at Bellevue Hospital. That should have brought up a pleasant memory of Franny as a frisky compact woman with straw blond hair, but instead it called up the time he'd been sitting in a coffee house in the East Village and a homeless guy tried to strangle him with a ratty gray scarf. He remembered the scarf and the color specifically. Fortunately his table mates had pulled the guy off, and then the police came. Also distinctly, the memory of the one patrolman asking him where he was from, and when he answered Indiana, the cop had suggested "Why don't you go back there."

"Oh, yeah?" The driver cast a wary eyed side glance, half-finished ice cream bar in hand.

"Yeah, I probably have an entire alphabet of women I've slept with, and while it may have been fun at the time, looking back I think I missed some real opportunities for a meaningful relationship." Val's name swam up. He hadn't meant to conjure her name, more proof of her haunting even a year later. She had occupied his physical space and his emotional state far too long and painfully to let go. She would always inhabit a part of his being as an aftertaste of guilt-wracked regret. He didn't want to think about Wendy, either. She had saved his life, but in the worst way possible.

"Here's a bit of free advice, a pity fuck always turns to shit."

The driver discarded the empty wrapper on the console and nodded as if he'd received the transmission of sage advice.

He laughed at himself yet the set of his mouth also indicated that he had said as much as he was going to say on the subject, now that the x

had been taken out of sex, and he turned his attention to the passing landscape.

The dusty blue car followed the climbing road in a series of switch-backs, the forested land on either side creating a canopy through which the mounting sun cast its dapples, flickers of hypnotizing light accompanied by the swaying motion of the vehicle's swing through the curves, all conducive to the dance of reverie.

**“How many poets does it take to change a light bulb?”**

“None. Poets don't change light bulbs. They're adept at groping in the dark.” He tried to put across the impression of a cool dignity. He'd even been quoted as saying “I want to give the impression that I am eccentric, outside the circle” which was not quite the same thing. It was part of the interview he'd given after receiving the Pillsbury Prize. The payoff, as he thought of it. He remembered writing his name on the paperwork in Hugh Klidian's office and feeling like he was signing his own death warrant.

“I was drawn in the first instance to a poetry that had power, a commanding poetry, because I desired that ability. However, once the sheen had worn off that rather dubious range of command, I understood that poetry is about surrender.”

The interview had been conducted at Cydnie's, the cybercafé on Green St., a short walk away and where he went to get relief from the toxic passive aggressive atmosphere in the house on Russell.

“We are too tied to the page,” he'd said, and, “Poems should be like truffles. You should have to dig for them. Root them out of their secret hiding places.”

It was also at Cyd's, as everyone called it, that he had run into Ellen D. Travers, author of *Elusive Joy*, someone he hadn't seen in years who remarked on the lack of moustache.

“You used to look like a young Gene Hackman. . .or that one picture of Apollinaire. . .”

“The one with the bandage on his head?”

“No, the more formal portrait photo. Where he looks like that TV comedian who plays a delivery man.”

“Now I look like an old Walter Matthau. Or a young Walter Matthau. There wasn't that much difference.”

Someone had once described him as dressing French with a hint of Chicago mobster. His sartorial model was his uncle, Pat O'Neil

Patrick and his brother, Michael O'Neil, were officials in the Carpenters Union though he had never seen either of them lift a hammer or wield a saw. Mostly they just smoked endless packs of cigarettes and drank countless bottles of beer and played cribbage or eight-ball and hung out talking on the phone in the union hall office. Uncle Pat, if he was honest about it, dressed like an Irish pimp or an Italian wiseguy, same difference. He got his fashion ideas from Playboy and Esquire. He owned a red Corvette and always had a dolly on his arm. And he liked jazz, though his taste was rather conventional. It was Uncle Pat who introduced him to the music of Miles Davis. Bird, Diz, Monk, Prez, Bud, Trane, he'd found on his own.

Uncle Mike was not as fastidious or as snake slight as his older brother, a leather jacket with a Black Hawks logo barely enclosing his portly gut the extent of his garniture. His hobby was painting tiny lead soldiers for the collection of military figurines he frequently arranged in dioramas of martial strategy. And he read, mostly history. That's probably where he got it from, his love of reading. And of course being both heavy drinkers, they argued, mainly over union matters, and not very discreetly. Mike would fuss and worry that they were on the brink of being indicted, and Pat would swear up and down insisting that the Feds didn't have a leg to stand on, the witness wouldn't talk. He'd eventually understood, in his early teens, that when they said they were going fishing, that although lakes, boats, and anchors were involved, they never returned with any fish, and always joked about the one that got away. Uncle Mikey's rheumy eyes he realized, much later as well, were due to the lacquer paints he was huffing. Pat and Mike were muscle, and eventually they paid for it. He remembered their reaction when he'd come out as a poet. Mike's was a big grin and Pat's was a worried frown, but secretly he was sure they were both pleased.

Back then, Peggy, his mother, worked as a paralegal for the American Civil Liberties Union. The brothers would joke and call her their little Red sister. It was at her insistence that he apply to IU, and the scholarship from the Carpenters Union Educational Fund, courtesy of his uncles, sealed the deal.

Peggy had devoted her life to the ACLU, and in the end, she was forced out of her position by a group of young lawyers who considered her beneath them even though her years of experience trumped their Ivy League law school education every time. And that may have been the reason, professional envy and jealousy, or a combination of class



snobbery and political correctness—those two go hand in hand. Besides, her brothers were reputed mobsters. And they couldn't have that.

**There were two of them**, intellectuals, who'd arranged to interview him. One had Susan Sontag's eyebrows, sign of a serious mind, and a symmetrical face. The other, with unfashionable bangs, had narrow pinched cheeks leading to a pointy chin, and a severe myopic squint of someone too long at the books. They wanted to make sense of, or cash in on, or both, the myth of the avant-garde. They were quite naïve and prime examples of white privilege university educations. He had to explain to them the difference between the 'look at me I'm writing a poem' school and the homo-fascio anal retentive school also known as the flaming assholes. Clumpers vs lumpers. The problem was conflict of information, info wars, which side do you believe, and there are always more than just two sides.

"Poetry ponzi schemes!" he'd railed, conveniently ignoring his own poetry ponzi schemes, excusing himself for being a low key mom and pop variety, not the franchised pyramid that NAIF or even Iowa represented. He recalled Stoddard explaining the difference between them and the New Arts Inc. scam. "There are snake oil salesmen, charlatans like you and me, and then there are snake oil corporations."

He'd talked about poets who had made it big in stand-up comedy or as shock jocks. They were the right kind of sociopath, the unerring eye for human foibles and weaknesses, and the sadistic pleasure of pointing them out to a room full of quivering masochists. As well, pointedly, he'd attacked the Masters of Fine Arts scene, a debris field around an academic body as a stew of neurosis where everyone was very polite while they stabbed you in the back, with the exception of the occasional hot knives who cut through all the envy to effortlessly secure the prime academic closet, assured by the knowledge that they had made the right moves, dodged or denied the petty backbiting scandals while launching preemptive forays against troublesome associates and rivals. And if that weren't the worst of it, they ended up teaching a mainstream American Literature buggered by the Brits while fellating the French. As a consequence, poets, generally perceived as ivory tower dreamers, and underpaid to the point of extinction were among the most vainglorious and unforgiving in matters of placement at readings, or in the queue for appointments, inclusion in anthologies, residencies, associate professorships, and free lunches. It was for that reason, and fear of joining the ranks of "poetry church mice," perennially going on their appointed

academic rounds on campuses all across America, repeating the bleats of a penned flock fleeced by a cynical unrepentant patriarchy, that he had shied, with a few exceptions, at offers and opportunities to conduct workshops, give lectures, the kind of thing that brought him in contact with potentially clueless however ruthless ambition.

After leaving the sanctuary of Balboa Street, he'd become increasingly anxious and desperate, and Nora had promised that if this gig went well there would be other, better paying assignments. Five hundred dollars for three days wasn't anything to sneeze at since his other paying prospect, the column in the weekly, had gone south. She had arranged a reading and lecture at Gila Community College in a farming community down the coast near Monterey. The other was speaker slash panelist at a weekend writing seminar slash retreat in Las Garritas, a gated community near the *palo alto* of greater Stanford.

He'd been instructed to take the Hound as far as Morgan Hill, south of San Jose, where he would be met by the husband of Natividad Sorrales, poet and teacher in the English department at Gila Community College. He was to talk to the writers club and speak to her Advanced English class and that evening give a poetry reading for the faculty and students. Bed and board were to be provided courtesy of the Sorrales' at their nearby home.

The meal was a disaster with the husband glaring at his wife, the English professor, ESL English as she had clarified, and sniping at her in Spanish which he didn't understand but the glowering man with a nose like a bent nail and tortured swath of moustache looked at him as if the intent didn't need translating. Natividad Sorrales was a mousey little woman with a small tremulous mouth and large devouring intelligent eyes. Her tension showed by the way she held her shoulders as she nervously deflected her husband's remarks while at the same time offering her guest more food, homemade tamales, beans, rice, guacamole, three kinds of salsa, mild hot, medium hot, and hot hot, all equally hot as far as he could tell.

After the meal, Jaime, the husband, brought out a bottle of mescal and two glasses, one for himself and one for the gringo poet. He had toasted the husband and dropped the shot down his gullet. Cactus juice was not his favored drink, but this particular mescal went down smooth as quicksilver. When he expressed his surprised appreciation at the quality, the husband reached across the table and shook his hand. They were now *compadres*, and two more shots were poured, two more shots were consumed. Natividad had come out of the kitchen, surveyed the

situation, gone to the liquor cabinet and procured her own shot glass. She sat down and poured herself a shot daring her husband with a stolid face to stop her. She raised her glass and saluted each of them and swallowed the dollop with one easy motion. Her husband laughed uncomfortably. She smiled and said, "It is an honor to have you join us for dinner, Señor Wendt," and proceeded to fill each of their shot glasses to the very brim, one that would require a steady hand to get the entire contents down the gullet without spilling a drop. "To your health, Salud!"

He had cheated by bringing his mouth closer to the glass and then opening wide. Señora Sorrales, with barely a tremor, lifted her glass and swallowed the contents in a blink. Her husband opted for the quick wrist snap and got it all in except for one little drop on his lower lip that dribbled down his chin. No one deigned to mention it.

The drinking continued with him offering his hosts thanks and compliments for their hospitality, adding that it was rare to meet such like-minded people. The husband reciprocated with a long honorific in Spanish of which he caught bits and pieces thanks to his high school Latin and his brief stay in Madrid. In this manner the bottle emptied in quick order and the honor of drinking the grub had become his. By then, in his state of quasi-psychedelic intoxication, it could have just as easily been a gummy worm. Upon reflection, he had been clearly guided to the horizontal position on a bed of fresh laundered sheets and left in the dark, the closed door revealing a sliver of light at the bottom edge. Apparently the Aztec gods had not been informed of his immortality in regard to alcohol because this stuff had really kicked his ass.

He'd fallen asleep but was awakened by loud banging, crockery breaking, a man yelling and a woman screaming back, then a screech, a door slamming and a woman sobbing. He'd thought to go investigate but his limbs were paralyzed and he fell back to sleep only to wake the next morning with a head that would fit snugly inside the helmet from the Castle of Otranto.

Ironically they'd gone to a McDonald's, the teacher ordering an Egg McMuffin as if she was unaware of the rather large mouse under one eye, and the other swollen and red from crying. He'd figured that this probably wasn't the first time nor would it be the last time. She'd hooked sympathetic looks from the women, mostly domestics or young mothers who were there with their young school aged children.

He'd had a faux latte with his crayon sized sausages and laminated eggs while she outlined her schedule and how he fit into it. There would

be a lot of down time so he would have to find ways to keep himself occupied. There was the cafeteria, but it closed midafternoon on Fridays, and the library where he could examine their poetry section. Or watch TV in the faculty lounge. He'd wanted to express sympathy when she explained, shyly, "My husband is. . .very jealous." As they'd left the restaurant for campus, he noticed a white pickup truck parked across the street, very similar to the one he'd been picked up in by her husband the previous afternoon.

Gila Community College was a cluster of modern buildings resembling a water treatment plant at the end of a long straight road bordered on both sides by artichoke fields. Señora Sorrales introduced him to some of her colleagues and then ushered him into the first class, an English Lit class studying, at the moment, the Romantic poets. He'd asked if they'd learned anything about Walter Savage Landor and then proceeded to declaim Landor's epitaph.

*I strove with none, for none was worth my strife.  
Nature I loved, and, next to nature, Art;  
I warm'd both hands before the fire of Life;  
It sinks, and I am ready to depart.*

That had had the desired effect of leaving them gape mouthed so he extemporized on Wordsworth and Blake and Coleridge and Shelly and Byron, dropping what he thought was a big bomb that it was Shelly's wife, Mary, who had written Frankenstein. Someone in the back, a young woman, offered that they'd seen something about that on Netflix. The students were all female with the exception of a rather stiff young man who without even moving or lowering his lofty gaze appeared affected and feminine. Señora Sorrales explained that she encouraged her students to view historical dramas about authors and in fact much of her teaching materials about poetry were video productions from public television and Spanish language literary biographies available through academic distributors. He'd had his attention called to the large screen TV and the shelves of what he thought at first were books of poetry but were DVD collections about poets and poetry. They did not have a text or anthology in the curriculum. Señora Sorrales was confident that the students' natural curiosity would lead them to read the poems.

He'd spent sometime in the cafeteria enduring the really bad coffee and the stares of hick students and faculty. Natividad found him later that afternoon sitting on a bench in the little cement plaza between

buildings and fetched him to her writers club. He could see that this excited her and with a certain pride she introduced him to the five students, four young women and one young man, the one from the earlier Lit class, who remained undecided. He gave his standard *So You Wanna Be A Poet* spiel toned down from the usual hard edged cynicism. One of the club members arrived late and sat behind the others. This one, a little older, more experienced, he remembered thinking, maybe it was the slicked back hair, the careful moustache, the way he slouched in his chair.

He answered the usual questions of how did you get to be a famous poet and how can I do that, too. Some may have been too awestruck or struck dumb by his mere presence. Which he'd doubted, the enthusiasm generated mostly by the teacher. Mister Moustache was attentive in a catlike way and wasn't inclined to speak up. He hadn't learned his name because the sullen young man had been late to arrive and left before the meeting was over.

He'd had to be patient while Señora Sorrales took him over to the Administration office where she was informed that his check had not been cut. She became quite upset, raising her voice and berating the Accounts assistant. Much of it was in Spanish which the young woman behind the desk seemed to understand. Presently a balding Icabod Crane stick figure came to the door of his office and inquired as to the commotion. When the young woman and Señora Sorrales both started explaining and pointing in his direction, the spectral figure glommed him with lemur eyes and gave a tight lipped smile. The English teacher looked poised to tear the man's throat out with her teeth. The administrator nodded, handed the assistant a set of keys to the cabinet safe against the wall. Natividad had apologized to him that it would take a little while before they processed the payment check, insisting that she had put in the paperwork weeks before, and glancing nervously at her watch, expressing her hope that they weren't going to be too late for the reception at the Chair of the English Department's home. When she finally handed him the check after he'd signed a number of receipts and withholding documents, she apologized again that the only way they could get the check cut on such short notice was to take it out of a special account reserved for field trips.

The reception had been a field trip itself. The chairman's wife was British. She was given to making inane pronouncements to the small gathering of friends and faculty, yet said in her accent they had the effect of sounding haughtily profound. He'd been introduced by Señora Sorrales and had taken an immediate dislike to her. It was the way she'd

regarded the English teacher with a condescending veiled look, tagging her as the ultimate British snob. The woman, Deidre, was perceptive enough to realize that he'd tumbled to her as a phony. The evening had gone downhill from there. A few others of the faculty cruised by to sate their inquisitiveness but mostly he and the English teacher were shunned while Deidre corralled the guests, speaking to them in hushed tones while shooting daggers in his direction. It didn't affect him, being inured to such behavior simply by being a poet.

It did however affect the audience at the reading that followed and hardly anyone from the reception deigned to attend. If there were two dozen present, clumped or scattered throughout the assembly sized auditorium, it seemed like fewer due to their placement. That he had to read from a podium on the stage seemed even more ludicrous and senseless. Señora Sorrales had been clearly upset by the sabotage and the poor turnout. The fact that her husband was seated on the aisle in the last row in his white Stetson and drinking from a paper bag might have also contributed to her cabled frown and hunched shoulders.

He'd cut to the chase, made a few lame jokes, praised "Señora Sorrales' dedication to education and literature", and finished up with a poem that was basically a stand-up routine saved for just such interminable situations.

Half a dozen students, four boys and two girls, had strolled into the auditorium around the last of his reading. He was aware of them because they caused a commotion by giggling and whispering loudly as they scuffled around in search of the best seating. Not that there hadn't been plenty of choices. Judging by the staid constrained expressions of the young men, they were stoned. Señora Sorrales had shot laser beams of rephension at them but they remained unfazed. When he'd ended by thanking everyone, they were the ones who cheered raucously while the others in the audience clapped demurely. He'd mingled with the attendees, some shepherded over by his sponsor, shaking cold limp hands or nervous eager moistness. The pack of latecomers consisted of three students from Natividad's Writer's Club. The prim young man still looked severe, but now because he was stoned, only as severe as a plush toy. The mature guy whose name he never got put a grin on his mocking and macho gaze. The young woman, compact with native features, in her late teens, had been the inquisitive one in the classroom, interested in learning the mechanics of attracting attention with her talent, assuming she had talent. The other three he did not grok.

Young moustache had congratulated him on his reading and offered

to buy him a drink. This had caused Señora Sorrales to growl the young man's name threateningly. "Carlos."

His name was Carlos, same as his. Funny the affinity that arises in meeting someone with the same name, a naïve trust in fated coincidence, and a drink was exactly what he needed. Besides, the way Señor Sorrales was bobbing and weaving at the rear of the auditorium, his face red as a ripe tomato ready to burst and spatter his white sombrero, another night of passive aggressive seesawing at his hosts' abode had the potential for being trouble, troubling, and troublesome. He was traveling light, the clothes on his back and his book, manuscript pages, toothbrush and change of underwear in the russet pigskin bank courier's pouch he'd picked up for a steal in a secondhand store.

The bar was a sandbar thick with indigenous willow a polite jump across the trickle that represented the late summer flow of the Larree River. The Indian summer day had been hot enough that the night air enjoyed a comfortable residual heat. The fire pit in the beach clearing had the look of an established artifact that perhaps generations of teens and young adults had partied at this particular spot. The drink was cerveza and Cuervo, neither of which he objected to. Someone had hooked their phone up to some tiny speakers from which Spanish language music emanated, softly in the background. He'd been introduced around to the young men and women, some in the typical white shirt and levi attire, others a little more flashy and risqué. They were serious young folk but clearly enjoying the drink, the talk, the camaraderie.

Carlos presented a young woman, Jacinta, who had not been at the reading and indicated that she was a poet. She was quite pretty he remembered, and fiery. Carlos had asked her to recite one of her poems which she did with much verve and drama, entirely in Spanish, to the dithyrambic rhythms of hip hop or rap. Soon a few others joined in as a chorus or solo improvising their own verses and it went on like that in a kind of round robin until they collapsed into laughter and pleasure at their own cleverness.

Carlos called for Estrella, the young writer from Señora Sorrales' writers club, to recite a poem. Hers was much more serious in presentation and code switched between English and Spanish, a complaint of neglect, exclusion, and disrespect for indigenous culture, and although it was met with approbation it was kind of a damper as if someone had given a political speech at a beer bust. For that reason more bottles and cans of cerveza were opened and the Cuervo passed around. It was a jolly group of amigos and amigas bantering and storytelling. Most of them were

from Señor Galliego's Spanish Literature class, Carlos had explained. It was the most popular class at Gila Community College besides Farm Management and Agriculture classes. He himself was a big fan of the visceral realists that had been unintentionally spawned by Bolaño's novel, *The Savage Detectives*, but he loved Neruda, too, and Borges, and the French Surrealists, particularly René Char.

As the festivities brightened further under the influence of various intoxicants, and as the guest of honor, he had been asked to join in the improvisational recitation and posturing of the younger crowd. He'd counted on them not being all that familiar with Dylan's work, Bob or Thomas, and borrowed from both freely. So he declaimed beneath the diamond sky, spoke of haunted frightened trees, the circus sands, the frozen leaves, and crazy sorrow because the times were changing. In his craft and sullen art he'd raged against the dying of the light not willing to gently go into that good night. He'd been a hit, cheered and egged on with various exhortations of the Spanish variety such as *mas, ándale* and *olé* from the appreciative albeit drunk youngsters.

Later, as morning rose to take the place of night, he and Carlos, now fast amigos, had staggered back to his pickup truck, young Carlos with his arm over his shoulder and confiding that his mother was a big Bob Dylan fan and he'd grown up listening to his albums. He'd asked, rhetorically, "Why do you think I'm a poet? But don't worry about it, I'm probably the only one of those *chollos* who caught it. Anyway, it's all about the singer not the song." At least in the arroyos poetry was alive albeit in another language. Anglo was deaf to their lyric concerns.

**Next stop, Las Garritas**, nothing but cul de sacs and the faux masonry facades of rustic cabin quasi-Craftsman chic, of large fireplace living rooms, useless under current air pollution regs, sparsely almost bleakly decorated minimal large canvas art and glass chrome and leather furnishings that just screamed white privilege. . .and two and a half bathrooms somewhere at the end of the narrow framed art attended hallways, a place of intrigue and downright unpleasantness where he'd gone to splash water on his face, try on a few rakish expressions, and smooth the wrinkles from his clothes without much success. . .in the large open plan of the living space with its floor to ceiling window overlooking a drought resistant landscaping of wild grass and juniper, he entered the familiar world of sharp elbows, razorbacks, and hatchet expressions. . .all the potential elements for an orgy in place except that the milling bodies were way too uptight and self-constrained. . .that would evolve to further



neurosis as the effects of alcohol took hold. . .at that moment it had been as if the women's pussies were made of gold and the men's cocks, for all intents, were made of lead. . .Jay Velour taught at Pepperdine, a major snake oil conman if there ever was one, where he'd bluffed his way into a teaching position using a repertoire of smoke and mirrors that even in the parched and cynical land of holly and wood still dazzled the gullible. . .they'd been fellow travelers a ways back, Berkeley in fact. . .Velour wasn't much help, reacting as if he'd been asked for his password. . .he'd laughed dryly, smirking, "You don't know Lacy?" . . .Sue Denim, a poet and psyche lamprey with skin like a Dead Sea scroll touched up with rouge and eyeliner loomed into view at his elbow. . .she had a smile like the Alien about to grab Sigourney Weaver by the throat. . .he'd put the buffet table between them. . .but bumped the elbow of a woman surveying the spread with narrowed eyes. . .she'd given him a look that would have withered a normal human. . .he knew the type. . .there was always the question as to whether it was their hand or their ass that required kissing, probably both. . .the indignant reaction was so well practiced. . . "Do you know who I am?" . . .he hadn't considered it a question. . .and of course having been in similar circumstances before, he had a ready reply "I'm not certain what you're asking. . .do I know who you are or do I know who you think you are" . . .her name was Lacy Fabric. . .she was the alpha female running the literary scene in Las Garritas and, due to its proximity, firmly under the thrall of the university in Palo Alto where the people there were just as brainy and snobby but much more chic than Berkeley. . .and also the wife of the debonair Slavic language university professor, Serge Fabric. . .it was generally agreed that weekend poetry intensives were the height of literary pretension so all the pretenders and their acolytes were sure to attend. . .as it was also agreed that she was a narrow nosed bitch. . .nothing like getting off on the wrong foot. . .he'd been scheduled to be on the afternoon panel and his mantra in such situations was "why do I let myself get roped into these things". . .they were all seated behind a long table much like the one that had held the buffet, a cast of doddering academics, literate dowagers, and himself, a rumpled wild eyed poetry pimp. . .the attendees now assembled to nosh on abstraction. . .fortunate for those who had a taste for academic inane as the panel's discussion was to be on *The Longfellow Syndrome, Bigfoot in American Poetry*. . ."I'm an anachronism: white, hetro, male, not interested in teaching". . .that was always a good way to introduce yourself to a group of teaching professionals, educrats and workshop honchos. . .he'd focused on the floor to ceiling window at the rear of the room

appreciating the senseless vacuity of dominating light. . . “I became a poet with malice aforethought” . . . why did he feel he had to tiptoe around the poetasters, pretenders and poseurs. . . poets are shameless, like professional Irish. . . he didn’t like what he became when he had to scuffle for money although that was solved for the time being. . . even so he felt like he was wandering around a parking lot wearing a clown car looking for a parking space. . . thin skinned, thick headed like the Irish, they expect you to dance a jig on eggshells. . . yet he had his little song and dance down pat. . . “Of course my main ghosts are the three W’s of Poetry Americano, Whitman, Williams, and Whalen. . . but as you may know I favor the obscure as none of these guys get any respect in Anglo dominated academia. . . same with that generational ghost, Jack Kerouac. . . the Brits used to have thirteen colonies. . . now they think they have fifty. . . they may have lost their political dominion but their linguistic hegemony is still virulent. . . time for a second Americano revolution, to free ourselves of the yoke the Brits consider “proper” English. . . after all, we like to dangle our prepositions and grate with our minor key grammar, like the blues, and spice in some español, with dashes of far-ranging non-Indo-European accents. . . we be Americano. . . you have to understand that poetry is written in two languages in this country. . . there are those writing in conventional Brit influenced English, primarily brainwashed English majors, and those who write in American English which doesn’t adhere to conventional modes when it comes to phrasing, elisions, trains of thought, contractions, blends, blurs, slurs and word culture. . . Americano has a different ear. . . most poets today write with a conventional ear out of a need for acceptance and survival in the evil Anglo language empire. . . it is these two opposing currents that have created the poetry vortex in El Norte. . . as someone once proposed ‘when a poet dies two more are born’ and that’s either a good thing or a bad thing. . . poets are the myrmidons, the ant people, as any small press distribution catalog more than amply illustrates. . . they’re everywhere and in many respects equally insignificant. . . but leave a piece of sugar or fat out and you’ve got a swarm, the original flash mob. . . for sugar or fat, substitute grant, publisher, fellowship, tenure, public exhibition, et cetera. . . the true anonymity of being a poet is never considered”. . . once he got going on that particular freight train, it was hard to stop. . . the gaped mouth, frowning brows, and wide-eyed disbelief reward enough. . . bourgeois pretension is so easily dismantled. . . “You don’t know what it is to write. . . it’s a crushing task. . . it bends your spine, blurs your eyesight, creases your stomach, and cracks your ribs”. . . quoting a 10<sup>th</sup> century scribe to make a point. .

.by the reaction of the audience to what he'd said, some had taken it personally. . .Jay Velour had found the ear of Paul Esther's widow, Polly, and appeared to be whispering his terms of endearment. . .Stoddard Leary had once remarked, in a somewhat cryptic fashion at the mention of Velour's name, that he liked to smoke other men's cigars. . .Paul hadn't been in the ground more than thirty days and already the vultures were circling. . .in answer, during the Q&A afterwards, "Oh, yeah, that's why I'm a poet—I like the attention. . .it always has been all about me, too late to change". . .and it probably wasn't very politic of him when one of the panelists whose name slipped his mind immediately after they had been introduced, announced that he would read a few short poems to illustrate a point to say "Short poems – my favorite kind". . .had he said that out loud? . .during the discussion phase of the panel, Gabriel Bardine, a university lit professor had stated some warmed-over leaden cliché that prompted him to say, "Come on, Gabe, you're a college professor, what do you know about poetry?". . .the Las Garritas set had their token bard, an unkempt fellow, bully, mamma's boy, and plaything shadow of the alpha female. . .think panda bear. . . by the name of Hayden Fleece whose shtick was to try to out-Irish Heaney. . .close but no cigar. . .he was the figurehead for a poetry package tour run by the Fabrics to what was advertised as the cradle of poetry, or the crossroads of poetry, with the unlikely name of Sunny Beach, a resort on the Bulgarian Black Sea from which no doubt the professor and his wife received substantial kickbacks. . .it also had the reputation of being a satyric romp. . .they'd circled each other at the watering hole whereupon at the conclusion of the panel the ranks bellying up for a drink was three deep as if all that dry academic blah-blah had parched them to no end so that listeners as well as speakers needed to quench what seemed like a bottomless thirst or to somehow obliterate the sheer convoluted gibberish that had filled the air with pompous self-importance. . .he hadn't strayed too far as free booze, even if it was much maligned central coast varietals, was a phenomenon to be appreciated and cultivated. . .of course standing around with a glass at the ready was all the opening most people needed to come up and spew their opinion. . .to insult or be insulted, as a kind of social jousting, and something at which he was quite adept. . ."You are a snob with class aspirations. I'm just a snob". . .said to someone's husband. . .and the obvious answer to the oft asked obvious question. . ."I write what everyone else writes, only better". . .he did this thing with an eyebrow that arched just a bit. . .it wasn't much but it was enough to appear threatening to some. . .a gathering of poets should not be a meeting of

the Rotary Club but nonetheless the less will spin their wheels. . .always the same, the saucer eyed groupies at these parties and readings. . .there are good poets and bad poets. . .that said, they are merely points in a vast gray field. . .“Her poetry. . .I’d read her poetry if it was printed on wet toilet paper”. . .unfortunately he hadn’t caught the name of the poet. . .the DIY poets dominate such scenes, hobbyist for the most part, the lunatic autodidact fringe serving as the perfect example that a little knowledge is dangerous. . .the Notational School was also represented but no one had yet to take note. . .“Your name is synonymous with asshole and when it’s spoken it means ‘steaming piece of shit’”. . .he’d looked in the direction of the speaker, certain it was meant for him. . .“He probably feels the same way about you”. . .said of somebody else. . .“You don’t think I’m funny. . .I don’t care.”. . .“I’m this way because of all the babies I’ve eaten,” she said cryptically. . .well, the upshot was that he’d met Amber Chiffon, the Hillsborough matron and money behind Iron On Press. . .that had led to talk about why someone with his reputation was due for a collected poems. . .when things seem to be too good to be true, they sometimes are. . .he still had his reservations but he would be foolish to pass up the opportunity. . .so the wheels were set in motion and especially now after the Pillsbury Prize and his name had a kind of lopsided buoyancy, she was planning a late fall publication date. . .he was of two minds: sure, he was due, yet a collected poems had such a finality to it. . .and now he had to come up with a title. . .how could one title represent his entire life’s work. . .at one point, way past the midnight hour, there were still diehard intellectuals arguing their stands somewhat repetitiously in their drunkenness draped or leaning against various pieces of furniture or in doorways. . .moaning low argumentative voices could be heard coming from the rear of the house. . .Jay Velour was giving his attention to an older carrot haired woman in a plush green druid’s robe whose bemused expression was in marked contrast to Jay’s sincere intensity. . .the buffet table was littered with dead soldiers and ravaged china, and he had wandered into the darkened kitchen to search out possible reserves to wet his whistle. . .and got more than he’d bargained for. . .there on the preparation island Lacy Fabric was scarfing down a late night snack between the legs of another of her gender. . .Polly Esther, as it turned out. . .who knew?

He was lucky to get out of there alive.

**“See you in the next incarnation** where you’ll be pretty much the way you are now, a pimple on my ass.” In answer to the dick who’d said “I hate jazz.” Who’d he think he was, Adorno?

He stared transfixed at the passing scenery. That J.J. Johnson composition, *Enigma*, was replaying itself between his ears with all its incredible nuance of instrumentation: Miles, the Heath Brothers, the lyric majesty of the orchestration, heart breaking. He could actually hear a faint modulation.

“So, where you coming from?”

It took him a moment to register what the driver had asked. “Uh, the city,” he answered dully as if coming out of a sleep.

“Frisco?”

“Yeah, but they don’t like you to call it that.”

“Fuck them!”

“I’m with you there. I mean what’s the big deal? I’ve even heard it called San Cisco.”

“Now what the fuck!”

“Just saying.”

The driver pointed at the windshield and the delivery truck blocking the road ahead, and ahead of it a pickup truck and ahead of that, another vehicle, rear partially visible around the turn in the switchback.

“Another fucking accident? This is the third inna week!”

Behind them came the ramping up of a siren in warning. “Here comes the meat wagon.” The rescue flashed by, red with a white stripe along the side.

The driver spoke his mind. “I’m gonna be late for the sales meeting. Shit!”

He stared dumbly at the rear of the truck ahead and realized that he wasn’t going anywhere. He cracked open the passenger side window to let in some fresh warm air and let out the thick smell of souring milk from the used wrappers and now empty box of ice cream bars.

“This better not take long!” The driver thumped the steering wheel, turned off the ignition and then gave him a look disgusted frustration.

The warm air played against his face and he remembered Irma had said “We shouldn’t be too long.” She and Philippe were attending a retirement party for a friend in Fairfax. He might have quipped, “and I won’t belong” as an indication of just how out of place he felt in what he considered the wilderness, somewhere on the populated mesa overlooking the town of Bolinas.

However it was, in Irma's guest room, French doors leading out to a small patio area surrounded by flowerbeds and lush greenery, much too much for him to absorb as anything but leaves of one kind or another classified in his limited urban taxonomy as either narrow or wide. The room with its profusion of natural light let in by the double doors was pleasant enough, and with a bed whose mattress might have been a trifle too comfortable, a padded armchair, a writing desk, and a wall of bookcases that served as an indication of Irma's literate capital. Yet in spite of all that outdoors he'd felt confined. And not to be ungrateful, Irma and Philippe were excellent hosts, the food plentiful and well prepared, the conversations intelligent and lively. And they seemed to be delighted to have him as company despite the meaningful sidelong glances they occasionally exchanged at perhaps his more outrageous contentions. Irma hadn't broached the subject but he knew that before his visit was over, it would come up. And he'd manage to keep his misgivings to himself. How could he complain when sitting in the comfortable white wicker settee on the patio with a latte from Irma's personal espresso machine and eye candy from Philippe's irritatingly complete art library? Philippe being a prominent art scholar did confer certain advantages. And not only that, but ubiquitous bird song accompanied his reverie, at first to his surprise, then to his wonderment, and lastly to his annoyance. He couldn't hear himself think! How he missed the soothing mechanical growl and purr of street traffic. One bird in particular, a jay of some sort, had been pestering the edge of the foliage almost as if it were objecting to his occupying its territory. He doubted that it was more than wishful thinking but what happened next could hardly be thought as revenge unless he was being more paranoid than usual.

Irma had a large black Persian cat named Midnight, a slothful creature who undoubtedly considered the settee its own private perch and which he had displaced with his latte and stacks of art books. He chose to ignore the remorseless yellow eyed stare and eventually Midnight found an alternative spot at the edge of the garden where Irma had a little plaque that quoted Voltaire, "*Il faut cultiver notre jardin*", and stretched out in the classic sphinx pose with its front paws extended before it, inscrutable, alert but motionless. The bird kept up its racket.

He'd continued to flip through the monographs, Rice, Rivers, Rothko. He'd already done the P's, Picasso, Pissarro, Pollack, and so on. Something had caught his attention at his periphery and he looked up just in time to see Midnight rise straight up through the air as if levitating and with one masterful stroke stretching its entire feline length, no longer

an overweight kitty, more like an unerringly accurate furry arrow, and snag the annoying chatterbox that had apparently flown too close.

At first he wasn't sure that he'd seen what he'd just seen and had to replay it. Cat shoots straight up, agile as Jordon, and knocks bird out of the air. While he was reliving his astonishment, the cat busied itself with the coup de grace. Then it proceeded to toss the lifeless shuttlecock around as if daring it to show signs of animation. As he knew, this was a house cat, fed on table scraps and any variety of canned or dry repasts. He'd watched the strangely sadistic but business-like dispassion of the cat's actions with his own detachment. Or maybe it was his own sadism and lack of mortification at this senselessness, a prime example of nature red in tooth and claw. When Midnight began tossing the lifeless bundle of feathers up into the air, he projected its taunting intent. "Think you're so smart, doncha? Think you can fly? Let's see you fly now, Mr. Chatterbox." Some part of him was appalled, and it disturbed his complacency. That might have been why he decided to take a walk down to see what there was to do in town.

**He'd written down what there was to do** in Bolinas as a Berrigan styled list while he was on the bus that morning. He opened his bag and extracted his notebook computer and found the word file.

***Fourteen Things to do in Bolinas (A Sonnet)***

*Get lost*

*Watch surf (& surfers) from atop a steep cliff*

*Wonder if the sun will ever show its face*

*Identify the post office*

*View the library*

*Find the bar*

*Drink coffee*

*Make small talk with local big wigs,*

*Accepted generic congratulations (genuine or bogus)*

*Realize invisibility is proportional to population density,*

*Wear clothes that say 'I am a tourist' (not baggy shorts and tee shirt),*

*Get drunk*

*Meet pretty young delivery girl for Point Reyes Oyster Company,*

*Leave Bolinas (with her)*

Even out in the country there was no escaping his impulsiveness, in fact it may have been exacerbated by the fresh air. He'd taken his laptop

bag to Smiley's with the intent of working on the manuscript for his collected, now tentatively titled *Unintended Consequences*. He'd need to do a search to see if anyone else had used it. He wasn't too worried. Even if someone else had, he had more where that came from. Originally he'd been torn between *No Wonder* and *What's Yours Is Mine*, a nod to the thread of plagiarism that ran through his oeuvre. Then *Recent Ash* was momentarily in the forefront but sent to the discard pile for its potential for mispronunciation as *Recent Ass* which would probably prompt friends as well as detractors, often the same, to comment that the *ass* part stretched much further back than *recent*. *Read My Dust* soon followed but that was a titled best suited for a chapbook.

As *Temporary Eternity* had been. The letterpress chapbook published by Grand Teton Press in Montana turned up during one of Nora's periodic sorties through the disarray of her office, discovered behind the couch in the debris field that was her work space. How such a successful agent could be so functionally disorganized was beyond him. Well, working with writers was like finding order out of chaos so the mess suited her skills. On a day he stopped by looking for an advance on the work he was doing for her she'd pointed to the white mailing box sitting on the ottoman and said "that came for you." She didn't bother to mention that the postmark was almost two months old.

He'd been crashing on a boat with Aaron Shone at Mission Bay at the time. Aaron Sidney Shone, poet, songwriter and longtime cohort, lived illegally on a boat moored there. Aaron was hardly ever around, spending most of his time with an entourage of groupies and drug dealers around a cultish cover band called The Reruns but known to everyone as the Runs at a practice hall/dungeon in the shed of a demolition yard in the neighborhood. Although the space on the boat was cramped and Aaron was a borderline hoarder, its one advantage was that it was close to The Bayside, a seafaring watering hole of old favored by pier rats and the worker class. He felt quite at home there though that could be said of any number of watering holes scattered throughout the city. The disadvantage was that the gate to access the berth was locked from eleven pm to four am and those inhabitants who did not possess a key and were there illegally found themselves locked in or locked out. Not a few early mornings had found him scaling the chain link gate to make it to his bunk to be rocked to sleep by the mostly gentle swaying of the dilapidated bay cruiser. He'd also lost a pair of pants in the crotch, snagged on the twisted terminus of chain links.



At any rate, the box of chapbooks beautifully designed, hand set, and printed on rag paper by the renowned Dan “Red” Cliffords who operated his prestigious little poetry press off the grid in the shadow of the Grand Tetons, paid off or paid down a lot of markers and favors. He could have realized a good price by placing some with the bookseller Harry Croft, but he wasn’t going to forget that Croft had set him up, though he continued to vociferously deny that he had anything thing to do with that incident a year ago that had almost got him killed.

**“My boss needs to get me one of those.”** The driver indicated the notebook. “They’d be great for inventory.”

He glanced up from the screen as if coming up for air, breaking out of the depth of his ruminations in the privacy of his feelings to engage the stranger, and appreciating that going into his device might be construed as rude though he knew the younger folk thought nothing of tuning out. “Yeah, they’re pretty handy. Lots of bells and whistles. I’m still trying to figure out what they all are.”

The driver craned his neck to watch another car queue in behind the car behind him behind him. “Fuck,” he breathed looking back at the display on his phone, “Not even a bar.”

A siren sounded ahead of them and a red and white ambulance with lightbar pulsing hove into view going in the opposite direction. In the distance the loud growl of a heavy truck starting up, a few other engines kicking in and what sounded like a helicopter churning overhead.

He couldn’t help himself, the display pulling him in like a deep dark pool. He’d been borderline obsessive before, but now technology had pushed him over the edge.

**He was introduced to computers rather late**, getting rid of his old Royal, appropriately, at the turn of the century. First through the glacially slow desktop stations in the library, owning one then beyond his means, and subsequently picking up someone’s cast-off, after they’d purged the hard drive. “Knowing you, Wendt” was a common assumption, plagiarism allegations following him around like he’d stepped in dog shit. And he’d learned the hard way to make back-ups and hard copies, friends letting him have use of a printer or an office machine. The last one, an obsolete laptop Angie had let him have, was not wifi capable, though it had come with one of her old printers.

“I don’t know what to do with them, they just pile up like broken toasters,” she’d complained.

He couldn't figure it, an earth conscious stalwart like Angie and she couldn't make the jump to recycling them. He'd thought to get a cell phone and a tablet. Short of robbing a jewelry store and that wasn't going to happen. Then he met Oren Rickles. Or was finally introduced to him, by Stoddard Leary, a slightly rotund man with a head of oily dark curls and beard, signature orange converse. Friend of Kay Sayrah's, and apparently IT consultant to the poets.

A sign read *poetry is code* over a workbench strewn with a rat's nest of wires, stripped armatures, and solder studded green motherboards. Rickles had taken a look at his laptop when he'd asked if it was worth upgrading with a wireless connection. The tech looked at the top and the bottom without opening it and then had shrugged handing it back, saying "I dunno, paper weight, museum, boat anchor?"

It struck him then how dependent on his computing device he'd become. He didn't think he wanted or could, even if he tried to, go back to not being able to record himself through the magic of electrons. It wasn't exactly a deal with the devil, but he did upgrade to a used laptop with wifi, charger thrown in, word processor software, an updated version of the one he was already familiar with. Once he got the hang of the web browser, well, the world was at his fingertips like never before, every and any arcane fantasy could be called up at a key stroke, mouse click, dark, unknown corners brought to light in the course of a browse to spiral further down that autodidacts' rabbit hole. It had taken about a week to scare up a down payment from various sources, the bulk of which came from Nora who reasoned that an improvement in his prospects was an improvement in her prospects of being repaid the money he owed her.

But he had to draw the line somewhere or redraw it, at least, and branding himself as had been suggested as a path to success, was it. He wasn't interested in the shiny lamination of a presentable product, a definable entity encased in plastic like a fly in amber. It offered a dubious immortality and in a disposable culture the chances of being recycled were slim. Facebook, Twitter, he didn't have time for their compelling hypnotic appeal. There had to be a demarcation, a perforation between the tectonic plate of one generation and the next. And where the plates shifted, that's when the energy was generated, a friction felt along the fault line that filled the air with static electricity. There he drew the line.

Yet there was a treasure hoard of nostalgia, the open sesame to which was whatever one wanted it to be as long as it comprised eight characters and at a minimum upper and lower case characters and numerals. Arcane

lore and magical science, showrooms of innovation and museums of ancestral excellence, documents and documentaries, the past represented in grainy photo and remnants of shadow on yellowing celluloid. To his everlasting delight he had found footage of the jazz giants in his pantheon of greats and lovingly indulged in every move, mannerism and expression of his heroes in the delineation of the music that resonated in the depth of his being. To their videos he gave himself unconditionally as if in a dream with a fixity that excluded all else.

And this was only one facet of the holographic cyberinth, there were so many corners to turn, so many surfaces to explore, so many directions to follow without a thought to ever finding the exit. And then there was porn, the brothel for the eyes, that alone providing enough proof for the primacy of the visual cortex in processing consciousness let alone on-demand woody. Never have the uses of anatomy been so graphic and sex so boring, after the first five minutes at least. Porn, he came to understand, was fascinating more on a metaphysical level than on a sexual one. It was an outsized athleticism, a fiction of equine proportions and juicy Junoesque dimensions consumed for its mockery of the absurdity of sex as a cruel collective spectacle. And it makes men into voyeurs, a world of Chauncey Gardeners who like to watch. Porn can't capture two of the most essential aspects of sex, intimacy and scent. If there were any lessons to be learned, one was that all vaginas are not created equal, and that not all penises can tell the difference. Also the male is on automatic and soon runs out of gas. The female is on manual but once started won't stop. The only thing worse than porn's hypnotic repetitious inanity is cat videos. Yet now anything of visual stimulation by the abundance of choices glossily presented is deigned porn for its salacious appeal which naturally enough encourages consumer orgies of which the economy so much depends upon.

**Oren Rickles was an odd egg** but fairly personable for someone with borderline autism. His workshop/squat took up the rear of an industrial building in the flats off of Third and one of the State streets. Apart from being a computer nerd, he fancied himself a poet and a literary theoretician, but because he was a tech no one would take him seriously when he spoke his ideas about poetry. It was, yeah, thanks for fixing my computer but I'm not interested in hearing what you have to say about literature. So typical of English majors. And because Rickles was letting him buy the reconditioned laptop on time, and that he needed to be talked through the open source operating system, its quirks and whistles, and

the kind of product review that only a guy totally obsessed in discerning the x-y coordinates of every aspect of the technosphere could give, he had lent a superficially sympathetic ear.

What transpired during these tutorials along with helpful hints and various shortcuts was a recitation of Rickles' opinions on the failings and future of poetry in the cyber age. Such as the internet had exposed a vast wasteland of writers of poetry whose only definition of the art came from the dictionary and children's nursery rhymes, and that they far outnumbered the really intelligent working artists, threatening to redefine poetry by their sheer number and shameless ignorance, and comparing the situation to the cult movie *Idiocracy*. Also, that a tsunami of shit poetry would wipe out any accumulated innovation and reset the bar to ground zero. In his opinion, authentic poetry would rise from the obliterating sameness in an adjacent possible where it would flourish in ways unknowable as a creative adaptation to new technology. Language changes, he'd insisted, because new words are needed for new concepts which are then parsed as common denominators. And, in turn, that affects the direction of cultural drift. Rickles had a lot of other crazy ideas. He'd even quoted Italo Calvino to him. "*The author, that spoiled child of ignorance and romantic myth, vanishes and gives way to a more thoughtful person, a person who knows the author is a machine and knows how the machine works.*"

He'd come to similar conclusions. Now with his own personal access to the internet and the millions upon millions who wrote poetry, he understood that good or bad was no longer a valid standard, that whether a poem was good or bad really didn't matter. Obeying the laws of entropy, poetry was becoming static, flat, dissipated, an infinity of poetry particles whose repulsive polarity, no longer negative or positive, was, as a consequence, losing its energy. It didn't matter if he had written a good poem or a bad poem. What mattered was who his friends were, who he knew in advantageous positions, and who could exercise their power by awarding him boons or influence others to do so. Yet poet was such a solitary occupation. And success required social skills, the one seemingly a betrayal of the other. That left only the luck of the draw.

Though certainly less tactile than a cocktail party, there was a similarity to online interactions. Internet poetry groups were like children lost in a forest calling out their positions or locations to each other or merely, as birds in distant trees or thickets, defining the edges of their territory with song. They represented not so much an avant-garde poetry underground as they did isolated instances of undifferentiated ground litter. And as in the actual world, the cyber world of poets was its own kind of

hell. Well-meaning intention could count on being easy prey for poetry trolls and grammar ogres eager to exploit potential for conflict.

The faith of these poets in their simpleminded intent reflected a particular innocence. Uninformed of the latest developments, their poetry was lacking in the most basic acquaintance with the breadth of literature and its significant history. These *Volk* or folk poets were often driven by self-righteousness and exhibitionism similar to those of itinerate preachers or evangelicals. In spirit, they believed in a true poetry, unhampered by the petty questions and quarrels that made up the dark matter of the literary universe. On the other hand, and not surprisingly, theirs was also a very conservative poetry, one not so much devoid of inspiration as perhaps of innovation and imagination. The styles adopted or imitated were modern only in the sense that they were developed in the Twentieth Century. In some ways, they could be considered zombie poets, living off the dead in a clueless regurgitation of great art.

And that went for those who recited free associated lists as a claim to a pedestrian edginess as well. Their poems championed a self-conscious abstraction. Abstraction, the deadliest of language mires, was the beacon of pretenders. Ironically, only parodies of abstractions were actually bearable and anywhere near being truly abstract. But presenting this metaphorical porridge as jambalaya was criminal not to mention nauseating.

Still others wrote the poetry of misguided journalists whose feeble ironies served only cliché while yet others aimed to be photographers, subjective in their Ansel Adams black and white objectivity. Poetry workshops and writing groups, to further muddy the waters, fostered a self-esteem that verged on delusions of reference in which celebrity was the ultimate attainment. What all of them could not comprehend was that poetry was tautegorical, not intellectual. The poem did not represent the thing, it was the thing. Poetry belongs to the sphere of affectivity and will.

Poets surround themselves with words to assimilate the world of objects. The poetic mind never perceives passively, never contemplates things, and all its observations spring from some act of participation, some act of emotion and resolve. Even as the poetic imagination materializes in poems and presents the definitive outlines of an objective world, the significance becomes clear only if the dynamic sense of life from which it originally arose can be detected. Only when it expresses itself as love or hate, fear or hope, joy or sorrow is the poetic imagination roused to the pitch of excitement at which it begets a definite world of representation through the agency of the poem. And only when the

entire self is surrendered, possessed by a singular impression, is there the utmost tension between subject and object, the outer and inner world. Then external reality is not merely viewed and contemplated but overwhelms with its sheer immediacy, with fear, hope, terror, or wish fulfillment. A spark jumps the synaptic gap and the tension finds release as subjective excitement becomes objectified and confronts the poet as a poem. The earliest products of poetic thinking neither are permanent, self-identical, or clearly distinguished as poems, nor are they immaterial inklings. They are like elements of a dream, objects endowed with poetic import, haunted places, accidental shapes in nature resembling something of portent, all manner of shape shifting fantastic images which speak of larger ineffable ideas of good and evil, life and death. Their common trait being that they evoke awe in the connectedness of all life. Poetry does not give rise to discursive understanding. Nor does it beget apperception by sorting out concepts and relating them to distinct patterns. A poem tends to bring together great complexities of related ideas in which all distinct features are merged and assimilated. He'd said as much to the two women who had come to interview him.

**“Finally!” the driver shouted with exaggerated triumph.** A stream of sedans, pick-ups and delivery trucks rushed past in the opposite direction. The delivery van ahead of them belched noxious carbon particulates from its exhaust. And slowly, like a pipe unclogged, the train of motor vehicles inched forward.

Gazing at the tangle of curling understory along the side of the road he doubted if an answer to his incomprehension would be found there among the tatters of styrofoam and fast food litter, the stooping choirs of a species of oat gone wild, the snarled maze of winter fall and decay. It was as if his destiny, something before now he thought he had well in hand, had been repossessed by a fickle whimsy. In exchange for his recent windfall, perhaps. He'd had misgivings all along. The whole chain of events had an aura of fiction about it.

In his convalescence, he'd also grown fond of Rude Christine's, a cybercafé off of Fillmore in the vicinity of Japantown.

It was a Monday, he remembered. He had passed the time surfing the web, jotting in his word file stray bits of conversations, making observations:

*“The manager and her mother will let anyone in. Are you man enough to do it? Someone has to guard the door while the other one goes up.”*

*Three gay cocks lit blue as gas flames. The owner has a chest condition. "When you get done, we'll play backgammon." The lead singer from an old seventies punk band has a sore throat.*

*"If you fall by Tuni's, I'll turn you on to some tuies."*

*Kinda rhymes.*

*Stacked saucers, flowers, a Cubist era style calendar.*

*"I owe damn near 300 large on my rent. I'd just as soon cut off my nuts as give it up."*

*"I'll be leaving at about half past eight tonight."*

*Six mirrors always reflecting each other.*

*"I think we're just getting deeper in shit."*

*Dear Sir, you are a lousy crumb (in response to a negative review – the irony perhaps too subtle.)*

*That woman has a nose like the tip of a sewer snake.*

*Louise forgot her fur. Me, I don't need a fur nor am I cold. A guy known to everyone as Danny smokes a cigarette (outside) and checks the bus schedule. A black cat traipses across the brass rail.*

*"Those crepes were exquisite."*

*On a cell phone. "Oh, didn't make the MacArthur cut again this year? Yeah, me neither."*

*The soda fountain trickles. Dress black as her nail polish. It's completely impossible.*

*"Here you go, mister. Malachite ring."*

*The floor sown with sawdust. The redheaded waitress took off with the bookstore clerk. A reporter I vaguely recognize from elsewhere.*

*"Listen, Jack, what I'm about to tell you is of the utmost importance."*

**Passenger Cargo Manifest** (art deco poster for a steamship line.)

*"So he says to me, mister, would you like to see what I can do with etchings or oil? I've just got this little cutie."*

*After lunch at the café on Steiner.*

*"Once there, he introduces me to some big shot who tells me, 'look that's all well and good, in Syria, Naples, Tunis, but good God, where is it?' The last time I was in China. Gotta be eight or nine years ago."*

*Honor often arrives at the stroke of the hour (the beginning of her shift).*

*The upper hand (something he felt he had to gain).*

And that was where one of Hugh Klidian's associate had found him to tell him the good news.

**He'd been similarly idle at Smiley's** in Bolinas though the atmosphere was a shade more rustic, and he was fussing with his notebook, fingers

too large for the keyboard, it was like typing with sausages. And his anonymity there had been compromised. Someone must have made a phone call or texted. Word got around that he was visiting Irma and the literati who had sequestered themselves in this coastal enclave hoping for a little pastoral cred and attaching themselves to the cachet of living in a hip backwater surfing destination wandered in to gawk and say hi. Soon there were grinning faces and hands proffered to shake. And things like “Congratulations on the award” and “You deserve it” and “let’s get together for lunch while you’re here” were said. He’d wonder at the last, “What’s wrong with right now?” Not that he didn’t appreciate the attention. He did have to restrain himself from hitting them up for a loan, out of habit. How would it look if a guy who’d been awarded a quarter mil had his hand out? The cash, would be the reasoning, should be going in the other direction.

He’d had a premonition that he’d find himself in such a pickle, the shoe on the other foot, the reversal of roles, now that he had what others might want. It was the look in Hugh Klidian’s eyes, gleam actually, when they shook hands after he had signed and dated the paperwork in multiple places. Like he’d just been initiated into a club, the club of people who smelled of new money. A notary was present as was the branch manager of the bank in the same building as Klidian’s office. He’d been in a daze, elated by the news that he’d been awarded the first ever Pillsbury Prize, named in honor of the late Dorian Pillsbury and funded by his estate, yet he felt a nagging in his solar plexus like his amygdala had just given him the shot of adrenaline required to address a vague unknown fear. He’d caught himself looking around for the exit.

Eventually he moved from the table in the corner at Smiley’s to the bar where a rather besotted professor emeritus was holding forth. He’d gone from dark roast extra cream to carbonated sugar free flavored water. He saved the waitress a trip and paid at the bar. While he was there he listened in to the old guy with the rosy cheeks, shamelessly red beezers propping up large dark framed eyeglasses, all else bare and blotchy pink except for tufts of white hair sprouting around his ears. He was making a point about women to the bartender and anyone else who would listen, illustrated by a folk tale of Indo-European provenance.

Apparently an old chieftain, patriarch of a large clan, was tired of his wife and wanted to take as his bride a new younger woman. Had it been for political reasons, it might have been understandable. But it wasn’t. He told his old wife to take whatever she thought most precious to her and return to her people. She in reply reminded him of all the children



she had provided him, and because of her, grandchildren and great grandchildren. She had stood by him as an ally to her father's people. She had guided him to the prominence that he now held. Her arguments were to no avail. The chieftain called his relatives and clansmen together to celebrate his betrothal to the fair youngster, younger, in fact, than many of his own children. Some of the children commiserated with the mother. Why doesn't he just take her as a second wife or even a consort? But the mother hushed them and pointed out that the young bride was the daughter of a respected man in the clan and to make her subservient would be a grave insult. The feast went on for many days, with the old chieftain showing that he could still hold his own in both storytelling and drinking. Finally the old chief showed his age and passed out, dead to the world. During this time the wife had busied herself by putting her affairs in order before she left, and when the celebration ended shortly thereafter, she set about cleaning up the banquet hall with the help of her daughters. When the old patriarch finally came to, he was completely disoriented, having no idea where he was. First, he was moving or the floor beneath him was moving. It was then that he realized that he was in the back of a wagon packed with trunks and baskets. When he sat up he saw that he was in the middle of vast grasslands, the circumference of the dome of endless cloud streaked blue visible in every direction he looked. Pulling the wagon were two teams of oxen, and leading the oxen, a short shrouded figure that, at his angry shout, turned to reveal itself as his wife. He demanded to know the meaning of her actions. Did she not understand that he had sent her away? The old woman waited for the wagon and her husband to come abreast. I am doing exactly what you told me to do, dear husband, she answered, I am returning to my people. But why have you kidnapped me, the chief demanded. But husband, you said that I was free to take that which is most precious to me.

"When a man loves a woman," the old professor said by way of making his point, "it's all about what he'll sacrifice for her and the fear of the loss of what he's sacrificed. When a woman loves a man, she's in for the long haul no matter that she's disrespected and disregarded, the nature of her love is what matters."

He'd wanted to interject that Picasso once said, "When a man watches a woman sleeping he wonders how he can make her dreams come true, but when a woman watches a man sleeping she wonders what kind of sauce to serve him with", but just then an elderly woman entered the bar and, smiling, caught the professor's eye. The old man unglued himself from the stool, leaving a pile of singles on the bar, saluted the bartender

with a finger off the edge of his brow, quasi-military style, bowed in acknowledgement to his listeners, and spoke “my Volkswagen awaits” with an air of drunken aplomb.

It was watching the old dean depart that he’d noticed the sign painted on the window advertising *NAL on Tap* again. He’d seen it when he’d first walked in and it had made him curious. When the bartender came around to check on him, he’d asked, reading the sign in reverse like it was someone’s name, “What’s NAL?” to which the bartender had answered “New Albion Lager.” A long ago bell of familiarity sounded, and he’d responded like Pavlov’s dog. “I’m just going to have to try a pint of that.” How easy it was to disregard the doctor’s advice with the excuse that just one drink wouldn’t hurt. How easy to step off the wagon. He could have at least waited till it came to a stop.

**Remembered only in snatches**, the vague contours of what had happened next stood out like silhouettes, shadow puppets with dialogue. Standing outside a restaurant. Point Reyes. Talking to the young girl in the western hat by the pickup truck. Older model, blue. But before that, having had a few more NAL’s which he found himself pronouncing “nails” and soon progressing to the harder stuff, he’d had a conversation with a young woman who approached him and said “Tell me, don’t I know your name?” She was a robust blond, roughened by the elements, delivering something he later learned were oysters. She’d mistaken him for someone else. But to keep up the small talk, he’d asked, “Know of any good places to eat?” When she told him of a place she liked in Point Reyes, he’d slyly invited her to join him, not really expecting her to accept, but just to feel that he could still be bold, and perhaps a little gallant. He’d been having feelings of gallant lately. Maybe it was the medication. But she’d said “sure” and “I’ll come by when I finish my deliveries.” By then he had a skin full. She’d assumed he had a car, but when it turned out he didn’t, she agreed to take the company truck.

The dinner passed in a blur and he was spending like a drunken sailor. He was, in fact, the epitome of a drunken sailor, one of Francis Drake’s, with a huge credit line. Then in the parking lot. He’d made a clumsy drunken halfhearted advance. He distinctly remembered her clapping a rough red hand with a surprisingly strong grip on his shoulder and looking up into his face to speak the words he would remember to the end of his days. “Time to give it up, old dad.” And then immediately, just like a woman, felt pity for him and handed him a burlap bag of oysters from the pickup bed as a consolation. At least they too smelled of the

sea.

Next thing he knew he was at the side of the road holding a smelly burlap bag and trying to get back to Irma's in Bolinas. His cell phone had died somewhere along the way so he couldn't call Irma and Philippe to the rescue. The driver who'd picked him up, a wild eyed speed freak whose jaws were so tweaked he could barely talk, and when he finally did some many miles down the road, said "You're in luck, I'm going all the way to Sebastopol." It was then that he realized that he was headed in the wrong direction and was faced with the choice of either getting out in the middle of nowhere to go back in the right direction or continuing to a destination that at least had street lighting. That was how he had ended up in Sebastopol. And all this time he thought it was a port in the Crimea.

**The self once damped by alcohol**, and necessitated by his medication regimen, in the process of drying out, had begun to emerge, the knee deep doubt that planted him in the precarious position of having to reconsider his past, soberly. It was a self he had dodged with drink, fortified against a persistent sense of doom or anxiety about his life choices. Some paths were less traveled because they led to dead ends, although all paths inevitably led to a dead end. It was the promise of a shortcut or slighter inclination that enticed the lazy and the foolish. But blinkered by booze, he'd relied on the rosy glow of unrealistic expectations and overly romanticized delusions. What he also knew, how easy was the slide back into the elbow bending habit, anesthetizing the turbulent doubt inflaming his frazzled psyche. Had it not been for the admonitions of Dr. Darcy D'Mise, the physician who had advanced the diagnosis of POEMS Syndrome, he might have never known how close he was to dying. In the medical sense, at least.

He'd even had fantasies, drug induced no doubt, while lying in the hospital bed, of a young Middle Eastern or Indian intern standing over him with a clipboard saying, "You've got testicular cancer." And his smartass answer, "Ah, a case of the punishment fitting the crime." Or the doctor, now a dark-eyed East Indian woman, telling him, "You have rectal cancer." And his witty retort, "Well, what can I expect after all these years of being an asshole." It was during that morphine induced haze that he'd come to the realization that he should have died young like all the other promising talent but through some fluke he had been spared that fate. The gods had smiled down at him. Or maybe they were smiling smugly and cruelly behind their hands, as only superior beings

can, with the knowledge that his hubris was going to cost him big time.

So when Dr. D'Mise brought up POEMS syndrome, he thought she was pulling his leg, the good one. She had learned that he was a poet and this was her little joke. But she was dead serious and had no idea, nor did she seem to care, that he was a poet. POEMS Syndrome, she went on to explain, was a rare blood disorder that damaged the nerves and affected many other parts of the body. POEMS stood for *Polyneuropathy, Organomegaly, Endocrinopathy, Monoclonal plasma-proliferative disorder, and Skin changes*. Yikes! Talk about a gang of tortuous tongue twisters erected as a monument to foreboding hypochondria.

Ticking them off on his fingers, yes, he had been feeling numbness and a tingling in his legs, particularly the one with the fractured femur, but that was to be expected. Yet it also fit the symptoms of polyneuropathy. Enlarged liver was a likely diagnosis of a booze hound such as himself, but an enlarged liver counted as organomegaly. His thyroid had tested borderline hence the endocrinopathy worry. But some of that might have been a result of the beating and the ruptured spleen. Also, the blood tests showed that plasma cells floating around in his blood stream, possibly as a consequence of the fracture, were producing monoclonal proteins and so the reason for the monoclonal plasma-proliferative disorder concerns. As for skin changes, he'd always been blotchy, and after the bruising had faded, either on the skin or the muscle underneath, little areas of roughness or atrophic inflexibility were perceptible.

But, as D'Mise had cautioned while trying to assuage the panic that must have shown in his face, POEMS Syndrome can be misdiagnosed because the signs and symptoms mimic those of other disorders. Which was why she'd advised that he stop drinking, both to take the stress off his liver, and also because the medication she was prescribing had a dangerous interaction with alcohol. "POEMS syndrome progresses rapidly and may become life-threatening," he remembered her saying, "so early diagnosis is important." He knew that the treatment might improve his symptoms but would not cure the condition. His options included radiation therapy, chemotherapy, and peripheral blood stem cell transplant. He shuddered. But he was getting ahead of himself. More tests were needed. The booze helped to muscle the pessimism out of the way and at the same time it was killing him. He wanted a cigarette so bad just then.

**The driver pointed out the windshield** at the wreck. "I knew it, some idiot taking the top of the curve too fast."

The line of vehicles was moving at a slow enough pace that the older model sedan wrapped around a tree, pine or fir of some sort whose shabby lower limbs appeared to be reaching down to comfort the crumpled roof and webbed windshield, was in full display before they came up on the Highway Patrol unit, the tow truck, and the volunteer fire company's surplus fire rig, and were directed around to the one lane by a young man in baggy yellow pants with red suspenders over a blue tee shirt. The flare pattern sparkled an unearthly color along the roadside like footlights on an elaborately staged set.

"There's always a wreck here," the driver said, assigning blame to the location. "There should be a flashing sign up here that says *slow down* or something, doncha think?"

He wasn't listening. He was picturing a similar scene a little over a year earlier. He had come to, the left side of his face throbbing after momentarily being numb from the impact of it hitting the ground, the illusion of the lawn's softness masking the hard pack underneath. He'd ripped his pants, the left knee shredded, palms abraded, and perhaps a tad concussed from the nose dive precipitated by his having tripped on the concrete wheel stop escaping someone who had tried to run him down in the parking lot. He might have lost consciousness because the next thing he knew someone was standing over him saying, "I saw it! That guy tried to run you over, I swear!" A few more feet and legs approached, some running, and he'd accepted someone's hand in getting up, "You OK? That was a nasty tumble." He was all right. "Anybody get a license?" But no one had. It was dark, it was foggy. There were sirens. "Did someone call 911?" No one had. And the sirens passed them heading back toward the avenues.

He'd dusted himself off, found the package containing the Lucien Graff first edition, assessed the damage as slight, assured the few who'd witnessed the chain of events, either getting out of their cars or getting in, that he was fine, thanked them for their concern, and headed back home to lick his wounds. And self-consciously, too, to avoid giving anyone a glimpse of the wet patch that had spread in the area of his crotch.

Still slightly stunned, he'd boarded a city bus just arriving at the bus stop at the head of the parking lot. He hated taking the bus but he knew he wouldn't make it back to Balboa on foot in his condition. The bus was nearly empty at the head of its return route and he took a seat by the window to stare at his mirror likeness and the bruise blossoming on his cheek.

The bus had traveled not more than three hundred yards before coming to a stop. Flashing blue and red lights, white strobes freezing shadows, blocked the path. A female patrolman held up a hand in the glare of the bus headlights talking into the radio mic hooked to her epaulet, and then waved them forward. Off to the side of the road, a dark two door sedan had met its match with an immovable hundred year old cypress. A squad of firefighters had gathered at the driver's side with extrication tools.

"You got a cigarette?"

The driver looked a little surprised. "Uh, no, trying to quit." He pointed at the center console and the empty box of ice cream bars. "Why do you think I'm eating these?"

He thought of saying, "I've heard of cold turkey, but that's an interesting variation," but didn't. He said instead, "Got a little rattled by the wreck. I quit, too, about six months ago, but whenever I get stressed, I get the urge for a cigarette."

"Yeah, I know whatchu mean, and there's not always a convenience store around the corner."

**How he'd put the two together** was one of those instances when disparate elements brought in proximity to each other form an agreeable union. The close call had decided him against selling Dorian's copy of the signed Lucien Graff, admitting to himself that it was despicably low, even for him. When he went to return it, he was met by Terrence Klout, Dorian's business manager. Julie was in the hospital in critical condition. Dorian had taken a turn for the worse. The prognosis was not good. And the police had been by. Terry didn't think Dorian should have any more visitors to further agitate his breathing difficulty. He'd left the Graff with Klout. The mention of police had stopped him before he headed back down the stairs, and he'd inquired why the police had come to see Dorian. Klout explained that because Julie had been in a car wreck he assumed that they had talked to him because he was her employer. They'd asked to speak to Dorian in private, detectives, a man and a woman. He didn't realize then that he would never see his old friend alive again.

He'd put all that aside to deal with the impending move from the Balboa address. To his relief, Andy Porter's basement studio was available to him for all of May while Andy was in Shanghai. As that was only temporary, he'd had to look further afield. Nora had nixed even the barest hint of couch surfing. He'd looked in on a couple of old

girlfriends, but most of them had new boyfriends. Tom Presley's place over on Albion was good for a few nights but he knew that Elle loathed him so the atmosphere was hardly congenial. That had left Aaron Shone's cabin cruiser on the Bay as backup. Mary O'Nyett, author of *Hanging Out With The Poetry Puppets*, had taken pity on him and let him housesit while she spent a few weeks in the Sierras.

In years past he had wandered like a ghost through the apartments and homes of his friends. Why did he think he wouldn't have to do it again? The phone rang in the apartment he was house sitting. He let the machine pick up. It wasn't the first time. And it was always the same message. The worried voice of an older woman. "Mark, I know I've called before, but I just want to know you're OK. Please return my call." It wasn't his business. He didn't know any Mark. He was just occupying the space like the dead air after the machine went silent.

He'd even considered joining the Zen Center over on Page. His Buddhist buddy, Mal Fein, had done quite well with them and now ran a shanga on the Costa Brava in Spain. He didn't think he could sit that long without a cigarette. Why couldn't you meditate smoking a fag? He did it all the time. Besides joining a group violated a basic principle, never compromise your ego.

The upshot was that he was never settled. The twelve years as a boarder at Angie's had atrophied his instincts. He'd spent not a few nights in twenty four hour coffee joints trying to stay awake long enough for the library to open so that he could rest his head on a good book. Or find an unclaimed shady spot in Golden Gate Park. It was not that his friends had abandoned him but there was only so much they could do short of adopting him. And nobody wanted to do that.

What finally got him over his anxiety about contacting Grace Niklia was due in part to his excuse. He was curious to know if she had been one of the detectives who had paid Dorian a visit because of Julie's accident. He was hoping that it wasn't because Julie had reported the Lucien Graff as stolen. He was surprised and elated when Grace suggested that they meet for coffee, a chain diner over on Larkin near the State building.

Grace had handed him a photocopy of a page ripped from a spiral notebook. Apparently it was a note found in Jeremy Beljahr's room. "Is this a poem? If it is, it's a really bad poem" she'd opined which had called for his favorite comeback, "There are no bad poems, only bad poets."

He'd read it through and offered, "I've seen worse."

"But it's gibberish, right?"

"Gibberish, poem. Poem, gibberish. It's a fine line."

“That’s what I thought at first. But then I realized that it was gibberish with a purpose!”

“Gibberish with a purpose? I think that would stand as a definition of poetry.”

Grace ignored him. “It’s an acrostic!”

He remembered re-reading it several times, stunned, silent.

*When sun touches the crimson ocean  
Exactly between the golden span  
Nearby a tiny green door creaks open  
Desire’s dismal return always reminds  
The mammal brain of its intrinsic purpose  
In spite of culture’s encompassing rind  
Solemn as a lizard’s plodding advance  
Nature holds tight the reproductive patent  
Excepting nothing but forgone conclusion  
X-ray eyes penetrate far beyond  
Thermal illusion’s blink of horizon*

“I guess I did learn something in Granahan’s class.”

“Oh, yeah, what’s that?”

“How not to be afraid to look below the surface of a poem to understand its reason for being.”

But that was not the least of it, and momentarily he’d had a sudden paranoid chill shock the base of his skull. What he wanted to know was why the police had gone to see Dorian and was it connected with Julie because he did not like the narrative he was writing for himself given what he could gather from coincidence.

Grace in turn wanted assurances that none of what she told him would appear in his gossipy newspaper column. “Because if you publish any of this, I will find you.”

He’d explained to her that the column was history. With Charlie Reyes out of the picture, the editor who, as it turned out, actually was a friend of the late Reg Meyer, had no compunction about letting him go. “I like the sound of that.”

She was her no-nonsense cop self that day. “You won’t.”

The way she explained it she’d tumbled to a pattern of poet-involved deaths, ones that were deemed accidental or suspicious. It was busy work while she served out her disciplinary time assigned to the mayor’s office. She was made to review reports of accidental deaths and suicides at the



city's SRO hotels and come up with some numbers. Her boss didn't care, any numbers would do. They would be crunched further by the analysts at Human Services to either get more preventative funding or to justify the funding they were currently receiving. Using raw data from the coroner's office, she listed the SRO addresses as parameters to narrow down the sheer number of deaths in the city. It was dull, ghoulish, coma-inducing work and to her mind hardly fit punishment just for calling a supervisor a woman-hating rat-faced son of a bitch.

Be that as it may, if they thought they could punish her with boredom, they hadn't considered that boredom was the mother of necessity and that necessity was the mother of creativity. She'd recognized a name on the death roster, a writer, the poet Luke Recess, author of *Natural Thang*. Then an obituary in the daily caught her eye, Jasmine Gore, author of *Get Out Of Here, Poems of Escape*, killed in a motorcycle accident. And there was the news that baseball celebrity, Ben Adams, author of a book of poems entitled *I'm Back!* had died under suspicious circumstances, possibly a drug overdose.

Since she was playing with the database to begin with, she added poet or writer as an occupational category to further define her parameters. There seemed to be a trend of accidental or unexplained poet deaths beginning a few years prior. When she searched for what they might all have in common, she'd uncovered a rat's nest of incestuous relationships and internecine warfare in a mad quest for fame and fortune. She'd ascribed some of the suicides to the recognition that these poets' unrealistic goals would never be realized, and that warm fuzzy bubble of self-esteem punctured by the mocking chimera of cruel delusions emptied of any hope. Some of the accidental deaths involved blunt force trauma or motor vehicles. None of it really added up to anything until she noticed that a few of them had been recipients of the Latham Award which led to a further coincidence in that they were also associated with New Arts Inc., San Francisco. When she narrowed the connections down even further, a common thread was the Holbrooke Foundation and its chairman, Dorian Pillsbury.

She felt that if she was right in her assumptions, and some of them were leaps but what difference did it make, boredom had driven her to it, then perhaps others in that circle were in danger. Ian Blake's death seemed to have confirmed her thinking that the poets associated with that coterie were at risk of untimely or unexplained demise.

Jeremy Beljahr was another name on the list. He'd been surprised to learn that Jeremy had received a grant from the Holbrooke Foundation.

That must have been the money his landlady had mentioned. Niklia had tracked him down and interviewed him but had dismissed his rant about a serial killer of poets as something she wasn't going to entertain no matter how bored she was. Then his suicide added more weight to the possibility of an invisible hand behind the deaths of poets.

His name was on the list as well, and Grace had remembered it because Granahan had mentioned it numerous times in his Advanced Poetry Seminar as belonging to a great poet who would never get his due. He remembered liking Dick's comment but was annoyed by the prediction. And it was wrong. He was getting his due if the recent accolades were any indication.

After reading Jeremy's acrostic poem, Grace had thought that it might be a good idea to pay attention to the poet Carl Wendt.

But what did any of that have to do with Julie he'd wanted to know.

Among the things found in Julie's trunk at the scene of the accident was a set of fake plates that matched those on the vehicle that was involved in the hit and run that had killed Alonzo Murphy: 1H8P08S. Julie had died from her injuries so all of that was moot although it did cast suspicion on previously unexplained and seemingly accidental poet deaths. Julie might have been behind them but now that she was deceased no one in the department cared to follow up on Grace's suspicions. Poets were not high on anyone's lists of priorities.

He tried not to think about Grace but occasionally memories came back to punish him, like the one after their heart to heart talk when she had laid it out on the line in no uncertain terms that "they" were not going to happen so he'd best get her out of his mind. And devastated by the realization of his gross egotistical misconception, he had tried to laugh it off. "What are you going to do if I don't? Arrest me?"

Her expression never changed. "No. I'll have someone else do it." She was one tough cop.

**"This is as far as I go."** The driver had turned off the highway onto a side road and stopped. "This is Boonville." He pointed to the cluster of buildings lining the highway further up. "You shouldn't have any trouble getting a ride out to Elk." And once he'd gathered his bag and as he climbed out to close the door, "Good luck."

He stepped out of the shade of the oaks at the intersection and walked toward the wide expanse occupied by low slung single story buildings, some with cars and trucks parked at an angle in front of them. The late morning sun made its presence felt almost immediately. A sheen of light

perspiration populated the pores of his forehead as he adjusted the bag slung over one shoulder. The weight reminded him of his past and the future. He was seized by a self-loathing for being such a hack, a cynical charlatan. Did it matter that his intentions were pure? And were they not just a little sullied after years of wrestling with the demons of doubt? When he caught a look at himself in the reflected glare of a passenger side window he saw a weak man, unreconciled, frustrated. As for the future, what was the impulse that had led him to this wide spot in the road?

He'd taken down the walls. They were the last of his things to be packed away. The framed prints and broadsides, the posters, snapshots and incidental art that had occupied his walls, particularly the one above the old phonograph. They were his trophies, signposts to the past, prompts to nostalgia, diversions and inspirations, indications of his presence in a mad dog poetry world. He had none of that in the makeshift shelter of Courtney's office where everything was either hers or David's, and he was obliged every morning to erase every trace of himself from that space, particularly once he was ambulatory again. And as things stood now, the smoldering atmosphere was suffocating, as if he'd set another bridge on fire.

All of his things, the file cabinet, the boxes of accumulated memorabilia and correspondence that he must now sort through and try to sell to an interested institution or collector. Cory Anders had sold his archives to a big university library. On the strength of his aesthetic argument they took anything he had, and paid well for it.

And he'd decided that it was imperative that he find his own place to hold all of him, ancillary or otherwise. Things were looking up so maybe that wasn't quite so impossible. He had acquired a new shine with the recognition bestowed on him by the Pillsbury Prize, and his sparkly refraction of the divine spotlight was attracting attention. So he needed the key to the storage unit in South City. Angela had the key. He had misplaced his copy of the key long ago. She had informed him, through Nora, that she had finally moved all of her furniture and miscellaneous items up to the country and the rent for the unit was now up to him.

He needed to talk to her about that. He missed that aspect of their relationship. The talking, unguarded, free from judgment thanks to what seemed like her infinite patience, but engagement on a personal level, nonetheless. He'd often joked that she was the only woman he'd lived with that long without some conjugal arrangement. She would make a face when he did, and blood would darken her cheeks so he didn't go

there that often. Her feelings were close to the surface and he respected that. After Sam was born, their familiarity bordered on domestic. He could have waited for Angie to come to the city to get the key from her, but her sojourns to the Bay Area had become less frequent, settling into the routine isolation of the country. She could have mailed the key to him. And he wondered if coming out to visit her had not been at the back of his mind when he'd accepted Irma's invitation to spend a few days in Bolinas. To him, in his poet's illogic, the two places, Bolinas and Elk, because they were both situated on the coast, were practically next to each other. Only now did he realize how distant they were, worlds apart, actually.

**Two urges overcame him simultaneously.** He needed to offload the sugary drink from earlier at the beginning of his hitchhiking and his gut was signaling him with the "feed me" flag. The large pale green building with the Western style false front had a sign above the double glass doors, *Live Oak Bar & Grill*, and in the large round window off to one side a twist of neon read *Open*. Once inside, he glanced around at the bar partly in the shadows further back from the natural light of window and doors. He was looking for the facilities. He noticed the knotty pine passageway next to the jukebox leading toward the rear.

A silhouette detached itself from the shadows and stood by the cash register at the back bar, a younger man with a stubble of beard who nodded. "What can I get ya?"

He stared at the chalk board menu letting his eyes adjust. "Kitchen open?"

"Sure is. Here or to go?"

He noticed for the first time a couple of young men in ball caps seated at a table eating burgers from red plastic baskets, bottles of beer ranged between them.

"Patio's open too, still a little shade."

He turned his attention back to the menu. The lunch special was pulled pork sandwich with secret sauce, salad or fries. He chose it as the path of least resistance partly at the urging of his bladder.

"Drink?"

He hesitated. A wise man would have chosen moderately, coffee, tea, soda. "You carry New Albion?"

The bartender brightened. "Sure do! Lager, ale, or porter?"

He chose the lager reasoning that the porter would make him feel too full and the ale was a little too high octane for him right about then. He

pointed to the passageway by the jukebox and was assured by a nod of the head that it was where the “men’s” was.

The young men at the table looked up as he walked by. The silver suit was meant to stand out in a crowd in the city. In the middle of nowhere it was an alien presence and an indicator that you thought you were some sort of superhero, jive ass, or pimp. He’d gauged a similar reaction in the bar in Sebastopol the previous night, a place called *Car Pet*. It had once been a carpet warehouse and the new owners, to save money, kept most of the original sign intact. It also housed a microbrewery and he had been stuck in a quandary over which style beer to order, there were so many to choose from. Now he just needed to pee.

The symbol on the door to the *Live Oak* restroom showed that it was dual usage. Inside a commode and a sink and a paper towel dispenser crowded the minimal space. On the back wall above the commode a framed poster advertised a reggae festival of years past. Next to it was a notice that read *If you’re standing to pee, please lift the seat, place your feet on the foot prints on either side of the commode, aim, and replace the seat when you are done. Thank You, The Mgmt.* Someone had scrawled *Bitch* on the laminated sign in black marker pen.

The walls of the bathroom were pale knotty pine similar to the interior of the bar. The paneling lent a rustic appearance with its whorls of grain and the dark singularities of the knots. However, correct placement of the boards to avoid repetition of a pattern is imperative so as not to have two boards with knots side by side at about waist height giving the appearance of eyes staring directly at the crotch area. Anyone with a bashful kidney would certainly be disconcerted by something like that. It reminded him of something he’d read that thanks to certain neural wiring humans can discern faces in just about any shape they see. It drives some people crazy because they don’t realize that they are wired to recognize parallel dots or shadows as the signature of another binocular creature. The permutations and configurations are infinite, every combination a potential face.

Above the paper towel dispenser to the right of the mirror was a plaque purporting to be in the local dialect, Boontling. It began: *If ya can **harp** (talk Boontling), let’s hear an **almittey** (loud burp) and give yer **bahl** (excellent, good) **apple-head** (girlfriend) a **barney** (kiss) on the **moldunes** (breasts) or if you’ve a mind to **burlap** (have sexual intercourse) or get down to **mate gormin’** (oral sex) that’s just **bahl**. But **cock a fister on** (get into a fight) and it’s no **wess** (lie) you’ll get an **ear settin’** (talkin’ to) so don’t be no **backdated chuck** (stupid person) with their **golden eagles** (underwear) in a bunch. Stay*

*cool as a briney (ocean) breeze and everything will work out bahl.* Underneath the text someone had scrawled *if you've read all of this you've been in here too long and someone's probably waiting to get in. Next!*

**The pulled pork sandwich was tasty but sloppy** and came with a sheaf of napkins. He put to use just about every one of them. The cook, an older woman, a little on the heavy side, faded tattoo sleeves and a backward ballcap, had brought his plate out to him at the table in the patio just to check him out. It reminded him of the time that he and Ken Willard, now Chair of the Writing Department at Southern Illinois, had taken off at Easter break of their senior year in high school and headed out to Durham, North Carolina to drop in unannounced on Wallace Fowle, the Rimbaud scholar then teaching at Duke. He remembered Fowle as a stern but pleasant man, balding, full faced, and likely amused by their youthful exuberance. It was probably while taking tea with the older professor who was approaching his sixties then that the foolishness of their quest had dawned on him. At one point in the conversation when they were pressing him for more details of Rimbaud's life, Fowle had protested, "It's not like I knew him personally." The other thing he remembered the Rimbaud scholar telling them as they climbed in the old '57 Ford for the drive back to Indianapolis, "Read, boys, if you have any ambition of becoming poets, read like your life depends on it."

On the way back Ken had thought it wise take a short cut through the Virginia Kentucky Appalachians. On the way to Durham they'd taken the straightest, quickest way, the north south Interstate to Tennessee and then the east west Interstate to North Carolina. East of Memphis, they were pulled over by a State Trooper. Ken was driving and his longish hair, the Indiana plates, IU sticker in the back window signaling "college boy," and the *Make Love Not War* bumper sticker denoting "communist" probably had something to do with it. They had been traveling above the posted speed limit, the Trooper informed them. Ken, never one to let the obvious slide, argued that everyone was travelling over the speed limit and he was just going with the traffic flow. The Trooper then declared that he smelled marijuana and ordered them out of the car, stepping back and placing his hand on the butt of his pistol, and in doing so, stepping to the edge of the traffic lane causing an oncoming semi to swerve suddenly into the path of a sedan in the process of pulling ahead of the lumbering dreadnaught and having to execute a maneuver that launched it into the center divider with all the attendant screeching of brakes and smoke and dust as it came to rest on its side

almost in the west bound fast lane. The Trooper's attention thus diverted, they took that as an indication that they could continue on their journey.

To avoid going through Tennessee on the way back, they'd left the Interstate near Winston-Salem, and then in Bristol, Virginia took a winding switchback road down into Kentucky stopping for breakfast in a small burg on the Cumberland River by the name of Elmore. They sat down at the lunch counter in a dusty five and dime and all three waitresses who weren't all that busy to begin with, seeing as how the morning rush was over, had to wait on them. The brave one took their order and the other two stood behind her with their mouths wide open. It was a dueling banjos moment. That was the first time he'd ever been regarded as a freak by anyone. Besides the football team, that is, and they were just jealous. It was the beginning of an assessment of himself based on the reaction to his mannerisms, his style, his ideas, that took years to mature and fully grasp, and maybe even now not so completely, that he was a freak, different, not as an affectation but different because he was, different.

When they got back to Indianapolis they learned that Martin Luther King had been murdered and the entire South was under curfew. They had just missed getting caught up in it.

**The bartender sauntered over** and asked if everything was all right and did he want anything else. He suppressed a deep burp, an almittey in Boon slang, and handed over his credit card. "I'm good." He had a pocket full of change and a wallet stuffed with dough. The credit card thing took some getting used to though he was a quick study. He'd had less change and fewer bills the previous evening when he sat down at the long polished wood-grained bar in the *Car Pet* micro-brewery. His plan, rather than panic and call Irma and Philippe to come all the way to Sebastopol and fetch him, was to call someone, a poet he knew by the name of Chuck Bolten, who lived near Sebastopol. Or Petaluma.

He'd assumed, in out of blue desperation, that it was either of those odd sounding names. He fired up his notebook and searched the local white pages. There were a little more than half a dozen Boltens in the immediate area. When he asked to use the bar phone, the bartender give him a "what you don't have your own phone" look and directed him to the pay phone in front of the McDonald's down the street. He'd had to break a twenty to get change if he was going to make some cold calls which didn't sit well with the bartender either.

He'd lucked out. On the third call, the surprised voice of a man replied, "Hey Carl, what can I do for you?" He explained his predicament and said he needed a place to crash till the next morning when he could catch a bus or taxi back to the city. He remembered the hesitance and Chuck eventually agreeing, "Yeah, sure. Why not." He'd gone back to the *Car Pet* and awaited his succor while sipping a craft brew, and then another. Chuck had indicated that it would take him about fifteen minutes as he was not just around the corner. And he had another craft brew, remarking to himself that the bar was unusually busy for a Sunday night, tables and chairs in the cavernous space filling with young couples or groups of middle class hipsters discussing the finer points of their beers. He had another one, asking himself why he ever considered depriving himself of this pleasure.

He was laughing to himself, perplexed yet appreciating the irony of the unpredictable direction his life had taken, when he noticed an older guy, barbered hair and collared shirt, smiling tentatively at him. As the man appeared to be preparing an haven't-we-met-somewhere-before proposition, he'd fended him off with "I'm not into that kind of thing." So it was not a little embarrassing when the man introduced himself as Chuck Bolten. Who was the guy he pictured as Chuck Bolten then? And it came to him, this Chuck Bolten was someone he'd met at the NorCal Writers Conference several years back, someone who had given him a book of poems to review or to at least mention in his column. And he couldn't remember if he'd written a review of it or even mentioned it. Not that it mattered. He pegged Bolten as someone used to being a carpet, a doormat, or so he thought. He'd gathered up his bag and the burlap sack of leaking oysters. Bolten had reacted in surprise when he held it up to him and asked if he liked oysters. In the parking lot, Bolten fumbled for the keys to his van and then turned to him with a maniacal grimace of pure hatred.

So it was "Fuck you, Wendt, and the horse you rode in on." Not something he hadn't heard before. "You're an arrogant prick," yeah, "kissass snob," ok, "asshole," right, "overrated has-been," sigh, "backstabbing creep," just staying alive, and when nothing else got a rise, the ever-popular "and your poetry sucks!" Apparently he'd made a pass at Bolten's wife at the afterparty for the Writers Conference and as that was when he usually tested his options for fun and debauchery, it was very possible.

Bolten drove off without him shouting something about poetic justice, flipping him off, and yelling "Cocksucker!" Didn't he know, there's



no justice in poetry, and he begged to differ. Still, that wasn't how he'd imagined it playing out, left standing on the curb under a streetlight in front of a fast food joint with a burlap bag of oysters and nowhere else to go. What happened next had pushed the envelope of happenstance.

"Carl?" The voice came from the car exiting the drive thru. "Carl Wendt? Is that you?"

**He'd been feeling no pain** after an early dinner and a couple of drinks. More than a couple of drinks, actually, and he'd meant to flop in his bedroom for a nap and a second wind before beginning his late evening social travails. Almost ten years past, back when his bid for immortality was still under review with the Olympians and alcohol was having its predictable effect. He'd heard a shriek of laughter coming from the room down the hall from his and which he immediately identified as belonging to Val. He'd let his curiosity get the best of him as it always did when laughter and women were concerned. The door wasn't really closed so he'd peeked in.

There were four women in the tiny room crowded by a bed, a dresser, and a chair. He recognized three of them. Shannon, whose room it was, seated on the bed with Val. Angela was in the overstuffed chair, and at her feet on the floor, a skinny woman with a blunt cut bob, Hello Kitty barrettes and glasses who was introduced as Patti Purloin.

Funny and also frighteningly fluky that they should run into each other in Sebastopol that way, and that Patti had allowed him to crash on her couch less than twenty four hours earlier. A coincidence that was stranger than fiction would allow. And the memory of Val, as their relationship shattered into bitter recrimination, drifting apart because it was too painful to be together, came back to him with a shudder.

But that night Val was flying first class and on more than just the bottle of Jack Daniels they were passing around. She was wearing a synthetic powder blue wig, slightly askew allowing her darker pixie cut to peek out. He'd excused himself for intruding and turned to leave, warned in part by the intense female energy in the room, the knowing excitement imparted by a secret pact. But Val had insisted that he join them for a drink, seconded siren-like by the other women. Step into my parlor said the spiders to the fly. Most everything after that was murky and fragmented. He'd definitely lost a few brain cells. What he remembered in particular about that night was the smell, the pungent sweaty odor of overheated genitalia.

**When Patti reminisced about Val**, she was sad and serious, and a little upset about how she had not learned of her passing until six months after the fact. She had been a performance artist like Val, which was how she got to know her. They'd been lovers for a while, after that night, in fact. She confessed that she'd always been shocked and in awe of Val's addictive behavior, her seductive decadence, as it were, a lustful leprosy, the fear of surrender to a darker side, one that she still trembled to imagine.

It all came back to him as if it had never left. Patti and Ginger, friends of Val's from the femme performance circuit. They had a routine called *Men U*, billing themselves as PhD's, Doctors of Phallicology, and presenting a curriculum that included *Basic Menship (or How To Handle The Prow)*, *Penis 101*, *Blame The Mother*, *He's Just A Dick On A Stick*, *Some Dissembling Required*, *When A Cigar Is Not Just A Cigar (The Clinton/Lewinsky Syndrome)*, and *Don't Shoot The Sperm Delivery Messenger*. Ginger was no longer around, and he hadn't asked why.

He'd spent much of the night talking and not talking about Val, skirting the events of that particular night ten years ago, sitting at the table in the brightly lit kitchen of Patti's little farmhouse on the outskirts of Sebastopol before she bid him good night, excusing herself because she had early classes the next morning, teaching in the Drama Department at the local State University.

It was with a sense of relief and gratefulness at his rescue that he'd sat around chatting, pulling up stray strands of memory of when they had first met but still hesitant to speak of the particulars of what had actually gone on that night. He had to guess, by the way Patti smiled and chortled at his discomfort, that he had had her as one of his sex partners.

It was during the course of her favorite parlor game, Truth Or Dare—Val knowing that he was more comfortable with a dare than the truth—that he had been the first to lose his shirt. Could his pants have been close behind? He did end up on his back on Shannon's bed, he was fairly certain of that. One of them had placed their naked twat on his face but from his position it was hard to tell which one of them, if it had been only one of them and not all of them, taking turns on his tumescence as if it were some kind of amusement ride, but distinctly remembering being milked like the Minotaur in the labyrinth.

Patti had asked after Angie, too, having fallen out of touch with her. She reminded him that Angie had got very drunk and had passed out around the time that most everyone's clothes had come off. She'd also heard that Angie had a child, a girl, and asked how he felt about that.

He didn't know how he felt about that. Angie was his landlady who

just happened to get pregnant and have a child during the time he rented a room there. She had always talked about having a kid. But she was also fiercely independent and outspoken with a low tolerance for stupidity. That left out most men. He'd seen her intently studying the literature about the Melville Fertility Institute, a high end sperm bank, at the kitchen table. She hadn't asked for his opinion or his consent, and he hadn't offered.

Patti had scoffed: "There's a whole woman's world out there that guys just pretend doesn't exist, and that's been going on, for what, a million years?" and then asked him if he'd ever caught her performance routines, *Clueless In Long Pants* or *Anatomy Is Destiny*. He hadn't and couldn't figure why she'd asked him that, dismissing it as more enigmatic insinuations he was just too tired to puzzle over. Later on the couch as he'd started to fade, replaying the conversation, fatigued at the thought of revisiting all the various possibilities and combinations of that night, and the drinking after a long absence catching up with him, something swam out to trouble him, and he'd been overcome by an urgency to get into the storage unit and recover Val's diary as if it might hold the answer to a vague nagging question.

**"Those aren't tits!** They're flaps with big brown buttons!" he was quoted as saying, and he got in trouble for that one, too. If he hadn't started enough of a shit storm with his long poem, *Procreation*, he was now working on another that was bound to rattle the ranks and rattle the bars of political correctness. It was the output of an exercise that he had picked up from Val's performance routine. Val would find a random text, a passage in a novel, an article in a newspaper, and search for sentences beginning with the pronoun *she*. Part of the act was to point out how few such constructions there actually were in the public context. He had always been amused by the random incongruity of her examples. He'd jotted down the few that had lodged in his memory along with all the other Val related miscellany. He had tried her method and her contention was valid, there was a lack of *she* constructions of any authority. He'd accumulated a list that was beginning to show signs of life of its own. That, as a consequence, had started a creative dialogue with the material and was generating some original constructs in the process of assembly and inspiration.

The idea that the poem should be in the form of an ode was prompted by the title of Ian Blake's collection of poems, *Ode To Sunset*, and included poems with such titles as *Ode To My Nikes*, *Ode To Grecian Formula*, *Ode*

*To Kitty Litter, Ode To Moby's Dick, Ode To A Good Dump*, whose epigraph was "I shit the sun" which Blake had facetiously attributed to Shelley. The title poem of the book, *Ode To Sunset*, had as a dedication *to Carl Wendt*, not *in memory of* as previously noted, and one, *Ode To The Coffee Maker*, which claimed to have been inspired by Frank O'Hara's *To The Harbormaster* but was actually a riff from O'Hara's *Ode To Michael Goldberg*.

*Yippee! she's steaming! she's  
boiling the kettle on the stove  
and I simply pour it (the water)  
bubbling over the drip ground coffee  
(this shouldn't infer derogatorily  
rather merely imply the process—  
if that's possible—by which the  
coffee's prepared so that the essence  
can be extracted from the bean)  
and yippee! she's frothing!  
in the cone and oh! the aroma!  
I don't know if I can wait!  
now I have the first (fresh) cup  
and I'm too delighted for words!  
yippee! oh my taste buds! oh yippee!*

Originally his intent had been to honor Valerie Richards by editing a posthumous collection of her work. But the Richards of New Hampshire were not having any of it. Vivian, Val's sister, got right to the point: he would never have his name associated with that of her sister's under threat of lawsuit. So the idea to dedicate the ode to Val's performance persona, Valentina Fox, seemed to be the likely work-around.

By chance, on his own scholarly ruminations, he had come across an old goddess poem entitled *Lightning Flash Thunder Clap* in an obscure study on Gnosticism. He could claim to be a goddess poet, in the style of Robert Graves, for the purposes of that poem at least. Technically, *Ode To Woman*, was more of a litany, familiar enough from his childhood and rosary fingering grandmother. It was a kind of praise song highlighting women's strengths, and their flaws, that he felt qualified to call an ode although Pindar might have wanted to arm wrestle over it.

*She takes just like a woman  
She's a party girl*

*She's a sweet thing*  
*She's a rebel*  
*She's a ballerina*  
*She's a funny girl*  
*She's a rock'n'roll woman*  
*She's a rainbow*  
*She comes in colors*  
*(I heard her call my name)*  
*She's a big girl now*  
*(if you see her say hello)*  
*She's a black widow spider*  
*She's a barefoot country girl*  
*She's an American woman*  
*She's a parachute woman*  
*She's a factory girl*  
*She's a brown skinned girl*  
*She's got a sister*  
*She's got the silver*  
*She's a stupid girl*  
*She belongs to me*  
*(I've grown accustomed to her face)*  
*She has faraway eyes*  
*(they're Bette Davis')*  
*She's a sweet black angel*  
*She smiled sweetly*  
*She's a lady*  
*She should have just*  
*She's long and she's tall*  
*She came in through the bathroom window*  
*She's too much for her mirror*  
*She's waiting for her man*  
*She ain't gonna do right*  
*She tries to understand*  
*she's yours*  
*she's mine*  
*she's someone else's too*  
*she's got it bad*  
*she's alright*  
*she's looking good*  
*she's so fine*

*she said yeah*  
*she give me fever*  
*she's got personality*  
*she's my back street girl*  
*(I can't get no satisfaction)*  
*she is one brick short of a full load*  
*she is a real flake*  
*she's my friend*  
*(I can never put myself in her shoes)*

was how some of it went. He had wanted to memorialize Val, Sheila, all the women he had ever known, with an ode to their shimmering effervescence. The epigraph read “*There are no books like a dame*” as the lyric from *South Pacific* put it. Subtling it *Homage To Catullus* gave it a hoary attribute and served as a foil in case feminine umbrage was taken by the naked revelations. He could always claim the Roman poet made him do it.

A long poem such as he was envisioning would have to be divided up into books. *Book One* would say things like

*She gives me crazy love*  
*She changes her clothes once it's all over*  
*She's a real democrat*  
*She gives everyone a chance*  
*She thinks it's funny*  
*She's got the kissing bug*  
*She draws her breath in surprise*  
*She says she likes the way I hold my microphone*  
*She drives me crazy*  
*She lays a bitchy spell on me*  
*She doesn't bat an eye*  
*(I'm packing my bags to leave)*  
*She tries to make me what I'm not*  
*She makes me unhappy*  
*She gives me a kiss and a bug to remember her by*  
*She makes me happy*  
*She says she's sorry*  
*(but really I'm the one who's sorry)*  
*She makes me doubt myself*  
*She makes me grit my teeth*

*She pulls the carpet out from under my feet  
She thinks she listens to what I have to say  
She's just waiting for me to finish  
(I'm done even before I open my mouth)  
She turns on me like a tame animal gone wild  
She devours me with her anger  
She turns on me  
She turns me on  
She is never done  
She is well attended  
She is well intended  
She weaves during the day what  
She unraveled in the night  
She's a dream  
She's just like a woman  
She isn't for everyone  
She makes it hard  
She makes it hard for us to be just friends  
She's easy to remember and hard to forget  
She rips my heart from its place  
(her lips as cold as kissing a mirror)  
She thinks that I'm just an unimportant part  
of her pastime  
She's right  
She got me so I can't sleep at night  
She keeps me prisoner of her every whim  
She throws a big hint my way  
She thinks she can tell me what to do  
She does*

And maybe another book would detail his complaints

*She gives me static when I'm trying to think  
She is just an old hose among the weeds  
She's not going to fall for a cheap trick like that  
She's bleeding like a stuck pig  
She has the personality of a rabid dog  
She's about as perceptive as a banana  
(with her I might as well be beating my meat in a blind alley)  
She's a 20th Century fox*

*She turns me to impotent jelly when black moods cloud her brow*  
*She only acts as interested as is necessary to attract attention*  
*She sics the DA on me*  
*She rains dirt down upon the shore*  
*She has a pimple under her nose*  
*She belongs to another era*  
*(if this were the 17th century they'd be strapping*  
*her into a dunking chair)*  
*She has her hackles up*  
*She has fallen into the pit of sleep*  
*She's got the Cadillac walk*  
*She's slightly off balance lately*  
*She likes to get on my case*  
*She is as plastic as a Twinkie*  
*She's about as sexy as a stuffed kitten*

Another book featured the translation of Philippe Soupault they had done together and which was probably the source and spark that had led to her performance piece on the feminine pronoun.

*She smiles seductive*  
*She pretends to be salvation*  
*She holds out her hands*  
*She makes magic signs*  
*She prowls without a sound*  
*She has the stealth of a wolf*  
*She speaks not*  
*She waits by the side of the road*  
*She doesn't say her name*  
*She is this close*  
*She knows just who's expecting her*

There was potential for boundless books, of litanies beginning with the feminine pronoun. He had already penned the final book of *Ode To Woman*, a compilation of all the great and terrible, honorific and propitiatory, praise and damning names applied to her confounding presence.

*She invents speech*  
*(I'm left speechless)*  
*She is the triplicate goddess*



*She is red white blue*  
*She is Hecate, Persephone, Athena*  
*She is Hera, Aphrodite, Artemis*  
*She is Demeter, Cloe, Phaedra*  
*She is virgin nymph crone*  
*She is Helen, Penelope, Gargamelle*  
*She is Pocahontas, Sakajaweia*  
*She is the corn goddess*  
*She is the riddle of nature*  
*She is Christabel, Belpheobe, Ophelia*  
*She is Sheila, Valerie, Danni*  
*She is Isolte, Gueneviere, Juliet,*  
*She is lunatic*  
*She is Madame Bovary, Anna Karanina,*  
*She is Molly Bloom, Lady Chatterley*  
*She is a garden of delight*  
*She is Lolita, Candy, Zazie*  
*She is all of them*  
*(I can't tell them apart)*  
*She is the first woman*  
*She is the last woman*  
*She is the only woman*  
*She is only a woman*  
*She is this woman*  
*She is that woman*  
*She is the ever-changing face of seasons*  
*She is a kbnt, ancient priestess of Ishtar*  
*She is the vagina dentata*  
*She has snakes in her hair*  
*She is the vast unknowable of knowing*  
*(no wonder I'm confused)*  
*She is the cloud of archaic night*  
*She is the clot in my arteries*  
*She has no feet*  
*She has but one foot*  
*She is a mountain*  
*She is the mother shadow at the door of infant memory*  
*She undulates like a wave*  
*She's a snake in the grass*  
*She is all pink on the inside*

*She has a rash*  
*(I should have shaved)*  
*She floats like a butterfly*  
*She stings like a bee*  
*She is almighty*  
*She is restless*  
*She is relentless*  
*She rests on the seventh day*  
*She is the ever-changing river always the same*  
*(I am caught up in her current)*  
*She is a delicious nymph*  
*She is the narcissist witch queen*  
*She is Eurydice*  
*She lives underground*  
*(my name is Orpheus—look for me in there too)*  
*She told me not to look back*  
*(I must have lost my head)*  
*She runs with the pack*  
*She tears me to pieces*  
*(I'm feeling a little scattered)*  
*She's a sex machine*  
*(I'm still trying to find the "on" switch)*  
*She is divisive petty spiteful envious*  
*She has her own reality*  
*(I haven't a clue)*  
*She has it her way*  
*(I'm just a side of fries)*  
*She's in charge of her life now*  
*(I've lost control)*  
*She is the labyrinth*  
*(I am lost within and without her)*  
*She is the moral ambiguity of nature*  
*She has fatal charm*  
*(I'm dead meat)*  
*She is Snow White*  
*(I'm just one of the seven dwarfs)*  
*She has a fear of flying*  
*She comes after me like a bat out of hell*  
*She sucks me dry*  
*She puffs the blaziness on*

*She can turn a gob of refuse into a spreading  
web of sentient being*

*She is sane*

*full  
amoral  
fertilisable  
untrustworthy  
engaging  
shrewd  
limited  
prudent  
indifferent*

*She's known as the vamp of Canal Street*

*mother of mercy  
aurora borealis  
dreamboat steamboat  
non-stop love machine  
blue velvet dream  
mater dolorosa  
queen of heaven  
siren of the present  
moan of the abyss  
mistress of beasts  
great ooga mooga  
siren of the labyrinth  
great originator  
whore of Babylon  
sphinx  
Greek strangler  
great toothed man  
doll face  
mother goose  
dame fortuna  
venus barbata  
mamma doo  
bloodsucker  
redheaded nightingale  
la belle dame sans merci*

*She tells me all about herself with one look  
(and that's all she wrote)*

**“I don’t care what they say** about it as long as it’s not true,” was his attitude in the reaction to the publication of *Procreation*. Once in print, his long poem had confounded everyone’s opinion. Instead of the expectation of his usual scurrilous imprecations and political incorrectness, it was reviewed as a maturing of his oeuvre whose clarity of vision was based on a breadth of learning. “*Procreation is divided into three parts,*” a review of the book pointed out, “*Man, Woman, and The Act. Sex is the eating of the apple from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Once you’ve tasted it, there’s no going back.*” It also helped that he’d received an excellent although breathless blurb from his old pal, still in hiding, Yuri Khasid.

*“Carl Wendt is a poet who immortalizes and, in many instances, resurrects not only the popular but neglected regions, landmarks, and eccentricities in our modern culture, combining a poet’s vision with a jazz musician’s rhythmic sophistication, in a manner not only winningly but surprisingly beautiful, as a haunting contemporary song of amazing intelligence and grace that is brave, ravenous, intensely moving and utterly his own, a poetry that charms the birds out of the trees with a clarity that breaks the heart, presenting satisfying and arresting insights marked by a lush lyricism in passages fusing innocence and wisdom. Reading this epic poem while guided by conventions of collective spectatorship, we catch ourselves perversely trying to refamiliarize what Carl Wendt has so successfully defamiliarized, and in doing so, the double bind of our ethical conundrum becomes acutely perceptible.”*

He’d had to go back and reread his long poem to make certain that Khasid was talking about the same work. Still, some had demeaned the opus as mansplaining and typically phallogentric. The bee and the flower image “*I’m the bee and your pussy is the flower*” had come in for some heavy criticism. One such reviewer opined that *Procreation* was “*an attack on women by a male chauvinist pig, a fossilized anti-social mentality desperately grasping for notoriety by outraging convention—how juvenile!*” Others claimed that it was a wannabe *Wasteland*. That had stung. The common criticism, though, even among those who viewed the one hundred and fifty odd pages in a positive light, was that the title might have been a bit misleading. One reviewer voiced the opinion that it could have been better titled *Fogged In Frisco*. And most often cited was an excerpt from the prologue he had entitled *Foreplay* and generally pointed to as the prime example of a clueless hambone. Of course, out of context, it was the obvious candidate

to be picked apart by the maenads of bourgeois sentiment. Essentially what everyone was pissed about was that he'd written

*A man is as are all men a cock and a woman is as are all women  
A cunt denigrated as well as defined by these unique attributes  
And there is really no politically correct way to reference them  
Because culturally we are taught the shame of these body part  
There is no escaping sexual purpose, and that is procreation.  
And procreation sets into motion the four stages of life:  
Being born maturing to reproductive fitness aging to helpless  
Decrepitude and dying anything else about the sexes men and  
Women is social fiction an elaborate genius chimera*

He had sent the manuscript to Leo J. Nightly, of *Robo Jive Press* out of New Haven, who had expressed an eagerness to publish it. He'd added the caveat "print this and duck!" Portions of the long poem had already appeared in *Plainspeak*, a magazine from Lincoln, Nebraska, whose editor, Elmer Pike, an old friend of Dick Granahan's, had wanted to do a special issue of his and Dick's work. No pay as the magazine was yet another minor marginal poetry operation, and being cast as one of Granahan's acolytes had inevitably rubbed him the wrong way. But in advance of Granahan's collected poems announced for later the following year, the issue received a lot of attention.

"My only fear about what critics say about me is that they might be right," Granahan had confessed shortly before he passed. That was when Dick had asked him to oversee the publication of the posthumous collected, maybe write a preface. UC Press had already contracted to publish it, and an honorarium had been set aside to pay for his effort.

Jane, Dick's ex, had gone along with Granahan's choice, saying, "Carl, I never liked you. I don't think that will ever change. You brought out the worst infantile tendencies in Richard. However he was confident in your ability to do right by him with this collection, and I respect that."

There was also a big kerfuffle with Marguerite "Kay" Sayrah over his being appointed editor of the collected. The compromise was Jane's doing. Marguerite would get to write the introduction since he was contributing the preface and determining the contents.

Needless to say, Kay's introduction to Granahan's collected, *There's Always Something*, like her poetry, was incomprehensible. Her ideas of what constituted the esthetic behind Granahan's poetry were a convoluted mess of postmodern jargon and academese. The text acted as an

off-putting barrier to anyone curious about but not familiar with Granahan's work. He had complained to Jane about it to no avail, and there was no talking to Kay because communication between her and the planet Earth was virtually nonexistent. To him this was yet another instance of the grannyhand's unintended consequence rearing its pointy pink head, and on top of that, the rumblings about the correctness of publishing the work of a known sexual predator. He felt that he should somehow redeem his old friend's reputation, but that would only call to mind his own repute for unsavory behavior. In the end, it looked like old Dick was going to have to shoulder most of the weight with his own words.

He'd found a letter Dick had addressed to him among the box of manuscripts for the final edition. He figured to bracket the letter for the preface with a little biographical material and praiseful assessment of Granahan's importance to American literature. The letter pretty much spoke for itself.

*Dear Carl—*

*Sometime in the latter decades of the past century, I realized, like many of my contemporaries, that poetry, as it was written in the US, had lost its identity and consequently its efficacy in making any impact on contemporary culture. The fractiousness of the various schools of poetics had stretched the art so thin that it became transparent, the invisible art. Vain attempts (pun intended) were made to reinstate poetry in the pantheon of cultural darlings. They failed because they all tried to make poetry what it was not. Attempts to redefine poetry in the modern trappings of popular entertainment or intellectual faddism missed the point. Poetry is archaic, and its appeal is to the archaic in all of us. It is the original joy of language, the play of words.*

*To think that the poet is some kind of highly sensitive antenna tuned to the deepest sensibilities and secrets of the heart is a romantic notion. The man or woman with the talent for words, the ability to string them together with lyrical fluidity is just as likely to be blind and deaf to the motives that their words reveal. What's to guarantee that they are not hollow instruments, an empty metal tube? Yet there is a possibility that if such a pipe is positioned in such a way that a breeze or light wind coming from the right direction might blow across one end and produce a sound that causes both awe and fear at the realization of our tenuous hold on the moment, a haunting haunted breath, and a match for the resonant frequency of being. "The*

*unconscious cannot be civilized” as Bachelard states, hence the primitive anti-social attitude of the true artist and poet.*

*To that end, participation in the art becomes a very personal and at times private practice for those who accept this perception. If the art is invisible, then the practitioners are unseen as well. Performing on stage, construction-(or deconstruction)-isms, or braying from the podium doesn't amount to a blip on the culture radar. Invisible is as invisible does. Even as I write this, the paper crinkles smugly and the ink giggles that I have not abandoned my conviction that the work alone should be judged, not the mitigating influence of the writer as salesperson.*

*If poets and their milieu are essentially non-existent to a large part of the public to the point of being obscure—this applies to some of the best and better known writers of the day—then imagine what it means to be obscure and non-existent to that set. The poetry pie is very small, a tart in fact. Some will never even taste a crumb. And they are the most vulnerable, ripe pickings for all kinds of products and scams from workshops to self-publishing to poetry apps. Poetry is a gated community with a surplus of gatekeepers.*

*The role of the poet in this country has been relegated to teaching at a college or university while writing innocuous verse and staying away from politics. Academics are a cheap investment. They're happy just to have sand in their sandbox. However they are notorious about not sharing their toys. Academics poets are corporation poets, agendized by the mere fact of their employment. Today's poet is as never before under pressure of academic attention and expectations. Consciously or not, numerous poets begin to write a type of poem that will reward the structural analysis of college and university classes.*

*The other option is to belong to the marginalized majority of unaffiliated ineffectual poetizers whose sole aim appears to be at war with each other. North American poets because of their manic quest for visibility are always looking for the latest fad, diet, cause, camp, school, or program. They are pulled in a thousand different directions at once, shredded to tatters, unable to fashion coherence if their poetic lives depended on it. The literary world, especially the poetry scene, is one of tormented and agonized beings who only contrive to exist by devouring each other, and in which every ravenous writer is the living grave of thousands of others, its self-maintenance a chain of painful deaths in which the capacity for feeling decreases with knowledge. But the guardians of language and literature, what are they but ineffectual banks trying to contain the raging unruly stream?*

*It should come as no surprise that there are three classes of writers: the working class writer, the middle class writer, and the aristocrat. Working*

*class writers tend of be utopian while also keenly aware of convention and their abject adherence to a hackneyed ideal. The middle class writers are the ones with the greatest interest in keeping the particle board ceiling in place and making up the rules as they go along. Middle class writers are bifurcated into two general groupings that consist of the successful (i.e., professional) and a much larger grouping, critics (also professional) of conventional achievement. What they inflict on each other is only amusing from the sidelines. Those sidelines are populated by aristocrats, by nature bored, looking to dabble in a little decadence. Some write, quite well at times. They inhabit a closed world similar to that of the working class writer but with a better view.*

*The authorship of literature has pulled away from addressing an audience on any common communicative level that is not fraught with code for obviously limited consumption and the assumptions of elitism. At some point literature becomes abstruse, it leaves off the reader and becomes entirely the province of the writer and specialist as an ornate rococo that assumes the guise of the mock discursion of science employed by modern philosophers, and yet even while it advocates the equanimity of humanity, it distances itself from the rabble by its use of obfuscating language.*

*True, there are still a few pockets of informed intelligence in the poetry world but most of it is unmitigated dreck, a squirming field of half formed and unrealized egos on the rotting carcass of a deathless idea that the right word or combination of words will guarantee immortality. The poetry path is a gauntlet lined with people greeting you with smiles and handshakes as you approach but backstabbing and spitefulness as you pass. So with the obvious exception of those still in the fray, shadony narcissists that they are, poetry and poets have faded into the woodwork.*

*What comes off as interesting, in the final analysis, after all my eager efforts to gauge and disseminate the worth of my writing in comparison to anyone else in the field, the adjustments and fine tuning, the practice all the while compulsive, passionate, fiercely engaged in its output within the parameters of an uncommon aesthetic, is the realization that a return to the original impulse to set words down on paper has occurred, fleshed out but essentially the same, and that, looking over my shoulder, looking over someone else's shoulders, standing on the shoulders of others, I end up back to where I started from.*

*I forget who said it originally, but I must, before I die, find some means of leaving behind the essential thing which is in me, that which cannot yet be said, a thing which is neither love nor hate nor pity nor scorn but the very breath of being, shining and coming from afar which will link to human life*



*the immensity of the frightening, wondrous, and implacable forces of the non-human.*

*This must be where these pages come from. The acts and events I can tell you about, and the reasons for them, are mine because I made them. And because they made me. What I am is that agent whose life I can tell you about. I can tell you, and I can tell myself. The process of self-description begins in earliest childhood and includes a good deal of fantasy from the outset. It continues throughout life. It is what I do, it is what I am.*

*Poetry, it turns out, is not for the casual reader. Nor is poetry knowledge. Poetry is revelation, a revelation brought about by random language. Poetry is now the art of reading the equations of existence, the art of being read.*

**Coming out of his thoughts** he found himself walking to the west end of the small one-horse town, toward a tall conifer offering shade on the shoulder of the road. As Diogenes the dog once said “I have come to debase the coinage.” Now I’m leaving, he added with a measure of self-satisfaction. He was a poetry curmudgeon, like Rexroth, but without the Wobbly cachet. He’d always thought of himself as different, eccentric perhaps, superior, some would say, certainly apart from the rest, an exile from the herd. And that bit of askew provided an off kilter balance that kept him unique.

“What does it matter beyond gilding the breath for its own sake?” Was he to consider himself a cynic like old Dio Dog? Well, for one thing, he was pretty blasé and indifferent, like a stray, living the public life, making no bones about his lust, on the loose, running free. A dog is shameless, and he was as shameless as an Irish man or setter. In fact he was one of a cult of the shameless, not as being beneath modesty, but as superior to it, and which included most poets whether they admitted to it or not. And as a cynical cur he had an infallible olfactory sense to sniff out what was bullshit and what was not when it came to the tenets of poetry. Like the mutt that he was, he was loyal to his friends and presented a lip curled snarl to those egotistical poetry pimps who would dare tread on his turf with their outdated presumptions.

On the other hand, he tried to maintain an easygoing temperament. That was his goal at least. To be thankful for a clarity of mind that penetrated the smokescreen of mindless ignorance, folly, and conceit, his own and that of others, particularly that of others. And his good nature came from living in accord with a common sense that allowed him to accentuate the positive while sidestepping the dog pile of the negative in

the furtherance of his day-to-day survival. He had a rein on his arrogance most of the time because he knew that it led to false judgments which in turn led to negative emotions, unnatural desires of the fame and fortune variety. All the same he had a killer instinct for the emotional jugular. He walked the line knowing that his good nature depended on a single minded self-sufficiency, the mental composure of a Zen monk, a joyful participation in the sorrows of the world, that allowed him to glean nuggets of wisdom from the most mundane and insignificant moments of existence, what Basho had called the spirit of *karumi*.

For his good nature to flourish he knew he had to eschew such valueless concepts as wealth, fame, power. How then could he explain the wad in his wallet, his bank account, his sudden rise in visibility? He'd been nominated for The Holbrooke Foundation *Excellence in Literature Prize*, otherwise known as the HELP, and been assured that he was a shoo-in. He was being sucked into the mainstream by the attention of others, tagged for envy and spite, but also appreciated as a discovery much as the petrified bones of a fossil might be. His shameless impudence, his ridicule of social norms, of literary conventions, his violating the rules of conduct and social interaction taken for granted as civilized behavior were now being lauded as visionary and/or quaint.

He'd taken pride in his robust no-frills life style that required only the bare necessities for existence, a liberty unshackled from any need to conform to convention. And it was essential that he apply himself to staying unfettered by dint of daily practice much as Buddhists put into practice the tenets of their beliefs, not only in exercising judgments and forming mental impressions, but also by keeping physically fit with his meditative constitutionals which also served to get him from one place to another.

As D Dog used to say, "There are two kinds of exercise, that of the mind and that of the body." The healthy body creates in the mind split second intuitions by virtue of its vigor but the one is imperfect without the other, since a healthy body and clarity of intellect depend equally on both. Of course he had strayed, often willfully, from many of these precepts yet had kept them in mind like a cracked and faded photo in the folds of a wallet. And it was not like he was a recluse or anything. He had lived in the full glare of the public's gaze, indifferent in the face of criticism at his unconventional poetics. And certainly not cowed by the prescriptions of political correctness, he had the right to be outspoken, contrary, and irascible, vain and intractable. He considered himself, above all, a citizen of the cosmos, elbowing the stars and gods alike. And perhaps because of this heady company, he was always more than ready to

point out the fallacies and pretensions at the root of everyday rote, and to question every aspect of interaction with the world as a clear path to integrity and purity of existence.

In light of events over the past six months, his was an ironic reversal of fortune. For starters he wasn't in all that good of a shape, physically. Not since the night of what he self-referenced as the "Halloween Bash." The time in the hospital, the months spent recuperating after the surgery, had taken a toll on his stamina. He still got around but less easily with his game leg, and his jaunts around the city required careful consideration and the hustling of rides from friends. It had slowed him down and subsequently he slowed down.

Then there was the money. The award had only succeeded in making his life more complicated. Suddenly he was back on the debt radar and being hounded by collection agencies over his unpaid student loan, back taxes, and medical expenses. Not to mention those of his acquaintances who suddenly and conveniently remembered a loan they had made some years before and couldn't remember if he had ever paid them back. Wasn't there a statute of limitations on that kind of thing? Not that it mattered. He was going to eat up that money like a termite with a sweet tooth through sugar pine.

In his vacillating self-concealment he was feeling the regret that comes with questionable success. What he had lost with this sudden celebrity was his shadow. He had become transparent so that light passed right through him, an invisible man practicing an invisible art. At one time he had been content with being a famous nobody or, better yet, nobody famous. Behind his cynical dog-like sneer he tried to maintain a core of innocence that allowed him to still write poetry. Yet the corrosive effect of fame on the innocents was well documented. Kerouac was a prime example, hounded and shamed for being just that, a pure product of America, harassed for the very innocence he proclaimed. "Fame makes you stop writing," Jack said. He was also reminded of Michel Brazon's story of hanging out with Bryce Dunnigan on the terrace at Enrico's one night. Someone at the table was annoying the celebrated Confederate author of *Fishing With Dynamite* with suggestions as to how he could further boost his national appeal, such as making appearances on late night talk shows. All of which sounded exactly like something the predictably inappropriate Brazon would do. As Michel told it, Dunnigan fished a hundred dollar bill from his wallet and held it up, saying something like "this is what I think of fame," and set it aflame with the centerpiece candle. When he heard the news that Dunnigan had put a bullet

through his head, the thought had crossed his mind: much more effective than burning a C note.

“You know that there will always be an awful lot of good poets,” Dick Granahan once told him. “Some no one will ever hear of, and that’s what kills them. Some, on the heels of luck, are renowned from the first word that dribbles from their pens, and that’s what kills them. Everyone else is just twisting in the wind of slow death oblivion. Great artists are always offing themselves because it doesn’t matter that they’re great, they still can’t live with themselves.”

That he knew, but it bore repeating. Fame, like shit and death, happens. Then the times and fashion change and step right over you as if your entire life were nothing more than a crack in the sidewalk, a lump of detritus, a flash in the pan.

**“Eating pussy and having your dick sucked** are like the two major facts of life, dude.”

It was a surprising turn to the conversation and maybe he shouldn’t have expected anything less. He hadn’t been standing in the shade of the tall redwood for long when the purple muscle car minus grill and pounding out a thunderous chassis vibrating bass pulled over to give him a ride.

“Jusgowindowaroadapeace. Philo.” The driver shouted over the ear rupturing pulse.

“Gowintaphilo.” At his blank look the driver turned the sound down. “Philo?”

“Where’s that?”

“Couplamiles. Wherugowin?”

“Elk.”

The driver nodded, a young man in his late teens early twenties, backward ballcap, earlobe plugs, smear of goatee, and Yakusa style tattoo sleeves poking out of a black tee shirt with a *Beetle Juice* logo splashed across the front. “Gechacloser.”

He lowered himself into the ratty leather bucket seat and noticed that the back seat was taken up entirely with two enormous black speakers ready to blast the back of his head off. He’d barely buckled up when the car shot out onto the highway, fishtailing a bit before hugging the yellow line.

“So like whatdayado? Band manager, booking agent, record producer?”

“Uh, no, what makes you think that?”

“Wayurdrest, yaknow. You out scouting local talent for the big festival? I’m inna great band, rockincountryreggae, I play harp for’m.” He pointed to the tee shirt. “*Beetle Juice*. It’s a band and it’s a drink, man!”

“Betelgeuse, like the star?”

“Naw, man, I mean, yeah, like a superstar, the band, but it’s also a drink, you know, like the juice from a beetle.”

“Ringo, Paul, John or George?”

“What? Oh yeah, like those English dudes, the British Invasion, yeah, nothing like that, man. Besides they were too pop corporate, their stuff sucks, I mean, where’s the sex, where’s the pain? It’s the kind that’s a bug, a beetle.”

“An old Volkswagen.”

Naw, man, not that kind of bug, man, an insect.”

“Ok, I get it, like a dung beetle maybe, also known as the scarab beetle. They spend most of their existence rolling around balls of shit. The ancient people of the Nile delta, where they’re from, believed that the beetle species had no female. They were wrong, of course, there will always be a female component to any successful reproductive binary. They thought that the male beetle ejaculated sperm into the balls of shit, and reproduced themselves in that way. Which really speaks to the primal hubris of primitive male homo sapiens who would actually conceive that they could create themselves out of nothing but shit.”

“Dude, what you said.”

“The Egyptians were a civilized people and understood the importance of the shit disturbers which is why they placed the beetle so high in their animistic pantheon. Dung beetles, incidentally, are currently the only known non-human animal to navigate and orient themselves using the Milky Way.”

“Yeah, I heard about those Egyptians, man, and they built the pyramids. Those dudes were cool. And to think that they learned to build them from the scarab beetle.”

“I don’t think I follow you.”

“Well, it’s kinda like, if you’re gonna stack your shit, the pyramid is the maximal way to do it. I mean if it’s a shit ball, it’s gonna be round, and when you stack it on another ball it will fall off to the side, and if you continue to try to stack your shit balls, they will eventually form a layer of shit balls that will support the additional balls, stacked one on the other. In time, shit ball by shit ball, a pyramidal shape will arise. Just sayin’.”

“Does your product contain the juice of the betel nut? It’s used as a mild narcotic in some cultures, you know.”

“Right, right, I heard about that shit, turns your teeth black. Not gonna happen in smileyfaceland, man, white teeth are health indicators, you know, good teeth, good genes, and besides you start gaming that shit, the Dental Association would be on your ass like white on rice, and you don’t want to be messing with no dentists, they’re like some sadistic motherfuckers, man.”

“So what are the ingredients then?”

“Mostly papaya, hibiscus, grape extract. . . .”

“Grape extract? You mean juice? Or concentrate?”

“Yeah, juice, but you know extract’s got more biotech buzz, everybody can key off the word, too, man because, you know, it’s got a resonance for certain people. You feel? Plus there’s a secret ingredient I’m not at liberty to disclose but it’s from the leaf of a plant whose name starts with a C.”

“Chrysanthemum.”

“Not even close, dude.”

At that point the driver cranked up the volume. The thud thud thudding of the bass supported what sounded like a solo by a squeaky hinge or spring or just really bad harmonica playing. He was getting pulverized by one end of the frequency spectrum and put on his last nerve by the other. He read the driver’s mouth to hear him say, “That’s me!”

Out of the polyrhythmic chaos, a voice unconcerned with the potential for song of the laryngeal harp, spit out the lyrics. The driver sang along. They were a karaoke on wheels.

*You suck my dick, I’ll lick your clit  
Got something here you know gonna fit  
Go down on me baby go down on me  
(break) and I’ll go down on you*

*(Chorus)  
Go down baby go down  
Yeab, baby go down  
And I’ll go down on you*

*I’ll flick your bean, you flick my bic,  
Glom your lips round my lovin’ stick  
Go down on me baby go down on me*

*(break) and I'll go down on you*

*(Chorus)*

It was obviously a love song. And it ended, finally, none too soon, as they were leaving the canopy of trees and stretches of vineyard for a wide spot in the road populated by a few small businesses and a post office. The sedan angled onto the paved shoulder and muscled its way into a parking space between a minivan and a pickup truck in front of a country diner.

"I work in the kitchen," the driver said turning off the engine to a remarkable silence. "Whaja think of that song?"

"Interesting lyrics."

"I wrote them."

"At least we know what's on your mind."

"Eating pussy and having your dick sucked are like the two major facts of life, dude."

Once out of the car, he oriented himself, looking for a shady spot to stand and exercise his thumb. He had to get out of the bright day glare or wilt. Luck was not with him as the road narrowed almost immediately as it left Philo and that's where the shade was, where there was no place for a ride to pull over. He was forced to walk a distance, his leg nagging, hobbling him, as he stumbled over tree litter on the uneven roadside. In spite of the shade, jacket slung over one shoulder, his Banlon was drenched with sweat. He stopped to retrieve an amber vial from his bag and dry swallowed another pain pill. He could barely muster the saliva and the bitter residue caused a shudder of revulsion that stopped him in his tracks. Eventually the road widened out to accommodate a convenience store fronted by gas pumps on the other side of the country highway. There was a rutted pullout on his side of the road and somewhat shaded by a mossy limbed specimen whose shiny dark tiny leaves looked like jagged green teeth.

Cars and trucks sped by in either direction and he got the full effect of their exhaust. He was either invisible or too visible, whichever way he spent an interminable while gazing at the winking neon in the window of the convenience store and the hill behind it dotted with trees from among which a yellow green shimmering haze seemed to rise as an indication of the increasing midday temperature.

**“Homogenized American bullshit**, make work job security, personal crisis fabrication, poetry power politics, and just plain bad writing. As the cop says to Paul Sorvino in *Goodfellas* when they bust him, *‘Where’d you fellows get those clothes? Somebody sure pulled a fast one on you.’*”

They’d wanted his opinion and they got it. In answer to the question, didn’t he appreciate the purely cerebral in writing, he’d said, “Well, yes, I suppose if you like masturbation, and hey, who doesn’t? I’m with Woody Allen on that one. It’s like having sex with someone you really love.”

And while he was on the subject, he thought he’d add, “The intellectual climate in this country can be described as adolescent, and that leads to a lot of masturbation, but serious masturbation. Something badly written, disorganized, gets a lot of attention and it makes you wonder why, what is not evident, what are you missing that everyone else gets or, you ask yourself, is that what readers want, something that insults their intelligence, the most bald faced manipulations and self-aggrandizements?”

The two intellectuals, the one affecting Susan Sontag’s eyebrows and the one who looked like she cut her bangs with a pair of children’s paper scissors interviewing him for the splashy French online art magazine, *Selon*, asked questions that sent him back searching memories from his beginnings.

“Jeez, I hate to think that far back. If it was an express straight through, but no, it’s the local with all those stops along the way.” He did remember that the name of the first indie magazine he’d ever published in was called *Louder Milk*. “You have to be a selfish self-centered prick to survive as a poet.”

In regard to a question on his process, he’d allowed that “My head often knows nothing of what my hand is writing.” It was a quote he’d come across, quoted by someone who was quoting someone else who was quoting Wittgenstein. Maybe those degrees of separation were prophylactic enough that he could claim it as his own. It certainly fit his experience like the proverbial glove. He’d also repeated one of his signature comments: “I wrote that by rolling the dice, an old trick I learned from Mallarmé.” And he’d quoted the French poet, *“laisser l’initiative aux mots.”*

He’d accepted, he told them, that without attention to the grain of everyday life, the essential tension between substance and sign is prematurely broken. “The source of poetry should be the quotidian in that it is precisely the most usual whose unusualness is unknown or not noticed for its unusualness. The most usual itself becomes what is most unusual,” he’d explained. But it gave him pause, was he nothing more than a



cataloger of coincidence? Hypnagogic figments floating up out of a chemical dispassion, i.e., boredom. What is language before it reaches the tongue, after all—a soup of body chemistry? And there he was running around with his hair on fire and his head up his ass.

“There’s no purpose in writing for your peers as they are too busy with their own self-importance, or in writing for the previous generation, as they either think they know it all or are totally clueless and like it that way, which leaves the younger generation, full of potential and themselves, searching for something new among the old to bootstrap a reputation of being smart as well as diligent,” he’d answered to the question about the younger generation of poets.

He understood only too well the law of the West: that there will always be someone a little younger, a little faster, hungrier, better looking. The breaks, the grants, the fellowships were going to a class of classroom professionals, As the poetry prizes got bigger and bigger, the winners got younger and younger it seemed. All the same, much of what was written as poetry was often only an addendum to *curriculum vitae*. It had a purpose other than itself and had to be viewed as merely superficial. And while he could admire the intelligence brought to bear on the pyrotechnical display, it was strictly methodological and impressionistic. “The horror of mortality had been replaced by the fashionable lie in the hall of linguistic mirrors.”

“You’ve been quoted as saying that you’re a revolutionary on his way to becoming a reactionary.”

“It would seem inevitable, don’t you think?”

“But some people think you’re a revolutionary, that you’re way ahead of your time.”

“I was, once. . .but to myself, I’m rapidly becoming a reactionary, my arteries are closing off the vital flow of creativity, that’s what’s happening to me now. . . there’s nothing out there, I can’t see it, it’s all trite and pretentious with not one original or unique idea. It’s all philosophy and hype, I know, but at the same time if what you’re saying is correct, they’re using my early work as a referent which puts them incredibly behind the times.”

“You’ve moved on from that.”

“I left that behind long ago.”

“I guess the young poets who are using your example are just as reactionary as you say you are.”

“One man’s revolution is another man’s status quo.”

“But don’t you somehow feel vindicated?”

“Not at all. Some of my early works are an embarrassment, others I just don’t relate to anymore. They are too long past their use-by date. The poems that endure are ones I can view like snapshots in a photo album. They are fascinating in the kinds of emotions and memories they call up. They evoke a time, induce nostalgia, none of it very useful in the long run. Like rich food, they’re palatable sparingly.”

“Yet you’re not without critics,” Sontag eyebrows interjected ironically.

“To those whose searching is different than mine or who don’t experience the awful futility of being caught up in the egocentric projection of social extremes, who believe that the tawdriness of civilization is usefully progressive, or believe in the myth of progress, or those who reap the benefits of this lemming-like inclination, promoting and calling it desirable—for these people my poems undoubtedly appear preposterous and probably not worth considering.”

Maybe it was the medication but he couldn’t resist babbling on. “When I stopped caring about what other people thought about my writing, I started caring about what I wrote. I used to worry about not having a signature style or central subject matter or a fixed character of poetry, and at some point the worry ceased. I gave myself permission to do what I’ve been doing all along without worrying about it. A poet has to be able to shoulder the weight of meaning in his aimlessly scattered words.”

And they had wondered, now with renewed interest in his work and his sudden celebrity, how was he handling being considered the grand old man of poetry?

He didn’t feel old—he was not yet sixty, a year and some months short—just a little tired, an aftereffect of the trauma the doctor had explained, and the medication, it was bound to slow him down. On the other hand, the celebrity part was highly overrated. It not only made him a recognizable target but it brought out the most servile sycophantic tendencies of friends and strangers alike. Approaching the double thirty, would it be as important a milestone as the original thirty? Or just another round number, the completion of an arc, one large step for him, one small stumble for poetry.

“The fear as a writer as I get older is that my language use is on the verge of becoming archaic. Even the words I use are losing their timeliness. Although their meanings are still fresh for me, they are no doubt a little worse for the wear, threadbare, for others. Fortunately or unfortunately I am finding myself at an edge in history where what I do is anachronistic. It doesn’t come overnight. You wake up and that’s who you are

and it's been going on your whole life.”

He'd been reminded of what Jeremy Beljahl had said about new poets being born upon the deaths of other poets. His birth day was October 20<sup>th</sup> 1950, midcentury, on the cusp of balance and lethal. Of the poets who had achieved nominal renown, Edna St. Vincent Millay had died the day before he was born, of a heart attack. Yet if he considered the year he had actually set something down as a poem then that would have been Masefield, Hughes, Yoshino, Sandberg, even Sassoon. Not that any of them rated high in his pantheon of poetry heroes written in the stars. “I've written close to a million words since 1967 when I first began to write, poems, essays, aphorisms, journals, and any number of unfinished novels that I would never admit to having started. Poetry has rationalized my errantry, my essentially prodigal behavior. I have also been the victim of an ego craving superiority and worst of all, fame. I cravenly used poetry to gain respect, idolatry, sexual success, and everything else that goes along with it.”

“Would you care to name the writers who have influenced you?”

“Once I start listing the poets who have had an effect on me, where can I stop? I could reach all the way back to my first reading experience or when I realized that the reading experience could also be the writing experience, when the elements of style become obvious in the light of imagination. Sometimes poets are influenced by works whose greatness they have only heard tell. Their imaginations rise to the occasion that there is such greatness, and that all greatness has a quality that can be grasped apart from the poem itself. There is, on the other hand, no substitute for the real thing. However, the real thing could very well oppress and intimidate causing an experience close to anaphylactic shock.”

And no interview would be complete without the quote from Plato: “Acquaintance with poetry must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship, when, suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining.” That had been tattooed on his prefrontal cortex from the very beginning when this exact same experience had signified his doom as a poet.

“How does one penetrate the veil of interpersonal relations, the aura field, invisible to the learned sensibility, that the eye as the sole discriminator, the evil genius, filtering all information, in control of all the senses, smell, touch, sound, even taste, and subject to whatever wavelength triggers the visual cortex?” the bookish one with the bangs and glasses had asked.

He wasn't exactly certain what she'd asked, if it was even a question and not just a spew of undigested concepts ending on an interrogatory note, but he answered anyway. "There is someone, others you might say, privy to their own information about their bodies and the semblance is exuded in numerous subtle ways affecting interaction that includes the senses as well as a presumed psychological state measured against our own ingrained knowledge of ourselves, and how accurate that is will determine the success of our engagement."

"Could you talk about the drawbacks of being a poet, of writing poetry, modern poetry in particular?"

"You should know that poetry is a seducing forbidden fruit and whoever has once tasted its sweetest innermost juice is irretrievably lost to the active living world. I forget who said it but that, in a nutshell, is the poison of poetry that poets become actors who regard the whole of life as a role, addressing from the podium of the page an ideal ultimate world so that real life becomes a miserable patched up imitation for them. Not surprisingly, there is a destructive element in all artistic activity, poetry in particular, an antisocial disintegrating force.

"Poetry begins without a doubt. In order to be a poet there must be no doubt. Modern poetry is doubtless. If modern poetry, because of its beginning, has excluded for all future time the possibility of anything more modern, this suggests that the beginning is more than an historical beginning and is essentially an exemplar beginning. Modern poetry must be assumed to be always in the process of becoming otherwise there would always be something more modern in relation to which it would be older and that that something would come after and be judged to be postmodern."

"Is it by accident that modern poetry begins without a doubt or is it by necessity?"

"The individual poet must become conscious of him or herself and in the consciousness of self also become conscious of his or her significance as a factor in the moment in modern poetry. Modern poetry must in turn become conscious of itself as a factor in preceding pre-modern poetry which in turn must become conscious of itself as a factor in the historical unfolding of an eternal poetic."

"How is it possible that every single factor can become conscious of its eternal validity as dynamic in the whole?"

"Poetry is the possibility of relating consciousness as reflection, the first form of which is affirmation. The relation of reflection is that categories touch each other in such a way that relating is possible.

Mind/spirit which is consciousness presupposes poetry. If this were not so, it would be impossible to explain poetry. As soon as poetry reveals itself, the spirit of consciousness becomes two, modern and historical, and it becomes a third, its timeless self. Poetry is the possibility of relation, or in other words, poetry is disinterested consciousness whatever the relation and therefore interested. All poetry which is interesting is the presupposition of faith. If any poet imagines that they can overcome magical thinking with so called objective thinking, they are mistaken. Magic is a higher form of consciousness than objectivity.”

“Earlier you made mention of what you call ‘true poets.’ Would you elaborate on that?”

“To begin with you should know that there are very few true poets in any one generation. Among American poets there are not quite a half dozen who are for real and not playing at it.”

“Would you care to name them?”

“That wouldn’t be polite.”

“What do they have in common?”

“A source in the primitive. In the pre-logical. True poets’ lives tend toward anarchy and chaos, and their poetry is apt to neglect discipline and order, perseverance and steadfastness because of certain irrational factors that are peculiar to the practice of poetry. True poets are not creative in the sense that they decorate or embellish the existing literary canon. They are the ones who bring in the new to shatter the old. Such poets form the progressive element of the community, but at the same time they conserve and link back to the origins of their art. They establish new provinces of consciousness and overthrow antiquated systems at the behest of the voices whose summons they follow. As well, true poets have an arrogance of spirit no matter what humility they may profess.

“The depth of the unconscious from which the new springs, and the intensity with which it seizes the individual poet, is the real criteria of this summons by the voice, and not an ideology of the conscious mind. Poets are the unwitting vehicles of this illumination and consequently become alienated from normal human situations. This entails suffering because in their struggle for freedom they are also the victim and representative of the obsolete old order and are forced to bear the burden of it in their psyche.”

“Is it a prerequisite that true poets suffer from this sort of alienation?”

“The nature of true poets is as manifold as the agonizing situations of real life. They are compelled to sacrifice normal living in whatever

form it may affect them. The danger to which true poets are exposed is the isolation in themselves. The suffering entailed by the very fact of being egos and individuals is implicit in poets' situations of having to distinguish themselves psychologically from their contemporaries. Poets have uncommon vision. They are not taken in by the purely temporal which means that they are out of time and necessarily alone. True poets can claim their psyches as their own because they have fought for and won them. As a consequence true poets stand between two worlds: the inner world that threatens to overwhelm them and the outer world that wants to condemn them for going against the grain. True poets stand their ground against those collective forces and act as examples of individuality in possession of Prometheus' gift, the torch of freedom. So it is up to true poets to destroy the old, extricating themselves from the constricting coils of culture, by creatively breaking the stranglehold of outdated tenets."

"That sounds rather bleak. What about publication parties and readings, awards, and the regard of your contemporaries?"

"All the things you mention are like the foam on a pint of stout. While it may be creamy and taste sweet, it will never have the substance of the brew itself. In the end the true poet comes to realize that to be a poet is nothing, that poetry is all. Poems are made to speak, not to possess. Poetry's greatest achievement is negation in dialogue with that which it negates. Poetry destroys you. No one bothers to tell you that. And if it's not destroying you, is it poetry?"

"What then is poetry?"

"If no one bothers to ask me, I'm confident I know. When someone does ask, I have no idea."

"Surely you must have an ontological conception of the art you practice, where poetry comes from." Bangs again, with a severe intensity.

"Ok, if you insist. Poetry then arises when the space of possibilities is too large by far for the actual to exhaust the possible. After all, the purpose of poetry is not communication in the sense of a message delivered or of an idea expressed. It is, instead, communication as the continuous encounter between ideas and things in language on the page and in language in between the ears. The meaning of poetry is positive and synthetic precisely because it provides an outlet for emotional components that have been suppressed. The positive voices of the unconscious find expression in creative persons and flows through them into the community. Partly they are old voices shut out by the specialization of culture and partly new and untried voices destined to shape the future."

He liked to use what he called the Eastwood classification of poets: the good, the bad, and the ugly. As always, the problem with that sort of taxonomy was that sometimes the ugly wasn't so bad nor was the good always all that good. "On the other hand," he'd advocated devilishly, "there are some who would say poetry in America is widely perceived as useless, even by the poets themselves. It is non-productive, degenerate, barely a product, mostly bilge and dregs of a deluded class of authors. Poetry, they say, is the excrement of civic life.

"Do you believe that is true of poetry today?"

"Poetry today, if anything, has lost much of its spontaneity and has become the prize in contemporary poetry's fights against itself, against its origins, against its basic inclinations and instincts. Previously writing a poem had been regarded, if not as a process of letting one's self go, then, at any rate, as that of letting one's self be guided by one's talent. Now it seems as if every poem has to be some kind of *tour de force*, an achievement that has to be wrung out of one's self, obtained in conflict with that self. As if poets each had a separate unique way of expressing themselves, distinct as stripes on a zebra, when it's really just a borrowing from everyone else around and multiple media sources, decanting the latest distillations of *bon mots* and what it might be like to repeat something their favorite celebrity, contemporary or antique, might have said with the same intonation and sense of gravitas or sarcasm or incredulity.

"The role of poet is basically anti-social. To acknowledge the acceptance of their work for true poets would mean lowering their standards merely to be social. Society at its most social is a predatory relationship based on acceptability according to consensus. The unique, the novel, the uncommon are acquired tastes available to all only after it has been commodified, packaged, leveled to the point that what was once unique is now banal, overcooked and made into pabulum.

"Poetry nowadays is no longer about ideas. It's about style. The most crucial career decision for poets is picking a good *'ism'* so everyone knows how to categorize them without really understanding the poems. Say some poets write goofy pedestrian faux clichés so then they're pegged as suburban post-modernists. Maybe they wanted to be neo-deconstructionists but their moms wouldn't let them. However things are tough for the subpomo poets because the insubstantiality of goofy pedestrian faux clichés doesn't really recommend them to being remembered as anything special. Besides, no one really wants their tax dollars to support poets who are regarded as effete blood suckers, and corporations won't

support them unless they're famous enough to effectively advertise their cultural enlightenment.

“The problem is that the point of the current crop of poems generated among the writing workshop cliques and MFA pods is the idea that syntactical, grammatical, logical anticipation and expectation should be thwarted. The thought being that the further away the poet *slash* poem can land after the dissolve in the verbal *slash* syntax *slash* visual logic of the text as meanwhile another track is quickly laid over and over again in some kind of white noise iteration will generate grunts of approval from the audience—if that’s what they are and not a cultural dyspepsia inflicted by bad poetry—as an acknowledgement of the poet’s avant-garde credentials. That’s what the poem has become. Its function is no longer where you might lead someone or offer a unique linguistic experience but that you have channel changed seemingly without any structural goal, motive, or purpose solely because you can or as a failed attempt at random cerebral similitude. It is the signal that the poet has triumphed over something, someone, or some subconscious dynamic in doing so. And hopefully, in the process, made a contribution to neuroscience. What this something or other might be is never made clear. Unless, of course, being forced to endure the disaster of hearing some poet’s tedious exegesis. Then it’s an agonizingly embarrassing view into the abyss of that poet’s cluelessness.

“This is unfortunate because a common mistake poets always make is thinking that poetry is created for others. In reality poetry is a private language for sophisticates to congratulate themselves on their superiority to the rest of the world. Their statements on poetics explain that their poetry is utterly incomprehensible and therefore full of deep significance. Invariably they misspell *weltanschauungs*, but then such declarations always say more than their poetry does. So they deconstructed syntax in a vain attempt to vanquish society’s heinous hold over their pitiful lives and brains.”

The interviewers had scanned their notes for any lingering boilerplate questions they might not have asked. “How important is truth to a poem?”

“Poetry speaks the only truth, but a truth treated so subjectively that not everyone hears it. That said, a poem can’t be measured by any external standard of truth but in an absolute immanent way, through the gap between itself and its own exemplification. Truth is infinitesimal which is why it’s often overlooked, but it has a large aura that catches the inner eye and a poem can be infused with it.” And he’d added, as if it needed



to be repeated, "Truth is a convenience not everyone can afford. For the poor, the disenfranchised, truth has many more subtle variances than it does for the wealthy who act like they own it and can sell it to the highest bidder. For the poet, the truth of the poem becomes what it is as part of an historical process. Every succeeding poem imperceptibly changes the poem that preceded it, and inevitably its subsequent relation to the truth."

They inquired as to his reaction to the bad reviews of the publication of his book length poem, *Procreation*.

"They're like paper cuts, they hurt at first, sting like the devil, itch, but they heal soon enough, and eventually you forget about them."

"Do you ever respond to your critics?"

"These so called literary critics, I don't think they know a thing, of who I am or what I'm about. They think they do, but what they think is ludicrous, humorous if it wasn't so sad. I try not to take it personally because I'm confident in what I do as what I do. Most of it is pseudo-criticism anyway, and it's merely literary chit-chat which can make reputations boom and crash in an imaginary literary stock exchange. Much of it, whether it hems and haws over an obscure point or vacillates for ulterior motives or reacts by taking refuge in cliché is merely uninformed leisure class speculation and conversation. Over half the poets today are working under a mistaken job title. They should be philosophers or theoreticians, but that requires a discerning intelligence—you have to have a clue. Or they can become literary critics. That way they never have to have an original idea of their own. Those remaining true poets know exactly where they stand as all but lost to the rest of the world."

"Could your outsider outlaw reputation be one of the reasons why you were never published in *Poetry Magazine*?" they'd asked.

"*Poetry*? Outta Chicago? That's a laugh. When I was coming up *Poetry Magazine* was considered a joke. Now it's a joke with a lot of money," he'd answered.

"How does one differentiate themselves from their contemporaries?" bangs and specs wanted to know.

"You try to be different than anyone else at the same time reading everything at least once to ascertain just what that difference might be. You have to be eclectic to stay original. The challenge is to find your own path or way through the poetry thicket even if it does in some instances parallel those who have gone before. Originality can be a matter of choice between the spontaneous and the received. But if progress is not to come to a standstill, concepts of being and objects must remain plastic,

must be modified, enlarged, limited, transformed, must separate and unite continually in the light of experience. If they become too rigid and turn into a system which claims to be self-sufficient, the mind engaged in such a system will go on working inside it forever and ever, cut off from any contact with reality which these very concepts are supposed to represent. They become the object of a hollow and useless dialectic and the source of deathly infatuation.”

“Is that what you’re doing?”

“I am not a machine. Poetry is not the fashion industry where I market something new every year. I work very slowly. I don’t analyze my artistic impulses. If I analyze, I eliminate chance. Poetry ultimately is about mystery. Poetry’s appeal is that there are distinctions to be made, no matter how slight. Intellection is the process, intuition is the progress. Sometimes the most obvious solution eludes the simplest approach. Everything continues to conspire with everything else to hinder any imagined objective—compromise works either from demand from within or from without. Straight lines in nature, the archeologists say, are uncommon. They do lead to the discovery of ancient civilizations. All the same this was not my intent. Need I say more?”

There were so many other things he could have said, walking the woulda shoulda coulda tightrope of what was better left unsaid.

Poets see hidden intention everywhere and invent meaning where there is none.

“What looks large in the distance up close ain’t really that big.”

Poetry is a process in which every phrase is a summation and transformation of the previous phrase in that it incorporates the series of phrases or transformations through which it has developed and as a result of which it assumes its own form and structure.

Wisdom often smiles but rarely laughs.

The illusion of a work of art makes a prison of passion.

The relationship between artists and their art is always tenuous—what in one moment of elation is luminous can be soul murdering garbage in the next.

Poetry aims for the universality of autobiography.

It is the mark of a literary criticism to praise someone before stabbing them in the back by the last sentence.

Existence is necessarily a line drawn in the sand that joins other lines to spell *Help!*

If you’re going to live a lie, make it a good one.

And when they’d asked if they might do follow-up questions over the

phone: “Telephones? I stay away from telephones. They’re like truth serum. As soon as I get on one, I start babbling. There’s no telling what I’ll say or reveal just to accommodate the device.”

**He surprised himself by playing** through the entirety of *Ruby, My Dear* in his auditory cortex, and the bell-like clarity of Coltrane hitting that note, that part sampled at will. There in the lull of the traffic flow while the air thickened with heat

That was one of the little joys, a piece of jazz, just a piece, and some fading memories with a side of great sorrow. Lost touch with a vitality of language that I used to take for granted. Now it’s like trying to squeeze a tube of old glue. The comparison to constipation obvious. I can’t even come up with nonsense. Real life has its hooks in me and it’s reeling me in. The unintended consequence of fame and fortune. The fantasy world I once pursued in search of fame, money, power even, sent skittering like shadows in bright light, left alone with the naked horror that is me.

Caught by Coltrane’s clean coloration but held by Monk’s invention. One of my favorite things, the tap of the foot as a hand rolls over the keys before the rest of the band kicks in. There is a similarity. Take a familiar tune and improvise from it, that’s what jazz is all about. Take a familiar idiom and repurpose it, that’s what poetry is all about. Jazz is an authentic musical form. Its complexity increases as standardization spreads from its origins. It represents an integration of diverse musical cultures that has, in turn, produced a unique creative relationship that could easily serve as a model for human behavior.

**The blinking LED sign in the window** of the convenience store across the highway had finally hypnotized him into believing he needed to purchase something, some kind of liquid refreshment from the cooler, a pack of smokes. He was about to step across the pavement when he noticed a cloud of dust emerge from the green haze at the top of the hillside and make its way down an unpaved access road to the left of the store. Since it was the only activity besides the blinking advertisement across the highway, he watched vaguely entranced as the dust got closer and he could finally discern a beat-up green vintage Chevy pickup of a shade barely distinguishable from its surroundings. The driver shifted to a stop at the highway before trundling onto the blacktop.

He held out his thumb convinced of the gesture’s futility. To his surprise the truck pulled over into the rutted turnout and stopped. He hobbled to the passenger door with the large red primer circle on the panel

obscuring the symbol that had once indicated its use as an official company or government fleet vehicle and yanked on the pitted chrome handle. He hoisted himself up onto the bench seat being careful not to disturb the backpack in the foot well and dropped his satchel next to it. He nodded to the driver, an older man with long graying hair tied back in a pony tail, a bush of gray beard, and a large wide brimmed leather sombrero. "Thanks for stopping."

"Spaceship break down?" Pungent cannabis scent permeated the cab.

"Excuse me?"

"You look like the man who fell to earth in that outfit. Lose your space helmet along the way?" Then a big hearty guffaw.

"I'm not sure I get what you're saying."

The driver glanced over his left shoulder and then steered back onto the roadway. "Ever see the movie, *The Man Who Fell To Earth* with David Bowie?"

"Ok, now I get it." He shook his head. "It's been a long day. But no, I never saw the movie." He didn't think he needed to add that most Hollywood movies either made him impatient or the plots were so predictable they weren't worth sitting through. "I did read the book, though."

"Really, a book? I thought the director, Nicolas Roeg, wrote it."

"No, it was published in the late 50's, I think. The author was Walter Tevis who also wrote *The Hustler*, another of his books that was made into a movie, with Paul Newman, and which I did see though I never read the book." He never tired of pointing out the irony of certain situations.

"Oh, yeah? I didn't know that. I guess you can't compare the book to the movie since you never saw *The Man Who Fell To Earth*. Was the novel any good? The movie is a cult classic."

"It's one of the most heartbreaking books I ever read, a true lament on terrible ambition and great failure, an evocation of man's absolute, unbridgeable aloneness. You might say it's existential in the only true sense."

"Whoa, sounds like a bummer." And then apropos to nothing, "I named one of my boys after him, that's how impressed I was by the movie."

"After the character in the movie?"

"No, the actor, Bowie."

"You named your kid Bowie?"

"Actually Ziggy, Ziggy Stardust."

He felt like saying “that’s unique” but in this neck of the woods it probably wasn’t.

“Wheryaheaded?” The driver reached into the ashtray on the dash and retrieved a lumpy cheroot, setting fire to it with a flick of his Bic.

“Elk.”

“You’re in luck, I’m going right by there, on my way down to Manchester for a co-op meeting.” He handed over the smoking cigarillo-sized spliff. “Here try some of this, it’s an indica sativa blend. You get the rich earthy spice of indica and the peripheral vision clarity of sativa. It’s one of my hybrids. I call it *Satori In Paris Blue*.”

Of course, someone else living Kerouac’s dream of a little place in Northern California with a wife and kids and living off the land, he mused, not so much raising cattle as growing dope. “Uh, man, that’s ok. After I smoke that shit I’m useless, I can only do housework.”

“Not into smoking dope? The first one’s free,” and coughing up a laugh of aromatic smoke.

“No, yeah, I mean, it’s been almost forty years.”

“Dope’s changed a lot since then, both in the potential of its psychotropic properties as well as in the popular perception.”

He shook his head at the proffered joint. “I prefer the ingestion of liquid refreshment for my buzz and bite.”

“I can tell. You’ve got a boozer’s gut, enlarged liver. The Banlon shows it off nicely.” The driver held out the smoking reefer, “You sure?”

What the heck, it was a cigarette after all. The smoke was harsh yet sweet and the spice piqued his nasal passages to the verge of sneezing until the lungs protested and expelled the smoke as an explosion making his eyes water. He stared at the tube of smoking herb in his hand as if it were an unfamiliar object. That quick.

“What do you do? Music biz, real estate, buyer, dealer, wine salesman?”

Distracted by the peripheral, it took him a while to process what had been asked and how to answer, “Um, no, I’m a writer, a poet.”

“I would have never guessed that. What’s your name?”

“Carl Wendt.”

“Ever hear of a poet by the name of Chuck Weedell?”

He handed the joint back to the driver. How often was he asked if he was acquainted with such and such a person who was also a poet because everyone assumes that the poetry world is small enough that everyone is known to everyone else? If they only knew the extent of the demon hoards they’d be appalled by the sheer onslaught of zombie poets oozing

out of every nook and cranny of the literary landscape. But to be polite, since the man was providing transportation, he admitted that the name sounded familiar. It didn't.

"Great poet," the driver offered. "Big name in these parts. He's the poet lariat of the county. Where you from? El Lay? The city? I'm guessing you're not a native son. Not by the way you're dressed."

"You're right. How about you? You not from these parts either?"

"Delaware. Dover. Just a name on the map between DC and New Jersey. There's no there in Delaware."

"Gertrude Stein said that about Oakland."

"At one time that may have true about Oakland. Now it's true of Delaware." He passed the joint back. "Never imagined I'd end up living in the middle of nowhere where, surprisingly, there's more than enough of *there*. I was going to U Penn, you know to avoid the draft, but I ended up dropping out, got drafted. You get called up?"

He took another tentative toke and shook his head. "I had a student deferment, too, for a while. Got lucky, I guess. My number never came up." His uncles had assured him that the fix was in with the local Draft board and he didn't have anything to sweat. Not that he had been anything but ambivalent about it. Mainly they had done it to please their big sister, ease his mother's worry.

"Yeah, I got lucky too, you might say. Instead of being shipped off to Nam I got sent to the language school down in Monterey, taught me Korean and sent me to a radio listening post in the Aleutians where I eavesdropped on North Korea MIG pilots talking Ruskie. After my discharge, I hung out on the coast, you know, Seattle, Portland, Frisco. Lived in the Haight for a while. Ended up joining a commune with land up this way. The social dynamic inevitably wobbled out of control. It only takes a few bad eggs. But I like living in the country so I stuck around."

"I grew up on a commune."

"Then you probably know what I'm talking about. They're magnets for sociopaths."

Remembering his summers in Dublin, he could think of a few. Control freaks, almost always the chairman of some communal council or committee, a few visibly armed even though they were all supposed to be pacifists, rationalizing that they had the right to protect themselves from those who didn't share their beliefs. Not a few sharing wives other than their own, creating oppressive hostile atmospheres. And those who

exuded a cloying sweet non-confrontational façade, they were the most predated snakes in the grass of all.

Mind numbingly blasted he watched the greenery flit by. He had smoked some hash years before and it had erased his memory tapes of everything from that point on until, blissfully hazy, he'd come to. But he hated that, and eventually stopped smoking psychotropics and stuck to tobacco and its twin addiction, booze. So yes, pot in some ways could be considered a gateway drug if his case were an example, a gateway to alcoholism. Maybe he was just old fashioned. He preferred jazz over rock, R&B over country, and was intimidated by classical and opera. Besides, they were hostage to class pretention.

“So are you someone I should know? A famous poet?”

“Oh, I've had my share of attention. I'd hesitate to say famous but well known and published enough to garner respect for my writing and win a few prizes.” He didn't understand why he suddenly balked at bringing up the Pillsbury. Was it something he hardly ever experienced, embarrassment? “I wouldn't want to be a famous poet because by then you are already dead, literally or figuratively. It encourages self-consciousness detrimental to creativity. In fact, success is a step backwards, at best a standing in place that a creative artist must overcome.”

“Yeah, I guess I can get that. It's the being in the moment, the moment of being. Kind of a Zen thing. Everything is an illusion. Be in the now, not in the what could be or what should be. . .had a lot of time to read when I was stationed up in the Aleutians. Got hooked on Asian philosophy, you know, Buddhism, Taoism, the like, getting out of the Judeo-Christian irreversible time mind set. . .that's probably why I ended up joining that commune in the Haight. I fell in with a bunch of utopian intellectuals who were interested in making the same life choices as I was. And it was great for a while until we had to make practical decisions and then suddenly not everything was an illusion. You know what I mean?”

He hadn't really been listening, veered off on why mentioning the Pillsbury Prize stuck in his craw. Everything about it just seemed wrong. It smelled, it stunk, of patronism, of cronyism, of favoritism, all perfectly acceptable in the arts as it is in politics. Still he was rankled, as if he were innocent of the hustle and con to the everyday business of literature. Maybe it was because it was so obvious this time, and he so preferred to be subtle about his charlatanism. He'd often indulged his fantasy of what he would do if he won the lottery. It never got much more elaborate than a nice apartment and an endless supply of good whiskey. And the Pillsbury was the literary lottery, his good luck riding on the hopes of others.

The moment Hugh Klidian shook his hand and gave him the debit card for the quarter mil replayed itself as a tape loop, alternating with his memory of the reception hosted by the Holbrooke Foundation in recognition of his having received the Pillsbury Prize, and how uncomfortable and disappointing that had been.

He'd gone totally off script, the script that he'd rehearsed beforehand, and began to babble, maybe it was the drugs interacting with that one glass of bubbly he'd allowed himself in celebration.

"The myths we breathe, the airs we put on for others that a community can be bound by our poems and become whole by the knowledge of itself, entranced by the dance of language and the ways it can mean."

And of course no rant could be complete without his favorite topic. "Poetry is a language technology for managing and exploiting the benefits of reputation and the cooperation it enables. Poetry has suffered the destiny of primary objective manipulation by a system of standardized means, and consequently, this art of language and what it can do, has become a good deal less significant."

Thus, he'd concluded, poets originally were purveyors of reputation, consecrated yes men, with their praise songs, genealogies, and lists of great names. That had gone over like the memorable lead balloon. He was struck by all the serious and unfriendly faces, many of whom he knew or knew of and who were frequenters of such affairs and which, in his estimation, were sops for the losers, that most in the milling cocktail totting crowd were the also-rans shadowed by their natty society swells and sycophants.

There were among them those who thought they knew and knew not, whose judgment faulted what they couldn't understand, and in ignorance proved their justification with dismissal. They inhabited a special kind of hell, a landscape of private doubts that barely concealed their uncertainty. Generosity of spirit was a bane to them. It was in their make-up to be small and belittle the great. Thus the conclusion that he'd come to many years hence: You try to never step in the same poetry scene twice.

Nora White had clucked on his arm like a proud agent. He was the best advertisement of her author management skills she had at the moment even if she was only peripherally involved in his selection for the prize. She looked naked without her three Maltese mutts and that was about as naked as he'd ever wanted to see her. Maybe she'd sensed his unease. As with many diminutive persons, she was succinct and to the point: "Face it, Carl, you're uncomfortable with success. Maybe it's unconscious but you'll do everything to undermine any opportunity."



She was right, he was always shooting his mouth off, and the hot air of his celebrity lifted him above the fray and allowed him to sound off.

“We deal with fears daily, fear that we’ve made the wrong turn, taken the wrong path, chosen the wrong appetizers for the party, the wrong shoes, the wrong word when we know we’re wrong to think so, that there is no wrong, only clockwise and counter clockwise, yet every manuscript page contains lists of fears and how to deal with them, and writing them down is one way of dealing with these fears because actualized as language they can appear foolish even comic and sometimes even redemptive.”

It could also have been the company he’d found himself in, representatives of the anecdotal, watery-eyed, watercolor, metaphysical cat’s cradle style of much of current American poetry, the snobs and asshats of the Sauerkraut Hot Dog School, all part of a greater crowd of elbows, assholes, and bellybuttons, all the same, no one different, just some louder than others, and when the crowd thinned out, in the immortal words of the bard, he owned his own accomplishments, much to everyone’s surprise and in some cases, resentment.

Individually, like his old pal, Ed Settera, whose envy was palpable, they might not be so bad, but an auditorium full of them was unbearable, the posturing and the perceived slights, the dagger stares and false smiles, the limp handshakes and faux congratulations. Along with the preconceptions of celebrity, people feel disappointed when you aren’t how they thought you should be.

They constituted what he considered The Oxymoron Movement, an umbrella designation for multiple coteries and schools with academic or government funded connections who subscribed to an oxymoron as their esthetic ground. *Modern Tradition*. It was a different shirt and tie world, a superficial formality that was a signal to others trapped in that world as well as a designation of class. The worker, ball cap, Levis, was out of place among pressed pants suits and shirts. In these situations language use carried along assumptions of social class, an embedded hierarchy of appropriateness and propriety. The distinguishing characteristic of this class conflict and its self-perpetuating upper middle class dynamic was a kind of neurotic exclusiveness that can never be quite identified, but, once breached, subtle alarms went off, doors closed and faces became blank.

“You don’t have to be a plumber to know shit floats,” he’d reminded himself.

He'd been on panels at writer's conferences with some of them, all working the retreat/workshop con. Burt Hardwasher, Paula Knitterknife, Jasmine Cake, Jackie Place, Nick Bare, Mary Window, Norm Niceleaf.

Some of them were writers represented by Nora White, or authors associated with Dorian Pillsbury and his publishing house, Gelett Garnett. Vivian Blackout, Kate Twaddle, Liz Ardd, Cher Annville, Brian Swore, Lisa Knicawteau.

No wonder Dorian was so appreciative of his acerbic irascible company with a following of ass kissers and back stabbers like that. Lee Grette, Mike Onanoff, Ari Goodrock, Lorraine Sinner, Jenny Pinewater.

The envy of others was as obvious as the food stains on their shirt fronts, napkin deniers, as if every morsel never missed its mark.

"Poetry allows us to talk to our surroundings," he'd pontificated. "Poems are created as go-betweens for us and the world as such and allow us, intermittently, to see relationships which enhance our understanding of ourselves. It is self-reflection which is why the whole scene is overrun with narcissists. The danger is in hearing only what we want to hear or see or perceive surrounded as we are by sycophants. Comfort is shameless."

There was an uncomfortable shuffling among the folding chairs.

"Then the demands of our surroundings are pushed further out of sight, out of mind. The complexity of the symbols folds back like a fan. The breath of a phrase, a murmur among the branches of trees. That's real luxury. The narcissism of pop, the reflective familiarity of everything. People, the folk, are symbols of themselves and what they are is what they've been sold, either from atop a ziggurat in Ur or a hundred floors up on Madison Avenue." If he'd had a hat he'd have used it as a megaphone.

Jared Lebeau known to everyone as Jarred Elbow, author of *Spilled, The Beans and What They Reveal; A Pythagorean Meditation, I Knew That, the Shaman Poems*, and *Reciprocity, Poems of Give and Take*, was very much in evidence, a wild man, wild eyed and wild haired, hang jowled like Droopy Dog, among the contingent from The Old Farts Poetry Society. He'd been made an honorary member but he never read their newsletter—it was the worst kind of junk mail, poetry junk mail. They were responsible for the most egregious platitudes.

*"Poetry is all poems collectively, good, bad, and indifferent."*

*"Poetry cannot compete with street traffic."*

*"To cling to the idea of poetry is poetic but not necessarily poetry."*

Vera Owley, poet, author of *Sometimes Why*, had rubbed his elbow in passing with a nod and a smile. She belonged to a vague history of single nights. Raylene Demantis, he knew to steer clear of. Aka Goldilocks, aka Preying Mantis, she was known for her incessant urge to copulate followed by publicly humiliating her sex partners. A textbook author psychopath. A psychopath textbook author?

He'd been surprised to see Ann "Holy Moly" O'Molie, author of *The Math Of My Being Doesn't Add Up*, in with that crowd. She was on the arm of the startlingly bald Jack Yulatian. Sue Anne Howe, also known as "Sue Pearl-Ative" author of the runaway best seller, *Apter Words*, a collection of words that might have been better, was a social butterfly so it wasn't surprising to see her flitting around the banquet room. She was having a very serious conversation with the sensibly stylish poet Irina Yvoinskya Nualainokova, author of a collection of poems entitled *I Vent To Be Alone*.

"Know what I resent? Being confronted by a closed shop, in this case, a magazine or a press that professes to want to publish everyone, new, young, experimental, as well as established traditional poets. Then only publishes a select group of the editor's university friends. On a small scale, of course, this is unavoidable, and for magazines with limited circulation as well as appeal, this is almost understandable. But for a magazine or a press to solicit subscriptions and manuscripts and then continually publish the same tired blather by the in-crowd is not at all excusable.

"Magazines or presses such as these, and they are more common than you might think, purposely set up this exclusionary policy because it will extend the interest and desirability of their product if it remains the goal of those who continue to hope for acceptance of their work or manuscripts—this attention will keep those excluded on a string, vulnerable to pleas for emergency cash infusions or continued subscriptions at an increasingly higher rate because they believe that their continued support will one day ensure their acceptance or the acceptance of their work by the particular magazine or press. The wise and sly editors will accept the work of writers outside their circle in the form of innocuous filler merely to string those writers along."

May Allovre and her old maid's moustache, Al Mutant-Abbey, bookstore owner and poet, Simone Lacra, author of *Let There Be Another Me*, and Paul Upps, a low level psychopath poet, all seemed to have congregated near the stage as if that was where they belonged. The nosh counter and bar off to one side was watched over by Archie Bishop, a Brit poet, Justin Toime, the Irish balladeer, and Paul Glee known to

everyone as “the happy painter.” They were there to make sure that their drinks were always on the verge of half full or half empty.

China Gordon, another writer from his past, author of *Seamen At The Prow Of Ourselves* and *Fear of Landing*, adventures in the psycho-sexual, stared stilettos at him from across the room. He couldn’t remember why. She was in a cocktail cluster with Fred Atatwa, Indonesian author of *Metahypnosis Theory*, and Dark Gonzales, author of *Viaja en la esfera astral*, looking like Jackie Chan with a scowl, part of the cultural seepage from Latin America. Charlie Big Elk, author of *We Are Brothers of The Land*, lived up to his name and stood out like a sprained finger in that gang.

And there were the poets of the comic book crowd, their heroes often pen and ink with an urgency established to save the world, the ideal protected from a crushing gravity that now inhabited a shadowy nondescript underground in a narrative spanning panels and framed close-ups, the legendary landscape of their lives where they got to act out their heroics. Anne Shovey, author of *Holy Mackerel*, was one of them. Floyd Eberhard, too, a pencil neck geek known to his friends as “Eraserhead” and not so kindly by certain ex-girlfriends as “Neverhard.”

Richard Grappler, LGBTQ poet, and his brother Peter Grappler, urologist art collector, cruising the crowd joined at the hip—they were twins—gravitated to a clot consisting of Dr. Victoria Ulva, author of *The Gash and the Why Chromosome*, and Simon Simone, author *Les Raisens de raison*. He’d recognized them from their jacket photos. They were among the authors of books Nora had given him to review and make some cash. He couldn’t remember what he’d said about them, good or bad. Ray Harmon-Minnows, the British poet, author of *I Say* and recipient of the 2008 Penumbroi Award, known as the ‘other PEN’ attended the fringe of that mix.

“I’ve spent countless years studying the art of poetry, practicing the art of poetry, and what have I learned? I’ve learned to be bitter. I’ve learned that notice goes just as easily to the pretenders as it does to the talented and ignores as well a good portion of both. That’s a given. But what of work and application, devotion and passion? All the wannabes are closer to that notion of notice than I’ll ever be. C’est le fad.”

Was that also the occasion he’d had the run-in with Elaine Trumpa-nazi, the blogger who had excoriated him over *Procreation*, or some other time?

“You’re not going to let me in your club because my spelling’s not perfect and my grammar errs as common usage? Let me ask you something. When was the last time anyone told you to fuck off?”

“Well, I don’t. . . .”

“Can’t remember? Let me refresh your memory. Fuck off!”

“You’re practically an institution.”

“Let me know when I become a full-fledged member and I’ll put a bullet through my head.

And asked if he was writing anything new: “I’m so constipated, my ass is like a coin return, I’m shitting one copper at a time.”

He had no idea who had invited Roman Ackley, there with a group of haughty young poets. Maybe that was it, haughty young poets. He’d been there, done that, and had gone through the many tee shirts commemorating the fact that he had. They had formed a phalanx he had to pass by.

Ackley had taunted with “Look, we’re in the presence of celebrity.” When he hadn’t reacted, Lon Murphy’s former number two, apparently now a number one with that crowd, tried a little harder. “I heard that it was a pity award. The man is a cripple.”

Slowly he’d turned. He’d smiled. “Right, right, now I know who you are, I saw you on TV.”

“Oh really? On Charlie Rose?” Ackley flashed a smug mug to his acolytes.

“Uh, I think it was on the cartoon network.”

Haughty’d turned to mortified as if someone had just given him a cerebral wedgie.

“You’re Lemony Snicket, right?”

And to the red faced bluster building to explode, “Oh, my bad, man, I meant to say, Percy Dovetonsils.”

And when all Ackley could do was gap and gasp like a goldfish flipped out of the bowl by a curious cat, he’d hit him with the Obie Wan coup de grâce: “You require much more attention than someone like me can give you. You’re wasting your time here.”

He was following advice that had been passed down through generations. “Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you are or might have been was otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise.”

He found himself tuning back to the drone of the driver’s voice saying “The problem with the morality in this country is that it frowns on the sensations: pain doesn’t hurt and nothing should feel good. That’s why we have addicts—they categorize our dilemma in experiencing a pain that feels good. They are the largest implication of societal hypocrisy. The social mores are rigid and brittle—they cannot keep up with natural

creativity, our innate mutability.”

Right about when he was about to ask him to repeat himself with the universal “hunh?” the driver stood on the brakes, rear end fishtailing and slamming him forward to catch himself on the dash with one hand in a split second reaction that left him amazed at his reflexes, stoned as they were.

“Oh, shit, I almost missed her” the driver said throwing the truck into reverse and looking over his shoulder, “It’s bad luck not to pick her up.” And to his questioning look, “The road hag,” as if it wasn’t obvious.

**In the side view mirror he watched an older woman** in a large orange floppy hat and long multi-colored gypsy skirt holding up the hem to expose tall western boots as she ran to the truck now stopped on the shoulder of the road. As she reached for the door handle he noticed a ring on every finger, and one on each thumb, her forearms sheathed in an eclectic mix of bangles and bracelets of every variety and material, silver and plastic, leather and wood, beaded or engraved. She looked up at him with snapdragon eyes and flashed her Hollywood whites. She had a girlish doll’s face that had not aged well. The dirty blonde wool of her dreads was spun with gray.

She clambered over him, saying, “I have to sit next to the pilot.”

He caught a distinct earthy whiff of unwashed coo.

Once crowded into the cab with little if any personal space, he experienced an overwhelming sensation of alignment so that everything was viewed in the light of that correctness. There could be no doubt that the driver was Enkidu, representative of wild and primitive innocence, and that he was Gilgamesh, the urbane urban sophisticate caught up in the agony of irony. Was she Erishkigal? But no, she introduced herself as Gina D’Entata.

He held his hand out to shake, but she turned the palm up and read it like the page of a book. He pulled away but she held fast, daring him with her glare. Besides he had no will to resist her pale blue irises like cut glass.

“Who are you,” she asked.

“Do I have to be somebody?”

“Do I know you?” She glanced down at his palm. “Your life line has disappeared.”

“He’s a poet,” said the driver. “Carl Wendt.”

“Have you ever lived in the city?” He was trying to connect her with a hint of familiar.

“Years ago, but I got friends.” She smiled with assurance. “Hey, now I remember! I read about it in the daily comical. You’re the poet who died.” And then, “Eek, a ghost!” She leaned her tousled do against the driver’s arm feigning a cringe and let out a raucous withering laugh. “I heard you was shot or beat up. I know, I read it. Then you died.”

“Maybe it wasn’t me.” There was always that possibility, of that he was certain, although the veil of reality shimmered and glimmered as sunlight fraying the edges of the vintage windshield, allowing a subsonic reality to whisper its alluring version.

“Somebody’s stoned.”

The driver offered a hearty guffaw and what was left of the spliff to the hippie granny.

“No, thanks, but I can’t. I’m visiting my friend in Albion and she doesn’t like it when I show up stoned. Says she can sense a slight disturbance in the astroplosphere and it makes her uncomfortable.”

The driver nodded. “Depending on the level of energy, I can see how that might affect some quantum psyche manifestations. On the sub-Planck length level.”

“My friend, Tina, is very sensitive. Scented products, laundry detergent. She makes her own soap. Anything petroleum-based gives her a rash. Her walls are lined with cork and she only eats raw. Weaves her own cloth, makes her own clothes. Maybe you know her. She’s a poet, too. Tina Argent.”

He was impressed. Of course, everyone knew who Tina Argent was. Anyone who was tuned in to the radical side of modern American poetry, at any rate. Tim and Tina, originally Silverman, though older, were a poetry power couple, similar to what Dotty Krاندall and Lynel Pauk had been, but with firmer charisma in the world of literary reputation. Tina was loved for her wisdom whereas Dotty, so far, was merely appreciated for her intelligence. The same dilemma applied to them both. They were better poets than the acclaimed males they shared their lives with. In Tina’s case, Tim went out to the bookstore one night and never came back.

“She live around here?” He knew she’d chosen the wilderness. They’d met a few times, many years ago, at various literary functions. Amusingly, they were always being reintroduced. But he recalled that’s she’d mentioned she enjoyed his collection of essays.

“Yep. Up at the top of Ridge Road. She’s got a little hut up there, no running water, no electricity. Candles, firewood, and a well is all she needs, she says.”

He was about to mention that one of Tina's minimalist poetry selections had been titled *Well Books and Candles*.

"I'm on my way to a meeting in Manchester and I can't be late again. Ok I let you off at the head of the bridge? You shouldn't have any problem getting a ride up the hill into Albion." The driver spoke his plea sorrowfully.

"Not if they're all like you, captain," she said giving the driver's arm an affable hug.

"Give her my regards," he said instead.

The old woman searched his eyes. "Who, hon?"

"Tina Argent."

He recognized the look she gave him, a look of concern verging on pity, one that said *Yes, of course, you poor deluded man, as if she'd know who you are*.

### **"Don't blink, this is Elk."**

He stepped down from the cab of the pickup at the dusty pull-out to the coastal access parking lot as the driver offered his hand. "Didn't get a chance to introduce myself. Name's Chuck," he said with a conspiratorial smile, "Chuck Weddell." Once again he was left to gather what he could from coincidence.

In the wake of the pickup's exhaust a low slung Western style false front building of weathered wood with tall red trimmed windows and a large sign above a similarly red trimmed doorway announcing *Heirloom Country Emporium* came into focus across the two lane highway and appeared to shimmer in the light of a cloudless blue dome of sky painting the wind shaped landscape with a fine solar oil. The next step was to get directions to Angie's place.

A silver minivan swung by, and gauging the distance and speed of the oncoming white pickup truck from the opposite direction, he erred on the side of caution, waiting until horizon to horizon no moving vehicles appeared, and then strode across still alert to the possibility that any peripheral spark or notion could easily derail the tenuous concentration of purpose, whatever that was.

It came as the oft repeated story of an incident in Dumas' *Twenty Years After* told by a French director of how setting light to a fuse on a keg of gunpowder to blow up the entrance to the castle, the portly Musketeer, Porthos, takes off running, and as he speeds away he becomes pleased with himself and the thought that what he has just done will do the trick, and that leads to the thought of how, hightailing out of range, after



twenty years he still has the spunk and spark of his younger Musketeer self, and struck by the realization of how remarkable it is that the human animal can sprint in such a fashion, one foot in front of the other in quick succession, he becomes self-consciously aware of his pumping limbs which in turn causes him to stop in his tracks, amazed at the wondrous cleverness of God in his heaven, and is consequently hoisted by his own petard.

The annoyed beep of a car horn sounded seemingly out of nowhere and hurried the last few steps to the unpaved roadside and the front porch of the emporium festooned with antique bric-a-brac, rusty farm implements, and overgrown planters.

Once inside the door, fire trap came to mind, the dark wooden floor of the narrow aisle creaking underfoot, overstuffed with cheap imported inventory, mostly bright plastic gewgaws to attract children and easily attractable adults, beach gear, gaudy striped umbrellas and Styrofoam coolers, a tangle of gaily colored kites hanging from the ceiling, stacks of rubber flip-flops in mesh bags, boogie boards, garish tee shirts advertising the locale, and finally at the end of the tunnel of junk the jittery light emitted through the glass doors of the rattling ancient refrigerator case with its tantalizing array of drinks. Not surprisingly he was parched.

The store clerk greeted him with a smile and “Can I help you find something?” She stood at the cash register among the array of assorted impulse items and doodads crowding the counter.

The words just burbled out, “I was wondering if I could use your phone.”

The large woman in a green vest smock, close cropped gray hair, appeared a little taken aback by the request. “Oh, car break down?”

“Actually, no, my phone is dead, or unconscious, whatever the case may be. I’m always forgetting to charge it.”

“I know someone just like that.”

“Talking about me again?” A short older dark haired woman emerged from the stockroom door off to the side of the cash register.

“He wants to use the phone.” The woman at the register with the nametag that read *Trudy* replied.

“Oh, car break down?”

“His phone is dead.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Are you going to give it a proper burial?” Her nametag read *Liz*. She laughed. They both laughed.

And laughing along allowed him a letting go prompted by the sudden realization. “Man, I am really stoned!” A declaration that took them all a little by surprise.

“Oh, my,” Trudy spoke with a chuckle, glancing meaningfully at her companion, “though that’s not all that uncommon around here. But if you don’t mind my saying so, you don’t look the type.”

“And maybe you shouldn’t be driving in your condition,” the short one advised, crinkling up one eye aggressively.

“I don’t have a car. I was hitchhiking and the driver insisted I partake. What was I supposed to do?”

“The way you’re dressed he might have thought you were a narc.”

“Are you going to call a taxi?” The brunette couldn’t help herself.

“I’m here to visit a friend and I want to call her and get directions to her place.”

“She lives in Elk?”

“It’s her mailing address, a post office box. I don’t know exactly where she lives.”

“We know just about everyone in Elk.”

“Unless she’s a newcomer then we might not.”

“She moved here maybe about a year ago.”

“What’s her name?”

“Angela Denotti.”

“And Samantha!”

“I knew I recognized you!”

Small world indeed. Trudy Stoyne and Eliz Tiklich.

“Carl, it’s Carl Wendt, Trudy!” Liz exclaimed.

The memory almost belonged to someone else that was how many years had flown under that particular bridge.

“Remember us? We used to own *10 Dance Gallery*.”

In an old Victorian in the Mission, formerly a dance studio, and they had their own little artsy scene made up of the likes of the Chinese novelist Herman Wei, Cher Wu and her son, Woody, Marcy Bruised, D.R. Bill, Jane Joys, Scotty Fizzknackered, n. n. leevings, Andrea Brayton, Louise Arrogant, Phyllis Sue Paul, Dresden Sorrow, Vince Key, Nan Ginski, Charlie Javelin, and the outlaw painter, Donyay Rewsew.

“Right, now I remember,” Trudy flashed a big grin, “You came to the Matt East show! Oh, that goes quite a while back!”

“I’ve been to a few of your art openings.” They always put on a good spread. The art was pedestrian, but the expensive wine flowed freely.

“You were at the Vic Aso show opening, too. I remember that in particular.”

They were old friends of Irma’s as well, and Vic Aso, the Japanese painter, was Irma’s neighbor in Bolinas.

“Why that show in particular?” Liz wanted to know.

Trudy’s grin turned mischievous. “Well, there was a certain young man there that night who thought he was an avant-garde revolutionary poet but who was really just very drunk.”

“Oh. . . yes. . .,” Liz said as it all came back to her.

“And I seem to remember that he hit on Irma Maurice.”

“Irma Johansdottir back then.”

“Do you remember that?” Trudy was enjoying herself.

The words of Irma’s rebuff were never far from memory. “*I don’t think I’m quite ready for the revolution*” had been like a curare dart, paralyzing, rendering him at a loss for a comeback. “Right! And now you own. . .?”

“An emporium. For lack of a better word.” And as if an explanation were necessary, “We found this place on a getaway from the craziness of the city. The couple who owned it wanted to move to Idaho to get away from the craziness of California. The price was right. . . so. . .”

“. . .we thought at first we would just convert the store into a gallery. . . .”

“. . .but then we realized that this tawdry plastic rubbish mass produced in China makes more money than any of the lame paint splattered abstract canvases we ever. . . .”

“. . .and we don’t have to put up with any petty self-absorbed tantrums from prima donna artists!”

Apparently anyone who was anybody these days moved to a location that gave them an unobscured view of sunset, all, in one fashion or another, adherents to the cult of the dying sun.

**The first message he left on Angie’s answering machine** was “Hi, Angie, this is your old roomy, Carl Wendt. I’m in Elk. . .uh, I’m calling from. . .uh. . .right. . .the Heirloom Country Emporium. Sorry to drop in on you on such a short notice. . .kinda spur of the moment, I guess. . .same old impulsive me. . .anyway, hope to hear from you soon.” The second message said, “Trudy here at the Emporium suggested that you might be some time getting this message so I’ll wait for you across the way at the beach access parking lot. . .or maybe down on the beach. . .come find me there.”

The undulating lead sheen of the molten Pacific reflected a bright saturating light and assaulted his eyes, making him squint and lament the fact that he'd left his sunglasses at Irma's in fog bound Bolinas where there was more often than not little chance to use them. The path down to the beach consisting of an eroded rut of loose rocks and gravel was challengingly steep to anyone even if they weren't juggling a twelve pack of beer, generic smokes, personal butane ignition cylinder, and assorted snacks and faux meat slim jims. "You're not allowed alcohol on the beach," Liz had advised, "but if you keep the beer in the bag, no one will bother you." Nor were the slick leather soles of his loafers suited for the perilously precarious descent, made, as they were, for sliding across the floors of cocktail lounges rather than slipping over granite rubble of a weed clotted switchback. Complicating matters as well was his painfully throbbing leg.

A young family with a group of friends among the craggy rocks came into view, blankets spread on the sandy beach catching rays, third or fourth generation flower children in long skirts, uncombed hair worn long or as dread locks, pierced and tattooed, tribal, a few glancing up in his direction. The young women, barebacked, sunbathed, and the young men, bare-chested, two of them playing guitar and flute, were a primitive depiction of Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* or more appropriately, *Déjeuner sur les rochers*.

A wave and a wave back with his free hand. The real waves lapped on the crescent of beach accompanied by the rush of displaced air roaring as they broke. The scintillating play of light on the heaving presence of blue green swells, and at the bottom of the trail a trampled path giving way to the dream familiar resistance of loose sand. He surveyed the boulder strewn edge of a dark green spiny shrub infested sheer cliff precipice rising up to the edge of the parking lot from whence he'd descended. Further down at the tip of the sandy crescent a field of craggy boulders stepped out into the crashing surf toward a massive guano topped monolith rearing up from the wreathing sea as some kind of black seabird perch. A steady breeze cooled the ambient heat. He trudged, suddenly out of breath, his pinned shin stressed to white hot pain. Rounding the face of a large granite outcropping acting as a windbreak and partial shade, a narrow gravel apron presented itself, perfect for sitting and gazing at the ungraspable expanse to the horizon.

At the periphery where the young family had gathered, naked, a blond longhaired child, no more than three or four, scampered to the foam white edges of waves with a blue plastic cup to capture sea water and

then ran back to dump it into a hole in the soft gray wet sand while a young woman, ostensibly the mother, stood by, the breeze pulling at her hair and the folds of her long skirt as an iconic representation of watchfulness.

Folding his suit coat to make a cushion, he placed it over the gravel patch and sat, stretching out his legs on the slight decline, the excruciating throb having given way to an all-consuming numbness just below the knee calling for another dose of painkiller. And a second one for good measure. He washed them down with beer and eased back to await the effects with his first cigarette in many a month. It was as if he'd never quit. Exhaling he was moved by the muse to muse and consider the oceanic vista with amniotic awe.

**And here I jolly well am**, to paraphrase the late great Lord Buckley. The obvious question being by what stroke of serendipity have I landed on this Pacific shore like so much driftwood? In the present instance, at any rate, my presence in the land of sunsets testified to by almost forty years of habitation now firmly a state of mind.

**"I can drop you off at the transit mall** on my way to the gym," Patti had offered earlier that morning, how many hours now, eight, ten? She had a full day of classes otherwise she said she would have considered giving him a ride back to Bolinas or the city, even. "You can catch a bus back from here," when she let him out at the unfamiliar downtown plaza. And that had seemed reasonable enough though it was frightfully early and the fitful sleep on Patti's couch had been merely a hiccup in his groggy post-inebriate consciousness.

The metal mesh benches in the open air mall near the departure lanes were still wet with overnight accumulation and the boarding points surprisingly crowded, bustling with activity. Laughing and smoking, gaggles of women dressed warmly against the morning chill queued to bus doors, most speaking a rapid lyrical Spanish, carefree in tone and belying the drudge awaiting them at their day jobs. The bus to the city was not scheduled to arrive for another half hour according to the timetable posted at the kiosk so he'd busied himself with his laptop.

Eventually the crowd of domestics had dwindled down to perhaps a half dozen women and young girls waiting by the door of the last county transit bus. He'd also noticed a couple of rough characters who did not appear to be waiting for a bus lurking at the periphery of the mall. He'd made them when he first arrived, triggering his enhanced sense of

danger, particularly palpable since the assault, and once the terminal began to empty of commuters except for himself and the final few passengers stepping up into the last bus, the scruffy young men appeared all the more obvious and sinister.

He'd slammed his laptop shut and hurried to the bus just as it was pulling away. He'd banged on the door shouting "Hey! Wait!" With a look of annoyance the driver set the brake and opened the door. He'd clambered up the stairwell and sat down on the bench seat behind the driver. He could see the two men on the platform. One seemed surprised, like a cat whose prey had suddenly flown, and the other, laughing, flashing the bird at the departing bus.

His plan had been to exit at the next stop, his assumption being that, as with most city buses, it would only travel a few blocks before he could exit and reassess his options, find a café where he could grab a cup of coffee, and show up in time to catch the bus back to the city. To his distress, the bus had taken the freeway onramp a few blocks from the transit mall and merged into the sluggish clot of commuter traffic. As it turned out the bus he had boarded was an express, and his destination was Cloverdale, someplace he'd never heard of before.

Once he realized that there was no way the driver would let him off until their first and final stop, in spite of his plea that he was going to miss his connection to the city, he'd paid his fare and settled into a seat at the rear. On the positive side the bus claimed to be equipped with wi-fi and from the number of people engrossed in their smart phones and pads there didn't seem to be any reason to doubt it.

Retrieving his notebook laptop from his bag, he'd logged in to the cyber stream, navigating to the map app on his browser and typing in *Cloverdale*. The pushpin told him nothing relative to where he thought he was and he'd scrolled out to better gauge his geographic position, perhaps a little too aggressively, and found himself looking at a large chunk of the North Coast, from the main highway corridor to the expanse of the Pacific. He'd determined at a glance that he was heading north. It was the name at the periphery that caught his eye, jutting out from a dot along the jagged coastline. *Elk*. The bus's eventual destination placed him within fifty miles according to the squiggly yellow orange highway line terminating at the coast. He'd felt the weight of significance as a catch in his breath burdening him with the inevitable. Mere equivalence always signaled a date with destiny.

**Technology has worn its own grooves** in the possible pathways of the mind. I am now uncomfortable with that word: mind. I live with its assumptions, however, and every possible interpretation that can be attributed to any particular frame of mind.

**While on the bus he'd had enough sense** and a modicum of decency to fire off an email to Irma with the header *I was here but I disappear*, a reference to Irma's all-time favorite movie, *The Harder They Come*, with Jimmy Cliff. The text read, *Took an unexpected turn and ended up far afield. I shall reappear.*

Out of recently acquired habit verging on obsession, he'd scrolled through recent emails and deleted the older and no longer relevant ones though he stubbornly and not so surprisingly kept the months-old approbation and kudos that had come his way since the Pillsbury not to mention the heap of get-well wishes while he was in convalescence from people he'd assumed dead or estranged, and even a few celebrity grade poets and artists he never knew knew of him.

As well, saved in its own folder, was the exchange he'd begun with Oren Rickles about the implausibility of artificial intelligence generating anything but fake poetry. He was ambivalent about robot poetry, which, if he understood the nomenclature correctly, should be designated *robopo*. Could it be any more awful than the poetry produced by humans?

Rickles was convinced that his poetry generator, *pogen*, as he called it, could pass the Turing Test, which in this case was the acceptance of an AI poem for publication by a legitimate literary magazine. Rickles was obviously overestimating the acumen of most poetry editors, and he had said as much in reply.

*Yo Oren—*

*You are correct in your assumption that these juxtapositions are evocative and 'poetic' in that they demand attention in an unusual way. Boneless and sky are not associative yet together are acceptable as a figure of speech though you might not want to use it in the company of nephologists. Delicate shadow is not that much of a stretch as we already consider shadows to be ephemeral. It's natural to want to make sense of what we see and likewise to want to make 'sense' of what we read, to keep the narrative moving. But reverse your examples and you get 'skyless bones' and 'shadow delicates' which are a little more extreme and not as acceptable because of our perception that they are cart before the horse constructions. The ultimate problem with the poems*

*you generate, and this is the problem that the lang gang encountered as well, is loss of a frame of reference and disorientation when the narrative is not resolved or is irresolvable. In other words, no resolution is reached, or can be reached, as a kind of suspended animation. That kind of indeterminacy is not uncommon in modern poetry and it is based on the idea that meaning is an emergent property.*

And since Oren lived his life in the cyber zone of keyboard and display, he always had something to say in reply, often within minutes, even if it was something he'd already said.

*I have developed an artificial intelligence that can create poetry indistinguishable from real poets. The Turing Test for this AI poetry generator would be that the poems are accepted by a distinguished literary journal.*

And eager to divulge the cleverness of his technical feat, Rickles had gone to some length in explaining how the context-free grammar systems he used to generate the poems were a generalized system of formal syntax defined by production rules that allow sentences to be recursively built from smaller phrases. The formulation had been developed by Chomsky years ago. Essentially the poetry generator worked by having the poem emerge from random fields of all available linguistic constructs based on specific literary parameters mined from the vast information sink of the internet and deconstructed into progressively smaller sets: stanzas, lines, phrases, then verbs, adjectives, and nouns. Once the algorithm was initiated a poem was created by recursively generating randomly selected units into conventional predetermined forms such as sonnets, odes, ballads and any variety of recognized lyric configurations, even free verse. Or, especially free verse.

As Rickles went on to explain, he'd trial tested a number of the AI generated poems.

*I began by submitting my poetry to a popular open poetry website. I never let on that these poems were computer-generated. I published under the name of Ann T. Kythera, an in-joke for the digerati. The responses I received were, for the most part, quite flattering. For instance:*

*"Multi-layered demanding second and even third look. Are you on Tumblr? I'd love to see what you look like."*



*"I like it, straight from the pages of a mystical story, filled with delightful colours and wonderful landscapes. Are you in a current relationship?"*

*"I like your style of just giving the reader a small taste of what you are expressing. It opens up cerebral passages and gives me something to ponder without any idea of what I'm doing. Cool!"*

*"What a wonderful piece of writing. A vivid picture you have painted here. Well done. Do you have a mobile phone? I would like to talk to you privately."*

*"It's like you just sang a beautiful song, but slightly off key. Très moderne."*

*"You certainly know how to make words jump through their semantic hoops. You should be a doggerel trainer."*

*Even the negative criticism I received which typically found that my poems were incomprehensible or nonsensical, proved my contention that though it is not understood, a poem can be given legitimacy because it is not a requirement for a poem to be explicit in the modern era, only that it be considered a poem. If anyone answered anything other than "That's not a poem!" then they probably believed, more or less, that it was a poem, and therefore, by the same standards, the artificial intelligence that generated this poem passed the Turing Test.*

Undoubtedly seeking some kind of validation, Rickles felt that he needed to share the documentation of the process.

*The overwhelming positive responses compelled me to use a more stringent test of authenticity—seeing whether this computer-generated poetry could get published in a poetry or literary journal. As many poets often do, I tried submitting the poems to several places. Also, I never specified that they were AI generated. I submitted to Memory Loss Journal (now forgotten) and the Original Poetry contest but both rejected the poems without comment. I then turned to more conventional sources and submitted to Crenellation, one of the oldest continuously published literary magazines in the country. I actually submitted a selection of poems generated from a list of poetry books titles found online. And Crenellation agreed to publish one of them! See the email exchange below.*

*To: Poetry Editor, Crenellation*

*From: Ann T. Kythera*

*Attached is a selection of poems from a manuscript entitled Some Assembly Required. I hope you find them suitable for your magazine.*

*To: Ann T. Kytbera*

*From: Bea Reeves, Poetry Editor, Crenellation*

*Hi Ann – thanks for your submission. I would like to use them all but our policy is that we can only use one poem by any one author per issue unless they are established poets. I think it's a stupid policy but since this is my first year as poetry editor there's not much I can do to influence the editorial board.*

At this point Rickles admitted to some trepidation, in spite of his jubilation that his AI poem had passed the Turing Test, that perhaps he'd let the genie out of the bottle. After all, if AI poetry was possible then anyone and everyone could generate a publishable poem. And then what? The bottom would drop out of the poetry market!

He'd also included as an attachment the poem selected by *Crenellation* with an explanation that the bold text designated the random titles selected by the poetry generator.

*From Some Assembly Required*

***Rough calculation of reading materials***

***as a passing thought***

***hold forth***

***sidetracked***

***by dead reckoning***

***and studied deviation***

***in the public domain***

***for instance***

***a creature of habit***

***in familiar surroundings***

***the anecdotal evidence of chance operation***

***far be it from me***

***be that as it may***

***be premature***

***word gets around***

***like easy money***

***and all about me so name your poison and***

*don't ask me why ask the reality next door*  
*in line of sight*  
*on the one*  
*or better yet*  
*a polite fiction with its hand out*  
*pretty much*  
*the exaggerated misery of dust catchers*  
*and wool gatherers*  
*as the mission creep*  
*of sexual favors*  
*seriously askew*  
*led down the garden path*  
*aren't we all in on the exit plan*  
*come full circle*  
*no deposit*  
*for instance*  
*a creature of habit*  
*whistling in the dark and the necessary correction*  
*of plain foolishness*  
*out of sur-*  
*face*  
*and private lies*  
*on second thought*  
*imagine accolade*  
*it matters not*  
*in a blind spot*  
*as lord of the cooking smells*  
*there are no new messages*  
*only the routine*  
*of scare tactics*

In answer, he'd replied:

*Let me cite Gertrude Stein's work as an example of the method you're using. Stein was an early pioneer in looking at language scientifically, playing with basic components of grammar in a forensic manner. Her sentences are spare and flat but it's with subtle variation that she can trick out an alternate vector. The challenge for your or any AI poetry generator would be to mimic what Stein is doing by limiting the available sets to a single pronoun, a minimum of conjunctions and*

*prepositions, and neutral verbs and nouns that can be used interchangeably as nouns and verbs. The mind is not content until it puts some kind of order in its findings (literal or figurative) and invents a hierarchical relationship among the various possible interpretations. And while your AI poem might be able to fool the reading mind, can it fool the ear? For that to happen, you will need to factor in patterns of syntax that are rhythmically fluid and acceptable to the discerning ear or, in the case of deliberate dissonance and silences, intellectually coherent. The biggest challenge, and your biggest success, to my mind, if you could accomplish it, would be to develop an AI Haiku generator. Of course people would go nuts over it for all the wrong reasons. The process would likely generate faux profundity galore, the kind so popular as internet memes, as well as improbable juxtapositions that resonate with otherworldly simultaneity, kind of like quantum theory's spooky action at a distance. Plus they'd be succinct enough to make them ideal for most types of limited character social media. As I see it, AI is learning about poetry from VI (visceral intelligence) and consequently VI will have to learn about poetry from AI in a way similar to how we've learned about language and art from Stein and Duchamp. Also Oulipo's influence shouldn't be overlooked, its unintended Schumpeterian effect laying the groundwork that will allow algorithms to be considered as authors, leading to the eventuality that only other computers will interface to share knowledge once known as reading. The nature of poetry has to change because technology affects our approach to the world. We think of machine language as benign but we have assimilated it and that changes us. We have become wheeled electronic eyes and ears, constrained by our pets and leashed to promises of credit in the face of the apocalypse. Reality is 99% perception and 1% object, as we know. That said, the downside of poetry in the virtual realm is that any poet is just as good as any other poet. The perception of goodness (excellence) is relative, meaning that where any one poet stands in relationship to any other poet makes the difference, not the work itself, and this difference is primarily a result of social standing. Your poetry generator, to make it a lasting success, will have to feature a ranking system. And this system will need to establish itself as some kind of gold standard that imitators and knock-offs will have to abide by to be credible, some kind of poetry social standing algorithm that already exists in some form or other among poetry groups and associations but has yet to be entirely deconstructed and commodified as a common denominator. I have to admit that what you are proposing has really got*

*me thinking. What the AI poetry generator has revealed, I realize, is that an emergent poetry approximates an averaged or high level description that leaves out much of the detail. The ultimate organizing principle resides in the outcome of the process not its poetic origins. The question then becomes how is what I do any different? I like to think of my work as discrete yet I know that it is all part of cosmic consciousness decanted into a collection of antique bottles.*

Over the last year his relationship with Oren Rickles had evolved into one similar to a druggie with his dealer. In this case, the fix was his cyber connection, and he'd been dependent on the tech savvy poet to provide him with the means to maintain his digital addiction. The notebook laptop he was using was one refurbished by Rickles. Upgraded he'd called it, and a rock bottom deal considering that it came with a load of apps and open source programs at no extra charge. The problem was that many of the little bells and whistles were beta versions that Oren had "improved" and while they might have been useful to someone adept with computers and program language, there were often burps and hiccups that stymied the average user. Screen freezes were a particular irritant. The hours he'd spent on the phone being walked through a fix or waiting around the cluttered lab/squat for Rickles to edit or rewrite code was analogous to junky downtime, waiting on my man, as Lou Reed so aptly put it. And of course the familiarity built through that relationship obligated him to endure the unburdening of Oren's paranoia or self-justification or just plain everyday vituperation in scaling the hierarchy of where one stood in the poetry world and how that was just or unjust, but mostly the latter.

The latest email from O. Rickles, as he liked to sign himself, was puzzling in its complete *voltafaccia*. He'd listened to Oren's rant, raving against Mitchell Tjantor and his stuck-up poetry crowd not more than a month past. How they were all predators, literary vampires befriending promising young writers and stealing their ideas and occasionally their souls. "Mitch Tjantor is an energy sink, a black hole, you get within his event horizon and you're dead, he'll suck all the poetry out of you." were words he'd heard spoken more than once.

Adding insult to injury, Mitch Tjantor was also involved in the race to develop an AI program to write poetry from input of all of world literature and regurgitate it in any form, from sonnet to haiku. A clear incursion into his turf as Oren saw it. Tjantor was calling what he was doing synthetic poetry, *synpo*, produced by an algorithm known as,

ominously to Oren's sensibilities, the "loom" that would allow users to add their pithy poems to social media walls as graphically enhanced placards and join the noxious parade of unoriginal superficiality with the posting their own vacuous and innocuous poetry memes.

It had to be the money because now, according to the email, Tjantor was a "terrific guy" for having invited him to join in a start-up with a Silicon Valley cyber venture capitalist that would develop and market his own AI poetry generator. Gone as if it never existed was the absolute disgust for "vulture capitalist and upstarts" Rickles had so often railed against. Now the partnership had the potential of being another "Woz and Steve" collaboration. Oren did voice his reservations about the name of the company but it was pointed out that *ORickles Poetry* was too close to an existing brand and would likely entail lawsuits that their fledgling project could ill afford. So they had settle for using the initials of Tjantor's name, calling their enterprise *MT Poetics*, and that, from whatever angle it was viewed, summed up the venture precisely. Rickles had signed off the email with "Looks like I might have hit the jackpot. A real jackpot that'll make the Pillsbury Prize look like pocket change." Even among so-called friends, envy lies dormant in its own little unconscious niche of resentment just beneath the surface, coming to life in the event of anyone else's success or good fortune.

**The buildings on the frontage road drifted past** the bus window, brick engaged in possibility. Does anyone ever consider that there is a dreary side to being a writer? That it involves paperwork should come as no surprise. Sheer volumes, actual or virtual sheaf, not only to be edited but ordered, processed, that has nothing to do with creativity, entailing an endless shuffling of words, phrases, like the alphabet tiles of a pocket puzzle. Noun? Verb? Extra-grammatical relations? All the seemingly endless prospects to be compared and contrasted through the incessant drudge of formulation. And then there are the questionnaires.

It was one of those chores he always put off, but the bus ride had provided him with ample time and, as the result of his recent dissipation, he hadn't any expectations of fireworks from the low spark of his neuronal circuits. Overcoming a singular ambivalence, he'd sucked it up, dutifully filling in the blanks of the questionnaire from *APIS (Advanced Poetry Interactive Seminars)*, yet another load of bull, a scam that promised something from nothing. He'd been asked the same questions so many times, more so since the Pillsbury, as if being awarded the prize somehow

confirmed that he knew, at the very least, the secret answer to the question, *What is poetry?*

And, as always, he answered that question differently each time.

*Poetry is all about a weaving of sense and sound into a composition that is exterior and interior in nuanced relationship and provides a breadth and depth (bandwidth if you wish) not available with linear rationale. Thus the poem is multi-sourced and multi-voiced.*

It was another of Nora's referrals and he had to ask himself why he shouldn't at least be getting paid cash money if he was going to prostitute himself. Not the empty promise of poetry pie-in-the-sky assurances that his participation in the survey would bring paying clients for his services as a mentor, teacher, and on-call poetry tart. Not that he was averse to self-promotion, and there was a vague similarity to that of dashing off publishers blurbs for the backs of books. In those instances, at least he was putting out for friends and people he liked.

Yet one more boilerplate question to be checked off: *What is it like to be a poet?*

*Being a poet is like being the triangle player in a large symphony orchestra. Come in too early or too late and no one will hear you no matter how hard you bang on your instrument. Come in at the right time and you will be heard as tantalizingly ephemeral, but you will be heard.*

Then they want to get personal. *Why are you a poet?*

*One of the reasons I am a poet is that I realize there is such a thing as the inexpressible and so I am challenged to discover some formula to decipher it. As a poet I bounce my words off the cultural landscape to hear their resonance, their echo. George Steiner has said, "All signals we emit are potentially resonant with values and intensities beyond those of bare information."*

*How do you go about writing poetry?*

It didn't matter what he answered, someone was bound to take issue with what he said.

*Writing poetry is more like a dance, it's a series of gestures, albeit linguistic gestures, and movements, to its own music, and in this flow the mimetic arises, and the sequence of these actions signify, never as an object, always as a verb, and becomes, like myth, the thing said.*

Asked the same question at another time and place, he would undoubtedly have come up with something different, even contradictory.

*There is a matter of elongation, a stretching of meaning and sound to move from one level to another and once that is reached another step has been taken as all things now and forever are in the past. The delight is in the opposition of meaning and sound*

as in homonyms but in this case the multi-syllabication allows syntax to enter the picture and force the subject away from meaning into action.

If he could put his finger on it, it probably wasn't poetry.

*What advice would you give a beginning poet?*

Questions like that brought out his cynical side, not that it was ever all that well hidden in the first place.

*Find something else to do. If you must and enjoy writing poetry, keep it to yourself or share it with a few like-minded friends. Once you consider reaching a larger audience and begin to think in terms of "a public," you have left the real world behind and are tempting fate. As a poet it is helpful to assume that except for yourself every poet writing today is writing crap.*

Something Bob Kaufman once told him, or maybe he'd read it in the obituary where the "black Rimbaud" was quoted as saying "I wish to be forgotten" and realizing that such a proclamation was nothing if not memorable, as well as slyly echoing Pushkin's last words, "Try to be forgotten." Sound advice no matter who spoke it. But, all the same, wishing or trying to be "forgotten" was entirely different from being "forgettable."

*The poem comes before the commentary. The primary text is first, not only temporally. It is not a pretext for subsequent exegetic or metaphoric treatment. Its priority is one of essence, of ontological need and self-sufficiency. The poem embodies and bodies forth through singular enactment its own reason for being. The poem is. Commentary simply signifies.*

He could ask himself *Why do I write?* There were so many reasons, and not one said it all.

**Unlike poetry, sometimes what is said** in the heat of the moment has immediate and direct repercussions. He'd said something to Mac that night. She'd thrown her drink in his face. All he remembered was that it was harsh, unpleasant, demeaning in that he'd used a body part to belittle her. He tried to not to think about it but he couldn't forget, another instance of his failure as a human being. It wasn't the pain so much, but the memory, and with that memory the inevitable loss of balance and deflation, of punctured self-esteem. Pride goeth before the fall. He continued to experience it, battered ego, bruised body. And he now understood why they were called "flashbacks." He literally inhabited the original time space continuum of that evening whenever he conjured up the moment of his smug near-fatal arrogance. Answering "*why, was it your turn?*" resulted in a fist smashing his face. On reflection, maybe whatever he'd replied to "*you can't treat a woman like that*" would have resulted in the same response. The physical immediacy of the recall was always



accompanied by an audible moan or whimper. He'd caught a glimpse of the woman seated across the aisle from him on the bus looking up in alarm as the strangled groan escaped his lips.

The memory came flooding back. He'd come out of an anesthetized fog to an assortment of pale blue surgical masks and intent stares reading his vitals until they were satisfied that he could make some sense of himself. Then they checked the monitors to determine if the machines agreed. They'd rolled the gurney out into the hallway and added him to the non-life-threatening-but-requiring-immediate-surgery queue. He wasn't first in line. His face throbbed with pulsing blood, not particularly painful considering the morphine drip. A collection of clear IV bags with tubes trailing out of them and into him dangled from a stainless steel pole rack accompanying his gurney. The dark crimson one he'd assumed was blood. His left leg was strapped in some kind of brace or splint and felt like it might no longer belong to him. He'd gazed up at the fluorescent ceiling panels not really seeing them. The nurses and interns navigating the stark corridors were made up like pirates and superheroes, butterflies and fairies, a few dark humored zombies and Frankenstein or Groucho Marx didn't really seem all that out of place.

Chemical smells of his stay in the hospital were still lodged in his olfactory memory but the sequence of events leading to his regaining consciousness in the back of the ambulance remained disjointed and fleeting. The patrolman wanted a statement, a description of his attackers, and it had taken him a few beats to comprehend what he was being asked. He'd answered with a grin. It was about all he could muster. No matter, there were witnesses, and the promise of a follow up investigation.

Wendy, still wearing her ladybug antennae, had seemed on the verge of hysteria. At one point the staff had to ask her to leave the emergency room reception area. She'd clung to the gurney as they wheeled him in to the ER, her tearful apology not making any more sense than the situation in which he found himself. It wasn't until after Mike Reardon from Violent Crimes had come to interview him, wanting to know about the weapon and who had fired the shots that he began to slowly piece together the reason behind Wendy's frenzied distress, confirmed days later by her tearful confession. He didn't have much to tell Reardon, just that some guys, two or three of them, had attacked him in front of Giancarlo's. He couldn't remember any gunshots. He hadn't been hit by gunfire, just mostly beaten to a pulp. They'd found him curled up at the curb between two parked cars. Apparently he'd crawled there from out in front of the bar. He wouldn't forget Reardon's comment. "I didn't

realize that being a poet was such a dangerous occupation.” And he’d been too sedated to care if the detective was being sarcastic.

**There are certain individuals, not all of them writers**, who are ghouls in the perverse pleasure they take in passing on the news of an acquaintance’s illness or demise. Sympathy junkies, wild eyed with excitement in relating the details of a terminal illness or the last gasp of a friend in common. Or they altruistically offer insipid comfort, unctuous assistance, candied condolences just so they can say they are part of someone else’s tragedy, to seize that spark of drama missing from their lives in a kind of misapplied Munchausen Syndrome, in the belief that they could make claim to someone else’s suffering, pain.

He’d always hated the thought of ending up in a hospital. For one, they were too bright. Another, they were the source of some of the most virulent drug resistant bacteria in the world, and to make matters worse, laid up, confined to a bed, attached to vital signs monitors, there was no way to avoid visitors. Once word got out that he was in the hospital, the parade of the concerned, shocked, and disbelieving crowded the visiting hours for the short time he was laid up. They passed through, transparent and diaphanous, like phantoms in a house of mirrors.

It was maybe not so surprising as to who had *not* rushed to his side. Not Mac, who could be considered the instigator of the whole fracas, but maybe she was too embarrassed. Asking around after his release from the hospital he’d learned that she had decamped from the local scene and was rumored to be living in Tucson with a Literature Professor teaching at U of A. Nor did Grace deign to look in on him, and that had hurt. It puzzled him that he still felt an unfounded twinge of abandonment. There was no reason to, except maybe regret for what could have been.

Jerry Pawl had dropped in near the beginning of his stay when large doses of pain drugs had him in their warm and fuzzy grip. Jerry had sad news of his own. Sheila had entered a hospice and it was only a matter of time. Of course it was always “only a matter of time,” but this matter of time was measured not in years or months but weeks, days, hours. True to form, Jerry never asked what had happened to him, staying completely nonjudgmental and grounded in the present. From his practice Jerry was acquainted with someone in hospital administration and had promised to look into getting him signed up for medical services.

Michel Brazon was among his early visitors, too, seemingly more interested in the magical modernity of the monitoring devices, buzzed to a

crisp if the fine carbon particulates populating his aura were any indication. First he wanted to conduct business and complain that he had never received the poems from Jeremy Beljahr's manuscript as he had been promised for the next issue of his next-to-nonexistent magazine, *Ton Trou*. Then he wanted to play doctor, asking the most inane and irrelevant questions of a quasi-medical nature, the result of watching too many episodes of *Grey's Anatomy* or *House*. His prognosis had been, "Hey, look on the bright side, you'll be able to collect disability." And he'd added: "Think of all the pity pussy you'll be getting." There was that.

Stoddard Leary had sneaked in after visiting hours. It had taken him a while to notice his visitor as he seemed to have blended in with the pale green privacy curtain that surrounded the bed. A belch and the singularly sour odor of consumed alcohol pinpointed his presence. And, obvious from his expression, he was savoring the irony of the situation. "Well, well, it's come to this. How the mighty have fallen. Or been brought low, as the case may be. Someone disagree with your aesthetics or take umbrage to one of your critiques? I wouldn't be at all surprised. It's a nasty backstabbing dog-eat-dog existence, the world of literature is. My guess, being that you are a quasi-famous poet and all, is that you were probably fucking somebody's wife." And there it was, the bare naked truth only a drunk can provide.

Earlier that day, Dottie Krاندall had come by to leave the moist pucker of her lips on his forehead and her peculiar nutmeg musky scent on the bandages around his head she had touched tentatively with the tips of her long fingers, concern wrinkling her brow beneath the shag of randomly bleached bangs. She and Lynal were "taking a break" she'd announced with aching irony. On the plus side, she was looking at a teaching position at an arts college in upstate New York.

Nora White knew better than to scold. She had sought to cheer him up with news that his translation of Odile D'Esayous' *Personne* was on the short list for a PEN award. They both knew he should be a shoo-in but with Pauline Fayemus on the panel he didn't really stand a chance. However, short list was better than shit list, as he well knew, having been on a number of the latter.

Charlie Reyes, the look of preoccupied concern that seemed perpetually etched on his features, had driven down from Fairfield to see how he was doing and if he needed anything, bringing Clarissa and the twins' best regards. The Iron Hat crew had showed up en masse, crowding the small space around his bed, awkwardly and self-consciously mouthing

platitudes of those comfortable only around the smell of carbon arc and acetylene. And Meagan Twohy, on her way to an appointment with her oncologist. She had patted his hand and left him with the pitying look of a parent who finally has to let go of their prodigal.

Hollow fever rimmed red eyes, sunken cheeks, raw cracked liver lips set in cold oatmeal pallor, Andy Porter looked like death warmed over. Reluctant to talk about why his trip to Shanghai had gone horribly and mysteriously wrong, and how that had resulted in upending the relationship with his girlfriend, he was hurting and taking anything and everything to ease the pain. He'd been tempted to tell him to pull up a bedpan and join him.

Jim Shue had come by in a show of concern but also to brag that his documentary on Kerouac was being considered for an award at the Azusa Film Festival. Sarah Dunn, Paul Ruiz, Diane McCracken, out of morbid curiosity more than anything else. Harry Croft casually inquiring about his archives and seeming disappointed when he was informed that the injuries were not life threatening. With Ricardo Rosario, the library custodian and poet from El Salvador, he'd exchanged customary greetings.

"Carlos."

"Ricky."

"What happen to you?"

"Aw, I zigged when I shoulda zagged."

"Even with all my year in this country I will never fully understand El Norte idiomatic expressions."

"How did you hear about my being in the hospital?"

"From my uncle, Javier Santario."

"Why is that name familiar?"

"He wrote the critical biography on William Carlos Williams as a Latin American author."

"Right, right. When is that gonna get translated into English?"

"Maybe never. It is not a popular point of view in Anglo American literary circles."

"How did he find out about my being in the hospital down in El Salvador?"

"If he still live in San Salvador, he would have been kill by now as a Marxista. Now he live in Daly City. He work on the custodial staff here at the hospital."

Cunt Cap Kelly, the cabbie, checked in, claiming he had as a regular client an old Chinese gent who didn't trust ambulances. Kelly alleged that

word on the street was his mugging was a case of mistaken identity. Some dispute that had started inside Ginacarlo's and spilled out onto the street and they took it out on the first guy they saw. "Random violence," Cunt Cap had offered, "or maybe gang related since someone did fire off some rounds. Whoever started shooting chased off your attackers. Turns out two of the guys were off duty Hayward cops. Good luck getting any justice out of that one."

Jake and Polly had also come by to look in on him, thankfully without their papier-mâché materials though he thought he caught Polly assessing the dimensions of his hospital space with a practiced once over, pinpointing where she might begin her environmental collage. Jake, like Brazon, wide eyed, fascinated by the plastic machinery and medical accessories, fingering the translucent tubing, had whispered repeatedly "robot. . .robot" while Polly explained, as she called it, the "good new bad new."

He'd read about their stroke of luck from an article in the daily. The Museum of Modern Art was acquiring their apartment as an installation space.

"They take entire, wall, ceiling, everything, piece by piece. Make at MOMA so patron can walk through. Pay much like lotto." But she hadn't sounded too happy about it. "Don't get me, but maybe all money wrong, leave bad taste. Build park garage in place old apartment. This part of deal. Irony, no? Parking now for museum. Success, yes?" She'd said it wistfully, like she didn't believe it herself, arm crooked, fingers splayed as if holding a cigarette, eyes narrowed to prevent the imaginary smoke from making them water. "Now no place stay except motel, not place for make art."

"Pinhole," Jake stated.

"Yes, as Jake say, you know where is this Pinhole?"

He didn't have a clue what they were talking about and it wasn't just the pain drugs.

"Industry zone far." Polly had pointed with her pipe cleaner arm in an assumed direction. "They find place, old machine factory, cement, like Socialist house in old country, very cold. No BART. No magic like Frisco. We go there live. No choose. Jake now sell to gallery on Fishman Wharf, famous junk artist make very good price."

"Not junk artist," Jake interjected, "Artist. Make junk into gold. *Alchemist*. Artist. Almost same word." He held up two fingers and brought them together. "Transform!" he said with a delight that brightened the shape of his face. "But now," with a sigh and appropriate gravity, "make only for sell. Like *meščanska*, bourgeois."

“Mmmm,” Polly had murmured. “Money make life complicate.” And with that Dietrich shrug, “Who can know. Fate.”

He had a memory of Irma and Philippe standing at the foot of the bed like stern concerned parents dressed as if they had been called away from the Symphony Season opening gala.

Then there were the tearful weeping ones who were deeply affected by his condition. Angela and Samantha one particular very painfully emotional day. Sam had burst out crying when she saw him. And Angie, expressing her maternal concern though he could see that she was having trouble controlling her composure. They had come down to the city for a dance recital by some of Sam’s friends and had been getting ready to return home when they learned that he was in the hospital. To her kind offer to have him come up to Elk to live with them while he recuperated, he’d replied “I’m afraid if I leave the city for too long, I’ll never return.”

Courtney and David, though mostly Courtney by herself, insisting that he stay with them until he was able to get about on his own. He hadn’t thought it the best of ideas, considering their history, but then what choice did he have? It was either Courtney’s sofa bed or some storefront doorway. She wasn’t going to take no for an answer.

And tearful distraught Wendy, visiting daily to finally work up the courage to tell him, confessing that it was her gun and that she’d meant to shoot him.

**The biggest surprise was that Roy Banks**, the jazz pianist, had dropped in to check on him. They had become better acquainted after he’d made a habit of swinging by the piano wine bar adjacent to the cable car turntable at the foot of Powell where Roy held forth for the tourist trade. He had been at loose ends that summer. The poet adrift, it had been his season in hell. Those years of stability as Angie’s roommate had mellowed the intensity of his social hustle. To suddenly have all that taken away, his survival reflexes rusty, mechanical in a digital age. At least he wasn’t walking a lobster on a ribbon like Gerard de Nerval. Some might have preferred a lobster rather than the vehemence of his desperation. But Roy was always good for some Monk on the keyboard and the occasional *petite vin rouge* on the house.

Over drinks after work one night at Bud’s they had seriously parsed the greats of jazz, ranked their virtuosity, influences, origins, innovations, sublimity, cultural significance, and so on, from Kid Ory to Herbie Hancock. Roy had reel to reel recordings of some loft performances from the 70’s and unreleased sessions by Albert Ayler, and Sonny Red that he

wanted him to hear. It was around midnight and he hadn't been paying much attention to where they were going since Roy was driving, actually steering with one hand and expressively testifying with the other. His eagerness to insert his own complimentary points had blinkered him.

The blue and red flashing lights ahead had prompted Roy to make a quick detour and steer down a few back streets. They re-entered the boulevard some blocks from the police action, pausing to let an empty 19Polk trundle past. The next thing he knew they were parking in a fog shrouded bayside neighborhood and clambering up the steps to a classic old Italianate cottage that had been partitioned off into several apartments. Inside the door there was the subtle odor of dust and decay, the ravages of oxidization, no doubt emanating from the wall of floor to ceiling shelves jammed with record sleeves and musty books. An electric keyboard was placed off to one side of the tiny living room that also contained a loveseat couch, a battered armchair rocker, and a coffee table neatly stacked with sheet music.

"I don't want you to get the wrong idea, but this place is usually a mess," Roy had called out from the bright lit kitchen. The kitchen was tiny as well, a small white four burner gas stove next to an ancient white refrigerator. A small half table was pushed up to one wall beneath a narrow sash curtained window along with two white chairs. Yellowing linoleum of indistinct pattern covered the floor. Roy had produced a couple of short water glasses and a bottle of wine. "But my oldest daughter Ayisha lives in the neighborhood and comes over a couple times a week to straighten up and spy on me." He smiled holding out the glass of dark red. "Zinfandel, from some brothers up in the Sonoma Valley. Anyway, it started with her offering to do my laundry, and I have to say, I took the bait. Now, it's 'where you been out so late' and things of that nature. I'm a grown man and she thinks she can watch over me like I was a child!"

Taking the bottle back to the living room, he'd set it on the coffee table and gone to the shelves that held the LP's at the center of which were his turntable, amplifier, and ancient reel to reel tape player. "This is what I wanted you to hear," holding up the square tape box and then expertly spooling it onto an empty reel, "Cat had a loft down on 12<sup>th</sup> and C in the East Village. German cat, Fritz or Deidre, some shit, bass player Cecil told me about. Had a baby grand and cats would always be falling by because Ray Ray, the Puerto Rican connection dealt from a pad a couple doors down." He powered up the amplifier and cued the tape. "I had an old portable Teac that I toted around with me if I was going

to do a rehearsal or a jam. So I set up thinking it was just going to be me and the bass player. Then a drummer showed up and I said 'hey man, where I know you from?' Turns out it's Billy Higgins and I caught him playing with Archie Shepp in a club one time so I knew he had chops. And I'm thinking, now we're gonna cook and about then this young white dude wanders through, by the shape of his tote I figure he's a sax man, turns out soprano. Know what his name was? Steve Lacy. Today you know that name. Back then he was just starting out. Now the first thing you going to hear is me intro the tune and then the opening bars of *Tempus Fugue It*. Well, man, you would have thought I had dinosaur shit on my shoe!" From the speakers the piano stopped followed by nervous laughter, and a voice asking incredulously, "Bud Powell?"

Roy had got a good laugh out of that, and they'd spent the wee hours of the morning listening to tapes and LP's. Roy had a jazz scholar's collection of the obscure and the unknown and it was with obvious delight that he shared his treasures with someone who could appreciate them, from Doc Cheatham and Jack Purvis to Anthony Braxton and Henry Threadgill. At one point, after Roy had brought out the port, he also produced a joint. "Care for some ganja?"

"Naw. Man, I'm ok, I don't smoke dope."

"Ah," Roy had said with a knowing nod, "You are a white man after all."

That did not stop them from strutting around the coffee table to *Fables Of Faubus* from bootleg tapes of the Mingus Paris Concert. It was an ass wagging high stepping finger waving poke in the eye parody of *Pomp And Circumstance* aimed at segregationist Orval Faubus and the Jim Crow apartheid South, and one that they had taken great pleasure in enacting with all the obscene booty shaking they could muster. When Roy fired up the keyboard and played him some of his own compositions, he'd been duly impressed.

Roy had assembled an old Army cot and provided a pillow and blankets. "You're welcome to crash here as long as you want, my friend," he'd offered before they turned in, by then the dark window edges easing to a gray transparency.

He'd been awakened later that afternoon by the ringing phone. Roy answered it in the kitchen. "Hi honey" and then silence as the person on the other end spoke, interrupted only occasionally by "But, honey," "It's my life," "I don't care what they said, they can mind their own damn business," and "He's a friend of mine," but mostly the caller did the talking.



Over coffee Roy had explained that the call was from his daughter, Ayisha, who had heard from a neighbor complaining about the loud music and carrying on coming from the apartment. “Nothing to worry about.”

He’d started to barbeque a rack of ribs, and pointing out the open kitchen door to the small kettle grill on the landing to the steps down to the tiny backyard, “You’re in for a real treat. The sauce is an old family recipe from down home.” Down home was some place he’d never heard of in Texas. The red wine that accompanied the meat was a pinot noir from Chile. Roy hadn’t lied. The sauce charred sweet with a piquant aftertaste, and along with the black-eyed peas and greens it was one of the best home cooked meals he’d enjoyed in a month of Sundays.

They had opened an after dinner bottle of red and were listening to and talking over a modal free jazz soundscape that Roy called, somewhat derisively, “LA Jazz”, essentially studio jazz, by musicians the likes of Oliver Lake, Don Byron, Wallace Roney and Ron Blake. Roy was explaining that it was all mood music, well played mood music certainly, but all the same it lacked the edge and originality of golden age bebop so that the lesson, that out of chaos came order was lost on the current crop of jazz musicians for whom chaos emerged from more chaos, and so they hadn’t heard the front door open.

Framed in the doorway to the kitchen a large black woman in an eye shocking tropical print full length dashiki with matching head scarf, scowling and pointing her finger at him, repeated something he finally understood to be “Get out, white devil!” It was stated with enough authority to be commanding. “Gather up your narrow white ass and be gone! Stop stealing the souls of our people!” He didn’t think that they were actually gold chicken wishbones she was waving at him with the kind of voodoo gesticulation aimed at banishing him and whatever bad white juju he might have tracked in and about his person. That led to the confrontation between father and daughter during which Roy called his daughter an ignorant superstitious brown medicine ball among other things. Or that was the way he remembered it. While they screamed their insults at each other, he’d donned his jacket and let himself out. No need to be the occasion for that kind of grief in family when they could find it perfectly well without any help from him.

The shadows in the hood had begun to lengthen but the radiant heat from sidewalk and asphalt kept things to a noticeable simmer. He’d made his way to the end of the block and the corner bodega where a number of people had congregated. He was looking for a main drag and

the bus line. He had a change of clothes on the boat at Mission Bay, and he could take a shower. He'd become gradually aware that something was amiss by the attention he was getting from passersby and in particular from the now mostly agitated young men on the corner. It was an "oh shit" moment that was clear. Even now he recalled the visceral sink in the pit of his gut.

He'd accepted that he would be toyed with. They were bored and he represented the source of their frustration and anger. He was shoulder bumped as he tried to enter the store with the lotto and booze ads plastered on the iron grilled plywood boarded windows. He'd apologized but the hostility persisted. Someone, a large youngster, he remembered, had blocked access to the door. He turned and ran into a chest towering over him. Either he was shrinking or he'd stumbled onto a hybrid species, *homo bigmofo*. In a situation like that the only solution was to piss your pants, or shit, or both. Fear won out and he'd starting shaking. That was apparently the result those crowding around had desired. The rest was a cacophonous blur of insults and spit invectives which found him at a loss for words. Just as he'd become aware that the encircling gauntlet was about to escalate into something physical, he heard his name called.

"Mr. Wendt?"

Coralene Purlee, the Richmond Branch no-nonsense librarian, had just exited the bodega wearing her signature light brown pants suit with the gold mule pin on the lapel, holding a brown paper bag by the neck, and which he later learned was a fifth of Stoly. She had given his tormentors the censorious glare that he'd seen her use on rambunctious students in the library before: if you can't keep your voices down, you will have to leave. It worked every time.

"Remember that time your daughter cast a voodoo spell on me with her gold plated chicken bones and I almost got my ass stomped down on the corner?" he'd asked his old friend seated by the hospital bed. "If it hadn't been for Coralene Purlee. . . ."

Roy, head bowed in mirth, had replied with a throaty chuckle. "Hee-hee, you sure lead a charmed life, Carl."

"I'm still trying to figure out which one was scarier."

"Appreciate the irony of the situation, my man," the jazz musician had offered sagely, "not many get to choose between an ass-kicking and an ass licking. Yet here you are laid up like you lost the coin toss."

Whenever he thought back to that night with the lusty librarian, not in the habit of hooking up with a woman that close to his own age, the word "formidable" came to mind.

The hospital rep from accounting had returned his application for medical services. “You won’t need this,” she told him, “You might not think that it’s your lucky day, but someone just paid your hospital bill for you.” When he asked who it was, she’d replied that it was an artist’s non-profit organization, “Artist Rescue.” He’d never heard of it, though it did have a familiar ring, like the name of a Romanian poet.

When Courtney wheelchaired him to the sliding glass doors at the hospital’s entrance upon his discharge, the nurse seeing him out had said, “You may experience headaches for a while.” Wasn’t that what the pills were for?

*There are thousands upon thousands of unknown works of genius out there by totally unrecognized unheard of obscure geniuses no one will ever know. And just thinking about them and who they actually are takes you into a Bohr-Hayes library universe of books that you can’t even begin to read and pass judgment on so that in such speculation lies madness, hell for the pedant.*

He’d looked up from his laptop as the bus slowed for the off ramp and made a left to cross the overpass into Cloverdale. He’d added that bit to the growing number of entries to *Never Say Die; A Bohr-Hayes Quantum Compendium of Literary Miscellany*, the tentative title of a piece he was composing for *Science Forum*, consisting of aphorisms and sound bites culled from his meditations on the works of Nils Bohr and Isaac Hayes. Nora had steered him to the science magazine from the same publisher of *Art Forum* and *Book Forum*, essentially a venue for science fact and speculation with a literary slant.

Although the concept had been prompted by the dialogues made popular in the early nineteenth century by Walter Savage Landor, *NSD*, as he abbreviated it, had evolved into a compendium of ruminations on poets and poetry filtered through two quite opposite cultural poles, a Danish physicist and an American soul singer.

For instance, a Bohr-Hayes hypothesis concluded that “*What goes up usually employs a stairway; what comes down would prefer one.*” And of course there was the Bohr-Hayes theory of the hourglass universe, also known as the *Shaft*, and how that led to the idea that “*a poem is a spiral sequence which turns ceaselessly without ever returning completely to its beginning.*” And as Bohr or Hayes repeatedly pointed out: “*Our efforts to map the subjective self on a plane of objectivity as the object self never returns to the same point.*”

As another example, according to the *Bohr-Hayes Theory of Real Poetry*, “*all experience makes its appearance within the frame of points of view and forms of perception. The relative prominence accorded various aspects of poetry depends upon*

*the nature of the matter under consideration. Occasionally the objectivity of physical observation becomes particularly suited to emphasize the subjective character of experience.*” Furthermore, “No poem can sustain itself in its own right for the reason that difference is only one complimentary aspect of its being—the other aspect requires participation in the sameness of the cosmic order. All differentiated poems in poetry require, in theory and in fact, supplementation by other poems.” That last was in refutation of the ubiquitous standalone fallacy of the individuality of the poem.

“Poetry is like a gigantic underground mushroom and each spore is a self-generating poem,” was another Bohr-Hayes maxim. As was “Meaning is created in the unraveling.” Also, “Thinking has turned into a way of writing.” Following that premise was the idea that “A sentence is only a linear progression after it has been written.” And “What is written in the present can only be read in the future.”

Then there was the Bohr-Hayes discursive word string theory: “Words give off vibrations like the strings of theory, resonate with assonance and consonance in harmony and dissonance, their semantic tar to be emulsified by recombination in novel attitudes of pictorial placements in mental frames. If mental energy can be delineated in the way light through a prism is, can it be possible that they are complimentary in that light energy can affect mental energy (sunny day, etc) and although mental energy cannot globally affect light energy somatically, can’t a cheerful mood cancel the effects of a gloomy day?”

A Bohr-Hayes theory of creativity also postulated the *Sisyphus Syndrome* in which “the rock gets bigger, heavier, and slipperier as you near the summit.” Its compliment was the *Syphilis Syndrome* in which “your genius goes unnoticed as you spiral out of control.” There was also the Bohr-Hayes critique: “Your poetry is crazy, just not crazy enough.”

Finally there was the Bohr-Hayes refutation: “That’s like saying the moon is made of green cheese—we have no way of knowing what kind of cheese the moon is made of!”

**Loafer out of indolence, trifler**, unqualified to hold any opinion, one way or the other. “What do I think?” he answered his imaginary interrogator, “Don’t ask me that. Next to the question of whether or not I have an opinion, nothing can be of less interest to anyone than what I think of anything. To have an opinion is both too much and too little. It presupposes a security and wellbeing of existence akin to having a wife and children.” The closest he’d come to domesticity, not counting the years with Sheila, and she’d never wanted children, possessed of the same creative selfishness as he, was when he boarded with Angie and occasionally

minded Samantha. He was damned by his eccentric muse to live as a refugee, an outcast, a lonely onanist at the fringe of politesse.

Born as the efforts of two, he mused, in the end, I am only one. I never wanted that responsibility, caught up in my own selfishness, the object of my desire a confirmation of being purposeful yet unique. Maybe I never stopped being a twelve year old, convinced of my personal omnipotence, god-like in my own estimation, implacable in the defiance of my mortality. And how rude and self-righteous in context then was Kerouac's repeated insistence that "we're all going to die" to lay bare everyone's naked denial. That, above all, is what I'm certain pissed people off and turned the East Coast intelligentsia against him, that immortality is an illusion. No one wants to hear that. Besides, if I were immortal the impulse to deny the inevitable would be unnecessary. It is the denial of my mortality that makes me alive to possibility.

He reached into the satchel and retrieved the slim volume of Ian Blake's poems, *Ode To Sunset*, with its depiction of a glaring bright orb sinking into the boiling sea, if for nothing else than to change the tenor of his thoughts, flipping open to a random page. But perhaps it wasn't all that random. He'd been to that page on previous occasions.

### ***Ode To Sunset***

*for Carl Wendt*

*Death cruised by earlier than you thought  
a friend of misery no kin to joy and you waved  
at its disappearing into the distance no matter  
what you think you saw you smelled the ash  
mud sulfur and closing your eyes felt its  
foot pressing against your heart hand gripping  
your throat but didn't cry out didn't fight  
back waited wait still and waking with a start  
on your death day counting the years as if  
they were seconds you've experienced much  
received little in return this morning commanded  
by an inner voice you started to inventory  
everything you ever thought significant or  
otherwise and yet to friends you still know  
and those you say you don't know are inclined  
to leave something even if they'll forget all  
about you because they undoubtedly will forget*

*as they've already forgotten the wind and  
the rain and sun their hands their eyes ears  
and the taste of pizza and the color of wine  
the secret of the four seasons a sunset to  
render them so no less as you shiver in silence  
and flee on the road to tomorrow a time passed  
of blue memories and still-born schemes ambitions  
the color of sunsets to accompany your worst  
nightmares time to stop and let go of your earthly  
desires yet you want to pass something on to  
those who have given you so much to those who  
never refused you to those who always held out  
a hand to offer help and to those who loved you  
you wish peace and not the memory of a guttering  
candle dimming bit by bit a scorch that fades  
over time but the certainty of new leaves unfurling*

He stared out at the seamless expanse of blue. There had to be a crack in it somewhere, a fissure that signaled the coming apart of his world.

**“For truth consists of nothing else** than the self-activity of personal appropriation,” Kierkegaard whispered in his ear. This was the poetry world, after all, not the real world. In this world, language was used to signify reality. Yet this was the world he’d inhabited most of his adult life. What began as a romantic fantasy had become an undeviating obsession. Practically all his waking consciousness was taken up with poetry and poets. Poetics, if there were such a thing, was the fabric of his reality, woven during the day and unraveled at night.

Why does it matter, he mused, that some poets write poems like an iron clad argument when there is no need for argument, no argument at all. It’s only language, after all, a house of cards at best.

Pity writers, especially poets, all they know is language. It’s as if Archimedes had said “give me a sentence and I will move the world.” That feathered offspring of great lizards whose domain they covet has given them a sequence of sounds upon which to develop their own flights of fancy.

Language exhibits many properties of the autonomous agent, co-evolution, community, and creates its own lexical atmosphere, moving toward greater complexity while allowing for a superior ability to conceive

as well as understand. A good poem is revelatory as it steps into the adjacent possible.

It's important to have the voice of speaking in poetry as well as the voice of intellect, and those seeking originality will appreciate folk speak for its oracular potential, the riddle that language unfolds. The mind speaking takes an unknown path.

Language, that ingrained attribute, conspires against the body in its breakaway republic of imagination. It works like light to express the shape of the ineffable.

Niche determining, language is a metaphoric process in which the comfort of perfected stasis tries to maintain balance in the face of unexpected revelation at the turn of a phrase, tricking order out of chaos, and chasing information along the thermodynamic gradient. Truly mutable, language traces the evolution of the psyche.

A poet's medium is this most common of attributes. Everyone uses language every day. Poets do what is obvious: they deal in the mysteries of the self-evident. Poems occupy the event horizon to the black hole of meaninglessness.

**When I turned fifty, I declared** that the best years of my life were yet to come. Subsequently when friends and acquaintances also reached the half-century mark, I made a similar assertion to them. Whatever prompted me to make that claim then, I see now that much of it was bluster, a whistling in the dark. The grim assessment of my final days nearing, I had to make peace with the mortality I so frequently denied. But I did also believe that better years awaited me. I had mellowed, and the fierce ambitions, if not fulfilled, were put in quieter perspective—some were foolish, some misguided, and a few were still in reach of a determined patience. What I could not have realized was how quickly the decade between then and now would pass. Those years are a blur. Memories, much more tenuous than they ever were, blend into an indistinguishable tangle of emotions, brief spikes above or below a median line I have tried so hard to walk. This last decade is one in which I resolved to live with a thoughtfulness and equanimity that hardly characterizes the previous five sets of ten. But there is no escaping the random turmoil that lurks around every corner, there's no use in treading lightly because those soft footsteps echo with heart stopping thuds in the hallways of history, as does each stubbed toe register a painful significance. To come to terms with these realizations is perhaps the consequence of my original misconception, that among these later years would be some

of the sweetest if for nothing else than their ripeness, the wonderful depth of their maturity. I should have considered *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Or, the more you struggled the deeper the hole you've dug for yourself gets.

**“Mind is the idea of body”** as Spinoza said, a poetical thinking that proceeds by emotional as well as logical stages to achieve a quasi-intellectual end by impressionistic or inconsequential means.

I recognize myself in the reified product of my accumulated jottings, re-appropriating and transforming that reflection into the transparent medium of self-expression. All the while cognizant that the act of writing seeds the bed with wild indiscriminate irony, and that the longer the tradition of writing endures, the heavier the ironic undergrowth becomes.

I have always been concerned with not only what words mean but how they mean. In my younger days, decades ago, I wanted to acquire the trappings of an entertainer, rock star, stand-up comic, even a scientist in an effort to appeal to the popular imagination. In the guise of academic analysis, I was among those who took language to task by dissecting, deconstructing, recombining, psychoanalyzing, personalizing, digitizing, fractalizing, and recycling it.

What I learned was that the degree of difficulty of any work of poetry distances it from entertainment and increases its atomic weight as it inches toward the eternal—in this case by Planck lengths. The poem is no longer a message but an utterance expressing doubt, curiosity, and tentative optimism.

Sometimes a poem is just idiot bravado. On the other hand, if I didn't write for myself, I would have a doubtful audience.

Poets are consumed by their successors in a tidal wave of relentless curiosity, blind to the real world, myopic at best, from all that introspection. In the so-called literary world, mental midgets and MFA pods lacking any sense of angst or verbal imagination control the jungle drums. I can't get published on the East Coast because I'm too West Coast and I can't get published on the West Coast because I'm too New York.

Dick Granahan once advised, “There are three things you should not be if you want to get published these days: heterosexual, male, and intelligible.” It's like Amy Lowell said, “In poetry circles, there are rings of intrigue.” Poetry coats its victims in honey before delivering them to the ant hill.

The first enemy of poetry is meaning. I have spent my whole life constructing meaningless poems. “Go for broke” has been my maxim. I



don't refute my contemporaries. I merely put gloves on when I have to deal with them. Those who have breathed the air of my writing know that it is a rarified if not sometimes excruciating experience. Poetry as I understand and live it means seeking out everything strange and questionable. Is it no wonder that the greatest threat to American literature is the English major?

In the face of acute self-consciousness, deserted by this layer of deviant illusion, I suspect all praise as false and believe all criticism to be irrevocably true, perfectly describing what I am. I question every good intention, jump at every shadow. Cautious, I shrink from the world I once wished to captivate.

And in the background, the cosmos, always a lover of irony, laughs up its sleeve.

**He closed his eyes**, heaved a great sigh, and settled back to view the abstract expressionist slide show. It was almost guaranteed to put him to sleep.

So dozing he dreamt that he'd awakened from a dream. A white horse was lying on its side in the sand. It had only one wing and was trying to rise, but was unable to. The sun was yelling, "Hey! Wake up! Don't be so rude as to snooze in my presence. You're only the second, no, make that the third poet I've chosen to talk to. So pay attention!"

"*Pay Attention*, wasn't that the title of my first book?"

"Right, now is the time to put that into practice. You think I've got all day?"

"Sorry, I stayed up late last night talking with Patti."

"The times I woke up Mayakovsky and O'Hara, they were a little more appreciative. Anyway, I wanted to tell you your poetry sucks. Sorry that's just the way I am—unfiltered through the niceties of rejection, so consider this your burn notice. I've seen a lot of poetry over the last couple of epochs and I have to say that yours has to be among the worst. The best I can say about you is that you're different. I've also heard it said that you're crazy but that's generally been from those who have been lobotomized by Anglo hegemony. The *real* crazy poets, on the other hand, think you're a boring reactionary and a sellout. Not that you shouldn't sweat it, the heat on your credibility is bound to get hotter, and you'll pay hell for ignoring it. People are always criticizing your poetry, that it's too smart or too dumb, too superficial or too obscure, too light or too ponderous, that the stanzas are too long or too short. And because you don't publish every day, they say you're lazy. Or dead. Don't worry

about your lineage, poetic or otherwise, it's never been anything to brag about and now it's practically non-existent. Maybe you should reconsider trying to cast your pathetic poetic light on everything from sea to shining sea, on the jungle, on the tundra, on the city, on the farm, the mountains and valleys, and most of all, the frigid wastes of the human soul, now that you've come to the end of your days, so to speak. No one is ever going to read you. Not everyone can stomach your narcissism. It hurts their pride."

"Ok, Sun, why are you telling me all this?"

"Remember I'm keeping an eye on you. It's much easier for me to talk to you out here than it is in the city. I don't have to slide down between buildings to get your attention. But you should try looking at more than the toes of your shoes, rejecting everything, people, earth, sky, stars, as you do, ungraciously and with your inappropriate claims to genius. That too is your inclination, known on high, and you should give it up, you're not a track star from Mineola Prep. It's the road to hell if you continue, and I don't doubt that it will lead you there. If you're lucky we'll speak again when I return from the other side of the world. Go back to sleep now, Carl. I'm leaving this thought in that pointy little head of yours as my goodbye."

"No, please don't go just yet. I have so many more questions."

"No, go I must, they're calling me."

"Who are they?"

"You'll never know. They won't be calling you, that's for sure."

Darkly the sun began to set, and darkly he awoke.

**I have to regain my balance.** The prize money just makes me paranoid, like somehow it's contributing to my demise. It will be gone soon enough and all I'll have left to show for it is my paranoia.

I don't mind being called a charlatan but to actually believe that I am is unbearable. To think of myself as a poet, even today, is to invite scrutiny and ridicule. It implies a particular ungrateful exceptionalism to the group, the social organism to which I owe my survival and existence.

I need a private life undetermined by social conditions and conventions. As an eccentric, I am on the periphery of respectability, my social surrender less than willing. My antisocial behavior, hermetic, belongs to the tradition of the yogi, the ascetic, the beggar monk. Grow a beard to hide my features. Maybe I can be like one of those fringe guys, eccentrics who disparage the status quo, like Han-shan and Shi-wu.

A life learned in private becomes the public lesson and then codified is made into the correctness of daily intercourse. In society the self is subservient to the group which is dependent on this unity for survival, and eccentric behavior is either a threat or sacred or both.

The more private my life becomes, instances of social interaction are less likely to occur. What is sacrificed? A broader though maybe disturbing objective view for a narrow though maybe more satisfying subjective view?

I'm way past my use-by date, I know. I was a promising young poet once but I broke that promise while dusting it and it shattered into a thousand pieces. I can't anguish over what I haven't done. Oddly enough after all these years of doing what I do, I feel more self-assured in my attempts at what I do, failed as they are. Consistency is what I'm after I realize now, not the mercurial delusions of mental masturbation. I've reached a point in my writing where I feel confident in what I'm doing. It may be crap, but it is confident crap. And after all, if I'm seeking thrills, there's no thrill like that old thrill. I won't agonize over what I'm saying because I don't know what I'm going to say until I say it.

It's been many years since I came to the realization that my life's work is my life's work which has had practically no effect on how I feel about my life's work. I am still petty, competitive, envious, fearful, ambitious, and solitary. My monolithic selfishness is a monument to itself.

**The look of haughty defiance** that says yes I am. That had been a large part of his personality, but then there was always someone younger, handsomer, more defiant. He was brought out of his reverie by laughter and complaint. The young child who had given up trying to fit the ocean into a hole had taken to circumscribing shapes in the wet sand with a stick of driftwood and warning the young men of the group tossing a Frisbee around, "Don't mess with my circles!"

The discus transformed from a plastic pie plate and aerodynamically shaped to glide across distances to the clutches of the young and athletic and their dogs, was further evidence of the endless potential of possibility. Once the young women joined in, the sport spontaneously transformed into tackle Frisbee. And no one paid any mind to no stinking circles. He assumed the group belonged to the VW bus and the pickup truck with the camper shell he'd noticed in the parking lot to the beach access.

There was a reason American beer was served cold. It tasted like piss when it warmed. He popped another top and watched a cocoon of foam

slowly inch its way up through the hole. He washed down another pain pill.

One of the young women looked his way and waved tentatively. He raised his can in return. Still he wandered inward caught up in a labyrinth of self-appraisal. . . .

*I should have listened to Granahan and his ghost is reminding me. Once you're famous your life is pretty much over because you're owned by those who have recognized you for who you are, for what you do, made up a special room in their consciousness for you where you are an expected guest, and by inhabiting that elevated station in their collective esteem, you have stopped being a person, your own private person, and have become a public symbol, an abstraction, a sacred object to be sacrificed so that those who have invested their belief in you can collect their dividend. Like Orpheus you will be parceled out in communion, something you can't hope to survive. All that will remain of you is the grim mask of your skull from which will emanate the endless recitation of your exploits and accomplishments, your claims to fame, and which will be placed on a flowering apple bough to float downstream to the bottomless sea of forgetfulness. Read the fine print before you sign anything.*

And here I am. I have arrived. Doomed to perform tasks which are meaningless to those who came before me because each succeeding generation shames its ancestors without really meaning to. Everyone has decided unique ways of achieving their objectives and once locked into these particular rituals pay hell breaking with them though sometimes the divorce from redundancy is the work of an instinct for survival.

Organization is the key. Words, phrases stuck together in a plan as in a mnemonic device—you can imagine a cathedral or a hermit's hut, each straw as important as every shard of stained glass. The choice is between humility of self and glorification of the universal. Raw materials are refined by order.

There was a time when poems would come three or four on the heels of each other, but those days are past. Once in a while a poem will occur to me with the aggressiveness of a junkyard dog and I have to write it down if for no other reason than to shut out the yapping—look at that, I've just compared the muse to a pit bull—most of the time though I'm content to let the ethereal bubbles of my musings burst of their own accord. I get to the point of thinking, why bother? I've written my fair

share. Let someone else shoulder the load. But as soon as I think that, there's that ferocious mutt nipping at the seat of my consciousness.

Preoccupied with the finished product, something, everything must have a certain finality. When I think about it, hidden doubts surface and the only finished products are the dead. These dead things, extinct, vanished, rubbed out become then the tangibles of an imagined perfection. To live up to these expectations, I only have to die.

But there is no perfection without mistakes. The perfection of mistakes is an art. The mistake of perfection is a mistake. Art is mistaken perfection. The principle mark of my genius is not perfection but originality. "Be true to yourself even when the truth hurts." My imperfections distinguish me from the next guy. I try not to make the same mistake twice.

As with any success comes the question, what are the consequences, the fall out, collateral damage? Success is what you throw in the face of those who doubted you. Success is always a disappointing drug. As is marijuana, and a dangerous drug as well. More dangerous than heroin. Overdose on heroin, the heart stops beating. Overdose on marijuana and experience a supernatural shift in perception as the heart rate increases. Cross over a psychic boundary where a unity is impossible to realize because it involves self-pointing. And as long as there is a self to point to, that unity will remain indefinable. The actualization of unity comes only with death, the transformation into dark energy. Psychoactive drugs establish the link to the trans-vegetative that the current dogmas and ideologies of death denial cannot allow.

The evil weed awakened a self-loathing snot sniveling psychosis, a litany of regrets, like a wave, a panic attack, the fear that his world had or was crumbling. Logically, he could attribute it to the nagging self-consciousness caused by the drug's psychotropic effect. But he wasn't really in a mood for logic right then. "Logic always produces pain which is very bad for you," as O'Hara had said. One of the reasons he so disliked pot. It opened too many doors, doors that ought to remain shut, double bolted. Behind them lived the morbid fantasies that were so insulting to his sensibilities, hard to shake, encouraged by superstition and fear. Exposed viscera sensitive to the very atmosphere can only react with pain, a sensitized instrument recording the vicissitudes of the slightest change traced on a graph of agony. Stoned, drunk, and medicated, there was

bound to be some kind of adverse reaction other than the foregrounding of the persistent tinnitus that was a result of the beating and an off kilter confusion. Yet the most terrible of drugs was the self, imbibed in solitude and whose surfeit led to estrangement from the world and from himself.

A particularly bitter realization comes to mind, not that it's anything new, it has always been there, from the very beginning in fact, and I've spent most of my adult life ignoring it, hiding it from myself with drink and distraction. Small victories, passing acclaim eked out of a thin stratum of marginal talent and dogged perseverance, grasping at crumbs fallen from the table of giants. What I have thrown myself into wholeheartedly as an accomplished destiny is foolhardy. What did Hammett say? Stubborn obstinacy is just the courage of the weak?

The poems, poetry, have fallen away from me as if I'd been clutching them like a hand over the edge of a cliff connected to a body of work and I can no longer hang on, they've slipped away into an abyss, into chaos, a space of language that is no longer comprehensible to me and I feel that I've lost faith, faith in the abilities I've practiced so diligently over the years to attain, and after all, once I lose faith I lose the underpinnings, the foundation upon which I stand, indivisible, or maybe it's me hanging over an incomprehensible void and it's literature out of whose grasp I've slipped. No matter, the feeling of loss is the same either way. I don't want to dwell on it. If I did it would merely be nostalgia for a life I once led, a life that gained importance at the tip of a pen, and now how foolish that all seems.

So what of that mountain of shit smeared pages, the *cacata carta* I produce with the regularity of a morning dump? The endless shit path taken. *Quelle merde!* What a load of garbage! What self-indulgent delusional crap! Clueless monuments of naiveté from an embarrassingly unaware infantile exhibitionist!! A wrong turn at my very beginning led the way to the inevitable dead end with no going back. A necessary surface tension has to be maintained otherwise, if the bubble pops, that once unique space becomes undifferentiated atmosphere. Another example of my wrong headedness, each negative iteration a hammer blow to the ego. The shame of a sham.

“I coulda been a carpenter,” he mumbled to himself, voicing regrets over the path not taken. The summer construction jobs during high school his uncles had arranged for him had been physically exhausting but also exhilarating, leaving him at the end of the day with a sense of accomplishment. Poetry never did that. There was always a nagging doubt that nothing had actually been accomplished. It was the original vaporware. And now his sense of self, his spirit had deserted him, and he was in freefall accompanied by that sinking feeling, not so much as the loss of self but the shattering of identity, a loss of purpose, confused, directionless, that his whole life was a lie.

As I suspected, it’s all a lie. “It’s all a fucking fiction!” Did I say that out loud? I’ve been here before, when the cookie crumbled, years ago. Everything I’d ever written, insupportable, a throbbing open wound of abject despair. But with time and the routine of being, no matter how superficial, it scabbed over and I resumed my wayward delusional literary ways. Yet here it is again, the unkindest cut of all.

Can I deny what I’ve devoted my entire life to? It would render everything I’ve ever done meaningless. But everything rings so false, contrived, self-indulgent, hopeless. I need a reserve of denial and that bank account is overdrawn. I hate what I am but even though I wish I could, I can’t stop being what I hate. The poet’s dilemma, Ovid had been there long before me.

Mortified, by which I mean embarrassed, humiliated, chagrined, discomfited, shamed, abashed, horrified, appalled at what I’ve done, by my present circumstances, not that the drift into abject debauchery is unfamiliar, yet another path to a predictable predicament fraught with tragic entanglements.

That sorrowful lost feeling was an occupying army, a dread that paralyzed any function, a blood blindness that routed everything through the inflamed amygdala and constricted perception to a long narrow tube at the end of which was barely a glimmer. He had to extricate himself from the spiraling vortex his almond sized ur-brain had awakened. The foundation of his beliefs moaned under the weight of his uncertainty. The gnarled hand of regret grabbed for his throat. A slug of beer, draining the can, and a deep drag at cigarette’s end, filling a lungful, restored the imperatives of the physical. The other hand shaking fumbled with

the laptop tote and the objects to which were moored a tenuous temporary sanity. The beer and the painkillers acted as brakes to the ganja fed obsessive self-destructive slide, but it was a battle.

If I don't destroy these thoughts, I will be destroyed by them. But that's the answer, isn't it? Art disrupts life. True poets invite chaos every time, reaffirming that which is denied. Art is the most direct connection between the sewer and the stars. Art is magic liberated from the lie of being truth. And what is that truth? That art foreshadows death.

**“Art foreshadows death”** lit up like a neon bolt in his forebrain. He was compelled to note it. That the whole train of thought was portentous, ponderous or profound had yet to be determined. He felt anxious, impatient. He rushed to open the notebook, and it was taking its own sweet time, scrolling rather slowly and lagging in bringing up the file. He had been ignoring the flashing icon in the upper right hand corner of the screen signaling the battery was low. The next question was how long could he go on ignoring it? He understood the concept that his devices needed to be recharged but had never managed to carve a niche in his routine to do it. He repeated the phrase to himself as the processing of his command was being considered. Then the screen went blue. The swirl of an animated enso preceded the gray powerless square blank eye staring back at him. The words he'd wanted to record, perhaps even the key to his immortality, had loosed their grip and were slipping away.

His gut did a back over flip before sinking like a lead weight. He had paper in his satchel, his medical report, on the back of which he could scribble his portentous burning thought. But even as he rummaged through the bag and inside pouches and pockets, he knew he didn't have a pen. He'd become overconfident and overly reliant on his devices to capture his notes and salient observations. Pens got lost or ran out of ink, always needing a spare or replacing, but they never needed to be charged. He panicked. It was a Richard III moment. My kingdom for a stylus! Desperate, he clutched a large sea washed pebble and scratched the words onto the side of the granite boulder. It might as well have been written in lemon juice, the granite was either too tough or the pebble not tough enough to leave an impression. What he had scrawled crumbled away as indecipherable beige dust.

The resurgence of hope snagged on a technological tripwire, and he plunged headlong into hopelessness. He was drunk and stoned and overmedicated. He understood now the fine print in his compact with



the gods. He could drink alcohol unaffected like an immortal, but mixing it with psychotropics and opiates was a deal breaker. “The gods have abandoned me!” he shouted pulling himself to his feet.

His brain turned to dizzy gel and his gut heaved up into his throat. In profound self-disgust he staggered toward the waves, gagging, tears and snot pouring off his face. Sea water washed over his silver loafers and swirled around his silk socks. His revulsion turned to unthinking rage. He flung the notebook computer into the consuming waves like a square Frisbee.

Instant regret struck him a blow to the solar plexus. The computer represented everything he had written in the past year, the documentation of a year in the life of his genius, and he had thrown it all away.

He turned, staggering, to see the young family of friends get to their feet, the women raising their hands in warning and the young men moving in his direction with cautious trepidation. He didn’t see it coming, only heard its roar as the sleeper wave rose up behind him and knocked him down.

The water swallowed him in one gulp, pulling at his clothes as he struggled to keep from being towed under. The relentless undulation produced another wave to wash over him, knocking the breath out of him and replacing it with bitter brine. He clawed at the wet sand in a desperate effort to anchor himself but it occurred to him in a moment of ironic clarity that he was still attached to his laptop by a binary umbilical and like a millstone it was dragging him into the deep.

**Numb he opened one eye and then the other.** He heard voices, low, murmuring. Someone asked, “Hey mister, you ok? You almost drowned.” He turned his head away embarrassed only to face the disapproving stare of the little girl with the tousled hair who was methodically pasting money on the large boulder that had been his windbreak. The bills were wet. At her feet he recognized the open maw of his wallet, his plastic lined up to dry along the base of the big rock. He read in her eyes something ancient, a perceptive wisdom beyond her years. And it shamed him.

“You’re soaked, mister. You should take off your clothes and try to dry them.” It was one of the young women of the group and he guessed the little girl’s mother. “You can wrap up in this blanket so you don’t go into shock.”

A fawn faced young man with a sparse ringlet beard looked at him up close. “You gonna be ok, man? Wanus to get a park ranger? Ambulance?”

He found the words and moved the sand out of his mouth with his tongue to say them. “No, I’m alright.” He sat up and leaned back on his elbows to face the curious stares of the tan and rough primitives as if he’d washed ashore from a shipwreck in the South Seas. “I’ll take you up on the blanket, though.”

“Wanus to call someone for you?” It was the girl’s mother. “Do you have a phone?”

He shook his head, “No, battery died.”

One of the other women held up her plastic rectangle and seemed to be searching the air with it. “Dude, I can’t get no bars down here!”

“Wanus to go up the store make a call?” the one who bore a striking resemblance to popular depictions of Jesus asked.

The blanket draped across his lap, he self-consciously began pulling the soaked Banlon over his head. “I’m waiting for a friend to come pick me up.” He understood that he was overstating, to be more accurate, hoping that a friend would come. Unbuckling his belt to slide his pants off, he noticed that he was wearing only one shoe.

Fawn face picked up on his consternation. “Dude, we couldn’t save your other shoe. On its way to China by now.”

The young mother took her child’s hand. “Come along honey, let’s leave the man his privacy.” Then to the Jesus man, “We need to get going if we’re going to make it to Rockport before dark.”

As they gathered up their things, the curly haired satyr wandered over to advise “the tide’s coming in. This stretch of beach will be under water by the time the sun sets.” The young man plucked a twenty drying on the boulder, holding it up. “This should cover the blanket.”

He nodded his assent. Yet isn’t it a blanket’s purpose to cover? Sometimes language has to be spoken backwards to make itself understood.

**Don’t be paranoid?** It pays to be paranoid. Paranoia is the first step in prophecy. Interpret the flight of birds. If there’s danger lurking, they’ll know. So far the only birds I’ve seen are gulls, some unknown black seabirds that shit enough to cover the rocks beneath them with calcium white slurry, and a flight of pelicans like workers returning home from the dayshift with their lunchbox beaks.

When I look back on the inevitable flight path of my life, it’s enough to make me paranoid. I struggle with paranoia as all unsung geniuses who

think too thoroughly do. Val was the same way only so much more talented—a classic passive aggressive which fit perfectly with her S&M fantasies. She'd say one thing and the next second deny that's what she meant.

Val. A one syllable mantra, the expiration of a breath. Just that. Val. A few months shy of fifty, from septicemia, invasion of the bloodstream by virulent micro-organisms from a local seat of infection. Blood poisoned, dirty needles they'd said. One year, one month, and five days ago at some unknown hour.

And so too Sheila, two old loves in the space of little more than six months. Although the door on that episode has long been closed, I still have an inventory of all the baggage stored behind it. The cancer shut her down the same day I left the hospital. A private memorial was held a few weeks later. I wasn't invited. Or I was but too depressed and feeling sorry for myself, I couldn't get out of bed. I pretended it hadn't happened. To save myself the grief. Courtney's anger was fierce when I bailed. That may have been when the regret for her generosity began. I had my excuses, but that's all they were. In some way or other I always manage to fail, to disappoint, the women in my life.

Nora had it right. "People care about you, Wendt, but they just happen to be the ones you push away." But then it's always been all about me. Deplorable, selfish, self-indulgent, cynical misanthrope. Of course if you're not all of those what business do you have calling yourself a poet? Both Sheila and Val had basically said the same thing using almost the exact same words at one time or another. "You don't care about me. You just want me around as an audience for your cleverness." The truth. It didn't matter how much they loved me just as long as they laughed at my jokes. My whole history with women is fraught with the freight of my ambivalence and cowardice.

Sheila, toward the end of us, disdainful, critical of everything I did. Our paths had diverged. She wanted success, I wanted immortality. We would never see eye to eye. We talked past each other hoping that the close calls would reveal our secret desperation. I had raged, "What do you want from me, eat seeds, shit flowers?" It was the straw that broke the camel's toe.

Once, in a moment of inextricable moroseness after one of the many blowups with Val, I remember thinking "women will be the death of me." I've kept it at the back of my mind like a get-out-of-jail-free card. But maybe I've been wrong all along. It's not Sheila or Valerie or Wendy or Mac or any other women I've accommodated and who've

reciprocated. Maybe it's more abstract than that, and it's Dame Fortuna, Santa Fama, who will precipitate my downfall. Fame and fortune, if the first one don't get you, the next one will. The original serial killer twins of poets.

There really never has been any room for women in my life. Except for the muse, and she's always a little indifferent to my attentions, especially of late. Miffed because of the Pillsbury I'll bet so now I'm tainted with the stink of hubris. Just like a woman. Well, what's the muse anyway but a convenient fiction, a figment, an ideal, a mark high on the wall of the labyrinth to aim for? And I've always been more interested in writing my name in the snow.

I've made bad decisions, gone the wrong way, mistaken paths in the tangled jungle of the heart and had to double back, retrace my steps, pick up the pieces of my shattered ego and repair it with the superglue of denial.

That explains my greatest fear: fear of woman, fear in the face of her unfathomable meaning, fear of the seductive abyss of the void, Plato's unspoken unspeakable cave of chthonic mystery

On the other hand, I'm not dirtier than any dirty old man, knowing full well my prime purpose has to be constrained by cultural convention and social taboo. Nature has provided a surplus of fertilizing agents just to be on the safe side. That writhing energy, more of a wave than a particle, requires a method of venting or appropriation to let off steam approaching critical mass. A successful channeling leads to greater cities and high-toned penthouse ideas, something to keep the extras in line for when the time comes to stand in for the sacrifice. But as I approach my expiration date, a tick at the tip of my chromosomes, and not that my swimmers aren't robust, it's just that other factors contribute to a less attractive appearance. There comes about a separation of elements, animal and magnetism no longer advantageously bound, a congealing that is barely congenial to affability. And with it comes the tang of cynicism, inevitable as oxidization. What's lost is sensuality, a round fullness, healthy glow and sparkly eyes to renew an understanding of the basics of an enfolding overfolding crashing wave degrading and being reconstituted by a leveling force.

The solid bass line of Mater Creatrix and my own airy piccolo out of sync, always a little ahead of myself or hurrying to catch up, never quite sure of the ground rules but willing to give it the old college try. Sometimes I wonder why I bother. Sex is an accident waiting to happen. Things start on the same page but assumptions and presumption, guess

work, always hit the wrong note and the delicate framework of a promising relationship splinters into lethal shards. If you're going to tell a woman you love her make sure she's in the mood to hear it. There is no room for improvisation as the guidelines were carved in stone ages ago.

The full value of sexuality nature has given woman can only be imagined which is why I am aroused to my primal mission by an image or a word. Women are the emissaries of necessity, beautiful when the nature of their work doesn't make them terrifying. Like the fates they only talk among themselves in the secret arcane language of destiny. A woman's voice has a harsh hysteric edge to it but it also rings a bell with its teasing music. The oscillations of the cosmos are like that.

**Annie Bola came to town claiming** to have talked to me telepathically. I avoid her like the plague. In tripping the synapses of where "all the women I've been with" are stored, one inexplicably looms up: Ellen Weals, *Squeaky*, for the way she used to chirp a twelve tone harmonic of orgasmic sounds, a symphony of ecstatic expression played by the joyous emanations from the windpipe. All her tattoos, and how each one had a story connected to it, not only a rationale, but the circumstances surrounding it, how it was a kind of skin memory, a picture album etched in the epidermis and a correlate of gray matter. Even though it depicted an erotic narrative, I have to admit that, yeah, I have a problem with girls with tattoos. Kinda like I'm in competition with the tat for the body, and it's obviously been there before me and will be around a lot longer.

Chrysie's mascara ran down her cheeks and made her look like Alice Cooper. The sweat glistened on her nose and her bare arms. She sang sweetly but like the Sirens of myth, dangerous in close proximity to her rock. With Danni Markov it was all white walls, tastefully appointed furnishings, and decorator art. Just walking on her antique Persian carpet I was tracking my muddy working class assumptions across her aristocrat vanity. I thought I had hit the jackpot but it turns out that I was destined to be just another one of her accessories. She was going to remake me, teeth fixed, hair done, new clothes, jewelry. I pawned everything except for the gold chain.

We were introduced at Megan Twohy's reception for the Women's Auxiliary Museum Society. But I had first laid eyes on her dark and intense beauty once before at the Brautigan publication party on Greenwich St. years ago. She'd seemed too young, too troubled and too restless even then. Just my type. She moved among the upper circles of poetry hell, academics and old money. Definitely not the coffeehouse and

bookstore type. For some people their drama is all they have. And later that evening when the formalities had ended and everyone had left except for a few of Megan's friends, she sat on the floor across the coffee table from me, knees up, legs splayed with a "look what I got" smile. What was I supposed to think?

Danni claimed to be a distant relative of a famous Russian mathematician who had developed a probability theory known as the Markov Chain. She'd explained it to me as a random process whose main characteristic was memorylessness, a concept that implied the nature of random properties related to the future depended only on the present, not the past. I'm not sure that I actually understood it all, but it gave me something to chew on. It sounds a lot like a theory of modern poetry.

The poem as a probability model used to describe phenomena that evolve over time and space, specifically the progression of the poem represented by a variability whose change is subject to random deviation. Instead of a poem that can only advance in one way, each word represents indeterminacy. Even taking into account the implication of previous word groupings, at every subsequent point there are countless directions in which the poem can evolve. The movement to the next word or line depends only on the poem's current state, and is independent of prior vectors of meaning.

Danni realized, as had most women who've known me in the biblical sense, that I was impossible to live with, and that I had only one true love, poetry, which by default was the triple deity, me, myself, and I. Toward the end when I insisted that regular sex would help with her restless nights, she'd replied, "I don't need sleep that bad." I just wasn't living up to the expectations she had of what life with a marginal literary celebrity might be.

She said she had to fly down to LA to visit relatives. I figured she was going to stay a while by the way her apartment was packed up. She was seeing a shrink, the guy she eventually married, and he was moving his practice to Santa Barbara. I should have seen it coming. What was it about "You are a wretched impossible human being!" didn't I get? The parting shot from the hip was "And your feet stink!" I admit my feet are graveyards of dead skin but that was still a low blow.

I have to own up to being an incurable romantic. In the intimate boudoir of romance, wearing your heart on your sleeve is never a good idea. It will likely get brushed off and stepped on. Unlike that old George Benson song where the greatest thing you could ever learn is to love and be loved in return, the reality of the situation is more along the lines of

Lacan's "Love is something you don't have that you try to give to someone who doesn't want it."

**All women are crazy some of the time.** Some women are crazy all of the time, but not all women are crazy all of the time. The old Orphic trick to avoid being ripped to shreds is to know how to identify some of those women and stay well away from them. It's not always that easy. I tell myself that I'm done with cheap meaningless sex, but when it comes right down to it, I can never bring myself to pass up a bargain. Women by being penetrable are impenetrable. You can have your cake and eat it too but it's very expensive. Culture does not so easily overcome biology's overriding purpose.

Angie had dragged me to an art gallery opening on Market, of all places. This was around the time she was shopping for suitable seed with which to become impregnated. Maybe I was showing off. I'd said it before, and it mostly got a laugh. "Forget the sperm bank, I'm a walking ATM." Third time was not a charm. I'll never forget what I saw in her eyes at that moment: rage, disgust, disappointment, betrayal. Don't shoot the messenger I wanted to say but I'd been on a roll and the transformation from ham to ass was almost inevitable. Besides who else is there to shoot or decapitate besides the sperm delivering messenger? The purpose of the Orphic is to stir up female frenzy before the mass fuck fest where the sacrificial victim, some old goat, always a male, is torn limb from limb.

That had come up in the discussion of *The English Letter* by M. Portmanteau in which the Brits were accused of ruining American literature. I'd been chatting with Lily Mao and her partner, Ann Toenin, the Russian author of *Art Ode*, a long poem consisting of exclamatory expressions such as *Oh! Won! Eeen!! Ugh! Hunh? Wha? Yuk! Bing! Bang! Boom! Arrgh!* and *Awk!*

I was holding forth as usual and unwisely described the nature of women as concentric. Linda Hoar-Eisen gave me a narrow look. I was being serious. By concentric I meant round, full, centered in consensus. My first mistake was not following the golden rule of mixed company conversation. Such generalities are often viewed as mansplaining in the delicate negotiations of cross-gender communications and can leave you out on the proverbial limb.

"Cuntcentric? Did I hear you say women were *cunt*-centric?!" Linda wasn't going to hide her disdain.

That wasn't what I said, but since the opportunity had arisen I

thought I would see how much more of my foot I could fit into my mouth by espousing the minority opinion on the etymological origins of the word. *Cunt* comes from the ancient Akkadian *ḫmt* which denoted priestess in the temple of the Goddess Inanna, and was once a positive term to describe women. With the denigration of ancient cults by usurper religions, the word had accrued negative connotation. I don't know why I thought that would cut me some slack.

She didn't mince words. "None of what you say changes the fact that you are a condescending dickhead, Dickhead."

Nothing can prepare you for the irrational self-righteous bitch or the crazed homicidal maniac, each tainted by their own hormonal destiny and hijacked by the ruthless almond shaped pea-brain.

Men may be idiots but women are lunatic.

**It was Halloween and the following morning** of *dia de los muertos* should have found me dead. That was when I came to hate her. It was then I understood Mac to be the most perfect example of feminine impermeability in all existence.

We'd spent the long day together in the Castro as the colorful and often risqué carnivalesque swirl erupted from bars with drunken hoots and shrieks, parading down the streets in high, very high, fashion. And with hardly any chance to talk, to catch up, jollying and jostling with old friends and new acquaintances, my own celebrity but mostly her credit card keeping us well watered. It was an evening destined for excess.

"Listen grapenuts, I'd be gay but I can't do the snappy finger thing." And like a broken record, much to her chagrin I'm sure, "Some of my best friends are cocksuckers." Someone in the group jammed a powder blue wig on my head and shouted in my face, "You're just an old queen!"

Eventually we found ourselves on the terrace at Enrico's, a table overlooking Broadway, costumed freaks and partiers parading by, the default costume being do-it-yourself zombie, smeared catsup on face and clothing and moving like imagined reanimated corpses might walk. A few *chollos* in their best orange and black walking their pit bulls followed by a bevy of transvestites dressed like they had just come from partying with the Sun King or returning from Cinderella's Ball. Feathered nymphs and bare breasted goddesses exhibited themselves followed by a pack of male supplicants and slaves in leather. Teen couples drinking jello shots or sucking on alcohol laced sno-cones ventured into the orange neon haze and the shadow black of night dressed as adults, indistinguishable from adults, all history and all mythology exhibiting the seven deadly sins.



On the street directly in front of our table, a man of about fifty, drawn cheeks no makeup could affect, gray stubble swathing his jaw, had stopped to stare at us, holding by the hand a small boy dressed in out-sized clothes, and carrying on his arm another small child held to his shoulder. He was a transient, maybe even homeless. The children's rags were not costumes. Maybe he had taken them out to relieve the horrible monotony of their uncertainty and poverty. It wasn't on my powder blue wig he had fixed his gaze, perhaps even wonderment, but at Mac's purplish glowing light-reflecting red satin low cut dress that left nothing to the imagination. That and the pair of little red horns topping the liquid curls of her carrot tresses. The wicked smile was not part of the costume but it fit the occasion.

Song writers say that pleasure ennobles the soul and softens the heart. The song was wrong that evening as far as I was concerned. Even as I was touched by the haunting eyes of such desperation, I felt ashamed for the drinks we hoisted, too big for our britches. I turned to her, to catch her attention and convey a shared empathy. I looked into those green eyes, home of caprice and governed by the moon, as she said, "Those people give me the creeps." And summoning the waiter, "Can't someone do something about them?" So maybe hate is too specific a word for what I felt. Certainly disappointment.

For an instant I entertained the notion that I was looking at myself but in the past, and that those children were ours and I had finally found her after she had abandoned our marriage and left me penniless and caring for the kids. And it chilled me, that her disdain came so casually, so callously, that she didn't realize that I was just a step away from them.

**When I came back from the can,** there were strangers at the table. I snagged a waiter and he remembered Mac leaving with a couple of guys, headed up in the direction of Columbus. The sidewalks were packed with revelers and I had to weave my way through them. I thought I caught a glimpse of her heading up Columbus toward Green St. but I couldn't be sure. There was more than one devil afoot that night. Then I lost them.

I heard my name called. I didn't recognize Wendy at first in her lady-bug outfit: black leotards, a black turtleneck, and a vest that supported the black polka dot red carapace on her back. She was wearing a white sequined mask around her eyes. On her head two ping pong balls at the tip of wires bobbed independently when she talked.

Every time I ran into Wendy it was the same thing. She had become a stalker, at first moonstruck and then completely bat shit obsessed. And

each time I had to explain that I wasn't avoiding her even though I was, and that I didn't get back to the old neighborhood much anymore since Angie sold the house, that I spent most of my time making sure I had a place to sleep and enough to eat so I was pretty much occupied with my day to day survival. I had tried not to hurt her feelings, cowardly avoiding the inevitable confrontation. But that night, fed up with Mac and probably myself, I told her, cruelly perhaps, that she had to stop thinking we were in a relationship. Her face contorted in confusion. "You mean I'm not your girlfriend?" Likely it was impolitic of me to point out "We had sex, exchanged bodily fluids. Don't make it any more than it is" but at the time it seemed a necessity.

I walked away up Green St. leaving behind a ladybug weeping on a corner crowded with superheroes, witches, fairy princes, and hockey masks. I thought I caught sight of the devil going into Giancarlo's.

If a bar is a hole in the wall with bad lighting then Giancarlo's is a bar. I had been 86'd from there a number of times, probably the only one ever banned for non-criminal behavior. I could be just that obnoxious. It was a hangout for the Aether crowd, adherents of the questionable poetics of Jack Spicer. And drinking among them was like feeding time at a zoo, every little crumb of a comment was taken with defensive exception. The more outrageous the observation, the more it roiled the self-righteous indignation. So many buttons to push, it was often too irresistible.

That night the big attraction was Rex Coprophilius, King Shit, crowned with a large red spotted white *Aminita Muscaria*-like Phrygian cap. He was a traditional figure in North Beach at Halloween, dressed entirely in various layers and rolls of newsprint, phonebooks, and streamers, led through the throng so that people might tear at his attire to propitiate the gods and monsters abroad that night, the torn scraps known as "pieces of shit". He'd started off with twenty pounds of headlines stapled to his chest. By the time I followed him into Giancarlo's he was down to his yellow pages.

And there was Mac at the bar talking to this little fireplug of a guy in a suit that was definitely not a costume. He was with two other guys in suits and neatly barbered hair. I immediately thought "cops" but couldn't understand what the law would want with her. Not that it mattered. I walked right up. I said something. Derisive disappointment. Fascinated disgust at her selfish callow evil. She threw her drink in my face.

What words had I used? They hide from me in memory, skipped over like a needle in a groove to the part where the angry red pissed off

face of some guy is insisting that I couldn't say such things to a lady. I didn't deign to even look at him. "Get this clown out of my face." One of my talents is to be a complete arrogant ass.

The bartender, busy as he was, threw a thumb toward the entrance. "Ok, Wendt, you're out!"

"But I just got reinstated."

The bartender made a face. "Do you want me to have Jo-jo explain it to you?" Jo-jo was the bouncer, an Albanian giant who didn't have the reputation for being gentle. I caught the drift and sauntered out to the sidewalk terrace of my own volition. I lit up a cigarette. I should have known it would come to this.

"Snort it." she'd said. We were in a room at the Hotel Rexroth. She was naked and shiny. I was showing my age. She'd ground up the blue pill in the ashtray. I looked at the blue powder, "snort it?" "Yes, snort it!" Then her phone rang and she answered it. "When?" She stared at me. "Thanks, Nicole, I owe you one." And then to me, "My husband is in the lobby with a couple of his Fremont cop buddies. They're on their way up." And as if she had to say, "You better leave."

Clutching my suit coat and holding up my pants in the hallway, I heard the elevator ding arriving at the floor. I did an about face and headed for the door with the red exit sign above it. I heard the voices and the knocking as the door closed behind me. My unwieldy lumber jutted out from my briefs constantly in peril of snagging the iron pipe railing of the stairwell in my frantic descent. That had been a close call. It was apparent that Mac's marriage was not as open as she claimed.

I was leaning on the wrought iron barrier to the terrace out in front of Giancarlo's mulling the replay when I spotted Wendy coming toward me with a look of agonized determination. I stepped on my cigarette and turned to leave. The fireplug who had been talking to Mac was blocking my exit.

"You can't talk to her like that."

"Why, was it your turn?"

"She's my wife," arrived at about the same time as his fist to my jaw. Then the rain of blows coming from all directions sank me to my knees. I tried to squirm away on the sidewalk, absorbing the kicks to the gut, shielding my head with my arms, curling up to make myself smaller, more compact, and then the intense bolt of pain as a shoe crushed my shin against the edge of the curb, hearing as well as feeling the snap of bone with my entire body. I screamed, gasping for breath, an anguished naked roar. The gunshots, now that I realize that's what they were, not the

sounds of my rendering, accomplished a pause in the attack. I tried to crawl away, desperately seeking to leave the scene as well as find an equilibrium that might make sense of the searing heat in my mangled leg. What I finally managed was vomiting and lapsing into unconsciousness.

I don't know if "lousy poet" was actually part of the beating. Maybe I just imagined it. Come to find out it was Mac's hubby and his cop pals, practiced in the take down. Nothing ever came of it or I never heard that it did. Cops stick together, a fraternity, unlike poets, unaffiliated, cults of one. I'd heard that someone described the incident as "They were beating the hell out of a guy wearing a powder blue wig."

**The glare of white sand** shadowed to gray, rumbling waves lost their green sheen, and the hiss of dissipating foam edged closer. Sea birds screeched, gulls hopped among the debris of apple cores, carrot ends, food wrappers left by his rescuers, and his own empty beer cans, slim jim sheaths, and chip bag. Otherwise he was alone. A wind skimmed the waves chilling the air. In the distance the orange orb crushed a stratum of cloud dyeing the horizon with the blood of its muted fire. "Suppose you really do, toward the end, fall away into a sunset which is your own self-ignited pyre," the dying sun sang in his ears, a siren chorus with the shrill voices of cicadas.

Stupid. And I am the exemplification of that stupidity. Shake it off. Gulp in breaths of denial that it can't be all that bad. But which is worse, the headache or the heartache. The topsy-turvy scramble to regain mental balance in the face of an onslaught of contradiction and self-delusion painfully limited by my bone headedness or the gut churning, heart arresting, adrenal fueled, fear-based realization that it must end, and the immense futility of it all. Is there hope, that mocking seductive chimera, fickle as flickering day or is there only dark despair and night? Well, you live, you die.

Getting to his feet, wrapped in the blanket and feeling the full cold weight of being soaked to the skin, he stared out at the giant orange eyeball above the vast eyewash sea that seemingly demanded, "Just who the hell do you think you are?" He replied, "Nobody."

All the bad luck, terrible accidents, cruel circumstances, the waking horror I've been through, brushed off simply to continue. I can hear people say "What great promise he had when he was younger." At least I haven't

self-immolated as have so many of my contemporaries. Nora likes to joke, “There’s the smell of smoke about you, Carl, and I don’t mean cigarettes. It’s all those burned bridges.”

Death’s contagion breathed on him the familiar names of the departed just in the last year. Dorian Pillsbury, aka “Doughboy” aka “Pop N Fresh” when he and Roger Wilson were an item. Valerie Richards aka “Valentina Fox.” His ex, Shelia Norby aka “Sierra North.” Jeremiah “Jeremessiah” Beljahr. Candy “Tuna” Meltier. Tomas “Tom Tom” Valorbruto. Willy “Knickerbonkers” Hampton. Paul “Syn” Esther. And so unexpectedly, Marguerite “Kay” Sayrah, the obit pic a reminder of her wide crimson smile that touched the clown fear in everyone. Not so unexpectedly, Lynal Pauk aka “The Lyin King” who hadn’t survived long without Dotty or his opioid habit, on New Year’s Eve, giving the definitive answer to the question in the lyric of that old Holiday song. Tom “Toot Sweet” Trolley. Denny “The Touch” Darns, or to some, “Don’t Touch Me There.” Jody Kervish, known as the Shirley MacLaine of poetry. Otto M. Attic, the Richard Gear of poetry. Gus “Taffy” Jimson and Mariah “Whitey” Pall though worlds apart, on the same day. Colum “Too Tall” Jackson. Faye “Ginny” Lawrence. Cathleen “Cat” Tchewlayder. Al “Mick” Gayteur and his crocodile tears no more.

Me and my shambling machinations, in the end the question is who are these worthless pricks and why am I wasting my time trying to be one of them? I have no use for tight-ass flyblown poets, confining my associations to a few friends and lovers. The lovers never hang around for very long, and the friends have become victims of the three deadly D’s of friendship: disaffection, distance, and death. It’s when those names come with a face and a memory of palpable interactions that are no longer active on the perceptual plane, having achieved the stasis of the infinitesimal, that the truth of mortality sinks in or at least gives pause to the recall of a vivid impression. You live. You die.

As predicted the lap of waves advanced to cover much of the apron of sand casting its foamy perimeter within easy reach of where he stood contemplating the contents of his shoulder bag. He shook an amber pill bottle to hear it rattle. Time to order a refill. He dropped one then two and finally the last one into his palm. Enough to guarantee he would feel no pain. And dry throated one after the other blinking up at the inky blue.

I shouldn't think of life as disappointing. If nothing else it is consistent in its suffering, and that, in the face of it all, I am helpless. There's suffering because nothing stays the same which plays havoc with my desire to hold on to what works even if only for an instant which in turn causes the anxiety that makes me suffer. Nothing lasts forever and even that is gone in an instant. Life isn't anything unique by itself. It is what comes after what went before and what goes before what's to come. Conditioned by the past, it affects the future as a chain of instances linked by memory, desire's intelligence. It matters not one way or the other. It is all the same. Life or death.

Death is a hard act to follow. He paused at the spark of memory. Then, "I can't do it." As if by saying it out loud again propitiated the original awful moment. After the moderator of the panel shakily announced at the poetry conference just a few weeks past, the third member of the panel, Reston Pease, and his family had been killed in an auto accident. It was his turn to speak next. What a downer that was. And proving once again that April is indeed the cruelest of months. It dragged on his psyche like a sea anchor.

All I can hope for is a kind of intuitive understanding of death, dying, which surpasses reason and rules out any further discussion. All things, being impermanent, have no separate and independent identity. The absolute is inherent in all phenomena. Ultimate reality can't be explained in terms of existence and nonexistence. Everything is real. Each thing is identical with all things. To exist is to be in relation to other things that exist. The universe is simply the set of all these relations. You live.

Apart from Julie's explicable animosity toward him resulting in Lon Murphy's accidental death, the poet deaths were circumstantial. There was no actual serial killer of poets. That much he had gathered from his last conversation with Grace Niklia. She'd laid out the faults in his conspiracy theory as the transference of Jeremiah's paranoia as well as copping to her own wrong headedness in pursuing the investigation. She could be humble, admit her mistakes, something he still had difficulty with. The deaths of the poets were mostly a combination of hubris, despair, mania, addiction, and accident, a consequence of an irresistible desire for fame likely resulting from a frontal cortex lesion that manifests itself as a loss of social awareness and inhibition, emotional instability, irritability, and

impulsiveness. There is no grand conspiracy to kill poets except perhaps from themselves and by their own hand.

What comes of the illusion that even though I am edging toward the last days of my life that it is far from over, and joy and dread combined will find time enough to grow, planted in the fertile soil of anything of any moment up till now? Should I regret that at the end no one really ever got what I was doing and all the fame and attention are based on a house of cards, not on truth but on assumption and conjecture that have nothing to do with my poetry? You die.

**There was nothing in the laptop tote** that was vital to him at the moment: a dead phone, a book of not so great poetry by a promising poet who had died too young, a medical report that read like some kind of cruel literary joke. *Poems Syndrome*, really? All of it totally inconsequential and unnecessary. Not to mention the letter from the lawyers representing the Beljahr family with their final warning that if not refunded, the matter of the advance for the editing of *Messiah, The Poems of Jeremiah Beljahr, Edited with an Introduction by Carl Wendt* would be turned over to a collection agency. Both the unexpected hospitalization and then the Pillsbury Prize, each in their own way, had created an insurmountable ambivalence toward resolving the matter. He glared back at the horizon. Poseidon rose out of the waves with a trident, aka underwater pickle fork, and said “Time to come home, son.”

I acknowledge that there can be no other way. I must say my goodbyes with the realization that the world says goodbye to you long before you leave it. Goodbye means the same in all languages although for some it is more definitive than others. In my language I must say goodbye to friends because either they died or I did, or they have alienated me, or me them, by their, or my, thoughtless behavior which is a kind of death to me, and to them. I wish it wasn't so, but it is. So goodbye to those of parted ways, you are dead to me as I am to you. And those who have through necessity and circumstance physically removed yourselves from the immediacy of my presence, might as well be dead because memory is fickle and the longer separation is maintained the less the fact of your being matters. Nostalgia is merely the stubbed toe that calls attention to the foot and the blindness of inattention.

Unaccustomed to the unevenness of the path and his wobbly gait he located the thread of trail snaking up the side of the bluff to the parking lot. "It is no sin to advance limping," he mused. Eternal life belongs to those who live in the present someone once said. And his past was catching up with him. Death is the limit of life which cannot be located within life. First you are and then you're not. Simple as that. But then, as Bakhtin once pointed out, "Nothing is ever absolutely dead."

As the limping man, I am Jason, and all smithies made lame or hamstringed. The limping hero, one shoe on, one shoe off, the missing sandal, the single footed, the dancer, the shaman. I go through life doing the same old thing over and over and then one day it's different. I've reached a threshold. Step across, carrying the bride of my enlightenment or disillusionment.

Half way up the switchback he paused for a breath and stared at the ranks of clouds like the charred red bricks of a sacrificial altar. The physical exertion contributed greatly to the distribution of drugs through his system. Glazed by the failing light, his thoughts unconcerned of his body drifted to the checkout stand of a neighborhood bodega the previous week and the photo of Chris Salas looking torn and tattered with a couple of buxom blondes on the cover of a hip tabloid for an article entitled *Pearls Before Swine* with the caption *He's got a woman on each arm and more waiting in the limo.* The editor at Random House had been quite pleased with his article on Salas in PRIQ and had even offered to consider a manuscript of selected poems. Yet another crisis of self-worth presented itself to be ignored and denied, and along with it an evil procrastination. His problem was that he had an opinion about everything except himself. He'd always operated under a cloud of profound doubt that no amount of jolly approbation would ever completely alleviate. He had to make a choice. Go with Amber Chiffon's Iron On Press offer of a collected, or take the Random House proposal for a selected. Nora advised that he take the Random House offer, and like a good agent and friend, had made a point of keeping a file of all his published poems so she was able to throw together a substantial selection. She reasoned that delaying a collected until a few years down the road would ensure better sales once he had a book from a nationally prominent publisher. What to call it, though. He was leaning toward *So Long* knowing that Norma would veto it. It had the particular kind of ambiguity that appealed to him. On the



other hand, he could play to the classics crowd and title it *Ad Hoc*. Then again, in plain old American, *On The Fly*.

All I know is that every six months or so I die. I have died a hundred times a hundred, and it's always the same death. I don't know what dies, and why I have to be reborn again, always with the same high hopes, always the identical death. Death is a return to the cocoon. I should have died young like all the other promising poetry talent but through some fluke I was passed over. Now I am caught in the thrall of the denial of death syllogism: other men die, I am not other men, therefore I cannot die. I live.

How would he die? Sparks and flashes of genius, profound realizations and insight dropping from his lips like polished gems or just the inevitable downhill curve into equilibrium, excitement in the cells satiated and static, the white noise of nothing. He looked down at his feet, one step at a time. What does a man think about when he is going to die? The most mundane things. Not his legacy, not how he will be viewed once he is gone. His shoelace was untied, the other shoe missing. The meeting he had with a tax lawyer and how all that big money he had been awarded had strings attached, that he would once again find himself impoverished and scuffling. That cup of coffee he might be enjoying along with a few carefree thoughts. Laundry, always laundry, down to his last pair of clean briefs. His finger nails needed trimming as did his hair. And there was Pedro Contraras, Pete the Contrarian, in his barber shop on Sanchez and Market. Anything anyone said, he had a contradiction. He always said the same thing after a haircut: "You got nice hair, it cuts well. You got hair like a Mexican."

I have always followed my own path side-stepping the golden road for an uncertain cobble, more at ease at a pace that is mine, unhurried in the process though unsure of its eventuality, confident that it will end somewhere.

The parking lot stood empty as did he for a moment there, uncertain. A few cars and trucks whizzed by on the highway with obviously no intention of stopping. The windows of the Emporium were shadowed, the pale false front colored by the setting sun as were the coastal hills beyond outlined in a rapidly darkening orange. Lights showed among the shadowy folds of the hillside, or they might have been windows reflecting the

last of the daylight, perhaps some of them belonging to Angie and Samantha's home. Angie never got his messages. Or had ignored them. But he didn't want to think that. Or maybe she tried returning his call to a nonfunctioning cell phone. The wind stiffened at the top of the bluff, knifing through the thin blanket enclosing his shoulders and deepened his despair. He had retrieved his wallet, stuffed it with soggy bills, his bank card and ID. He had one cigarette left. He didn't care about the rest. He could at least recover some semblance of himself if not his dignity, ironically, with money. He cast around as if an answer to his dilemma would be presented somewhere among the pale windswept grasses and spiny shrubs. A trail marker pointed the direction to *Bear's Head Lookout* just off the parking lot. He followed it to find himself peering down at the waves and the very spot among the rocks he had just vacated.

What will they say about me when I'm gone? "He was a bit of a bastard and a bit of a genius too. He could be an egotistical drunk and even *he* hated his guts." Some might even say I was being too easy on myself. Besides when I imagine someone saying something about me, they never say anything I don't already know. I die.

**In the Romanticism of his inclination** at the precipice there emerged a disheveled chitchat. Like Empedocles, he would leave his sandals on the cliff and gaze toward Abendland, the vesperal land of sundown and freedom. How an eddy of fire roars suddenly from the setting of the sun. "One must die a man to be a man," a voice spoke to him, "The death of the hero resembles the setting sun." Although Pindar's poems were already reduced to silence by the disinclination of the multitude for elegant learning, he at least remembered a final stanza from the Odes.

*Creatures for a day! What is a man?  
What is he not?  
A mortal's dream of a shadow.  
But when there comes to men  
A gleam of splendor given of heaven,  
Then rests on them a light of glory  
And blessed are their days*

He paraphrased Browning: “Just when I think I’m safest, there’s sunset’s touch.” A daunting distance is death as is the sunset the hero rides off into. “That courageous and tremulous sunset, indivisible! Like an arrow shot through the heart, kimo sabe,” Tonto spoke. But then what did Shaw say? “Death is easy. It’s comedy that’s hard.” Or Dylan Thomas’ famous last joke, “I’ve had eighteen straight whiskeys. I think that’s a record.” Death is cruel when it comes right in the middle of writing something. Did Goethe understand when he called for “More light!” that it was death’s encroaching shroud shadow and not that the wick on his lamp needed trimming? Thoreau’s dying delirium produced not unexpectedly “Moose Indian” as was Alfred Jarry’s “bring me a toothpick” appropriately blasé and nonplussed. Nor will a dying wish necessarily be honored as Kafka’s “burn everything I have written” proves. The last gasp is the final opportunity to admonish the world as Joyce did, echoing the sentiments of all writers throughout the ages: “Nobody gets it.” The last time he spoke with Dorian Pillsbury, the old epicurean had complained, “This new medication kills my appetite so I might as well die. I’m not going to suffocate, I’m going to starve to death!” Toward Dick Granahan’s last days they had traded famous last words in a desperate dark humored denial of the inevitable. Granahan obviously had the upper hand as he had been preoccupied for some time with what his last words might be as well as what people would say about him once he’d passed. The dying poet had served up a fragment from Lucretius, “Therefore death is nothing to us.” He had lobbed back with Chesterton’s “Desire life like water yet drink death like wine.” His old friend backhanded a classic with Voltaire’s well known “Now is not a good time to be making new enemies.” He in turn volleyed with Wilde’s deathbed words: “My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or the other of us has to go.” Granahan, in an academic aside, reminded him that it was Rabelais who said “I am setting off to seek a vast perhaps.” And he had parried with the opinion that it was a mistranslation from the medieval French and that it should have been translated as “a vast perhaps not.” They had also speculated on what the last words of Orpheus might have been. “What’s that howling?” Or when he spied the maenads approaching, “Yikes!”

**When I still held the idea** that I would end up in the ground like everyone else, I wanted the quote from Tristan Shandy on my tombstone, *De Gustibus non disputandum est*. I’ll settle for *I am not done reading*. Now more like the Icarus of my previous days I’m tempted to fly into the sun

but reborn in my epiphany as Daedalus, I hesitate, my shadow tangled around my feet. The owl of Minerva flies at dusk, something that Daedalus should have reminded Icarus, when the sun's effect on wax wings is diminished. Where does that leave me? People don't want the soul-fashioned-out-of-thin-air stuff anymore. They want conceptual and commercial or tritely trendy tried and true. No soaring on wax wings, no clambering up to a seventh heaven, no leaps off cliffs, metered feet fitted with the conventional cement of sensible shoes.

So who is the one called Wendt? To whom the mail is addressed, whose name appears as a byline or on the title page of books and in discussions on the art of poetry. It would not be obvious just by looking at him that he was well known as a poet although in the eyes of some he was a poseur, a mountebank, a throwback, a full-time charlatan. As it was, he recognized himself less in his own books than he did in those of others. His life was a flight from himself. Everything he ever was or could be was lost to inevitable oblivion. He couldn't even remember which one of his selves had written this. Ink like blood flows in the slow spill of a lifelong intellectual sacrifice or suicide.

To be successful you have to believe in something. At the very least, yourself. I am too skeptical of everything, even myself, to be truly successful. I follow Descartes' original proposition, *dubito ergo sum*, I doubt therefore I am. Even my small successes are not my own, but those of others who see something in my work, something worthwhile. Moments of faith have allowed me to write and being able to write allowed me faith. Yet I undermine it all by my lack of conviction beyond that original instance of creation. I'm only as good as my next poem. And a poem is just another bread crumb in the journey through the deep dark forest. The older I get the more I realize that it's not just that the competition gets better, it also gets cuter. As Granahan once advised, "If all you got is technique, you ain't got much." Rationalizing with every breath, I follow the way of why, seeking the answer, any answer. But it's always someone else's answer and I hate being told what to do. Imprisoned behind the solitude of a fervent smile I am a virulent fever passing through a lukewarm crowd as my natural cowardice shrinks from the occasion. I mythologize my life to give it meaning at the most basic anthropomorphic level. Impatient with the slow return and low interest yield of poetry, impatient with a life that continually marginalizes me. Poets, like gypsies, are each about as welcome in polite society.

The wind riffled the edges of the army blanket wrapped round him lifting the free folds like the edges of a cape and in turn shuffled the neocortex rolodex between his ears and stopped at the appropriate citation. "It is he of the billowing greatcoat, Cedric Silkyshag." Or Lazlo Pierce, his alter ego lothario, expert in passion. How does the Iliad end? He was a refugee from the age of heroes.

I am the hero poet awakening the sleeping images of the future which can and must come forth from the night in order to give the world a new and better face. I am the enemy of the old ruling system, of the old cultural values. Poets are necessarily anonymous. "I am a voice with no name," echo the ages. Poets should prize their anonymity.

No sign of Angie the high winding whine of gears shifted up into cruising speed streaking taillights down the twilight highway reminded him. Angela Rhona Notti, named after Angerona, goddess of the winter solstice, she who gives the wheel of light a kick to keep it moving, angel of night. He was abandoned, a sad gunny sack at the side of the road, or more accurately at the edge of a cliff. Groggy from the effects of the pain killer and alcohol he leaned forward as if that would offer a better view of his predicament, numbly unconcerned. "When I die nothing of our love will have existed." He had no idea where that came from.

The absurd excitability of my system which forces me to create crisis out of every experience and puts drama into the smallest incidents of life makes it impossible to count on me in any way. I am no longer a poet. And then I am. At most I am a rendezvous of poets who, from time to time, appear as that one or this one with cocky insistence. For this very reason, like in some B western I find myself riding off into the sunset. Destiny imposes its own consistency and my thoughts and wishes are but a pretext for what I find myself doing. No passion, no act of heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling will preserve my life beyond the grave. All the labors of all my days, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the high noon brightness of my genius are destined for extinction in the vast solar munch, and the whole edifice of my literary achievement will inevitably be buried with me. A poet once wrote, "When I die I want to be buried in a book." Needless to say, it was his own book. The Fates do not have "needless" in their vocabulary. Death is the ultimate defining instance. To live in the present is to live facing death. Man invented

eternity and the future to escape death, but each of these inventions is a fatal trap. Only in facing death is life really life. Within the now, death is not separated from life. Both are the same reality. The search for immortality is a dead end in the labyrinth of existence. Death chews us up from the moment of birth and then shits us back out into a hole in the ground.

**The blanket slipped from a shoulder** and the dying breath of sunset pushed against his chilled torso, pulled at his sodden sanded hair. “I’m rich! I’m famous! Why can’t I happy with that?” And that caused him to cackle knowingly. He imagined the mess he must look. He just wished the day would end. Even if there was no guarantee of another one? Even. He was nothing, when he should have been everything. The search for absolute beauty is the quest for death, the exercise of reason’s constant critique of mortality. From a technical point of view, the world is comical. Death knells come cheap.

I tell my life to myself as dreams, images, fantasies, and an array of deliberate states reflective of the vast inherent power of cerebral activity underlying consciousness. What I speak is never the absolute truth. It’s either a half truth or a truth and a half. I understand now that I am essentially a monologist in poet’s clothing. First of all, the monologue is an art without an audience. And without an audience, the expressions of artist and art don’t exist. It is an art of forgetting and of forgetting myself as a function that eliminates the subject, indifferent to the outcome. In this boundless universe everything is arranged according to the principle of cosmic necessity as a manifestation without self-consciousness. My monologue begets the world itself. The boundaries of art are breached yet no originality is attempted because to try to treat the monologue in terms of esthetics is pointless. The eternal monologue that accompanies my consciousness overcomes all obstacles and concentrates much too much in every nuance in the steady erotic connection with language only possible in perfect solitude. All distraction disappears and nothing remains but a hidden maze and the echo of fragments in endless pursuit of each other. I don’t know of any more profound difference in the whole orientation of an artist, whether I look at my work in progress, essentially at myself, from the point of view of a witness or whether I have forgotten the world, simply humming a tune to myself.

As a child he’d once caught a striped turtle in the creek while staying with

his father on the commune for the summer. He took it home to Indianapolis when the school year began. He had named it The City of Clay Flowers. Was that an indication of his future poetic talents? Or maybe Peggy, his mother, had called it that. The turtle was in the habit of leaving gray amorphous lumps in various corners around the house. Maybe he misheard and she had really named it the “shitter of clay flowers.”

Well, it's been going this way for a while, impatient with the inevitable, I want to hurry it along, don't cry for me Argentina or Paraguay or Slovenia or Madagascar. It's been a great ride, and I got everything I deserved, good and bad, and maybe a little something that belonged to someone else. And know that I loved you, all of you, but there was only so much I could give after I served myself. Thank you for your belief, your disbelief, your indulgence, your indifference. You won't get hurt if you stand back out of the way, look on objectively and consider it the end of an era, my era and error, a bid for freedom, me free of pain and suffering, you free of me and my pain and suffering.

He felt a chill that cooled his liver and made him shiver. “This is the way the world will end, in rays, red,” Kerouac had dreamed, “silent, tired—the world of the mind is the real world—the rays of the mind, the real rays.” The old king must die before a new one is born, his legacy his grand illusion.

Gazing at the dying sun, what anthropomorphic arrogance is it that steals the essence of cosmic eternity and absurdly imputes it to an immortal self? Why must I insist on combining the attributes of myself with that of the universe? To be a poet means to calmly weigh the eventual terror and degradation of impotence at averting my own death and that of my friends and lovers, and by extension, the death of a clueless feisty species, the death of the planet, incubator of a vaunted sentience. And even the death of its vital star, that bright orange dollop sinking into the ironic sea. Will anyone mourn that in this place over a span of untold eons there once lived poetic intelligence?

He lit his last cigarette and stepped to the edge to relieve himself. As he watched the unremitting froth of breakers spray phosphorescent arcs among the jagged dark shapes below, hypnotic in their mutability, his attention turned to the next swell of wave approaching as the edge of a mysterious and chimerical energy. And what exactly is the attraction of

that shaped force consisting of undifferentiated particles caught up in concert until it breaks into the disarrayed individual wash of ephemeral droplets? It was all he could do not to join the cosmic undulation and become a part of it all. He contributed a little of himself anyway which pretty much summed up his life as a poet, a piss in the ocean.

I am as eternal as the universe and so the endless sea of matter, constantly unfolding enfolded forms, will find something else to do with me. Then my spirit should not be afflicted or frightened for I am this enchanted unity stable in my oneness and will remain so eternally. I am a non-symbolic thing signifying what I am. Those who consider the divine one thing and I another do not know. I is another, the rest is silence.

He recalled an old blues lyric “don’t the sun look good going down over the double tree.” But then the sun doesn’t necessarily always set, sometimes it just disappears. Nightfall is no mere failure of sunlight. He waited for it, the green flash, the exact instant that the sun plummets into the sea. “Adios, you who watched the sun go down. . . smiling.” He smiled to himself surprised to have summoned up of the last line in *Visions of Cody*. “Adios, King.” Yes, adios to this sweet shadow which beneath the surface makes things visible from the moment of birth but is the immediacy of death redoubling the world like a peeled orange. “The night is now!” he proclaimed as if in command. He looked out over the darkening expanse and the thought of it filled him with dread. It was a vast graveyard of everything that ever lived. And below, set afloat by the encroaching tide, his satchel bobbing on a swell like a drunken boat bound for China. He found himself at the edge of the cliff in the classic “*reculer pour mieux sauter*” situation, as if pulling back for a better leap was the answer. “A word, a word, my kingdom for a word” he shouted his desperate parody above the roar of the beast filled sea. But nothing. Silence. The motion of the ocean. The undulating carpet of animated water. “Life!” he cried, “for is there nothing sweeter granted us mortals than this life in the sunlight?” If happiness is the quality that sums up the whole of life then its realization must wait until it finds completion in death. He reminded himself that Nietzsche had once said “Human beings do not desire happiness, only Englishmen desire happiness.” Life is a horizontal free fall. When faced with death, everything is a loose end.

Unseen, unrelated, inconceivable, uninferable, unimaginable, indescribable essence of self common to all consciousness in which all ceases as



peace, bliss, not me nor I.

The image came to him of lemmings leaping en masse off a cliff into the sea. He was the last lemming, late for his own demise. Name is the guest of reality and he'd overstayed his welcome. Death is inherently personal. It called him by his name. "Death."

Death stands above me, whispering low I know not what into my ear.

A screech of brakes followed the squeal of tires. A slammed car door brought him out of his reverie. The headlight beams hit him square in the back, projecting his fleeting shadow onto the scrim of mist. His impulse was to reach after it. The updraft pushed against his chest as if it were strong enough to hold him aloft. He took note of the stark naked weeds in the artificial light at the edge of the cliff where it gave way.

beams

    fleeting

        reach

          aloft

            naked

              artificial

                edge

As accomplice to the rising wind, a desperate voice cried out,  
    **"WENDT!!"**