No small comfort

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NO SMALL COMFORT

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Failure, Manifest: A Statement of Aesthetics

In this introductory chapter there is nothing new to be said and it will not be possible to avoid repeating what has often been said before.

-Freud The Ego and the Id

Without access to the Greek mind, we cannot understand the epic impulse, the narrative drive that sparks Western art and thinking. It is a beautiful object we turn over in our hands. It won't quite let us in, and so our inception is refused, separated from our understanding.

The Pentateuch more properly directs our artistic thinking. What we mistakenly recognize as epic is there driven by program. The story is program, of program. The story is a people, of a people. All sense of serious western art stems from this principle. We distinguish between the trivial and the meaningful in terms of programmatic import.
The text works upon you. Or it doesn't. This is the standard.

What is most important is an honest acceptance of a simple fact: poetry is failed project. From the Pentateuch on, the abiding, challenging, and powerful texts are not just records of a struggle, but documents of failure. Drawing from any cabalistic source you might, the sustaining belief in the power of language to work upon one, to work upon the world, to alter reality, is everywhere accompanied by the stirring words of an artist whose words fail.

The Romantic project, still with us today, brings this fact to the fore. In this fact's blinding light, movement after movement has shielded its eyes, stood is revolt, or simply been annihilated. Be it Victorian 'Decadence,' Modernist gall, or three-quarter century of 'ferocious mumbling', every reworking of the project carries with it its failure.

The greatest art recognizes this fact, stares it in the eye. Is it possible today, as ones who have flooded in excess with Blake, as ones who have so desperately approached silence with Beckett, can we still attempt to wield words as spells? A quick survey tells us, no: the project, as project, is immediately held suspect, even by those who don't recognize the fact. But truly, yes, of course we must. What is called for is a tragic sense --oh, that the Greeks are so far from us-- in which the failure of words is enacted in its own glorious, if grotesque, dance of
death: *Le sacre du prétemps* in prose, primitive and knowing, passionate though not naive. A movement back from the poet as seer to the poet as blindman, stumbling in the dark of language, standing at the precipice guided only by our bastard sons, prepared always to fall. For a world in which one would die for the sake of dying words, that can only be a world changed. And if, instead, one found a strength to live in such a world...
Iron has powers to draw a man to ruin.
- The Odyssey 19; 14

Some kinds of love are mistaken for vision.
- Lou Reed

1. Common Sense

   It was mutual, the feeling. They were agreed. Joe Hatchet would be easy to kill, and they were the men to do it. So Jack Bleeker and Art Small headed out to Tower road to do the job, but as they neared Saunder’s Wrecking yard, Art let on to Jack that he had a terrible thirst and Jack said he could use a little something, so while they were feeling agreeable, they passed Saunder’s and continued on down Tower road to Barney’s. They pulled up in the gravel in front of Barney’s, stepped out of Jack’s truck, and they could hear the steady thrum of the giant power lines that ran all up and down Tower road. It was not a comfortable
sound, Jack said, and Art had to admit, it was not his favorite.

Inside Barney's, they could still hear the sound of the wires, but it was down, underneath the other sounds. There was the jukebox playing Patsy Cline so low you could barely make it out. There was some talk between Gerry Hert and Will Parker, up at the bar. There was the familiar scrape and suck as Carl the bartender opened the steel-doored cooler. And there was the bubble bubble gurg of the fish tank that took up most of the far wall, red light shining on yellow gravel and big tropical fish just swimming back and forth. And the hum of the lines. And the two men's thirst.

"Carl. How's things?" Jack said, setting down on a stool beside Gerry Hert.

"Things is things," Carl the bartender said, not unkindly. He was a ropy man, shorter than he looked, thin and strong.

"How about a couple beers? Art and I've got some work to do."

And Carl the bartender produced two beers before Jack had even stopped speaking. Carl the bartender had seen them coming. Art set down next to Jack, sipped his beer. Gerry Hert was telling Will Parker about maiming Johnny Handsome the time he found him with his wife. Picked up a whole chest of drawers and brought it down on Johnny. They had to take that arm off above the elbow.
Jack was thinking now, so he turned to Art and said, "Art, I'm thinking now. How we gonna do this thing? You have a gun?"

And Art looked shocked. "Jack, you know I don't have a gun. With children in my house? Don't take me for a fool."

Art took another drink of beer. "You have a gun?"

"Have one, but it's at home. Locked up," he added quickly.

"Well I've got a knife, but it's only about three inches in the blade. Don't know that would do it."

"Let me see that knife," Jack said, and Art pulled the knife from his belt. Jack opened the knife and the blade snapped into place. That was another sound. It was a wide blade, curved at the tip, with a fake horn handle.

"I just don't know," Jack confessed. "I suppose it depends on where you're putting it."

Jack held the knife up to Art's chest, squinting his eyes like he was taking measurements. He turned Art on the stool and tried to gauge how far into his ribs the blade would go.

"I suppose it might work. If you got the heart just so."

"I don't know. Where exactly is the heart anyway? On the left? In the middle?" Art poked around in his shirt, looking.

"What're you boys up to?" Gerry Hert said, turning on his stool to face them.
Jack and Art exchanged meaningful glances and finding wordlessly that they agreed, they took their beers, and Jack took Gerry Hert by the elbow and they all three went over to a booth, past the fish swimming, and scrunched in.

“All right, Gerry, we’re looking at putting this knife into Joe Hatchet’s heart and making off with all the cash at Saunders’. We’ll split it three ways if you help, if you help us really do the thing.”

Gerry Hert looked thoughtful, then concerned. “What makes you think there’s money worth stealing at Saunders’?”

“Art took in his mother’s Buick this morning, and Kenny Greene gave him one hundred and forty dollars for it. Right there out of the till. They’ve got that kind of cash in the register. The point is, Kenny told Art that he was heading into town today, so Joe’s back there all by his lonesome, waiting for us to put a knife in him. Easy as cake.” Jack sat back in the booth and took a drink.

“Well I don’t have any business with Joe Hatchet,” Gerry said. “If you want someone to go in with you, you should talk to Ben Painter.”

“It’s not so much that we want someone to go in with us, it’s just, we were trying to decide how to do it. All we’ve got is this knife.” And Jack pushed the knife across the table.

Gerry picked up the knife, opened it, click, closed it again. “Yeah, that would do it. Just put it in and twist it.” Gerry twisted the invisible blade into the invisible
Joe Hatchet and the invisible Joe Hatched died. "That’s the way they taught it in the corps."

"Makes sense to me," said Jack, and Art agreed.

"You ever seen Joe out there working that crane?" Gerry asked.

"Never have," Jack answered, and Art shook his head.

"His brother gets him up into the seat, and he just runs that thing like nobody’s business. The crane with the big magnet. Boy can’t walk, and man, he’s up there moving those cars around."

"It would be nice to have a magnet like that," Jack said, but Art corrected him.

"Couldn’t do it. You could never drive a thing like that away. You’d be hitting power lines all the way down Tower road."

And the three men all nodded their heads together. That was true. You couldn’t argue that. That just made good sense.

2. Real Time

Ben Painter had been off almost all his life. At least that’s how it seemed. Three years lost in Deer Lodge and a full, irretrievable decade gone to alcohol. But Ben Painter was getting things under control, straightening up, trying to set things right and get back on it. On the back of his left hand, the ink still fresh and the skin still raised,
was a roman eagle in red and black. On his right hand was a solid black cross that he’d had done three weeks before. Erik from the brotherhood had complimented the cross and lifted his sleeve to show Ben the eagle on his shoulder. That’s power, he’d told Ben, and Ben had believed him. But now, Ben was worried. When he spread his fingers, the eagle looked alright, but when he closed his fist it distorted, the wingtips pulling out.

He was driving down Tower road, flexing and unflexing his hand, watching the eagle shift, when he hit the fox. He pulled over, not sure what it had been, and climbed out. The fox was still in the middle of the road and very much alive. Its back legs were a pulpy mess, chunks of bone shoved out at the hip, but the fox was still moving, scraping its front legs and trying to pull itself off the road. It made a sound like brakes squeaking, an almost constant sound that rode high above the moan of the power lines, and Ben knew what he should do, what his father’d have done. He thought about the forty-five in his glove box. He stepped up closer, took the fox by the neck, wondering that the animal didn’t even try to bite him, turned its face up toward his own. Its eyes were perfectly round. It looked dead, but he could feel its breathing and the legs kept waving. He set it back down gently.

Standing at the center line of Tower road, Ben Painter pulled off his white t-shirt, bent down, and wrapped it carefully around the fox’s bottom half. The fabric went dark
instantly, and Ben picked up the animal, holding it like a babydoll, and carried it back to the truck. In the truck, Ben pulled a blue flannel shirt out from back of the seat. He wrapped this around the fox as well. The fox was trying to sit up, to look around. It continued with the high squealing, louder now, inside the truck. Ben started up the engine, put it in gear. Down Tower road a ways, he passed Saunders’ wrecking yard. He could see the big magnet on the crane, hanging motionless. He thought of Joe Greene, lying with a hatchet in his back, realized he didn’t really remember this. These were shared memories, common knowledge. But it was still true. Ben looked at the fox.

“I do believe you are a sign. Well, don’t you worry, we’ll get you fixed up.”

The fox laid its head down on the seat, whimpered.

“Call you Joseph,” he said to the fox. “My past come back and, for once, didn’t try and bite my hand.”

Ben smiled at the fox and at himself for his own cleverness. He pulled into the gravel in front of Barney’s. The fox lifted its head again.

“We’ll get you a drink,” he said to the fox as he raised it off of the seat.

There was a small, dark stain on the seat. Ben carried the fox inside. The place went quiet when he came in, like in a western movie, and this was for two good reasons. One: Ben Painter had been on the wagon for six months and everyone knew it. And two: he was bare chested, carrying
some half dead thing that had smeared blood up his arm and let out a sharp whining cry.

"What you got there?" Carl the bartender said.

"Joseph," Ben answered.

"What is he?" asked Gerry Hert.

"Sign, symbol, and prodigal returned," Ben said.

"Dog," said Jack Bleeker, and Art Small agreed.

"It’s a fox," Corrected Ben.

"Well get it the fuck out," called Will Parker from his stool.

"We’re going to save this animal, boys. But right now, I think it needs a little something for the pain. And I believe Will just volunteered to buy the first round. Carl, how about a bourbon?"

Carl poured a shot of bourbon into a glass.

"How you plan on giving it?" he asked.

"Only one way to drink bourbon, Carl." Ben set the fox down on the bar, lifted its snout, and pried the little jaws open. Holding the jaws apart with his left hand, he picked up the bourbon with the right.

"The blood and the life," he smiled, and he poured the shot down into the fox’s throat. The fox coughed, gagged, shook its head violently, whined, relaxed. The men all cheered.

"That thing won’t make it through the night," Will Parker said.
“I’ll take that bet,” said Ben Painter, and he ordered another bourbon.

“This one’s on me,” cried Jack Bleeker.

Ben repeated the operation, and this time the fox didn’t gag, but took it down, shook its head again, and lay back down. Its whining had ceased.

“Hey Carl, hand me that phone,” said Ben. Carl lifted the phone up and set it beside the fox.

“It’s bleeding on the bar, Ben.”

Ben smiled, picked up the receiver and dialed. Doctor Reverend Jim was neither a doctor nor a reverend, but he was a bit of both to the men at Barney’s. Doc picked up the phone and growled into it.

“Yes.”

“Doctor Reverend, this here’s Ben Painter. I’m down at Barney’s.”

“Well then, God forgive you.”

“I’ve got a little problem down here.”

“God bless the child that’s got his own.”

“Think you might come down and take a look?”

“Ben, there’s not an axe in nobody’s back is there? Just call in the police, Ben.”

“Just come down. Bring your bag,” said Ben, and he hung up.

Everyone was quiet for a bit. They looked back and forth at each other, at the fox, at Ben Painter, shirtless and bloody. The hum of the lines was big. The tropical fish
swam back and forth and then back again. In the quiet they could hear Roy Orbison singing *Ooby Dooby*, and that was alright. That was nice. The fox was sleeping or dead, but Ben put a hand on it and it was still breathing. Carl the bartender gave Ben a towel, and Ben did his best to wipe the dried blood from his arms and chest. The men all stood around watching the muscles shifting around in his shoulders and back. Ben Painter was a thing to see.

A half an hour went by and there was no Doctor, no Reverend, no Jim. Ben called his house again, but there was no answer either. He put his hand on the fox and he could barely feel the breathing. The fox was going to die.

"This fox is going to die," Ben said to the floor.

"That’s what I told you," said Will Parker.

"The Doc will be here, Ben. He’ll know what to do."

And then the fox was awake, but bad awake, shaking like with a fever and the sound coming from its throat like a sick thing. It’s eyes had whites to them now where they didn’t before, and it kept opening it’s mouth and snapping its jaws at nothing.

"This ain’t right, Ben," said Carl the bartender.

"Carl’s right," said Jack Bleeker. "That animal’s suffering."

Art Small just nodded his head, looked sad, slowly shook it from side to side, like he just couldn’t make up his mind. There was angel music from the jukebox. Jack
Bleeker took out Art’s knife and set it down on the bar beside the fox.

"It ain’t right for a thing to suffer," Gerry Hert whispered.

“That fucking sound is killing me,” said Will Parker. He was drunk now for sure.

Ben picked up the knife. Click. That was the blade. The angel music was rising now, high strings and trumpets.

“We’re put on this world to suffer,” said Ben Painter, tears in his eyes. “Who’s to say when we’ve had enough?”

But the men all told him it was the thing to do, that it was right, that it was kind, that that’s what the fox was wanting now more than anything. Tears fell on Ben’s chest, mixing with flecks of dried blood, rolling red down his stomach. He wrapped his left hand around the fox’s snout, knife in his right, and quick as can be, he cut the fox’s throat, nearly cut the head clean off. Blood pooled on the bar, but nobody, not even Carl seemed to notice. Ben lowered the fox’s head and turned away. Everyone was quiet. Even the angels had stopped their song. The fish stopped their swimming, just hanging there in the water. There was just the hum of the lines and the squeak of Will Parker’s stool as he turned to Ben.

“About fucking time,” Will Parker said. “I was about to do it myself.”

So Ben Painter put the knife in his neck.
3. Barroom Girls

Johnny Handsome came through the door with an angel on each arm, which was a bit of a joke, considering. His left sleeve was pinned up at the shoulder, but the angel’s hand still held on where the arm should have been. Like the ghost of the arm. That’s the way with angels. Merle Haggard was on the Jukebox, but that skipped and skreeched when they came through the door, and the angels on Johnny’s arms were singing something so high and sweet that everyone looked up from their drinks. Jack Bleeker says they were singing the Ave Maria, and Art Small, with a little coaxing, agrees. Carl the Bartender swears those angels were singing The Star Spangled Banner. Gerry Hert thinks it was John Henry, but admits it could have been Mystery Train just as easy. Will Parker didn’t hear a thing, dead as he was, lying on the barroom floor, one foot caught up in the stool. But it’s Ben Painter who tells it best, who saw it all, and he says that when Johnny Handsome came in, he was walking with two perfect angels, one with red curly hair and the other black skinned with long braids, and they were singing The Old Rugged Cross with voices so sweet and so pure that it rang in their glasses, set the lights swaying, and put the
quivering shakes through the puddle of blood that stretched out from around Will Parker’s body.

The angels stopped at Will Parker, their feet just above the floor, their reflections red in the blood, and though they cried then, tears of grief and sadness for Ben Painter, bottle in his hand, who’d done this terrible thing, they kept singing and the sound didn’t waver or falter once.

"Holy Shit, is that Will Parker?" asked Johnny Handsome.

"The body laid low by a good man’s hand," said the angels together. "The first step to the promised land, slain by Moses and blessed by God."

"Holy shit, Ben. You’ve done it now."

And the three of them moved in around Ben, and Ben was all but surrounded by looking faces, but he just looked back and forth at the angels’ faces. Their mouths were dark flowers and their eyes fox’s eyes.

"What you gonna do?" asked Johnny Handsome.

"Get the hell out," answered Jack Bleeker.

"That’d be for the best," said Art Small.

"If you got going quick, we could tell the police something. Say we didn’t see you," said Carl the Bartender.

"Why’d you have to do it?" asked the angels.

"He was suffering," said Ben.

"Not long," said Gerry Hert. "Dead before he hit the floor."

"He was suffering and I was to blame."
“We’re put on this world to suffer,” said the fox.

“Will Parker never could keep his mouth shut,” said Johnny Handsome.

“He didn’t have to kill him though,” said Jack Bleeker.

“Suffering,” said Ben.

“Who’s to say when we’ve had enough?” asked the fox.

“Who’s to say?” said the angels.

“You got any cash?” asked Jack Bleeker.

“I didn’t even see him,” said Ben.

“That reminds me, Jack,” said Carl the bartender, “you were paying for that second bourbon.”

“Hit him on the road,” explained Ben.

“I didn’t even try to bite,” said the fox. “You’ve got power.”

“Ben, I’ve got an idea,” said Jack Bleeker. “I know where you can get some cash. To get out of town on.”

“Power in your hand,” said the fox.

The angels took Ben by his hands. The angel with red hair let his right hand rest in the her palm, and traced the cross with her finger.

“The sign of forgiveness,” said the angel.

“You come with me and Art, down to Saund’rs Wrecking.”

The black skinned angel held Ben’s other hand, looked at the eagle there. She looked sad or tired or ashamed.

“Is this your power, Ben?” she asked him.

“It’s all wrong,” he said.
"It’s just a matter of finishing what you started with Joe Hatchet,” said Jack Bleeker.

“It just isn’t right,” Ben said, flexing and unflexing his fingers.

“These things that you’ve done,” said the angels, “how will you make up for them?”

“I don’t think I can,” said Ben.

“Don’t you love me, Ben?” asked the black skinned angel.

“Don’t you love me, Ben?” asked the fox.

“Don’t you love me, Ben?” asked Will Parker.

“Are you even listening to me, Ben?” asked Jack Bleeker.

“Of course,” answered Ben.

“You just put it in and twist it,” said Jack Bleeker.

Art Small nodded his head.

“That’s the way they taught it in the corps,” said Gerry Hert.

“Or with a chest of drawers,” said Johnny Handsome.

“You have the power,” said the angels.

“You just go on, Ben,” said Carl the bartender. “I’ll clean up here.”

“You must offer the right hand of forgiveness,” said the angels.

“I don’t know how,” said Ben.

“Find the cause of your suffering, dear,” said the angels.
“Easy as cake,” said Jack Bleeker.
“I think I understand,” said Ben.
“Of course you do,” said the angels.
“You always have,” said the fox.
“Sign, symbol, and prodigal returned,” sang the angels.
Ben leaned forward and kissed the angels, one after the other, on their foreheads. Their skin was cool like stone. Then he stepped away from the crowd, over Will Parker’s body, lifted the limp and heavy fox from the bar, and turned at the door.
“I’ve a need to talk to Joe Hatchet,” he said.
“That’s a fine idea,” said Jack Bleeker.
“Just hurry,” said Carl.
“Foriveness,” sang the angels.
“Foriveness,” cried the fox.
“Just get the fuck out,” cried Will Parker.
And Ben Painter went out into the daylight, angels singing in the room behind, and headed down Tower road. Iron drawn by the stone.

Doctor Reverend Jim was heading down, too late, to Barney’s, when he saw Ben Painter, underneath the powerlines, walking down the shoulder of Tower road, something in his arms. For the best, thought Doctor Reverend Jim. Best that he just get home and be rested. And Jim thought of Joe Greene lying with a hatchet in his back and Ben Painter asleep on the floor beside him. He’d seen this.
He still saw it. He watched Ben Painter getting smaller in his side mirror. Ben Painter was a thing to see, and then he couldn’t see him. He wondered what that might have to do with faith. Nothing, he thought. And, "Nothing," he said out loud to himself. He heard those about the same.

4. Hawks and Doves

Ben Painter saw the crane first, a black hand reaching up into the white sky. He looked at his own hands. This seemed to him a natural train of thinking. Marks on his hands. Symbols, he thought. A nice word. He said it out loud. "Symbols." He thought of water from a pump. This didn’t surprise him. He was used to thinking in this way. He looked up again and the crane was bigger now, looking more like a crane and less like a hand. He dropped his hands back to his sides and looked toward the crane and the magnet, just visible, a thick disk hanging from an invisible wire. Symbol, he kept thinking.

When he got to the gate of Saunder’s Wrecking, he stared up at the sign, yellow with red chipped letters. Wrecking was a good word too. He looked at his hands again. Symbols. He went into the yard and up to the office. It was a tiny glassed up place, dark. He went inside.

Joe Hatchet was sitting behind the counter, working at a long column of numbers on the back of an envelope.
“Hold on a second, Ben,” he said without looking up. He chewed the eraser of his pencil. He scribbled some numbers and set down the pencil. He looked up at Ben.

“You look like shit, Ben,” he said. He looked at the dead fox in Ben’s arms, back to Ben.

“I’ve had a day,” said Ben, laying the fox on the counter.

“What exactly can I do for you?”

“I need your help.”

Joe Hatchet looked solid at Ben, rolled his chair back from the counter and came around to the front. Joe Hatchet wore fingerless gloves for getting himself around. He looked Ben up and down.

“How am I going to help you?” he asked.

Ben held out his left hand, turned it over, showed Joe the roman eagle.

“The source of all my suffering,” he said.

Joe Hatchet laughed.

“Help me,” said Ben.

Joe Hatchet stopped laughing.

“What am I supposed to do?” he asked.

Ben looked around the place. It was cramped and messy. There were papers everywhere. Leaning against the far wall was a three foot circular saw blade. Ben went over and picked it up, carried it back to Joe.

“Cut it off,” he told him.

“With that?” said Joe.
Ben looked at the blade and then set it back down.

"It’s all I have," Ben said, and he felt tears coming up.

Joe looked at him, sighed, and rolled himself back into a second room, a tinier office like a closet. He came back with a red handled ax. A fire ax. It was laying across the arms of Joe’s chair.

“I’ve got this," Joe said, lifting the ax.

Ben took it from him and held it by the handle like he was going to swing it. And then he did swing it and it stuck with a chock right into the countertop.

“Perfect," smiled Ben. Things were looking up.

He pushed the papers off of a desk and pulled up a chair. He handed the ax back to Joe, and stretched his arm out across the table.

“Okay," he said and looked away.

Joe stared at the eagle, then he looked at the ax, and he looked at his legs, lying useless in his chair.

"Why do you want this, Ben?" he asked and Ben turned back toward him.

“Forgiveness," said Ben.

“What’s this to do with forgiveness?"

"Once I’ve suffered, then you can forgive."

"That’s not forgiveness, Ben."

Ben held up his right hand, showed him the black cross.

“Symbols," he said. "Symbol of forgiveness and symbol of suffering."
“And this?” asked Joe, pointing at the eagle.

“Justice.”

Joe nodded his head, looked at Ben’s hands, one, then the other. It almost made sense. He lifted the ax. Ben looked away. He lowered the ax again.

“This is gonna hurt,” Joe said.

“Yes. I think that’s true.”

“And that’s not justice?”

“Don’t talk symbols anymore,” said Ben. “Just do the thing.”

Joe raised the ax again. He pictured it, the hand away and the blood, still at first and then pumping. Left hand. Closest to the heart. A lot of blood. He pictured the roman eagle, lying useless on the desk. He lowered the ax.

“Ben, let me tell you something first.”

Ben turned toward him again.

“The thing about pain, well, the thing is,” Joe looked around the room, like he was searching for props. “Pain isn’t all bad.”

Ben raised his right hand, smiled.

“I know,” he said.

“No, I mean like in general. You see, I thought about this a lot, right after, when they told me I wouldn’t walk. You see, Ben, I can’t feel a thing below the middle of my back. Nothing.”

Ben looked at him, tears at his eyes.
“And, I don’t want to sound all melodramatic or anything, but that pain, Ben, you can come to miss that pain.”

“I can see how that could be true,” said Ben.

“That pain is a part of you. That’s what you took from me, Ben. That’s what I can’t get back.”

Ben pulled his hand back from the table and let it rest in his lap. This wasn’t what he’d wanted to hear. This wasn’t how the angels had told it. He didn’t know what to do next.


Joe looked at the ax in his hand, looked back at Ben.

“No reason, Ben. No reason at all.”

“I don’t remember a thing about it,” Ben said, “but I know I never planned on doing a thing like that.”

“Well, planned or no, here we are.”

Joe was silent. Ben was silent. The angels were silent. The little room was silent as could be. Ben looked over at the fox, Joseph, his sign and symbol. He thought of the fox there on the bar, shivering and shaking, snapping at nothing. Who’s to say? We’re put on this world to suffer.

Ben looked at his right hand. Black cross. Mercy. Who’s to say?

“I see what I’ve done, Joe. I think I understand. You’re right, Joe. Forgiveness has nothing to do with us. Just wasn’t reading the signs. Find the source of our suffering. That’s what has to be done.”
He put his right hand out on the table, spread the fingers out flat. Black cross on white skin. His hand against the cool grey of the desk.

"I just had it backward," Ben said.

"No," Joe said.

"What do you mean, no?"

"I won't do it. Enough blood around this place," he said, nodding toward the fox. "No more justice, no more mercy. I'm through with it all."

Ben turned away. The fox, he thought. No power, no nothing. Nothing in these hands. And then he thought of Will Parker, laying on the floor of Barney's, lying there just like a man laying dead on a floor.

"No more blood and no more symbols," he agreed.

And they didn't speak, no more blood and no more symbols, but Ben Painter got up from his chair and Joe rolled over to the counter. Ben lifted the fox, its head swinging like it was on bearings. He tucked the blood-soaked shirt around it, lay it in Joe's lap.

They went back amongst the stacks of cars and engine parts, across the oils soaked ground. Ben felt suddenly nauseous and light, but he could hear the angels again, up above, singing. They came up on an old, blue Buick that was half rusted out and battered. Joe opened the trunk, set the bundle in, and shut it again. He wheeled himself back and looked at Ben.

"Can you get me up into the chair?" he asked.
Ben just nodded, not really understanding.

Joe rolled over to the crane, wiggled himself to the edge of his seat, held onto the handles on the crane’s side. Ben took Joe’s legs and lifted him up into the crane’s seat, and Joe pulled his legs in behind him. Ben sat down in Joe’s chair. He was feeling lightheaded, the sound all about him coming in. Joe started up the crane.

There was the sound of the crane’s engine, rumbling along. That was a sound. And the squeak of the big arm spinning around. That was another sound. And then Joe turned on the power to the big magnet. It was a hot buzzing thrum of a sound, and it only lasted a second, but it rolled along underneath the other sounds, mixed with the sound of the wires up above, and Ben could feel it going through him. Then there was the skreek-groan of the car coming up off its wheels and Ben Painter just sat back in the chair and laughed. Laughed to see it. A car, flying through the air, up high above his head. And the angels all singing. And Ben Painter thought to himself, what a place to be, put on this world. The things a man might see, out on Tower road.
Phaino
-a monologue in three parts-
-for S. Beckett

Part One
This is the voice of a man talking. The air moves with my breath, quivers its way out of the dark. This is elemental. They leave me here, the words. A man, sitting, speaking, waiting for the words to fall, or fade, or return. They do none of these. They simply allow themselves to be uttered. This is no great allowance. They have little power, the words. But the dark sits thick on an old man’s shoulders, leaves the hands cold. My breath no longer warm, it only shakes the air, moves with my lips. There is little movement. Sometimes the words are just sounds, like now, but they mean. They mean. They mean that my breath still moves things, if only air, that I am here, a man speaking. The others are unimportant. That’s not what I mean to say, though it is what I mean. I mean...
Listen. My boy was born blue and gasping and turned red when the air came to him. He turned red and screaming, eyes all screwed against the light. That’s how I knew he was mine, the screaming. His mother called him William, and I didn’t argue. What did I know of such things? What do I know still? William is as good a name as any. He seemed to take to it. We called him William, and I held him in my two hands. I don’t remember the doctor. Perhaps a midwife? It’s unimportant. William was born blue and gasping, and someone removed the fluid from his throat and nostrils, a wet suck, and William took the air hungry. My boy, moving the air, hands and feet trembling. That’s what the words mean.

Or this. That I am a man alone, and the words move things, if only air, and the air continues to move. I feel it against my arms, a cold movement. And all I can feel of warmth is not even in memory, but in the words. Sun means nothing, nothing but a warm word in a sunless mouth. This is how we go on meaning, talking ourselves out of the dark.

Part Two

There was a time before this. And a time before that. Sometime there wasn’t, I’m sure, but that’s unimportant. Separating the darkness is a parlor game, no more. Time means everything here because someday, when there are days again, days will end. That’s the shape of time. Here, in this moment. But now, the words carry back into the light, back to the time before this.
Listen. My mother had a serving girl when I was born, a Filipino girl of about sixteen. In the old house beneath the dead cypress trees. This is no story. My father played the accordion. He squeezed this chromed lung in the front parlor with a short glass of gin. My mother bled quietly onto the sofa while the serving girl put wet towels between my mother’s legs, smoked cigarettes while leaning out the window, and read movie magazines. There was a sickness in the town then, the streets all deserted and the bodies of dogs swollen in the gutters, and the Filipino serving girl read her magazines and shook her ash out into the white heat of the afternoon sun. In love with the sound of my own breath moving. My mother could not be moved. She bled out onto the sofa, the horrible music wheezing itself out, and I came with little fuss. A healthy boy with eyes of a certain color, with or without hair. The Filipino serving girl put her hands up against the flow of blood, pressed her palms between my mother’s legs. And my mother breathed out two lives. My father set down his accordion and climbed the stairs to his room. Soon, the sickness passed.

Sometimes, the words rise above sound, aspire to music. If words aspire. This music contains something of that day, that dry bladder squeezing out its tune. But that’s just memory, of course, or something passing for memory. There may be memory still. It’s possible. There may be so many things. But what I know is this dark, this cold, this voice pretending to sing.
Part Three

This is the voice of a man talking, though I’ve certainly never been called that name. Few even address me at all, or did. Now, no one does, of course. Has this been said? It’s been said. Yes. It’s all been said. But might the truth not be uncovered still? Perhaps a song of smaller voice? If I understood these questions, I would declare them unimportant. Perhaps I am not a man after all.

I am the story of a man speaking. I was born in darkness and died young, my father a eunuch, my mother a gaping void. Born of this most unoriginal sin, I am fallen, falling, destined to fall always on deaf ears. But I am tidy, and for that sake, much is forgiven.

No. Nothing is forgiven. I am, for lack of better words, a man. A man speaking. A man speaking his lack in little words. Listen. Listen. They’re getting smaller.

William cried and cried. This was to be expected. But he cried constantly, and as if in pain. His mother was no bleeder. She was pacing the floor with him the same day. I was just a voice from behind a curtain, a breeze in the room, a man. It was his stomach. It wasn’t closed properly, they said, later. Like a cow, I asked. His mother clawed my neck. Not like a cow at all, but a child spilling into himself. That’s it. Make it untrue, the sounds so beautiful. Fall deeper into the dark. He was three days old. The
smallest voice. That’s some truth. That’s a truth to shut your eyes against.

Let me speak plainly. Sometimes, it is the agonizing beauty of the world that sends us scurrying as we do. To try and find one ugly word. But we love them all.

To do it all again--what?--everything again, I would leave the words behind. I would sit silently in an open room, in the fell of the mid-day sun, a Vermeer--oh, even here, such blessed onomatopoeia--I would be a Vermeer glowing with its own light. And the questions would no longer be meaningless, but silent. Is this a man? Is this his voice? Does his story open out, holding forth its own burning heart? No. This is not a man. This is not a story. This is a voice only, a voice speaking from nowhere, as unseen as light before it falls upon the page.
The girl from the German magazine wore black opera gloves and smoked cigarette after cigarette while stretched out upon the sofa, the white of her thighs shining against the gloved hands. Her tangled hair hung into her face, a dark strand of it caught at the corner of her mouth, a shock of hair at her armpit, and small, pink nipples. The girl from the German magazine refused color. The light was unkind. The too-long ash of her cigarette finally fell, dusting the cushion gray. He hadn't touched her. She shifted her white legs. He hadn't touched her.

The canvas was all tones, black to white and hard stippled grays where shadow fell. She was ugly under his brush, and yet he couldn't find any discrepancy between the canvas and her round, beautiful face. Philip wanted to black her out and paint only her small mouth, hair caught at the corner, lipstick on her teeth. But their time was almost up,
and the smoke hung thick in the studio's slanting space. He pushed the hair back away from her temple with the palette knife and threw it down on the table.

"That's all," he told her.

She dropped her cigarette to the floor and stood, stretching herself, ribs defined beneath the small breasts, blue veins spidering up into her neck. He looked again at the bloodless canvas and dropped his palette. She began dressing, pulling her crisp bluejeans up over bony hips. She peeled the gloves from her arms and lay them across the back of the sofa. She moved comfortably about the room, collecting her bag, her socks, finally pulling her t-shirt on and pushing the hair out of her face. He hadn't touched her.

"I'll wait downstairs," she said in her sharp accent.
"Back tomorrow?"
"Tomorrow," he nodded.

She disappeared down the stairs, and he busied himself, picking up. The gloves were a cheap touch. He was trying to hurt her. He wanted to see the hate in her face, the mouth bent downward, the body stiff and unyielding. But she thought nothing of it, or simply didn't think of it at all. She knew how to be in a room, how to sit, how to be elsewhere. Three days. He hadn't touched her.

He moved to the window, looked down. She was standing at the curb, hip cocked, smoking again, easy, like she was wearing someone else's clothes. She pulled at an eyelash and
stood squinting for a moment. She had a husband named Karl. Karl existed oblivious to cliché. Karl was twice her size and carried money in a roll.

He stood in the crisp light of the window, unwarmed. Watched her. Behind him, her image lay flat on the canvas, white of cheekbone shining against black of hair. He was angry, but it was less than emotion, a feeling he had to explain to himself, a name he had to place. Whatever it was she stirred in him, he called it anger. She was a million sputtering sparks that wouldn't catch, a story that couldn't get itself told. Or else he simply couldn't tell it. It hadn't escaped him, that possibility. He drew the shade as she climbed into the blue sedan below. He looked again at the canvas, at the nightmare body. A hundred years and he would never touch her.

Philip stood in the rain, rapping on the metal door with the backs of his open hands. After several minutes it opened and Sam peered out at him.
"Sorry, Sam. I know it's late."
"What you need?"
"To talk."

And Sam stepped aside, his too-tall frame swinging in like a broken gate. Philip slipped into the dark entryway, icy water dropping on the tiled floor. Sam shut the door and moved wordlessly into the hall, through the almost perfect dark, and into the orange light of his sitting room where he
collapsed into a wooden chair. He looked at Philip, a question.

"I think I'm through," Philip said, slipping his soaked jacket from his shoulders. "I think I'm finally through."

"Let's hear it," Sam said, closing his eyes. "Let's hear the whole story. No, not the whole thing. I know too much already. Start just after the middle and skip some parts."

Philip leaned against the cold radiator, "I just can't do it anymore."

"Do what?"

"Any of it. I can't please myself for anything. Not a stroke seems to matter, and not a stroke does matter. I can't finish anything."

"What are you trying to do, exactly?"

"Horrid question, Sam, really."

"Honestly, what? What do you want to do?"

"Paint. That's all I've ever wanted to do."

"But you are painting, Philip, you're painting and painting, horrible little portraits of horrible little people, over and over. What do you want them to do?"

Philip looked at the rounded corners of the ceiling, the cheap relief work crumbling in a chalky ruin. "I don't know. I guess I just don't know."

"You want to make something, Herr Frankenstein. Admit it. And then forget it." Sam stood up and came around to where Philip stood slumped against the radiator. "It's
second string work for you, Philip. The whole thing, the whole damn thing, it's a second rate trick. You're not God, Philip. God doesn't come pounding on my door in the small hours. If he did, I'd give him a sock in the jaw."

"It seems like I believed in it once, but what it was, what I believed, I mean, I don't even remember."

"Ah, don't come around here talking about your belief. Not at this hour. You paint or you don't paint, just don't beat yourself up about it. We'll all sleep better. Quit believing so much, or quit trying. Paint your pictures and pay your rent. Die undiscovered."

"That I can do. That, at least."

"We all want it to matter, Philip. We all want it to count. But it doesn't. So, now it's like going to church on Sunday. Just do it and don't ask questions, yes? And get some damn sleep, Philip."

"I suppose. Yes. I suppose." Philip smiled. What had he hoped for? What did Sam have for him? Nothing. That, at least, was something. But not enough. He thought of her, her red mouth. What did he want?

"Thanks, Sam. Sorry to bother you."

"No bother. No bother. Let's do it during business hours next time. You can buy me lunch."

And Philip let himself back out into the rainy night. Into the wet, where the traffic lights flashed red, and the sky was green and falling.
In the night the dream came to him like a giant bird, grotesque, beating the air with its filthy wings, water spraying up around them. Its radiant beak pulled at his hair and tore at his neck, and the wet belly pressed against his back, a terrible weight sending him down beneath the froth and scum, down into the black water where the dream split him open, pressed itself inside. In the dream, he rested there in the dark, while it ravaged him, knowing that its light, the space above water, if it touched him again, would annihilate him. So, he suffered the dream, and swallowed the cold water with its brack of blood and feces, and took the dream as willing as he could stand.

Morning, and he would paint her, only that she should be beautiful, paint the bend of her neck and the turn of her ankle, he would turn her in his hands, break her if he had to, he would touch her, yes, touch, and the light would be enough to live by, enough. Or almost.

Almost, at least, enough to see by.
René Descartes Approaches His Reflection

ONE

Suppose you're me, for just a minute --that's what I'm asking you to do--, just suppose for a minute that you're me, and ask yourself what it is you want to hear, because that's what I want, to have you listen, to have you hear like it mattered to you, like I was you telling you what you already knew, or had forgotten, or had tried to forget. Pretend I said it, whatever it is, just pretend you heard it just now and your pulse jumped and your groin tightened and you did that little manic swallow. Pretend you heard it, and it hurt you, and it felt like you'd been opened up and laid out for display. You're violated by what I know of you, what you know of yourself --supposing you're me-- and everything is too small, your clothes fit too tight, and the air is chill, your fear steaming with your breath. Suppose I took
you apart and left you that way, and tell me --really tell me-- that you wouldn't fall in love with me.

TWO

The roots of the old tree had cracked the foundation of the house --a shitty old place anyway--, but the roots were thick and the concrete was jigsawed and crumbled. Quite a job, that one, to mine those roots from that stony ground. The trick is to try to do good in an already hopeless situation. Now suppose you're me, and I'm looking at you, thinking this. The tools are old, but they're sharp. Anyway, the old tree must go.

THREE

Impossible to doubt me, speaking to you here, though you know I don't exist. Try to picture me. Describe me. I'm nothing but the weight that pulls at the back of your eyes. I'm weightless. Listen, you can't even hear me.

FOUR

The hand that holds the pen and the hand that holds the plow. All the same to me. Not my hand, anyway. Or my hand, but not me. May as well be yours. Take it. Dig us a way out, if you can. The pen or the plow? Or the ditch we look up from, thick roots bleeding sap, sky flashing above us, the cold cold smell of the new-clawed earth. Just try to stand.
It's far from deep, this ditch. But try to stand. Or move your hand. Or mine.

FIVE

I believe you. I take you on faith. For all I know you're already gone. White sheet against white sheet, that's a darkness I couldn't possibly see out of. It's only that you're just less than factual. One cannot observe fact. One digests and excretes it. You, dear friend, are a phantom vapor, a touch of gas, a piece of meat unshat. You trouble me a little, but you listen to me speak. That's a taste I savor. And so, I thank you.
Adam’s Curse

The way is dark, and I fear you will be the last to come this way tonight. And I know that once morning has come, I will have lost the strength to tell this, my story. So now, if my need to speak is tempered by a deeper, greater need to tell my story as it was, or rather as I remember it, that is, as close to the truth of the matter as I can come, and it seems that the night must surely end before my tale, be patient. I know the length of my story, as I have told it to myself every day and night of my life. It is long, but not too long. The length of one man’s life, the length of this one breath.

This is finally a story not about myself so much, but my brother, Adam, the brother who turned away from us all, destroyed us, left me as you see me now. Adam with the fiery hair and the back to lift the stones from the water’s edge. Adam who walked with the devil, trading tales of excess and debauch. Eater of children and trader of souls.
But first, let me go back, just a ways, just a matter of years, to the time at which my story begins. And go with me across the land here, over the long arm of the mountain range, down to where the waters suck at the shore. Back a ways further. Back to where this story first began. To the story that might make this story possible.

My mother’s story is something else, quite. She was orphaned at the age of three, having lost her entire family to hydrophobia, a curious and perfectly expected result of including the brains of slow and therefore capturable squirrels in their stew. Being one of a large family and an exceptionally ugly and unpleasant child, she was routinely denied her nightly nourishment. In this way, her greatest fault was her greatest strength. Wait. Is that true? I agree and disagree. That my mother was ugly is indisputable. That she made it her strength might be taking it a bit far. The most she did was not die, and of course we’re all just that strong. End of philosophical statements.

You naturally understand that I know nothing of the events which occurred before my birth. This is not a strength or a weakness. This is what is known as luck. Momentary continuation of philosophical statements. Continue.

There being no orphanages anywhere near this particular portion of the countryside, my mother simply buried the dead and set about running the household as best as possible, considering. What my young and dim-witted mother could not
foresee, however, was the arrival of a band of pirates who pillaged the coastline, burnt the farms, and took her as a galley-slave and entertainer.

She was a decidedly horrible galley-slave, with a weak back and long, curly hair that got tangled in her brush when on all fours, but it was as an entertainer, there among the pirates, that my mother finally found her true calling.

She worked out a song and dance routine which she would perform every night after the evening meal. Variations in the routine were quickly discouraged by musket-fire and cries of outrage, pirates being a conservative bunch at heart, and so, my mother worked her routine to perfection. Parts of this routine were transcribed by one Mr.--------, the ship’s entertainment coordinator, and portions of this document survive today. Exhibit a:

*Soft shoe- stage left- turn and curtsy*
-Oh, we’re sailing on the high, high seas
-kill the men and toss the babies
-Cap’n likes ‘em at least six foot three
-but he’ll take anything on its knees.
*pause for laughter- bow to captain- remove right stocking.*

And more of same. Wonderful, no? However, my mother made a sudden change of career shortly after their ship was sunk by the royal navy of some place or other and found herself as a serving girl at an inn by the shore.
Bah! You don’t care about the inn by the shore. How about the stranger in dark dress. Our dark stranger. Yes, let’s talk about him. Let’s.

The dark stranger was not a dark stranger always, and truly, he was not a dark stranger to all, for there were some who knew him quite well and some who had known him only a short time, but to either of these categories of acquaintances he could hardly be called a stranger. No, it was only to those parties to whom he was completely unacquainted that he appeared a stranger, and that was quite as it should be. Quite. But as for his darkness there was no denying it. His hair, when uncovered from beneath his narrow brimmed hat, was of the darkest black. In truth, even when his hat was on, his hair was of this same color, and this is true even considering the presence of color to be defined as the reflection of the suns meager rays, as it surely is, because this hair was so dark that it truly reflected no light, the very definition of blackness, I think, and was therefore the same color whether under his hat or no. There: one problem solved.

His eyes are another question altogether. The eyes were neither black nor brown nor hazel even, but blue of the watery-blue of glass, blue that would go suddenly colorless in certain light and then shine forth with a turn of his head. Needless to say, already handicapped by his many close acquaintances, the dark stranger chose to keep these eyes behind dark glasses. He dressed darkly of course, and
preferred corduroy, so his black slacks and jacket were all of this material. There. I give you this small, tactile detail to brush your filthy little fingers across.

This dark stranger did not speak much, but he could be seen walking up and down the dark streets of the town (by the shore) moving his lips and gesticulating with a gloved hand as if he were conducting a small symphony. In truth, he used the hand to keep the rhythm of his meter as he walked, composing iambic verse of which he himself was the subject. This is how he occupied his time. As an experiment, as one more way to urge the sun up out of its fetid, whory bed, we shall demonstrate. From here on, any further words on the dark stranger will be his own.

Throughout the dark and cobbled streets
He walks with head between his legs
His hat drops down around his feet
His ass lifts up toward heaven's face.

Christ, tetrameter! My prosodic skills are not up to this. Damn it all. Too much talk. Let's do the important parts.

The dark stranger wanders the streets of his dirty town (by the shore), sometimes stumbles, sometimes falls, sometimes scrapes the tender skin from the heals of his hands on the rough pavement, possibly wanders into a nearby inn for a drink and to stop the bleeding, might discover there a young, though ugly, girl serving in the inn, might recognize in her a certain grace of movement, might whisper secret words to her as she passes his table, might extend
his palms out, Christ-like, for her to witness, might take her away with him into the night where they fumble endlessly with his uncooperative member, and it is possible that finally a certain electro-chemical impulse is triggered in some hot and sticky portion of his reptile brain that causes the blood to rush downward, fill the sore and eager receptacle, and cause it to rise up triumphant. He marks her boyishly underdeveloped bosom with his stinging hands. He shutters, cries out, falls helplessly to the ground.

And I shall leave it to you to get him from this awkward and unnecessary position back to his normal rounds, just as I will leave you to straighten my mother’s torn and blood-smeared clothing, let you return her to her inn by the shore (though I was sure we’d abandoned it), and let you imagine the long months of her swelling and stretching and finally bringing forth a large and ungrateful animal, red of skin and hair, and deep of voice. For such a child. What might that sentence mean? And perhaps she in the meantime marries the owner of the inn by the shore. That would certainly be convenient. To our story, I mean.

There, there, poke that fire there will you? Poke it and give it a good blow. No, the bellows are broken, you must get down on all fours, put your head up into the chimney and feed the flames with your breath. It’s a wondrous thing, fire, no? Devouring, pulling everything that spills from our toothless mouths into itself, swallowing it, spitting the remainders up and out in a cloud of smoke.
Imagine if this were not the case! Words everywhere. Wouldn’t be able to walk across the room for the very proliferation of words piling up. Truly, the hated creator had one or two ideas that weren’t all bad. Truly.

Shift of scene. My brother Adam is pulling in nets, draping them across the inverted hulls of weathered and faded skiffs. Albatross lift themselves from the sand with a beating of wings, drop down again only inches away. Perhaps I can work in something about a gunwale. That would strike me as highly appropriate. The tide recedes.

Down the over-grown incline, sand skittering softly below her feet, comes a child of some four years old. She wears the grey and tattered clothing of the townspeople, but her hair, golden and translucent, is ringletting down around her little shoulders and shining in the afternoon sun. Few things are quite so satisfying as the ridiculous verb form.

Adam leaves aside the nets, takes the little girl up in his arms, presses his face into her curls. She laughs. Perhaps we should permit them some soft words with each other?

“Milly,” he whispers.

“H’llo, Adam,” she smiles.

This, as was to be expected, is getting us nowhere.

“I brought you something,” she tells him.

“What have you brought me today?” he asks, a bore.

“A loaf of bread and a bottle of tea,” she smiles.

Let’s say he’s put her down again.
“Well, that sounds like it might hit the spot,” he smiles back.

This isn’t working at all. We shall attempt to remove the prying voice of narration.

—in Irish accents—

M.— Me mother baked the bread just this very morning.

A.— I could rightly say that a loaf of your mother’s fine bread would suit me well. It’s practically destroyed I am. Ay, many an hour I’ve been hauling net and polishing the gunwales. Where is this bread of yours?

M.— I lost it.

A.— Where at then?

M.— Coming down the slope there.

A.— Well, that hardly constitutes a loss then. You know where it is. I believe the word you were looking for was ‘dropped’. You dropped it.

M.— Ate it really.

A.— Ah, so the word you were searching for was ‘ate’. A child of your age simply cannot afford such liberality of language, Milly.

M.— You’re not angry then?

A.— Ah, a bit, but mostly it’s famished I am. Come closer, sweet Milly.

Ahem. Pardon. This certainly is not the Abbey, so if you don’t mind we’ll get along with this part of the tale. And I believe that if there are no complaints we’ll move it to, say, the French countryside.
Adam grasped Milly’s round and curl besotted (?) head, twisted it with a slow and deliberate motion and counted the seconds as her tiny legs kicked futilely at the sand. She was quite dead, so he lay her gently down in the sand and, finding himself in the French countryside, set fire to the rather superfluous boats, nets, and immaculately polished gunwales, and he built for her with oars a crude spit on which he turned her little body around and around above the flames. The people of that country claim you can still smell the stringent, sweet scent of Milly’s golden curls being singed away. Now, how’s that for pathos?

Now, I know what you’re thinking now. You’re thinking: What have I done to deserve this, oh Christ, you bastard son? Or maybe: if I had only died some hours ago, though this filthy little man talks on, I would no longer be forced to hear? Or maybe: There is a terrible itch directly in the crack of my ass. All of these are reasonable responses to a story of this type (oh, a type!), and I wouldn’t worry myself, were I you, with them too greatly. Be content with the knowledge that this must, finally, end.

Naturally you’re wondering about Adam and Milly and the possible repercussions of the grisly act, and you would be right to do so. And it is true that Adam never told a lie in his life and was therefore placed quickly into the village’s one jail cell. And the same fate fall on all such cowards who would hide behind the truth. They thought to hang him.
And it was on that day, the scheduled day of his demise, that a miraculous occurrence occurred, miraculously. For this was the day that the devil came to town. And it was by the main road he came, walking with a slight limp and carrying a cane with which he poked toadstools and whipped the heads off of the delicate wildflowers that grew there along the path. In the interest of time, I abstain from describing his dress, so we'll suffice it to say that he was clothed lest you picture him striding up the path naked, swinging his stick. Actually I rather like that, but it simply does not align itself with the truth of the matter, so it must be ignored. Strike the image from your mind! The important thing here is that the devil walked right into the jail, through the bars of the cell, and sat down across from Adam with a smile on his thin and featureless face.

Lock and key hold no power over the Prince of Lies, that's generally accepted, I believe, so we will catch up with this horrible pair outside, a ways up the road, walking along through the mottled dark of the overhanging trees. Excuse me, please. They walked and spoke one to the other, told stories, say. No, don't say. I'm speaking now. And it came up among their conversation that he, Lucifer, Morningstar, Tempter, Stranger, was an old acquaintance of one pale and silly girl, though no longer a girl, whose description matched that of his, Adam's, (and my own) mother. These are just facts understand. That's why the prose has slipped into this unnatural stilt. We'll come
through it momentarily. Adam agreed to take his new-found savior down the hillside and to our mother’s house. There, it was said, they would have a reunion of sorts.

Mother was sitting, rocking by the fire, a child in her lap --look closely now, that’s me-- when the pair arrived at her door. She leapt to her feet, the child spilling from her lap onto the floor. She embraced the visitor and her wild son in turn. See, the pace is picking up now, no? And all that night was a drunken song. They drank wine from a bottle that never emptied. They drew warmth from a fire that never cooled. They laughed and danced to music that rang in the air about their heads like kittens hung from banjo strings. And all the while, the boy-child, the innocent babe, lay hungry and forgotten by the fire. Morning, and they tripped out into the pink light, stumbling. The people of the town say they could be seen, the three of them: Adam, Mother, and the sweet, smiling Devil, arm in arm, disappearing into the rising sun. And that’s what they did: disappeared.

And the boy remained. Waiting. Waiting. His soul traded away to a grim Justice. Grown to an old and flattened man, like brown fruit beneath a tree. A flame not snuffed, but rather held in constant suspension, fed on air enough to hold its shape, but just. A light that doesn’t even quiver. A light that gives no warmth. Waiting.

Waiting.

But you don’t give a damn. You only want me to talk on, or to be quiet. You don’t care what it is I might say.
Perhaps it's you who are the devil, though I doubt it. What are you then? A stranger to be sure, though dark I can't rightly call you. Could it be that you're my own father? Come to see me wink out like a star? Come to hear me speak my confession? Come to stand over my cold and empty frame and curse me further? No. You're not he either. I would call you mother, crawl up into your lap and press my mouth to your dry and empty breasts, but you plainly are not her. But perhaps I might call you that anyway? Mother. Yes, I can. Mother. I think the day is coming, Mother. The night is coming to its end. Mother, I think this life has come undone. I see it all as if from a distance. No, that's how it's always been. Maybe this is how it is inside. Inside this life. Maybe this is what I've never seen. Mother. Rock me, Mother. Here, on your lap. Tell me something, Mother, just a story. No time? Then tell me how it ends. Mother. An end. Mother.

A breeze from the chimney. Cold stones in the fire. The sound of water pulling dully at the shore. An end.
They'd agreed on the price quickly enough, but the attic air was thick with dust, and M. Borgne felt the closeness not only of the walls and sloping ceiling but of the woman in her ill-fitting pantsuit whose eyes flicked always between Borgne's face and the leaf of paper containing his scrawled offer, impossible to read, the scrawl and her eyes both, impossible. The collection was impressive in its content if not its value, and the third-hand books had the look and smell of books that have been read, a sensation which was no small comfort to Borgne. The woman was no comfort at all. Her angular jaw protruded, her lower teeth coming up even with the upper, a vision that seemed to Borgne to manifest sound. He imagined her sleeping, the abrasion of tooth on tooth rattling the window panes. Her eyes were small and widely spaced, brown and moving, impossible. Her dark hair
hung neat along the sides of her face, like a dirty curtain she peered out through, inspecting him. Her fingers were smudged with ink. Cobwebs clung to a shoulder. Borgne could hardly breath as he wrote out the check.

"Helen," she said. "Helen Fisher." And he wrote the name upon the line quickly.

"I'll come around tomorrow to pick them up. I think I'll need some help with all this. It's quite a lot. I can't help feeling I'm cheating you," Borgne said as he moved toward the stairs.

"Not at all. They were my father's, you know."

"Well, they're quite nice. Some really very interesting things." He was breathing freer on the landing now, lungs burning with the clean air.

"He was interested in things, many things, but not many things of great interest, I should think. What will you do with them?"

"What do you mean?"

"The books. Will you sell them? Are they worth a great deal?"

"A great deal more than I've paid, certainly," he reached the bottom of the stairs and turned to her, "but I assure you I don't plan to turn a profit. I too, I'm afraid, am interested in many things, though it has yet to make me more interesting."

They had reached the door, and Ms. Fisher looked too long into Borgne's face, showing up the fact that she was
studying him, showing how she was not finding there whatever it was she was looking for. Borgne looked absently at her shoulder.

"Tomorrow at noon? I'll come around with the car."

"I'll be out," she said, "but I'll leave the door open. It's been a pleasure Mr. Borgne."

And he shook her sweating hand politely, and turned away. Blood moved through him at a steady rhythm. He took note of this, and was thankful for it, but what it said to him was impossible to say.

**étude 1**

Now, one who does not know the blinding heavy pain that comes behind the eye, that threatens to open out the head like a burst potato, that sets one on to do the Greek and search out a hat-pin, well that one cannot know the lightness that comes after --the warm twin flush like jet trails through the face-- that comes with a belated self-medication. In M. Borgne's case he took his Ouzo in a too-large glass, the liquor gone seminal around the cold cube at its bottom. He took this in an establishment quite fit for the purpose, with company that was decidedly not.

"It is not enough to say one has an ache in the head," said Mincy. "What's do be done is to identify, classify, give it a right wallop with the old Adam schtick. One cannot conquer what one cannot name."
"It is my Aristotelian ache then. Named chiefly for its unity of place and time, both being cranial and more than likely imaginary, though its action is speculative only."

"Speculative action reeks of politics, and of political matters I cannot speak," spoke Mincy, apolitically. "I feel sure that could I speak, my discourse --political as it would be-- would not assist you at all in the getting off of the play."

"It is anyway a thoroughly undramatic thing, the poetics of this pain, being wholly lacking in pathos and finding more in common with a certain masterbatory technique often employed in any less-than-reputable bathhouse. Notice the self consciously elevated style of voice for what is finally but a feeling." Borgne finished his speech and followed his italics with a pinched face and a long draught of sweet liquor.

"Aristotle cannot help you here, that is certain."

"Alright then, enough. I christen this pain Helen, in honor of the lovely miss who gave away her library and took only my heart."

"And a personal check."

"Certainly, that too."

"So, you're smitten then?"

"Not at all. Ms. Fisher has not the power to smite, nor am I so easily smote, but she has certainly sparked a perverse curiosity. I do believe she finds me repulsive."

"That's not curious at all, is it? Perfectly natural."
"But I don't think she finds me altogether unattractive."

"Not altogether anyway."

"No. I believe I might be just the hot and cold son of a bitch she's been waiting for. I'm sure, given the time, she could come to loathe me in a most loving and sustaining manner."

"I loathe you already, just thinking about it," Mincy smiled.

"Will you come around tomorrow, help me lug the damn things out of there?"

"Ah, to see her first hand? No, sorry, couldn't possibly. I teach in the morning. Then to bed."

"Useless as always, Mincy, really. I'm going home."

"Pleasant dreams, M. Lukewarm. Happy wooing."

And Borgne stepped out into the blowing snow, the streetlights showering down onto the street their particulate illumination, and the night went on getting colder.

The next day, Borgne arrived too early, but Ms. Fisher was already gone. He pulled his weather-faded car into the drive, rapped uselessly at the side-door, and then stepped into the empty house. He wasted no time on the lower levels, rifled none of her things, hardly even looked at the framed photographs hanging along the hallway, but simply made his way quickly up the stairs and into the attic, where the
books lurked heavy and dark. He wiped dust and cobweb from the tiny attic window, and the day dropped its light grayly into the room. It would rain soon.

Packed, there were seventeen boxes worth, more than he could ever load into his car, so he resolved to make several trips and began carrying the weak and mildewed boxes down the stairs. He stacked them, just inside the back door, in towers of three: a little wall dividing the kitchen. After three trips, three towers, he propped open the door and began to carry them out to the car.

The car shrieked at the weight and listed sideways in a most unsatisfactory manner. Eight boxes fit passably, with one on the passenger's seat, but the ninth simply would not go. This was unnerving to Borgne. This was no small trouble. Carrying heavy boxes up and down stairs was not how he often employed himself. There was an arrow of sweat between his shoulder-blades. He resolved to place the ninth box back in the kitchen and return for it that afternoon. He set the box down just inside the door, pulled the door shut, and shuffled back down the drive.

As he pulled back out onto the street, shocks groaning and bumper sagging, large drops began to fling themselves dramatically upon his windshield. There was that at least. At least there was that. He turned on the wipers, and piloted himself home through the wet.
étude 2

Borgne stood in the half light of the library entrance. The rain had let up, and there was a damp smell, a coat of wet, an almost-pleasant balm to things.

Presently he was assaulted by a compact étudiante, pencil in hand, firing half-thought questions and jumbled ejaculations, scribbling all the while slantwise across her page. Borgne attempted to ward her off with concision and, this failing, cruelty, but she simply alternated from confusion to hysteria and back again, asking him to please, please, explain what he meant.

"Half-blind, or rather in the one eye," he answered quite truthfully.

"Which now?" she wondered aloud, pencil poised.

"That which might someday see god," he lied, revealing his weakness for the religious, and other redundancies.

"Again," she looked up at him.

He shooed her away with a wave of his hands and a hiss of his teeth. She vanished into the sucking air of the library. Borgne was thrown back on himself, alone, in the constant half-light, and he found himself thinking again of Helen. He thought of that long moment when she looked hard at him, when he'd been sized up. He turned toward the glass doors, lifted his chin, tried to find his reflection. There was only dark glass and faint stripes of fluorescent light somewhere deep inside the building. The wind moved the branches of the trees. Heavy drops were shaken down at his
feet. The sun was shining brightly off the rain-slicked walkways. Borgne adjusted his coat and went out into that light.

He made his way slowly across the campus. The old buildings stood like the old trees, oversized and inefficient. He took some comfort in that. He stood on the path, the waving shadow of a huge elm moving before him, and the movement made him feel something like happiness. High up on the nearby building, Borgne spotted a black brick, and a white one, lost in the geometry of crosshatched gray mortar. He almost smiled. He thought, only for a moment, of the student searching wildly through ancient texts in the library's dungeonous depths. Mostly, he thought of Helen and her cold look, her set jaw, the feeling that she was something he was meant to see. Or to touch.

When he returned to her house, she was still not there, but attached to the single box in the kitchen was a note. Borgne picked it up, stood looking at the ballpointed script before actually reading it.

'Very inconsiderate. Please remove at once. -H.'

Borgne folded the note carefully into his pocket. That, at least, was something. He made his way up the stairs and began to carry the rest of the boxes down. Once he had them piled evenly in the kitchen again, he recognized that once again there were nine. He looked back at the stairs. Finally, he loaded eight boxes into his car, removed the
note from his pocket, unfolded it, and fastened it carefully as it had been. He went out into the daylight, and pulled the door shut behind.

étude 3
By the time he reached downtown, it was late. Chander's shop was dark and the little copper bells clattered above the door as Borgne entered. Chander was nowhere to be seen, but his wife, half dead as always, was straightening books high on a ladder. She started when she saw Borgne and scrambled down the ladder, a three legged spider rushing to greet him and breathing her foul, decaying breath in his face.

"How good of you to come," she whispered, pushing him toward the back of the store. "So good of you, really," she whispered softer, yellow tears forming at the edges of her pink chaffed eyes. "Good friends and moral encouragement, that's what he's needing now. So good of you."

And she pushed him back through a narrow door Borgne had never noticed before, through a dark alcove stacked high with boxes and brooms, sausages hanging from the rafters, and into a tiny office, one half of which was occupied by a metal cot, all of which was occupied by Chander. A yellowed sheet was pulled up to Chander's neck and his fingertips clasped its upper edge tensely as if he might suddenly disappear beneath it. Chander didn't look well.
"What's wrong with him?" Borgne whispered, but Chander's wife was gone. Chander moaned and shifted beneath his thin cotton cover.

"Chander," Borgne croaked, "it's me."

Chander looked toward the alcove from which Borgne's voice had skitted, looked frightened.

"You've come," he said, "you've come to take me?"

Borgne stepped into the light. A rotten stench had followed him back into the little room. Chander raised himself on his elbows, smiled. With this he looked worse than before. His teeth were shining white, and his gums bled red around their edges.

Chander pulled the sheet away, and moved to rise. He was in his nightshirt, dirty and thin, snot dried on the sleeve, and as he swung himself around, Borgne noticed what he first took to be a trick of light, what must have been some strange collusive play between the sheet and Borgne's ailing eyes, for it seemed for a moment that Chander's leg, the left, was missing.

"Christ, Chander. What's happened to you?"

"Oh, nothing. Bit of an accident. Run down by motorcar. Please, sit, sit." Chander motioned Borgne to a wooden chair in the corner. He waved his oversized hands while sitting perched on the edge of his cot.

"Run down."
"Yes. Tuesday. Turned bone to powder," Chander smiled again, as if remembering a joke. "But really, the bones weren't so strong already. Sick in the bones."

"But your leg, Chander, I mean, Jesus."

"Nothing. Pah! Nothing. I forgot about it already, then you come in talking the leg. 'Chander, the leg, the leg. What will you do with the one leg?' Forget it. Leg is gone."

"But you are ill."

"Ah, she says so," Chander sneered, pointing through the cardboard walls. "You and her, you two are the same. You think badly all the time. It makes me ill, the bad thought. It does. Now tell me, why you come today. You have no books? You want to buy something? Something you need special."

"No, nothing. I don't need anything today, Chander. I thought I might have some things you might like to look at, that's all."

"Oh, I'm not buying any book right now. She says, no. She says there's no money for the books." Chander leaned in close, green veins showing in his cheeks, "I think she is hiding it, the money. She hates the books. She wants to open a store with the flowers and get rid of all the books."

"You really think that?" Borgne whispered, thinking more of Chander's wife than had ever occurred to him to.

"I know it. That's why she makes me sick. She's trying to kill me. But you, Borgne, you are a true friend. If you have something good, I will look, she doesn't need to know,
right. I have some money hidden away myself, no? What is it?"

"Oh, nothing, just an idea I had, but it's nothing."

"Idea? Dime a dozen, the ideas. When you going to do something better than ideas?"

"I don't know." Borgne leaned back against the creaking chair and looked up at the ceiling. "I thought maybe I was, was going to do something. It felt like it. But it might have just been the idea of the thing, like you say. It's pathetic, really. A book peddler masquerading as pedagogue, falling apart. I mean these headaches, every day. How do you do it, Chander?"

"Do what?" Chander asked, lying back down in is cot and pulling his sheet back up to his chin.

"How do you keep going? How does a person stay happy?"

"Little things, Borgne. Little things, I guess. A little thing that keeps you alive, maybe. Again with the bad thoughts. You talk to my wife. She'll tell you how. She's healthy as a goddamn horse, and you know her secret?"

"What's that?" said Borgne, rising to leave.

"She curses everything. Even life, Borgne. She hates it all. Me too, she hates me awful. She'll outlive us all."

"Not you, Chander. You can't die. I really believe that." Borgne moved into the dark of the alcove, pushing through the curtain and feeling his way toward the storefront. In that almost total darkness, he heard Chander's voice, weak and far away. He couldn't be sure if
he was speaking to Borgne or only to himself. The voice came from nowhere at all.

"I'll go soon," the voice said, "That's what comes of being in love with the world. The world, if you love her, she can break your heart."

ex nihilo

Chander arrived early the next morning at Helen Fisher's back door. She opened it slowly, and dropped the same penetrating look on him. Borgne shrunk. She opened the door the rest of the way and allowed him into the kitchen.

She was dressed, coffee steaming in a cup, one plate in the sink. She looked toward the box on the floor.

"Still waiting. You're lucky I didn't break my neck on the thing."

"So sorry. I meant to come straight back for it, but the weather was not cooperating."

"Will you be done now then?" she wondered, looking quite cross.

"Would that suit you? Or would you be sorry for it?"

"Sorry? I don't think I understand you Mr. Borgne. To have my kitchen back would suit me just fine." She moved around behind her chair, showing that she understood him all too well.

"I just wondered," Borgne pressed on, "if you wouldn't miss this excuse."

"Excuse for what?"
"For us to speak."

"I don't need an excuse to speak, Mr. Borgne, and it is terribly obvious that you don't even need a reason. I assure you with all sincerity that I shall be quite pleased to have you and those foul-smelling books out of here. I hope I've been sufficiently clear."

"I had thought so," Borgne stammered, unsure of his footing. Ms. Fisher was not making this easy for him. He wondered, for the very first time, if he hadn't perhaps misread her. "I had thought so, but it seemed to me that the other day, that we had shared something, just for a moment, and that it wasn't wholly unpleasant for either of us."

"I don't know what it is you assume we have shared, Mr. Borgne, but it seems to me that you've built up a great deal out of nothing. That, I'm afraid, is what we've shared: nothing."

"Interesting," Borgne said, almost to himself. "I've never shared it before. Perhaps this is something."

"Being something is one thing, being perverse is another. Perverse, Mr. Borgne, is not interesting. At least I am not interested in perversity."

"And even if you were," smiled Borgne, "that would hardly make me of interest to you. Quite right. Well, should I be off now?"

"I think that would be best."

"I can't say I'll think of you always," Borgne said as he hefted the final box.
"Perfectly natural."

"Do you suppose it will rain today?"

"It is entirely too likely."

"Well, Ms. Fisher, if you wouldn't find it too presumptuous, I might go so far as to say we just shared something."

"And what is that?"

"A little chat."

"And a wonderful little chat it was. Don't fool yourself into thinking it means too very much, please."

"Oh, I don't know," Borgne said, pushing the back door open with the toe of his shoe, "a little thing like that might mean a great deal."

"Have a nice day, Mr. Borgne."

"And you, Ms. Fisher." And Borgne turned away from her. Borgne turned out onto the thoroughfare, light shining on the road, trees waving in the morning breeze. Temperate. That's what it was. Not too hot, nor too cold. That was something. That was one way to make it through. With a blessing and a curse, and your heart broke wide open.
WINTERSONGS

Three Poems
Wintersong

Sleepless
beneath this mountain
side slatted rock and snow
river halved below
by its shadow made solid
on the ice
this laughter
    a child’s
and a bird
    black
wings closed against the wind
the wind
snow blown sideways
covering
    uncovering
what is blessed
    unknown
this shadow made solid
this black bird


--to M. Bigley

2
Why transformation
this black bird?
the dream of flight
no change but perspective
yet so many greeks
tongueless
the half sober and the godless
turned into birds:
the wish to rise
above what the darkness breaks:
a godly economy
this ecstasy:

a song.
Voices
yes
voices together
but still
harmony from this
difference?
Is this our winter song
this wind shrieking in the eaves
gutters shaking themselves nights
ice from the window ledge
    ringing
in the wind
    ringed
    in ice
this canyon
hellgate swung open daily
mountain unbroken by dawning
weight binding us
    beneath
the sound of a pilgrim’s feet
padding above
or wings against the wind
crying only this, our winter song
or is it perhaps a song
    of smaller voice?
The blessing is:

what is unknown
as this bird: too large
curled upon itself
closed
and the child sleeping
beneath no heroic star
this lone visitor come
in winter things
come not to anoint
but witness
to be witnessed
our need of its blessing
It shakes out its wings
neck uncraning
so common
this ‘bird-like’ thing
so common
this thing that opens
and rises on air.
The way cut by a closed world
unfolding sense
    upon its airy way
we who have no vision
who cry for vision, to be subject
and object of our vision
let us see
the river cut, darkness breaks
this winter song:
    what is finally known
a child’s prayer
laughter
    a child’s
as simple as birds
as simple birds
    so common
turn and re-turn
above icy pavements
made solid.
Hieros Gamos

I know the Black Walnut
its leathered skin—
fruit of shade trees
scrotal and fallen
flesh separates
a black heart hard
round in the palm
palm so brown so black
in orchard shade
so black it shines
like petrol oil
spilling
and marking the hands
the ground where it falls
the air with its scent
of wood-heat
dry tho moving

And I wanted to speak
of a way of being
that is a falling
a breaking
to believe some surrender
that binds us together
And the heart opening
at some force—a stone's drop
or the heart itself a fulcrum
between levered legs
and the coil of meat
solid within, sheathed
in the thinnest paper
a unity—radiating
from some center somehow
greater than one
single point.
This would be our metaphor
this fruit of wealth.
Anaxagoras knew more:
light flying from dark,
light from weight
light as we fly
one from the other
and freeze, bounded.
But I know the heavy smell
of redwood bark in a garden
and black fruit beneath a tree
and the pressures of stones,
whose strength bends us
and we become
our heart’s own fulcrum.
There is music
and that is all

we have learned
to say of it.

And the singing
to oneself over

and again to try
to learn to speak

as the humming of Gould
through variations bends

toward language
what language but this:

the words speak only
of the music they speak

or else silence
or failing that, too

poetry.
Waters of the Moon

Was it he, or she, reaching out arms and trying
To hold or to be held, and clasping nothing
But empty air?

- Ovid Metamorphoses (10.58-60)

He stepped out of the fire. That was the first thing we saw. The flames like a sunlit sheet hanging, a perfect wall of light, and a man walking calmly out, unharmed. Breaking the light as he did, a black figure, a shadow upright, and the men who circled the fire staying still, waiting for the phantom shape to pull apart, melt back into the light. Separated from the fire, a man walking calmly out, his hands pulled up to his chest and a second dark shape, small and quivering behind his hands.

This parallax, this displacement of perspective: interference around an earth-bound satellite. And from where we stood uselessly about, our sight did bend, and we saw a telescoping doubleness, a dark shape emerging from light, itself slowly finding definition and light, and a second dark shape emerging slowly from the first, as if there were a fire at the man’s chest, a second man emerging from it,
and the silhouettes of the man’s splayed fingers, tiny versions of ourselves standing about.

The black shape dropped from the man’s hands, landed two and two, quietly, its back arching up, head down, long tail curling up like a hook. Its arching back singed, it let threads of thin, grey smoke up into the air above it, rising together and then pushed away, a third curve, as the furnace-air of the building’s burning rolled out.

We stood frozen there in our heavy coats, faces hidden behind our helmet’s visors, all reflecting the orange light of the fire and the shape of the man. Some held axes, useless now, and some were frozen in the process of unwinding the hose. We all watched the man come forward, his double circling his feet, rubbing its smoky back against his leg, the tail around it like a vine. And I was at the front, counting to myself one, two, three, and thinking in the moment that the second shape dropped from his hands, that four was the time. A solid, square number. An open box. A tool for prying open. A pictograph of a cat, resting on a sill, its tail dropped down along the wall. And four, I will break forward and go to the man, a man walking calmly out. Sole survivor.

The cat sits at the sill, its tail dropped down along the wall, swaying slowly. Beyond the window, a line of trees and above the trees a quilted sky, dark clouds pulled apart by the wind, twilight sky going clear. The smell of apples
gone soft in a basket, cracked pepper, butter moving across the bottom of a pan. He pulls the meat from the bones, the tacky slickness of the breast, rips away the bone, trims away the white curdles of fat. No music for days. The place like a church. Church without music. Sounds like the beginning of a joke. The chicken hisses into the pan, butter popping. Not a joke, but one of those sayings. Like those math problems back at school. A is to B as C is to X. Yes something like that. A church without music is like a cat without a tail. He tugs at the cat’s tail, it pulling quickly away, back to its slow swaying, a lazy clock, a pendulum with a crooked arm.

The kitchen behind, the chicken still crackling in the pan, he rifles through the albums. Glenn Gould. He turns the record over in his hands, shining black, drops it onto the player. Variations. Yes. This is what is needed, certainly. Back to the kitchen, chicken over, popping butter and the perfect seared flesh, brown and crisp. The cat’s tail moving jerkily with Bach, the left hand one two three one two three its cat mind filtering out the flourish of the melody, the high runs and tralada’s. None of it. Quiet day.

Is it a parallelism? Ought to look it up, but she just has the old Scrabble dictionary. Can’t even spell that in Scrabble. Too many letters. Fifty bonus points and a trip to Bermuda. Settle for a god-damned dictionary. A church without music is like a house without books. Better the other way round. Is that a parallel? Equations working both
ways. Lifts the breast with the spatula to check the bottom. Nice. Cuts the flame, moves the pan from the stove. Forgot the rice. Ah well, lousy Scrabble word anyway. Chicken on the plate still sizzling, fork and knife jangling out of the drawer. Descending quietly into the room and don’t forget to give her hell about the dictionary. The cat drops down from the sill, two and two, and follows lazily into the room.

I go forward toward the man, the man walking unharmed from the flames. The man’s hands, now empty, hang at his sides. The night around us is black, black drawn blacker by the brilliance of the fire, the lights flashing, this circle of men in yellow coats and helmets, closing off the light, night at our backs.

I am still moving forward, one hand raised as if to take the man by the shoulder, hurry him away from the danger, but the man is still so far. How long? How long have I been frozen here beneath their eyes. I am a young man. Brave. But I’m afraid of the man who has walked from the fire, a shadow at his feet that slithers and gives off smoke. My hand is still raised. I am still moving. The lights from the trucks are swinging round to flash upon my visor. Across the walls. Gone into night. Red upon my face. I am coming forward. I see my own hand, raised. I am not afraid.
“Oh, la poulet.” Pushing up on her elbows. She’s French lately. Bad habit, rampant all over France.

“Le.”

“Wha?”

“Le poulet. C’est masculin.”

Sticking out her tongue, arranging the plate in her lap. “How do you say ‘Go to Hell’?”

“Vous dit, ‘Mon seul livre est une dictionnaire de Scrabble.’”

“Scrablu?”

“Oui.”

“No rice. Bach instead?”

“Fair trade, no?”

The cat kneading the thick blankets, curling down into its own warmth.

“Henry’s all low end, did you know? Follows that bass line like nobody’s business.”

Knife pulling back, white meat away, in her mouth. “In the story, do they have instruments?” French and with the wandering mind. Wonder, does she follow her thoughts?

“Story?”

“Bremen Musicians. Do they play, or do they just sing?”

“Rooster on the loot, I’m positive of it. Donkey on the bass drum.”

“Coming up with some wisdom. Figure good a time as any.”
Nowhere to sit and her bed, always cold. He leans in the doorway.

"Can’t wait."

"So far," chewing open-mouthed, "I’ve got, ‘Life is like sex.’"

"Referring to their anxiety producing affects."

"Shut up. This is death-bed wisdom here. Try not to be a smart ass for five minutes." Practically polished it off. The knife skreeking on the plate. "Life is like sex, in that they’re both just really good. There’ll be more, but that’s the general idea."

"I’m still trying to process it. Give me a minute."

"Mon seul libre est une dictionnaire de Scrablu."

"Livre, not libre."

"Shut up. In both cases, people are always talking about how good it is. Constant. All the time. Too much. And the thing you don’t expect." pointing with her fork, "is that it’s true. It really is good."

"But why truth?"

"Your five minutes are not up. Here." The plate, blue glass, a thin white bone from where? "It was wonderful."

"You really ought to write these things down. There’s posterity to think of."

"I’m too old and too sick to be worrying about my ass. No, I’ll leave it to you. You can touch them up, fix them so I sound truly wise for the funeral."

"A funeral now?"
"Why not?"

"You hate funerals."

"But I like the idea of everyone there to look at me and talk about me. Feels important. Like there’s something I should be teaching them."

"Don’t die."

"Not bad, but pretty it up some. A whole speech, I’m picturing."

He stands in the doorway with the plate, white bone, knife under his thumb. She’s going to. Too fast. See the pale come up in her cheeks, a cringe at the eyes. Sick.

Lord, look at it all. Didn’t eat that much. Jesus, blood, don’t need to see this. Lost love over her yellow bucket, retching le petit poulet avec sang. A study in color. Lord, it hurts, can see that from here. Holding a fucking plate. Bone, fork, knife under his thumb. Needle scratching at the end of the side. For god’s sake, move.

"Ate too fast. Sorry. Lovely chicken."

"You okay?"

"Je suis un peu malade."

"Tu es très malade. Watch Henry there, don’t need a cat in the bucket."

Henry following all the way into the bathroom, empty the bucket into the toilet, flush. A little more of Ellie down the drain. Won’t do. Need that stuff. All goes to the same place. Down the drain. So dramatic today. A woman without insides is like?
The cat up on the sink, sniffing out something, finally follows, down, two and two. Like a house without books. C'est un chat. La chat a quatre jambes. Deux et deux. Un, deux, troi, and the quatre says, 'meow'.

The house is going to go. I can see that. We all can. And I see the man still standing with his back to the flames. My own hand still raised. Nothing moves. Eight men and one cat. A house creaking under the roar. Basement windows shining like headlights. The whole place will go down.

What if I don’t move? What if I turn, gone, into the night? Six others waiting to step forward. A strange habit, thinking this way. When I buy tickets for anything, sitting there in the auditorium, in the theater, wondering. If I didn’t show up tonight, would anything be different? Would these two move closer, the man taking my seat? Would they meet, talk, go home together and make love? All from my absence. But I stay, sitting quietly in my seat. The woman doesn’t look at me. I go home alone.

But I’m working now, or at least about to work. About to do something. I can feel this moment. The moment before another moment. These are the best. Show over, everyone rising to leave. Her coat brushing my arm as she lifts it from her lap. The moment before I speak.

This moment doesn’t end. Begin to count again. Four. On four. I will move. One. Two. Three. The high screaming crack
of house-beams. A rush of burning air. Light everywhere.

Four. Four. Forward, into the flame.

She’s sleeping, the sun going down and the light coming up from under the blinds, yellow-orange striped across the ceiling. Parallel. A house without light? Don’t get too fancy. Poetry is the death of humor. Humor is the poetry of death. \( A+B=C \). \( C+A=B \). Still no parallel. Hopeless.

Henry curled and sleeping in the little valley between her feet. And she sleeps, her graying head on the pillow, skinny neck under the blankets. Trucks rolling by outside. Bottles shaking on the table by her bed. She’s got her own knife under her thumb. Or it’s got her under its own. There’s a bastard of a parallel. An equation of need. An equation? They don’t need her. Going to loose my fucking mind this way.

In the kitchen, burnt coffee, on the heat since morning. Cream goes in and swirls out grey. Taste like pencil shavings. He scoops the bone into the trash and rinses the plate in the sink. Sets it in the drainer. Light through the window, through blue glass, reflected across the stainless sink. Jesus, don’t cry. Hands on the counter, head down, cold.

Back to the room and she’s sweating now. Pale. Cold. A cold beneath the sheen of sweat that infects his fingers, chills him. Her eyes turning quickly beneath closed lids. She’s going to die, and I have nothing to say.
Awake and trembling, hands out to him.

“I’m sorry. I am.”

“Quiet. You need to rest.”

“Don’t talk to me that way.” and she’s away, turning over on the wet sheets. “I know I’m sick. Don’t talk that way.”

“What do you need?”

“Time.”

“Ellie.”

“I’m just so cold.”

“I’ll bring more blankets.”

“No. Just stay here and talk to me.”

“Alright. Let’s talk.”

“Just come hold me. I want to hear you talk. Tell me something.”

“What?”

“Anything. Something I’ve never known.”

“A story?”

“Of course a story. Yes.”


He wants to bring her back, return the warmth to her, but with one look at her he knows. And with that look, she
is gone. He begins to speak, and somewhere, somehow, with a spark, the story finally begins.

The moment before another moment. That moment gone, I am here, solid in this true moment. The next is unseen, a question behind the rippling air of fire-heat, the vastness of the night left behind, the crashing of the men through the burning beams and debris. They’ve got the hose on it, like a battering ram against the aluminum siding glowing hot. Surrounded by heat. It’s inside my clothes, inside my skin, exciting molecules, my whole body racing, charging, colliding with itself. I have found the man.

We stand facing each other in the heavy heat, the shirt on the man’s back smoldering, about to ignite, and I reach out, my hand already outstretched, the time for waiting gone now, take the man by the arm, pull him quickly from the flames. Passing through a second wall of flame and out through the heat that encircles the whole place, a bubble of overheated air that quivers and shakes, bends the lights from the trucks, bends the light from the fire as it flashes on the grass, bends the light of the stars, still somehow visible in the sky above, and seems to circle the large orange moon above the trees. It shivers. It rolls. Cold stone in space. Heat between. A reflection in a pool or a pool itself. A pool of warm water, reflecting flame. The waters of the moon come to cool our burning bodies. Out into its stream, alive.