

“Sui Generis”
and other fictions



Marc Lowe

ISM's Press

"Sui Generis" and other fictions by Marc Lowe

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Author's Note and Acknowledgments:

The following 23 short fictions have been selected from among work composed between the years 2004-2006, when I was living and teaching in Hiroshima, Japan. While not everything from this period could be included, obviously, these constitute some of my favorites.

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-M.L., December 2009

<i>Fish</i>	originally published in <i>Pindeldyboz</i>
<i>Eggshells</i>	originally published in <i>The Salt River Review</i>
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<i>The Baby is Safe</i>	originally published in <i>Farrago's Wainscot</i>
<i>The Church at Dawn</i>	originally published in <i>elimae</i>
<i>Immaterial</i>	originally published in <i>The Steel City Review</i>
<i>The Machines</i>	originally published in <i>Mindfire Renewed</i>
<i>Anchor</i>	originally published in <i>elimae</i>
<i>The Tree Cutter</i>	originally published in <i>Caketrain</i>
<i>Re-birthing</i>	originally published in <i>Mad Hatters' Review</i>
<i>The Third Person</i>	originally published in <i>Sein und Werden</i>
<i>Strange Things</i>	originally published in <i>The Angler</i>
<i>A Good Example</i>	originally published in <i>The Salt River Review</i>
<i>Sleeping Pills</i>	originally published in <i>Pindeldyboz</i>
<i>Public Case</i>	originally published in <i>The Beat</i>

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For M.

“Sui Generis”

The following occurred one Friday afternoon in the not-too-distant past.

After consuming a simple and healthy “B-course” set-menu lunch consisting of rice, miso-soup, pickles, and a small piece of salted fish, I realized that I still had a reasonable window of time on my hands before I’d have to go teach my next student (I’m an English teacher in Japan), and, as I was in the downtown area already, I decided to seek out a cozy little coffee shop somewhere nearby where I might begin drafting a story whose title I had determined in advance would be “Sui Generis,” though I hadn’t the faintest idea of what it was to be about yet, other than that it would be unique, a true one-of-a-kind story, so to speak, the kind of story everyone would be envious that s/he hadn’t thought of writing first. And so—precisely because it was to be such a unique, one-of-a-kind story—I determined that I absolutely had to draft it in an equally unique, one-of-a-kind sort of environment (forgive me the tautology), though to find such a place proved to be more difficult than I had expected, for, in the part of the city in which I found myself on that particular day, there were absolutely no cafés other than Scubrats Coffee as far as the eye could see... It soon became apparent to my discerning eye, however, that there were variations in size between and among the Scubrats establishments dominating practically every corner, though they all displayed the same logo with the same color layout, etc. Indeed, the larger establishments seemed to declare their independence from the surfeit of smaller shops, which were inevitably nestled inside of even larger franchise stores (or malls) like some miniaturized, model versions of their superior, somehow more believably authentic cousins.

As the clock was ticktickticking away, and as I really wanted to write something before I had to jump on a bus and head to class, I walked into the next *Scubrats* I stumbled upon, a three-story tall shop inside of

which I found on offer something that looked to be an amalgamation of the usual array of scones, sweets, and sandwiches one would normally expect to find in such an establishment, a sort of “three-in-one” concoction, if you will, though it was accompanied by neither name nor price tag. At any rate, I wasn’t in the mood to try out this bizarre foodstuff (did all *Scubratts* now carry this peculiar hybrid sandwich-sweet?) and quickly decided to order a small *Zen Blendy* tea, though when I approached the counter and requested an S-size cup, I was immediately informed by the green-uniformed girl with coppery red hair (which was all the rage, and apparently still is, among teenage girls) who stood behind the counter that, “In here, an S equals an M, sir.” “An S equals an M?” I stammered, not sure I had understood her correctly. “Yes, sir. If what you really want is an S then you should simply order an M, since the price is exactly the same, and to request less for more would be a completely illogical thing to do, don’t you agree? Our slogan around here isn’t ‘S = M = ☺’ for nothing, you know,” and so, left with little choice, I paid and brought my unwieldy M-sized cup of tea up to the third floor and, settling into a large, cushy sofa chair there, surveyed the area to discover, much to my delight, that the room was completely vacant. I then proceeded to extract my notebook and to place it on the table beside my *Zen Blendy*, which was already over-steeped despite the voluminous amount of hot water inside which two teabags sat as if constipated at the bottom; afterwards I removed the bloated bags of leaves and placed them, dripping a greenish-brown liquid, inside the overturned plastic white cover so that the hot fluid inside my “S = M = ☺” formula M-cup wouldn’t get any darker than it already was, and, procuring a three-pronged pen from my pocket (filled with black, blue, and red ink; I always use black for writing, red for grading my students’ papers, and blue as a backup for when the other two run out), I considered what the opening lines of “Sui Generis” should read and sipped languorously at my still-steaming beverage, which tasted of cheap, frozen-then-thawed green tea leaves mixed with haphazardly chosen herbs, and before long I realized that I had somehow written a quantity of truly extraordinary (in my not-so-humble opinion) words in my notepad under the heading “Sui Generis,” and that my

time was fast running out; further, I saw that I had already imbibed three-quarters of my *Zen Blandy* tea (um, *Blendy* that is...) and felt that I very much needed to urinate. Standing up and stretching my limbs, I noted that the room was still empty, so I left my bag and notebook at the table, along with my quarter-full paper teacup, and headed for the unisex restrooms... What I soon discovered, however, and much to my dismay, was that the restrooms on either side of the narrow corridor were occupied by two female employees who appeared to be cleaning the toilets, and who both, from the back at least, looked like the girl with copper red hair that had told me, from her place behind the front counter downstairs, that "S = M = ☺." At that moment the following thought occurred to me:

When recited in front of the restroom mirror, wouldn't the slogan/formula "S = M = ☺" change to "☺ = M = S"? And what does the ☺ actually stand for? Shouldn't the ☺ part be a variable standing for the customer's mood on any given day, so that on some days the formula would be "S = M = ☹" or, again, in the mirror, "☹ = M = S," etc.? How about [re]presenting this as "S = ☺ = M" or "M = ☺ = S," of course replacing the variable with various other moods as appropriate: grumpy, sick, horny, etc.? For me, and for my overburdened bladder, the ideal formula was/is "S = ☺," but I guess I'm a bit of a fecklessly artless fellow when it comes right down to it, despite the grossly novel ideas I've conjured up today for my one-of-a-kind story, "Sui Generis."

To continue with the main narrative, then... The two girls cleaning the toilets were of the same height, and both had coppery red, shoulder-length hair, and, of course, both wore the same employee uniform as one another/the girl behind the counter, but it was probably just coincidence; everyone (and her sister, and her sister's friend, etc. etc.) seemed to have coppery red shoulder-length hair these days, and a uniform is a uniform is a uniform, after all, otherwise it wouldn't be called: "uni-form"! At any rate, there was little else to do at that point but descend one level and use the identical restrooms for those customers who preferred the second floor, for surely management wouldn't have employees cleaning all of the toilets on every floor simultane-

ously, at least not when taking into consideration that there was a total of two toilets on each floor, making for a grand total of six toilets in all; they'd certainly need to save some employees for making the coffee and for running the cash register and for explaining that "S = M = ☺" (which was their slogan, after all) to all of the dullard customers who simply wanted a small tea or coffee. Anyway, by the time I had reasoned all of this out for myself I was standing in front of an identical corridor between two toilet rooms, exactly like the ones I had just come from, on the second floor, and, to my genuine astonishment, two young female employees' backs, indistinguishable in every way from the backs of the two girls upstairs, faced me (in other words their *backs*, not their faces, faced me) from the open restroom doors on either side, cleaning the toilets as the two girls on the third floor had been doing a moment earlier and probably still were. It was at that precise moment that I had the following thought:

Though I do fancy Baudrillard's theories about simulacra in the philosophical sense, I don't take them literally, at least not to the extent that I would have assumed all four girls – five when putting the girl behind the counter into the mix – to have been actual manifestations of the same person, where the original model upon which the others were based would, herself, according to Baudrillard's exposition [as I understand it], have had to have been an image, a concept, an ideal, rather than someone or something that ever actually existed on this plane, i.e. someone or something that "...has no relation to any reality whatsoever" and is "its own simulacrum," which would mean, in essence, if I were to extrapolate from this, that the girl who cited the "S = M = ☺" formula to me on the first floor would have had to have been no more than a copy of [a copy of a copy of...?] a person who never actually existed: a very unsettling idea indeed.

I attempted to shake the feeling of uncanny dread from my bone-marrow as I descended to the first floor to find myself nearly out of my head with exhaustion, standing in a narrow hallway between two open doors, staring at two identical backs as before and, disoriented to the point of not knowing who or what I was any longer and having to

pee so badly my eyes burned, I blurted out, "Excuse me, but do *any* of you plan to be finished cleaning any of the toilets in this (goddamned) establishment any time soon?" and before I knew what had happened both of the uniformed *Scubratts* employees had rushed off down the stairs, whisking their buckets of cleaning supplies away with them, so quickly they hadn't even left me enough chance to study their faces to compare them to or with one another (or to or with the girl behind the counter, for that matter), though all I could think about at that moment was reliefreliefrelief... At any rate, after my bladder had been emptied approximately three-quarters of the way, I conjectured the following:

The formula/slogan "S = M = ☺" – unless "S" and "M" were, in fact, equivalent to one another, i.e. completely interchangeable – which, in reality, they weren't, since an S-sized cup was in fact smaller than an M- sized cup – and unless "☺" meant that most customers actually enjoyed having to take a monster leak while all of the restrooms were simultaneously being cleaned by employees that all looked identical to one another – had to be false. It was a ruse, a ploy to make customers buy the larger size while implying that they actually had a choice in the matter, vis à vis "S = S = ☺," which was just as bogus a concept, really, and just as illogical, for the outcome might be "☺" in terms of monetary loss but "☺" in terms of bladder capacity.

After zipping up my fly and washing my hands in the immaculate porcelain sink, I paused long enough to admire the pristine gleam of the toilet bowl's surface beside me, then opened the door to find myself looking at myself in the mirror of the adjacent restroom, whose door had been left wide open (my image was as exhausted as I and therefore out of focus), before turning the corner and once again ascending the stairwell until I was back on the third floor, where I discovered that every last sofa chair in the room (save my own, where I had fortunately left my personal belongings to mark my territory, much as a dog marks its territory by tinkling) was occupied by a male customer with dark hair drinking an M-size cup of what appeared to be over-steeped *Zen Blendy* tea while furiously scribbling words into his notepad with a three-pronged colored pen... Without having time

to study any of these individuals' features, or to read what any of them had written in their notepads (all of the sofa chairs faced the opposite wall, so I could only see the tops of the backs of each's respective head), I hastily tossed my own coveted notepad, inside of which resided the incomplete, rough draft of my one-of-a-kind story "Sui Generis," into my bag, grabbed my jacket, and, glancing at my wristwatch nervously, bolted down the stairs, where I bumped into myself innumerable times, cursing Baudrillard and his ilk under my breath as I made my way to the bus, a pack of schoolchildren in uniforms following closely behind.

Fish: A Melodrama in Five Parts

I. Fish (Introduction)

The man wakes up. There is a large fish in his ear. It thrashes around, its tail beating against his paper-thin eardrum, splashing water down into his Eustachian tubes, down into his throat. He can feel it there, burning; it's like a sore thumb, an open wound, gushing, entering his chest, then moving down into his belly where it churns like butter, finally seeping down into his legs and feet. There is melted pâté in the cupboard, blotches on the walls. He doesn't want her to see him like this, can't let her see him in this condition. He turns around to face the window, sticks out his red tongue (which is coated with fuzzy, white stuff), holds his breath and counts to ten, then exhales, a few sticky fish eggs dribbling out of his mouth and rolling across the counter. His wife is in the living room, watching T.V. and sipping a red margarita while she fans herself with a section of newspaper. He feels like he's going to be sick.

And now for a word from our sponsors...

He runs into the bathroom. The toilet churns and spews. He licks the salty remains of the fish scales off his crusty palm. The inside of his ear tickles now; he can feel the fish there slithering, shaking, peeking its diamond-shaped head out from his own, a big, round, shiny eye peering back at him, taunting him, gritting its nonexistent teeth, shaking its two-pronged tail like a belly dancer and slapping it against his fatty cheek (in perfect rhythm with the theme music from the television show his wife is watching). He opens his mouth to vomit up his breakfast, but nothing comes. His stomach gurgles. He flushes the toilet and opens the door, the fish escaping into the bowl.

A woman was reported missing earlier this morning...

His wife is gone now, the television dead. The man wipes his forehead and, exhausted, blows his nose, returns to the kitchen, takes out a large butcher knife from the cupboard, chops off the ring finger of his left hand, wraps it in newspaper, and heads off to work...

II. Lemon

...and so the story goes, but it wasn't just Leona's fantasy, it was Sandra's as well, so the two of them bought a lemon and squeezed it as hard as they could, but the man didn't scream as loudly as they had expected when the juice reached the wound, so they...

III. Coffee

...believe we've met before. You have such lovely eyes. What's your name? Oh. Interesting. Here's my card. No. That isn't exactly true, you see. Well, OK, sure, I *have* technically, but it's different now. I mean, don't expect me to pull out a Luger and start putting holes into people in this café or anything, but, yeah, I've done lotsa jobs before. Sure. No, I'm not involved in that line of work anymore. I retired a long time ago. You see this? Yeah, that's right. That's what you get for fucking around with the big boys. They damn near lopped the whole thing off. Luckily, there was a bucket of ice around, so I was able to save part of it. I had it sewn back on by a very skillful surgeon – cost me a pretty penny, I tell you. Why aren't you drinking your coffee? It'll get cold if you just let it sit there like that. At least put the lid back on. Can I have a sip? Thanks. Your eyes are really quite lovely. Can I kiss you? My tongue is anxious to taste a bit of...

IV. And then...

...don't lick it like that, I say, it ain't a lemon! I don't mean to be rude, of course, but the guy is slobbering all over the place. Then he says to me, "This here cumquat is rotten, I want a refund." Jerk! I tell him to take his business elsewhere, tell him we don't sell no rotten fruit here, but

then he says he wants to order a friggin' *tunafish sandwich*. I tell him we don't have no *tunafish sandwich* on the menu, go somewhere else, and he flips me the bird. So what can I do? I grab his hair and smash his head into the edge of the counter without thinking – I mean, I don't take no shit from nobody no more – but he's got a friggin' metal plate in there which puts a chip into the side of the new marble counter. *What'll happen when the boss finds out?* I thinks to myself. The guy throws his glass of water at me, cusses, says this is the worst joint he's ever eaten in. I threaten to call the police if he doesn't leave. So what does he do instead? Asks me out for a cup of coffee. Can you believe that?

V. Conclusion (tentative)

And now, back to our regularly scheduled program...

The fish was raised in clean waters: the packing company did not use any harmful chemicals to preserve it. It exhibited a pleasant (if slightly salty) smell. When eaten with the proper utensils, it was easy to pick up and easy to insert into one's mouth. (It was also very delicious when eaten with a slice of lemon on the side.) Upon mastication the fish did not complain. After reaching the large intestine, it would make its way upstream to the small intestine, the stomach, traveling as far as the windpipe, where it would lay its glistening white eggs. Then it would follow a reverse course back down to the sigmoid colon and settle there in the dampness until the following morning, when the man would wake up and go to the toilet to read the newspaper and let his mind wander for a bit...

Eggshells

My wife and I sit facing each other across the kitchen table. Our conversation proceeds in the usual fashion.

"So, how was your day?"

"Oh, fine. Yours?"

"Okay, I guess."

"What did you do?"

"Well, I worked of course, picked up some milk and cheese, called to wish my mother a happy birthday..."

"Mmm."

"You?"

"Same as always. Work was hectic. You know..."

"Yeah, I know."

Neat rows of eggs line the table like small, rotund soldiers, trembling precariously every time a truck drives by. I have no idea why they are there, though I dare not ask.

"Are you working again tomorrow?"

"Of course. I always work on Saturdays."

"Right."

"What are your plans?"

"Well, I have a few errands to run. Yup, got a few things to do..."

She turns her head toward the large window behind her to gaze out into the empty lot. The egg nearest me suddenly falls off the edge of the table and lands under the chair.

"Shall I pick that up?"

"What?"

"One of th-the eggs just fell. Do you want me to pick it up?"

"If you like."

I open my mouth to say something else, but nothing emerges. I let my arm dangle for a moment, but can't find the egg.

"I can't find the egg."

"It probably rolled under the table."

"Do you want me to try and find it?"

"Well, do *you* really want to?"

I change the subject.

"So, what's for dinner tonight?"

"Chicken. Every Friday is chicken night. You know that."

"Do I?"

"Well, you do now."

She sighs and, standing, folds her arms in front of her chest; her lovely hazel green eyes are concealed by her overgrown bangs, which she keeps saying she means to trim but never does. I haven't seen those sad eyes of hers in months.

"I have to go. I'll be back soon."

Her tone is flat, unconvincing. Is she even convinced of her own words?

"There's chicken in the freezer. Help yourself."

"How soon will you be back?"

"Soon. I'll be back soon. Take care of the eggs for me until then, okay? They're bound to hatch any day now."

"They're safe with me."

The moment I hear the door close I climb onto the table and lie belly-down on top of the stark white eggs; they are reduced to a chalky-powder in an instant, like ground-up Tums. Realizing my mistake, I take the slab of chicken out of the freezer, lay it on top of the remaining eggshells, and patiently wait for them to hatch.

Restless

It isn't that there's no logic to it, Detective; it's rather that any logic that might have governed the sequence of events has been diffused by time and reflection. I can only tell you what I remember, though I'm afraid it's quite patchy.

We started at her house and circled around the neighborhood, our exhalations like dry ice. I had no idea where she was taking me, but I'd promised not to question her beforehand, and so obviously wasn't going to renege midway. The dim streetlamps were our silent co-conspirators, watching over us, ensuring we didn't get too far off-track. By that time of the morning—around 2 a.m., I believe it was, though it might have been earlier—the streets were empty, save the occasional swerving truck or motorbike. At one point I spotted a patrol car in a ditch surrounded by brush, inside of which an officer was banging the brains out of some poor Oriental girl; she was probably a prostitute, or perhaps a thief trying to plea-bargain. This of course has little bearing on my story: it's merely a detail, an image to place at the back of your mind as we move stealthily across the road and into the backyard of a house owned by "The Kimball's" (according to the mailbox). It's here that things get confusing. She nods to me—Kay, that is—and I immediately gather that this is where we'll do whatever it is we've come to do. The back door is open, and we slip inside unseen, using our penlights to guide us up the steep wooden stairs leading to the children's bedroom. I normally would have been worried about the creaking of the steps, yet for some reason it didn't occur to me to concern myself with it: I trusted her so completely as to discard all logic for the time being and just "go with the flow." Perhaps this was my biggest mistake.

When we reach the top of the stairs the little girls are there, sleeping side-by-side, faces half covered by their shared blanket, which appears to be filled with down (did I mention the cold? it was a frigid morning...). I follow the glow of her penlight—which is poised deftly in her

left hand – with my eyes to see that the two girls are identical. At first I wonder whether I’m hallucinating, but then I realize that they must in fact be identical *twins*: this is certainly a logical-enough explanation for seeing double, isn’t it? (I’ve already said that I had by this point “discarded logic,” but of course I meant that only in a manner of speaking.) My penlight is in my right hand as we make our way into the master bedroom, leaving the twins behind for the time being. There is a large oak dresser in front of me, beside which a small nightstand with a half-empty glass of water on it and an open bottle of pills rests. Why I noticed these objects before anything else is easily explained: I had had my penlight aimed directly in front of me, just as Kay had instructed me to do before we began encircling the neighborhood, though my own inclination – or should I say *intuition*? – would have been to do a quick survey of the room first, in which case I would certainly have realized that the twins’ parents were already making their escape out the window near the king-size waterbed; it wasn’t until some moments later that I heard their footsteps on the roof.

Kay, I whisper at this point, where are you? And so I have broken my promise not to “question” her method after all, though really this is a moot point since she is no longer there to call my bluff. It was during this interval that I heard the pitter-patter of the twins’ parents scampering across the roof over my head (see above). The rest is a blur, as I warned at the beginning. The twins are standing in front of me; both are wearing identical pajamas covered with an almost psychedelic – or at least I remember having had such an impression at the time – Mickey & Minny Mouse pattern. Hi, I say. My name’s Ray. What’s yours? My hand is trembling, and I nearly drop the penlight as I frantically, desperately even, move it back and forth to illuminate first one child and then the other; their faces are like masks, rigid and pale, and their blank expressions are so completely indistinguishable as to cause me once again to question my own two eyes; indeed, I cannot discern the slightest difference between the two – their visages are the same, down to the tiniest birthmark (that is: the small, brownish blotch seen beside the right down-turned corner of each’s respective mouth). Why

are you in our house, Ray? one of them suddenly asks. (I've dropped the penlight now; it lies lazily at my feet, most of its light absorbed by the shaggy carpet upon which I'm standing, or had been standing.)

It was at this point that I ran, or I must have run, for the next thing I remember is standing under a streetlamp outside Kay's house, thinking about her naked body, that body I never tire of exploring with my eyes and tongue. A police siren is wailing somewhere in the distance, or perhaps it's the sound of an ambulance—I can never distinguish between the two—and I have the vague feeling that something bad has happened to the twins. But of course the twins were just fine; or, rather, they *are*. Kay's body resurfaced the next morning, along with the twins' parents, both of whom suffered only minor injuries. There's really no need to rehash all of this, though, is there, Detective? That's as much as I recall. Don't say I didn't warn you. I'd like another cigarette, please.

Jagged Edges (The Letter)

She sat on the bed and watched. She watched them through a narrow chink in the wall. The boy had his arm around the girl. He was whispering something into her ear. The girl giggled and covered her mouth. He moved closer. She pushed him away. He tried again. She refused him again. He stopped smiling. She stopped smiling as well. They stared at each other. She began to sweat. Dinner! the girl's mother cried. Coming! she responded. She strained to see what would happen next. The boy stood up. He was holding something in his hand. She couldn't see what it was. It looked like a straight razor. Perhaps he was going to shave? Her heart was beating fast as she watched. She knew she shouldn't be watching. It was none of her business. Dinner was ready. But she couldn't stop watching. The boy lifted the razor into the air. There was no sound. She could not see the girl anymore. The rift in the wall was just too narrow. Then there was sound. It was the sound of groaning. What were they doing? Her mother's voice rang out again. It's going to get cold. Come down this instant! Yes Mom, she replied, one ear to the wall. The groaning had stopped. She peered through the small fissure again. She thought she glanced something. It was flesh-colored. It was a bit bluish around the edges. *The sound of footsteps.* Another bit of flesh. Pink and puffy. She turned around. Her mother was standing in the doorway. One hand rested on her hip. She was holding something in the other. It wasn't a razor. It was an envelope. The envelope had been torn open. A piece of paper peered out from it curiously. It was a letter. Her mother must have read it. Her mother's face was stern. It was reproachful. The girl on the bed gasped. The back of her neck had been spattered with something. She wiped her neck with four fingers. Then she looked at them. They were wet. The wetness was translucent. It didn't give off any distinct smell. It might be spittle, she thought. Or maybe water. Her mother approached the bed. She held out the envelope. One hand was still poised on her triangular hip. This is for you, she said. The girl took it with her dry hand. She held her breath. There was no return address on the envelope. She grasped the pointed corner of the letter. Her hands

were trembling. It was quiet in the room now. She pulled the letter out. The inner edges were jagged. They looked as if an animal had gnawed on them. She opened the letter. Her mother was eyeing her. She was tapping her foot. Her mother tapped her foot whenever she was nervous. What was she so nervous about? The girl smiled at her mother nervously. Her mother did not smile back. The girl unfolded the letter with the serrated edges. She looked at the letter and swallowed hard. There were only seven words written on it. They were not words her mother would approve of. They made the girl blush. She did not know who had written the letter. She wanted to know. She wondered if it was the boy next door. Her mother was staring at her. Perhaps her mother was waiting for a response? What could she say, though? She didn't know who had sent the letter. She felt ashamed. She didn't know why she felt ashamed, but she did. She imagined the boy next door doing the things in the letter to her. Her face turned red. It was hot. Her mother took a step forward. She raised her right hand to her left ear. Then she hit her daughter. She slapped her with the back of her right hand. The sound both frightened and excited the girl. She had never been hit by anyone before. Her mother was panting. Her face was redder than the girl's own face. The girl wondered if her mother was excited too. Her mother grabbed the letter from her hand. She crumpled it up and threw it on the bed. The girl put her hand to her cheek. It was warm. It throbbed. She liked the feeling. She wanted her mother to slap her again. Instead, her mother left the room. She didn't close the door when she left. The girl watched her mother go down the stairs. She could see her through the opening in the door. Her mother was crying. The girl picked up the crumpled letter. How had the edges of the letter gotten so jagged? She looked through the space in the wall. It was dark. She wanted to know who had sent the letter. She could smell fish. She was hungry. Her mouth watered. She suddenly wanted to lick the crack in the wall. She could almost taste it. There was no movement on the other side of the wall. The light had been turned off. She moved her face close to it. She stuck out her tongue. Her face was spattered with liquid. The liquid came from the crack in the wall. It tasted salty. It was salty and wet. She peered through the space again but couldn't see anything. Everything was black. Should

she call out? The smell of burnt fish drifted into her nose. Dinner must be burning. She didn't care. She wanted to lick the space in the wall. She wanted to taste more of the salty liquid. Her desire was overwhelming. She stuck her tongue out again and pressed it to the crack in the wall. The wall did not taste salty. It was not wet. It was dry as bone. It tasted of plaster. She coughed and wiped her mouth. She wiped it with the back of her hand. Now she was sweating. Her sweat was wet. It was salty. She should go downstairs and eat the fish. She should go and eat the salty burnt fish with her mother. She should tell her mother she was sorry. She had made her mother cry. She should throw the torn letter away and go downstairs. She should throw away the filthy letter with the jagged edges. She picked up the letter and looked at it again. Then she started to feel funny. Her heart was beating fast. Who had written the letter? She looked around the room. There was a hammer in her closet. It was in the toolbox. Her father had put it there. She got up from the bed. She was sweating profusely now. The room was hot like a factory. The air was thick with gray smoke. Why hadn't she noticed the smoke before? She began to cough. No matter. She needed the hammer. She opened the closet. The toolbox was there, beneath a stack of clothing. She opened it. She took out the largest hammer in the toolbox. It was heavy. She wondered how it would feel to be hit with the hammer. She wondered whether it would hurt very much. She wanted someone to hit her with the hammer. The hammer was very large. She put the head of the hammer into her mouth. It was cool and metallic. It made her gag. Then she pulled the hammer out of her mouth. It was wet with her saliva. This thought excited her. It made her feel tingly inside. She dropped the hammer and climbed onto the bed. She picked up the furrowed letter and ran her fingers over its serrated edges. One of her fingers started to bleed. She wiped some of the blood onto either side of the letter. She licked her salty finger. The letter slid off the bed and onto the floor. *The sound of footsteps.* She knew she had to act quickly. She picked up the hammer. It only made a small dent the first time. The second time it made a hole the size of a quarter. Pieces of plaster fell onto the edge of the bed. She turned the hammer around. She pulled it like a lever. The wall soon gave. The crack opened wide. She heard a familiar noise and jumped inside.

The Baby is Safe

[Left]

I am seated at my desk typing a memo when my watch begins to ring. I place my wrist against the cartilaginous part of my ear and say, Hello? still typing with my free hand. The gravelly voice at the other end says, Long time, no speak. I immediately recognize it as belonging to my ex-lover from Saipan. What do you want? I say. I'll call you back—I'm busy right now, and I need both of my hands to finish the job. She laughs. Why not strap your wristwatch around your ear like everyone else? You've always been stubbornly independent. Haven't changed at all. Just then my boss appears in front of me, her broad hips at the level of my eyes. How's that memo coming along? she asks. Oh, I'll have it to you soon. *Very* soon. I wonder whether she's noticed the glowing face of the watch. Huffing like a horse, she shuffles away. A moment later I hear her repeat the same question ("How's that memo coming along?") in the same tone to herself. I'll call you back, I whisper into the watch. Don't worry, the baby is safe, the voice says, and then the line goes dead. It is exactly 3:09 p.m.

[Right]

"...—nks to the advent of advanced psycho-cellular technology, communication between the sexes has never been easier. So says..."

She snapped the fingers of her left hand, instantaneously turning the plasma screen a vacuous black, while, with her right, she languorously stroked her client-lover's erect penis. "Are you almost there?" she asked, yawning to herself as she gazed at a swollen black beetle making its way across the far wall. Before he could answer, however, she increased the rate of her stroking and he ejaculated, grunting like a pregnant boar; in an instant the ISO3300X cleaning unit dissolved the spermy mess with a shot of translucent disinfectant spray. "All right?"

Now pull up your drawers and go to work or you'll be late. I've already scanned you for GC* 3900, so we're even." The man, who until now had been lying flat on his back, sat up on the edge of the bed and reached for his amethyst-colored synthetic pants, which were still piled up around his ankles. "Oh, and don't forget to pick up a discount coupon on your way out. 10% off the next time you come." He sighed inaudibly and, buttoning up his matching synthetic shirt, said, "I could do without the sarcasm right now. I've got a long day ahead of me. You shouldn't tease me like that, you know. A man is bound to..." She turned to face the plasma screen again and, crossing her legs, snapped her fingers. The man's watch read 9:03 as he walked past her.

*Global Currency

[Left]

I hand the memo to my boss, who snaps the fingers of her right hand. The double doors slide shut behind me as she takes the memo with the same hand and scratches some e-text onto the surface of her desk with the other. (I hadn't noticed that she was a leftie until now.) Who were you talking with on your watch earlier? she says. Who, me? I answer. It was just an old friend. I told h-him I'd call another time, since I was busy. She narrows her amethyst colored eyes and snorts, then bites her bottom lip with a crooked tooth. Is that so? she says. I nod, swallowing the saliva that has accumulated in my mouth. We stare at each other for a pregnant moment before she snaps her fingers again. You may leave now, she says, the double doors already open behind me. I feel wretched, though I'm not sure exactly why.

[Right]

She lay on the bed, watching the flickering lights of the flat plasma screen. The prosthetic baby in the room at the end of the corridor was crying. "Shut up" she said, more to herself than to the child, as she rolled onto her back and slid the hypodermic needle into a bulging

vein, pulling the makeshift tourniquet off with her teeth. The clock in the corner of the screen blinked 6:03 p.m. The crying grew louder as the vitamin-concoction (her lunch) entered her bloodstream. "Shut up," she repeated to herself, rubbing the fingers of her right hand across her sunken, bare belly, on which an orange-red cloth had been tattooed. When she snapped the fingers of her opposite hand the ISO6600X cleaning unit produced a steaming hot washcloth resembling the one inked into her flesh, except for its dull beige color. "Fucking baby," she said.

[Left]

I'm at my desk again. It's exactly 6:06 a.m., according to the computer monitor. Why the hell did I come in so early today, anyway? Ah yes, I have memos to attend to. My wristwatch has stopped at 9:03 p.m. I must have forgotten to recharge the six-month battery last night. As soon as I start retyping the memo from yesterday my boss's face appears on the monitor. Letting out a clipped burst of air from her nose, she says, Are you making any progress? Bring the memo to my office just as soon as you're finished. Yes ma'am, I say. I'll have it to you just as soon as I... At that very moment my wristwatch lights up. My boss's eyes meet mine through the monitor, and at that instant I know what I have to do. Removing the watch, I place it on the desk and smash it with the sole of my right shoe, as if it were a large bug.

[Right]

"I'm home," he said, dropping his synthetic briefcase with a dull thud. Where was she? Something felt strange. Was it the pasty walls, the lusterless vinyl flooring, the fat beetle on the wall now here, now gone? No, it was something else; a sound, unmistakably that of a crying baby, coming from the far end of the corridor. She hated children, wouldn't let him ejaculate anywhere near her reproductive organs (despite them both being fixed). Something was fishy – was it a trap? But why should he mistrust her? She was, after all, his one (and only) lover. He gazed at

his wristwatch before turning right, heading straight for the door from whence the child's cries were coming. The dark corridor was lined with mirrors of all shapes and sizes; they reflected his form from various angles, making him look like some hideous fiend from a campy horror film. As he approached the last door on the left the wailing grew louder, more intense. His hand fell upon the gold *nouveau*-Bauhaus style door handle and pushed. And then something went *click* from down at the end of the corridor.

[Left]

She snaps her fingers, I hand her the re-retyped memo, she scribbles some e-text on the desk, etc. etc. Let me see your watch, she says. My watch? I say, shocked. I smashed it to smithereens, of course. The battery was dead. She shakes her head, breathing noisily through her nose. But you could have just recharged it, couldn't you? Well yes, I suppose, I answer, searching her face for any hint, however small, of sarcasm. Why bother, though, when I can just buy a brand new one on the way home tonight? The new models have batteries that last up to nine-months in a single charge, whereas the old one had a battery which only lasted for six. Sounds wasteful to me, she says, snapping her fingers again. The double doors open behind me. By the way, she says, the baby is still safe. I have it on good authority. The double doors close behind me. My gasp gets stuck in my throat as I leave.

[Right]

She found him in front of the last door on the right, his left hand clasped to his chest, the right grasping the handle, as if trying to open it. How had this stranger gotten into her apartment, and what did he want with her? Good thing she'd had the new security system installed last month. He'd be paralyzed for at least another hour or so, which would give her enough time to call F— on her watch and file an e-report on the intruder... Ah, but her last after-hours client had smashed the watch to bits, apparently because he hadn't come (through no fault

of her own; he had been too uptight, obviously, sexually frustrated...). She'd just have to take the man's watch, which was a brand new model ISO93600Z, ironically the exact model she had seen advertised in the storefront on the way home from the office. The prosthetic baby was crying from the bedroom now, where she had locked it up for safekeeping. She had to return it to the clinic by week's end. Good thing the intruder hadn't found it, or she'd be in deep shit. As long as the baby was safe, everything would work out. The watch read 9:09 as she strapped it to her ear and dialed.

[Left]

March 6, 20—
9:36 p.m.

Text message:

dear f—

how's the weather in the asianp? have you taken care of those seminal vesicles yet? don't worry, i've taken care of things on my end. love you more than you know.

*xoxo,
r—*

The previous message was electronically forwarded to the watch I bought last night (the old one was either misplaced or stolen). Wish I had a clue as to who sent it. My name, for one thing, doesn't begin with the letter *F*: my first name is Carl, my middle name Ira. Further, I don't live in the Asian Pacific, not to mention that I also don't know any *R*'s other than Rachel P—, and she's been MIA for three full years now. At any rate, the boss is on maternity leave—she recently bought a new baby from that trendy new cloning clinic over on 6th and Cifi (or was it Lezboi?) Ave.—and I've been put in charge of overseeing the business

until she returns. Truth be told, there's not a whole lot to be done here apart from typing and retyping old memos, so whenever I get bored I do crossword puzzles, first with my right hand and then with my left. (I've always thought it'd be cool to train oneself to be ambidextrous.) When my watch rings I place it against my ear. A baby is crying on the other end of the line. Hello? I say, but the baby just continues to wail. It is in that instant that I realize the answer to *six down*, which has been eluding me for hours on end, is TRIGONOMETRIC.* That's it! I cry, snapping the fingers of my right hand and scribbling the answer down with my left. A tiny beetle scuttles across the desk. I smash it with the heel of my shoe as the line goes dead.

* "A function of an arc or angle most simply expressed in terms of the ratios of pairs or sides of a right-angled triangle is called a _____ function."

Guilty

I begin to undress, beads of sweat on my brow. *Where are you taking me?* I inquire. *Well, to the gallows, of course, they say. But, why?* A long pause. And then: *To be hanged.* Did he just say “hanged”? *For what?* But this time I receive no answer. My shirt comes off, exposing my lanky frame to the elements, and then my pants. I find myself standing at the top of a balcony and, for a brief moment, I actually consider jumping, though it’s an awful long way down and I’m chickenshit. What is this place anyway? Why is it so eerily quiet here?

Let’s go, one of them says now. *Where are we going?* I am taken roughly by the arm. When I look down I catch a glimpse of my naked cock, which is swinging back and forth like a pendulum, withered like a dried prune. I am suddenly scared. *Did I do something wrong?* I ask. *What sin did I commit?* The men on either side of me both smirk, but neither says a word. *It’s easier if you stop asking so many questions,* the man on my left says, finally. *Death is no big deal. Lots of people die every-day. And everyone dies eventually. You ought to consider yourself lucky. Die before it’s too late! Follow the examples of Crevel, Dazai, Woolf! Would you like a cookie?* The man holds out a bleached, lion-shaped biscuit to me. He resembles a History professor I once had who committed suicide the year after I graduated: same mustache, same spectacles, same sad smile. *No thanks,* I say, suddenly chilled.

The man on my right (whom I haven’t yet looked at) ties a blindfold over my eyes, and then I hear the sound of a creaky door opening; I am told to watch my step. Entering the dry, chilly room, I feel the accusatory eyes of the spectators – there must be hundreds of them – on my unclothed body, though no one makes a noise. *Sure you don’t want a cookie? Last chance.* The voice is different from before. I shake my head no, but a rubber-gloved hand forces the pasty thing into my mouth; the biscuit tastes of gluten and sugar, with just a hint of plastic. *Are there any objections to the hanging of this man? He has been found guilty of not*

being guilty: not a hint of favoritism, bigotry, or malice in the totality of his slender bones, nor any sign of the desire for money, fame, or sex with nubile young women! (The jurors gasp.) Death is best; he is not fit to dwell in this world. Shall we proceed with the hanging, then? The eyes of the spectators increase their intensity. I open my mouth to protest: B – but...

The blindfold comes off, and I see that my audience is composed of animals: dogs, cats, iguanas, parakeets, snakes. I feel as if I am in a silent film, staring at the screen of another silent film. The noose is quietly placed around my neck as the man who resembles my dead History professor crunches a skull-shaped biscuit between his stained teeth. *Death is preferable. Trust me.* He winks, and as my feet lift off the ground everything slowly comes into focus.

The Church at Dawn

First chapter

He steps out of the car, adjusts his hat, begins to walk. The air is brisk, the sky blue, the clouds a buoyant white. He walks, breathes deeply, seems content. When he exhales, a faint mist appears, disappears. Right foot up, left foot down, left foot up, &c. What is he thinking about? There is a stone church ahead of him, a large black cross upon its roof. He walks, the birds twitter. He looks down, sees the autumnal leaves scattered about, golden brown or yellow and red, stiff and dry or flat and wet. He yawns, touches the arm of his spectacles, adjusts his hat. There is someone lying on the steps in front of the church. He sees this, frowns. A small, black spot rests upon his bottom lip. Birds twitter, leaves crunch, twittertwitter, crunchcrunch. Inhale, exhale, left up, right down, &c. The shade upon the steps of the church describes a 45-degree angle. It forms a zig-zag pattern as it descends, drops first off and then on to each successive step. The figure on the stairs remains unmoving, still covered in shadow.

Final chapter

He squints his eyes, lowers the rim of his hat, frowns. What is he thinking about now? He rubs the wrinkled sleeve of his jacket, adjusts his spectacles. Then he lets out a sharp, clipped cough and clears his throat. His hands are chapped, the whites of his eyes not-quite white. Seconds pass. Someone groans. Now he is on the ground, a spattering of red, sticky wetness on his beige shoe. It appears as if he has slipped on something, perhaps an animal carcass. There is a bright smear of blood upon the tarmac, the leaves, his clothing. His hat has landed somewhere behind his head (to his right). There is more blood there (crimson, dark). The black spot on his lip has spread across his face, has eclipsed it. The clouds are still white, the sky still blue, the air still brisk. The birds chirp, the leaves crunch, &c. A man steps out of his car, adjusts his hat, and begins to walk. He does not stop until he reaches the church.

Immaterial

Audio Tour Begins:

The room you are looking at is 10 feet by 10 feet by 10 feet with no windows or doors. As you can see, there is a tiny old lady – we have not given her a name – hunched over a sewing machine from the previous century; as she feeds a length of material through the machine, it is drawn into a hole in the floor shaped like a giant mouth before being collected at the other end by “volunteered workers.” You may also observe that there is a dark red light bulb directly above the woman’s head. It was plugged in the moment she began sewing one hundred years ago today.

[Digi-camera zooms in]

One might call the lady’s shrunken head – though difficult to see on the screen – cute (in a perverse sort of way): her eyes are like two tiny probing buttons which dart to and fro, snapping open and closed while tracking the machine’s wobbly needle as it stabs the spidery filaments of thread through the variously shaped swaths of cloth. This is a sign of her remarkable precision, and is precisely why we are renowned on both sides of the Atlantic *and* the Pacific.

[Digi-camera zooms out]

These swaths of cloth, then, are fed into the room from a hole in the ceiling in an endless circuit. (The ceiling hole is located just behind the old lady’s shrunken head, in case you hadn’t noticed earlier.) According to our records, the lady in cubicle #426-H has completed 3,153,600,000 strips of material since her tenure began with us: that’s one strip per second, or 3,600 strips per hour, or 86,400 strips per day. For the record.

[Gasps of awe from audience; digi-camera zooms in]

How does she do it, you ask? Is she (wo)man or machine? First, direct your eyes to her brittle wrists. As you can see, they are bound with a material only slightly heavier than what she is sewing. We paid Canine Plastics, Inc. to design this special material for us with a grant received from the FDDA.* Though it is not as strong as steel, it is nonetheless extremely resilient and much less cumbersome for our workers, as well as for us.

* Federal Drug Dealer Association

[Digi-camera zooms in, refocuses]

This unique material, thanks to the brilliant engineers and chemists at Canine Plastics, has been soaked in a long lasting “venom” – albeit a mild one – and its special consistency allows for a constant, steady stream of the venom, which was originally extracted from the radioactive urine of a rare species of cloned bird found in one isolated region of Haiti, to be time-released into the worker’s bloodstream without any needles or pain.

[Digi-camera zooms out, tour guide clears throat]

This chemically converted serum, then, acts as both a relaxant and stimulant; we have discovered that, in addition to making our workers 300% more productive than they were during the wars of the early and mid 21st century, it also prolongs their lives indefinitely. We pride ourselves on employing real human beings such as this adorable old specimen you’ve been watching on the monitor, rather than following the trend, which, as everyone knows, is to employ regular machines to do all the work. Were we to simply parr –

[Light in 10x10x10 foot room flickers, dies; audio program abruptly ends]

Hey! The light burnt out. Hans, Takitani, Myerson! See to it that an-

other red bulb is readied for cubicle #426-H by the machine arm. In the meantime, if there are any questions, I'd be glad to oblige...

- Anonymous #1: How did her head become so shrunken like that? Is that a side-effect of the venomous serum, or...?

This is a fair-enough question, but I'm afraid I do not have the authority to answer it. You'll have to ask one of our experts on your way out. Next question?

- Anonymous #2: How did she get into the room—it has no doors or windows, according to what we've just heard—and also: how do you feed her?

OK. There are holes in the ceiling and floor, right? And she's a very small lady. She was smaller when she was a child. As for food, she doesn't need any...

- Anonymous #3: What about toilet breaks? Where does she...you know...

Well, if she doesn't eat or drink, she doesn't need to use a toilet either, right? The serum simultaneously provides a sense of euphoria and a "fullness" of the belly akin to bloating, though purportedly more pleasurable. It's certainly preferable to antidepressants, which are so late 20th/early 21st century anyway.

- Anonymous #4: Isn't what you're doing here in violation of the FDDA's abuse of legalized illegal substances laws, as set forth in the...

Umm...Boris! Take this gentleperson to one of the *larger* cubicles and answer whatever questions happen to arise, will you? Boris will see to it that you are gently reminded of our laws. Please follow him to cubicle #824-T. Ahh, wonderful! It appears that the light is back on again in cubicle #426-H. Let's continue our audio tour, shall we?

[Digi-camera reveals the body of the old lady slumped over her sewing machine; threads like stitches skip across her shrunken, fleshy skull as she stares vacantly into the digi-camera's lens for a single moment before being dragged down the mouth-shaped hole in the floor with a glugglugglugging, then a crunchchurn crunching, sound, her long, gray hair trailing behind her for an impossibly long time...]

Audio Tour Desists:

The room you are in is 10 feet by 10 feet by 10 feet with no windows or doors. As your observers can see on their monitor, there is a figure—henceforth referred to as “Cubicle #426-H” —hunched over a sewing machine from the previous century, illumined only by a single, dark red light bulb...

RE[a]D

He sat down among the vast library of books and sighed: the revolution had ended, and things had quieted down to breathless whispers. He would begin his new life by starting to read again, by re-filling his head with learning, with something apart from the insipid propaganda of the government (and of the brainwashed people), the reductionist logic, the *a priori* assumptions, the truisms and the lies... He would start with one of these books – any of them would do: he craved *substance*, as one craves *sustenance* – be it a piece of bread with butter or a full-course meal – when one's belly is empty. Starting at the far-right section of the shelf that hovers at eye-level, he now withdraws a hefty volume with a dark cover and nearly indistinguishable lettering upon its spine, a title he does not attempt to make sense of. Seating himself in a reclining chair, he props the large book upon his lap, opens it to the front page, and readies himself for the experience of reading.

The first page, however, is blank. He inhales and flips to the second page, which is also blank. How curious, he thinks, flipping to the third and then the fourth pages, the fifth and then the sixth. This must be an anomaly of some sort, a rare mishap! He wedges the side of his right hand into the center of the book, and then opens it. More blank pages, yellowed and dull. He stands up, tome in hand, walks back over to the shelf, and puts the unwieldy thing back in its proper place. Perhaps I ought to find something with a more legible title next time, he thinks to himself, and, skimming the shelf for alternatives, he hones in on a not-too-thick volume with a chocolate-brown cover entitled *The Darwinian Code: A Novel*. It slides out easily, as if it had been primed for his eager hands alone, and he once again sits down in the chair and settles in to explore the text. He opens the book to the *Table of Contents*, or to where he expects to find a *Table of Contents*, yet, as before, to his disbelieving gaze, the pages are blank, white as the white walls upon which no decorations can be seen, save a framed Modigliani print and an unframed, torn Renoir, the latter spattered with what looks to be red candle wax.

He cannot understand why there are so many blank pages. Looking to his left and right, to make sure no one is watching, he opens the back cover of the book, which would instead be the front if he were reading in Japanese or Arabic, confirms that the pages there, too, are blank, and then tears out three of them, crumpling them into a loose ball and shoving it into his right pant pocket. I will give these to my son, he says, nodding to himself. Then he takes out a pen and, cautiously eyeing his quiet surroundings, scrawls his name, the date, and the word "Nevermind" onto a random page before placing it back on the shelf (page 53, when counted from the front).

He has not yet given up on his search for knowledge-in-books, however. Indeed, he now gazes at a volume that sits atop a row of other, indistinct books (their drab, no-frills bindings all look the same to him): it is labeled, simply, *RED*, and its cover, as the title would imply, is red, a brilliant red that makes it stand out from the rest. This is the one; he can sense it: *this* is the book he has come here to read. He reaches out his hand to take the book, his fingers grazing the soft, slightly fuzzy cover, when a voice calls out from behind him. Stop! the voice commands in a guttural shriek. Do not move. You are under arrest. But the voice is only in his head; he has created it the way a writer creates characters on a page, and it is just as real to him as if someone were really there. I haven't done anything, sir, he answers to the voice, which tells him to "shut up" and to "lie down on the ground like the dog you are." He obeys, quivering now, for perhaps the voice is real; perhaps the man has really come to arrest him for snooping around the library, which would have been an unthinkable transgression during the height of the revolution (although, ironically, the revolution produced thousands of great works, whereas now little of value is being published anymore). There is pain and the sound of bone breaking as the "voice" thrusts a nightstick (?) into the back of his ribs. There is blood as well; it pools up on the floor in front of the bookshelf so that he can see it from his vantage point on the ground. A heavy hand reaches from behind him into his right-side pocket and pulls out the crumpled ball of blank papers he had planned on giving to his son; the ball of papers lands sound-

lessly in the pool of dark red blood, spattering some of the spines of the books on the bottom shelf.

You may read now, the voice says. The man struggles to his feet and, pain screaming through the side of his body where his ribs have been broken, reaches for the book with the bright red binding entitled *RED*. The voice disappears, as does the blood and the ball of white paper. He opens the book and drops his pen.

The Machines (Deus ex Machina)

[1st Episode/1st Stasimon]

Seven-thousand feet shuffle forward *en masse*, move one step closer to the checkpoint, to the place where the proprietors of the seven-thousand feet in this expansive auditorium with bare white walls will have a reading taken by one of the machines, the machines manned by one of the men – or women, for there are women too – in white coats. The men (and women) wearing the white coats are trained in the art of reading futures as transmitted by the machines; each possesses a key to obtaining information from them, the highly coveted knowledge of whether any of the 3,501 people in the auditorium today (one gentleman, a veteran of one or another of the recent wars this country has seen, is missing both his legs) will fail or succeed in life, whether s/he will live to be ninety-seven or die at the age of thirty-three, the kind of knowledge that was once the sole domain of the village shaman, a distinctive occupation granted only to select individuals who were chosen by the gods for their rare function, to one who would have undergone training, both great and terrible, in order to reach the stage where he – or she, for there were women too – could communicate with the spirit world, with entities who possessed this important (though dangerous) knowledge and who could only be coerced by offerings of spirit money, spirit food or, if necessary, threats of a “spirit sword.” This same knowledge, however, can now be transmitted through technological advances in electronics and medicine, can be channeled with perfect precision (there are no “*mis-readings*” here) to the men and women in white coats through intensive training involving expensive drugs and wire implants and other modes too secretive to be uttered.

[2nd Episode/2nd Stasimon]

Had you been born into wealth perhaps you, too, would be standing on the other side of the machines today, instead of shuffling your tired feet

here along with the other seven-thousand pairs of soles/souls in this white-walled auditorium but, alas, this is not what the gods intended for you, so you must wait patiently along with the rest. There is a buzz in the air, a palpable buzz – you can feel it circling around the room, closing in on you; you are especially sensitive to this energy (you can't even hold a cell phone in your breast pocket without your heart speeding up; you were a frail child), and your hand is shaking from it like an epileptic. It is your turn in line to go next, immediately following the obese lady with frizzy, amethyst-colored hair who stands in front of you, her body a fluorescent blob obscuring the face of the fortune-teller with the white coat whose voice you now hear as he speaks to her in quiet, but firm, tones; a symbol of both authority and parental concern. Your hands tremble in anticipation as

[3rd Episode]

a moment later the crowd pushes forward, the sound of seven-thousand feet echoes in your head, and you find yourself standing in front of what looks to be a large scanner the color of azurite from which a tangled mass of wires run like intestines, sleek and plastic and shiny red-and-white. These wires, along with the wires from the other machines, converge at what appears to be some sort of (nuclear?) generator that sits in the center of the room; the generator is run by a number of technicians wearing red and blue armbands bearing the staff of Asclepius: a single snake wrapped around a silver staff. The man in the white coat hovers above you; his headset is plugged into the machine at your side, and when he motions for you to first raise and then place your right hand on it you do. The moment your palm makes contact with the sterile glass a cold, white light emanates from it, illuminating the man's face so that for a split instant it reflects back a negative image, a skull with snakes for hair, a demon from a Japanese *Noh* drama. You feel faint but do not lose consciousness as the man in the white coat says:

[3rd Stasimon]

You will be diagnosed with terminal cancer in the third month of the New Year. How long you will live I cannot say. You must see one of the technicians for that, as I do not possess the authority to transmit this information to you at this time.

[4th Episode/4th Stasimon]

The man lifts his left eyebrow when he utters the word “transmit,” and your auditory senses devolve into static white noise. You hear—or, rather, *feel*—the sound of seven-thousand feet shuffling forward, but your trembling hand is stuck to the glass of the machine as if by some sort of epoxy, your mouth frozen in a scream rivaling Munch’s famous painting. This does not stop the crowd from shoving forward in unison, however, carrying you along with it. When you open your eyes, which have been tightly shut (for how long you cannot say), you are standing on the opposite side of the checkpoint. You see—through clouded, watery vision—three technicians in black coats wearing protective face and body gear; they are huddled around the machine you had been standing at only moments earlier.

[Exodus: Deus ex Machina]

The machine emits flashes of white-hot light in three second intervals as the technicians struggle to peel your severed hand and wrist from the plate glass with various tools that look to be ceremonial in nature—or are they merely *functional*, like those employed in the operating room of the next-door hospital?—and as you are ushered out of the auditorium by two dark-skinned women (yes, women) wearing white coats you suddenly realize that the gods have blessed you: by sacrificing your hand to the machines, you have cast off the malignant cancer that now engulfs the room in a profusion of radiant light like Greek fire.

Anchor

I rejoined her at the end of the pier. She wore nothing but flippers made of plaster and a silver ribbon in her hair. We migrated motionless through fields of windless calliope, stagnating tops, and schools of scuttled cuttlefish. *She* wanted to travel north, *I* south. A ribald pierrot with tears painted on his lips stopped us midway, beckoning with a trout's tail, but we were too smart to succor his fancy. When it rained metal hooks she remained stock still, her glistening body repelling them like a Teflon mummy. I was so impressed that I oiled her skin with my one lolling lung, never pausing to come up for air. She lapped at my pupils with her navel, claiming there was something wedged in my eye and cooing like a cockatoo the entire time. Was this love? I warned her never to go skinny-dipping without first consulting the bum on fisherman's wharf, who owned the seven seas and lived inside the belly of a snail. She smiled, sinking the steamship that would have wiped out the entire population and winning us interrational acclaim. Shortly thereafter, a plague of polyps was cast upon every home in the reef and we were depopulated like dolphins. Smearing our bodies with the innards of our would-be victims, we prayed for redemption from skin; three nights later we woke up in a heaven that had been deracinated, feeling diminutive. When I suggested that God must be dead the neighbors caught whiff of it and thrice beat us to death with fishing poles. But by then I had already lodged my leaden anchor at the end of the pier where I rejoined her once again, older but none the wiser.

Light & Accomplished

I. Light

Pause. Rewind. Replay.

This is the sequence: the light moving through me, through us, her bitter taste in my mouth; I glimpse a reflection of her naked buttocks, her trembling thighs, the soles of her filthy feet. The mirror falls off the wall, causes the rotted wooden slats of the floor to dance like the keys of a player piano; shards of glass fly in all directions and cut into my flesh. She holds a revolver in one hand, dexterously uses the other to push my shattered head deep between the warm, moist folds of her darkly pulsating vagina like a piece of rotten fruit.

The sound of the alarm does not rescue me from this waking nightmare, but merely signals the beginning of another cycle. Her bronze body slams up against mine like a palomino, her wraithlike silhouette momentarily illumined by the uneven light now filtering into the room. I try to take in air as the sinews and bones of my wrist are twisted and then snap, a fountain of dark blood splashing onto the wall behind us. I can barely breathe.

"I love you," I manage to say through the pain, biting into her slug-like tongue as if it were a piece of *sashimi*. She cries out, increasing the speed of her undulations; her body is open, yet impenetrable. I swallow a small piece of her almost tasteless tongue, whisper in her ear. She moans in response, viscous liquids running onto her chin and neck, slithering syrup-like between her two dangling breasts, where it mingles with her sweat. Her orgasm comes hard and fast; tears flow from her eyes.

This is the sequence.

The gun is in my mouth again, my wrists cracked in two, a splintered fragment of bone peering out. "I love you too," she says to me now, wiping her stained cheek with the back of a bloodied hand, "but I can never forgive you for what happened here—*never*." She pauses for a moment as if deep in thought before squeezing the trigger of the pistol; her body rocks backward as her face is spattered with hundreds of tiny drops of blood; the alarm screams, a ray of light floods into the room, revealing the contents of my head in the mirror.

...But before long she is on top of me again, thrusting, a chip of white skull stuck to her cheek. As the light passes through our bodies I close my eyes and suck another breath of tepid air deep into my chest.

Pause. Rewind. Replay.

This is the sequence: the light moving through me, through us, her bitter taste in my mouth. I glimpse a reflection...

II. Accomplished

i.

He hacks through the lower half of his body with the handsaw, replaces it with hers. There is no blood, only remnants of bone like chalk-dust, pieces of empty skin. Stitches made of gut run across his abdomen, form railroad tracks that demarcate the line separating man from woman. Now he is whole again, wholly himself. He places the upper-half of the woman's body atop the lower half of what had, up until a few moments ago, been his, weaves the two halves together like a patchwork quilt. Then he smiles, impressed by his own handiwork.

ii.

When she opens her eyes the first thing she sees is the triangle of hair that used to belong to her, a symbol of her femininity. It glares down at

her accusingly, as if she had betrayed it, surrendered it to an insufferable enemy. The man inserts his callused finger deep inside the dark, curly hairs of the inverted triangle.

It has been accomplished.

Hearing these words the woman's hand goes limp, the side of it brushing against the fleshy thing dangling between her hairy legs. The organ soon begins to rise like a cobra from a wicker basket. She touches it; it pulsates, veins bulging from its sides. The man looks down at her, his index finger moving in concentric circles. Then he smiles and reaches down to touch her erect nipple.

Don't you want to...?

A beam of moonlight drifts in through the window, forming a misty halo around the back of his head.

Yes, I've always wanted to fuck you,

she replies, fondling the purple-headed creature vigorously:

Let me come on your face. I want to be the dominant one for a change!

The words are not hers, yet do they emerge from between her own two lips! She stands up and thrusts the awkward thing into the warm darkness of her partner's lower half, nauseated as she observes herself penetrate (is it rape? did he acquiesce?) what had been her own body as if it were a flank of meat. Try as she might, however, she cannot stop. She does not notice the tears streaming down his stubbly face, the trickle of blood making its way down the inner thigh of the recently waxed leg.

On your knees, bitch! I wanna do you from behind!

She pushes him to the floor with the heel of her (his) filthy foot; his

forehead is pressed to the ground, the flailing mouth mumbling incoherent words that cannot be heard for the brown carpet beneath it. As she leans over his suppliant body, slick with sweat, her breasts dangle above the curved spine, swaying violently back and forth, back and forth... And after what seems like an eternity she is inside the pulsating darkness of her own womb.

The whole thing is over in an instant.

She falls away, retreats from the figure now crouched in a fetal position on the floor – the upper-half wracked with convulsions, the damp legs of the lower half like two broken pegs; the room soon dissolves into waves of undulating light.

iii.

The first thing she sees when she opens her eyes is the disembodied organ, gripped tightly in her hand. Four words

(It has been accomplished)

fall from her mouth and are soon swallowed up by the emptiness. Only now do they truly belong to her.

The Tree Cutter

I was nine when I met the tree cutter in the woods. He had wavy blond hair and, despite the rough beard, his skin was ruddy like a child's; the plaid shirt he wore was completely covered with bird droppings, tree sap, and wood chips. I'll never forget the way he looked at me with his bulgy eyes, the way he stopped his rhythmic sawing to size me up. When he spoke it was as though someone (or something) else were speaking through him.

"Hey boy, wanna try? It's real easy. Watch me carefully now."

The tree cutter took his two-handed saw – whose teeth resembled metallic thorns – and resumed cutting into the massive oak. He held his arms around the perimeter of the trunk the entire time, as if hugging it. This was certainly not the way my father sawed down trees; I had been taught that it was dangerous to saw toward one's body instead of away from it.

"D'ya know how old this here tree is?" he said.

I shook my head.

"Ya can tell a tree's age by the number of rings it has. I've sawed through about a hundred an' fifty already, so this here tree's probably about, oh, two hundred an' some-odd years old I'd say, maybe even older. D'ya have any idea of how old that is, boy?"

Again I shook my head. He continued cutting, never pausing to look down at his hands or the saw, the serrated edge of the instrument fast approaching his legs. Small wood chips flew in all directions as he moved it back and forth, back and forth...

"How old are ya, boy?"

"Nine and a half," I replied.

"Oh yeah? My son's yer age. Would y'like to meet him sometime?" He spat out a syrupy gob of saliva, which landed atop what looked to be a dead bird in a pile of wet leaves.

"You're a prissy little boy, ain't ya?" he continued, the saw gnawing away at the once mighty trunk as if it were made of cardboard. "Y'got no flesh on them bones. Where's your mama at? What're you doin' in these woods? Don't ya know that there're *evil spirits* dwellin' out here?"

I shivered when he said the words "evil spirits" and shook my head, my teeth chattering. I needed to relieve myself and felt chilled; sweat trickled down my neck and back. The tree cutter laughed and hawked another dark lump of spit onto the leaves beside the rotten bird.

"You'd better run home before it gets dark, boy," he warned. "Y'know ya ain't gonna escape unless you run fast, don'cha?"

I could do nothing but stand there, however, my feet rooted to the earth like a bulbous plant. The great oak began to tilt. I looked up to watch, but was too confused to guess where it would fall. At the same time, urine ran down my leg and into my sock, seeping into the synthetic bottom of one of my brand new sneakers. There would be hell to pay for this at home.

As the tree cutter continued sawing a grin slowly spread across his face. He did not pause for a single moment, though he had already started cutting into his own leg; instead, he smiled at me, as if this were all just a game. Before long he had sawn completely through the limb. His lower body was covered in what I assumed to be blood, although it was more the color of tree sap than of any substance produced by the human body. I should have bolted, but I was much too scared to scream, no less to move. With a flick of his terrible saw, he snapped a string of raw flesh that had previously connected the severed append-

age to its stump in two, like a string of greasy cheese. Regaining my senses, I began to run. I ran and ran, panting like a helpless creature, until I reached the edge of the woods, where I paused for a moment to catch my breath.

Before long I sensed someone's presence. A young boy stood perhaps six feet away from me. He was scratching his crotch with the barrel of a diaphanous, plastic water gun, the tip of which was dripping like a leaky spigot. He wore a flannel shirt—the same color and design as the tree cutter's had been—and had short, sandpapery-brown hair matted with small twigs and flower petals. When he spoke his voice was slightly hoarse, almost delicate. He hobbled toward me before speaking, as if injured.

"Have you seen my Daddy?" he said.

I shook my head from side to side, hoping he wouldn't notice the piss stains on my pants. The area he had just been scratching with the toy gun now glistened with little drops of sticky, translucent liquid.

"Well, in that case," he whispered, "*get the hell out of our woods while you still can.*"

He then pointed the plastic gun directly at my head, motioning for me to leave with a sharp movement of his smooth chin. As I turned to go I saw that his feet were hovering slightly above the ground (or perhaps it was the lighting? the angle?). Finally, I ran. I ran until I was clear out of the woods; the sky had turned gray, and ice-cold drops of rain soon began to fall *pitter-patter* all around me. I didn't look back even once until I had reached the porch of my house, wet and exhausted. It was a miracle I found my way back at all.

When I opened the front door I could hear my parents' voices. They were arguing about something: I couldn't make out the words. All that really mattered was that I got my sneakers cleaned up before they dis-

covered what I had done. I pulled the soiled things off as quickly as I could and scurried down to the basement; the water that ran from the rusted faucet there was so cold it turned my hands bright red, though it did little to dissolve the grime from my tattered sneakers.

As I stood hunched over the makeshift sink and scrubbed – rivulets of sweat running into my eyes and mouth – my father descended, a wood paddle clenched in his white-knuckled hand. I immediately recognized it as the largest of three paddles he had carved himself; it was also the heaviest. Without a word he grabbed my wrist, pushed me facedown onto the cement floor and began thrashing my naked backside. I don't remember for how long this continued – it might have been five minutes or five hours – though I distinctly recall the sound the sleek, lacquered wood made as it struck my raw skin, a most awful sound that is nearly as impossible to forget as the pain. When he was finished he sent me to my room without supper.

“That'll learn ya,” he said, his breath smelling of putrefied fish, before locking the door behind him.

While I lay there on my mattress that evening, my backside throbbing dully, the tree cutter's severed leg continued to chase after me, to lead me – in an interminable series of nightmares – back into the heart of these dark woods where I now stand, many years later, listening to the sound of that wretched saw as my son draws it across the girth of the large oak tree repeatedly (*back and forth, back and forth...*). My leg tingles like a phantom limb as I hobble forward to try and stop him from continuing, but the moment the large oak begins to tilt I suddenly slip on a pile of damp leaves and go down. My son smiles, says, “Have you seen my Daddy?” and, in response, the wizened man that now stands directly behind me, leaning on a gnarled cane made of pine, shakes his head from side to side, then slowly begins to walk away.

Re-Birthing

[click]

He sits, concentrates on the sound of his inaudible breathing, a reverse-image of who and what he once believed himself to be, his head expanding and contracting with each inhalation/exhalation, opening and closing like an invisible accordion; there is an insect no larger than a flea inside his chest, he knows it's there though he cannot see it or confirm it for himself, rather, he *feels* it there, moving inside of his shell-like body as he continues to breathe – calm, collected – concentrates on the movement of his hollow ribcage, his empty organs, his non-existent extremities.

Two children are playing in an empty field. One of them has already begun to die, the other has yet to be born. The boy will one day grow up to be a doctor, while the as-yet unborn girl, ravished by Catholic guilt for some sin she never committed, will retreat into the body of a simian and be taken to an institute for sex-addicts. The boy, now lying flat on his back and gazing up at the sky, wants nothing more than to be left alone; the girl, whose first menstruation cycle began less than two weeks ago, is frolicking in the sun and thinking about what sort of instrument her playmate hides inside his jeans. Before the boy knows it she has sidled up beside him, has slid her clammy hands beneath his plaid shirt, the one his mommy dressed him in this morning so that he wouldn't catch cold on this brisk January afternoon. His chest and belly are bare, free of scars or blemishes or warts, and the unborn girl, excited by the possibilities, snakes her fingers into the center of his cavernous navel, eliciting a scream like a siren from the young boy, who falls down a hole that begins to gush like liquid lava, spewing forth black tar, shit-brown water, a fisherman's cap, a box of soiled condoms...

He slowly turns the page of the tome in front of him, an illustrated textbook on natural childbirth (he is looking at Chapter 23, entitled "Non-Invasive Techniques for Taming the Shrewish Wench") and gaz-

es down at the drawing in front of him, a drawing of a plump woman lying spread-eagle on a wooden table, a tail protruding from her anus; her battered legs hang over the sides of the table like two dead chickens while the head of what looks to be a giant rat peers out from the dark space between them with large, squinty eyes; two male doctors stand at the foot of the table, a mucous-like substance dripping from their gloved hands as they converse and look on in terror at the horrifying female specimen on the slab...

[sound of page turning]

And now a picture of this same she-devil with horns, blood dripping from her/its mouth, a mouth that stretches all the way to the ears, belly bulging as she/it rides atop the rodent-like thing that has been ejected from the mysterious place between those fleshy white legs; there is a caption beneath the picture that reads:

Illustration #666: The shrewish wench has given birth to a giant RAT and devoured the doctors in her greedy jaws – this is a common occurrence! It is not enough to wear gloves. One must always carry a large knife and an even larger cross when undertaking the dangerous business of delivering babies.

[sound of page turning, the upper right hand corner tearing ever-so-slightly]

On this page there is an illustration of the woman (or what's left of her) torn to pieces, her uterus stretched across the floor like a slingshot; a trail of excrement leads to the two doctors, who are covered in a mixture of fluid and entrails which they apparently hacked through with their large knives and crosses when they made their treacherous escape from the wench's fetid womb; they are both standing atop the giant rat-child, from whose underside (it is now revealed) hangs a large sack of testicles...

[sound of book closing – very loud *thud*]

His breathing has sped up and his body started to regenerate, to sprout teeth, hair, genitals, eyes; he is suddenly thirsty and, using his new set of baby teeth to grab a carton of week-old milk, he tilts the upper-half of his partially-restored body back toward the floor, sending the milk flying into the air as his entire torso turns into a lolling, red tongue that laps up the airborne white liquid like a starved, expectant feline; the milk careens over the thousands of tiny buds on his torso-tongue before it rushes down into his chest, where the insect is still writhing about, flushing it down into the lower-half of his body, near his still-translucent, dangling penis which, startled (perhaps scared, even), swings with vigor into the book on childbirth now sitting on the desk of his study, causing it to fall on the remote control lying on the floor...

[click]

Mr. so-and-so, age such-and-such, a part-time volunteer for Drugs Anonymous (D.A.), was stabbed in the face with a metal fork last evening at 6:33 p.m. The perpetrator is said to have been an African-American male (someone shouts "duh" from off-screen before the sound of gunfire emerges) and was purportedly undergoing a very vigorous detox program when, in the middle of his T.V. dinner, he suddenly stood up, shouted "I'm not hungry," and plunged his fork into the side of Mr. so-and-so's face. When questioned about this later he told reporters that the man's cheek was the exact same color and texture as the food, which is why he became so disoriented (this was confirmed by others in the cafeteria at the time, including some of the "chefs," who spoke on condition of anonymity). The doctors from the next-door hospital who operated on the man earlier this morning told ZYX News that there had been some concern that the metal object, which had been thrust so mightily into the man's cheek, might have pierced the brain, but they were relieved to discover that his head was completely empty and therefore had been, according to one surgeon, "Extremely easy to manipulate..."

[click]

His toe, which had not existed until a few moments ago, presses the on/off switch on the controller so that he can once again listen to the soundless sound of his breathing, the sound of his inhalation/exhalation, and so he breathes, breathes with his whole body, his whole being, thinking now about the unborn girl and her curious, clammy touch that January day so long ago, that day when she unwittingly implanted the insect into his body; he also thinks about the detailed illustrations in the (albeit outdated) medical text on childbirth his wet eyes have scanned and recorded and digested, as well as his mentors in the medical establishment who have delivered him from "evil" on more than one occasion, and as his brain rotates like the earth around the sun he feels the insect pressing up against his anus as if trying to get out; taking a deep breath he coughs three times, expelling it straight through the shaft of his erect penis, now flushed with red and purple and decorated with stringy veins that pulsate like a wet vulva, sending the tiny, black insect onto the T.V. screen in front of him with a watery *splat...*

...and before long his teeth have grown a second layer of teeth, his hair has sprouted from his newly re-born(e) body in all directions like an overgrown *Chia Pet*, his eyes have bled like ink into his temples, which wrap all the way down and around to his feet, now floating in a gelatinous river of clear fluid, and before it's all over/begun, all of the images and the sights/sounds/ smells/tastes/touches that he has ever experienced or read about or dreamed about all congeal into one final, unresolved, resounding question that has/will torture/d him for eternity, the question that preceded/followed his inception and has/will never ever go away, the question that can never in a million years be answered because it is intrinsically unanswerable, undoubtedly, undeniably unreasonable...

Why
was
I
ever
born

??
?????
??

[click]

The Skeletal Bus and the Tunnel of Youth

you and your army of geriatric friends, faces wrinkled, arthritic hands barely able to grasp your shovels and your hoes and your axes and your steel-tipped canes, barely able to fire your guns into the air, follow me through this half-lit, waterlogged tunnel, this endless tunnel that traverses the galaxy, going from light to darkness and then back to light again without pause, without explanation, without apology

you and your cohorts, riding your skeletal bus, possessing neither wheels nor engine nor driver, encroaching upon me like a cancer while I take the reverse course, my limbs and organs growing younger with each passing second, growing stronger even as you howl and grind your decayed teeth, your hair falling out and leaving a trail of gray threads behind in the stinking *pissandshit* water below

yet do I grow healthier, yet do I return to my youthful days, yet do I, who have chosen (?) to take the reverse course, to “paddle upstream”... but my eyes are too sharp, my ears too keen, my systems – lymphatic, pulmonary, endocrine – too efficient, and now the light is too bright, this endless expansiveness propelling me backward toward my end/beginning too frightening, too uncertain to bear

you and your skeletal bus, rusted drool leaking from its underside, shit-brown, liver-spotted hands, hurling profanities at he (at me!) who hurtles now toward the light, at the one hurtling into the opposite direction which leads away from this world you have created and so stubbornly maintain, now slicing away pieces of your own bodies even as you talk about how unfairly *it* has treated you

about how *it* has made you *who and what you are*

(you were told you didn't have a choice, you were told this was how it was, how it always is, how it will always be, and you were, of course,

absolutely right)

you were right, and as for me, as my skin now becomes as supple as when I was a babe, my skull as soft as an overripe melon, my eyes and ears and mouth fallen completely open, struck stupid, I know I must return to the world, to your world, before it is too late, before this skeletal bus has decayed and fallen apart, leaving me behind here, all alone, to seek out the milk of God's great teat

you and your cronies have got me now, got me good, this shovel fits my already-callused white hand well, my voice is already hoarse, my ears already deaf, I'd like to fire the gun, I'd like to get that one there, that one right over there taking the reverse course, for it seems that s/he has drifted too far and I cannot wait any longer, I need to feel as if I've taken an active role in fulfilling my destiny

The Third Person

The six lines of tripled-up fluorescent lamps cast their sullen whiteness across the accompanying six rows of three desks each in the empty meeting room. The only sound is a mechanical hum emanating from a spot on the ceiling (it is difficult to pinpoint where, exactly, its origin lies), but then suddenly it stops and everything goes silent. I am sitting at one of the eighteen desks—the one in the far corner, under a rectangular indentation in the ceiling containing three parallel fluorescent lamps—staring across at the dark-suited woman who has just entered the room. She now walks over to the first desk in the second row and, sitting with her back to me, places her briefcase on the seat directly beside her (to her right); its squared-off backrest, like all of the other corresponding sets of seats resting on either side of the remaining desks (including my own), gives off a dull metallic gleam, though the chintzy red fabric which lines its interior remains hidden to me. I need only look at the backrest of the chair against which I now sit to confirm its color and texture, or at the backrests of any of the other chairs, for they are all identical.¹

¹ To break it down for you in simple math: 6 rows x 3 desks = 18; 18 desks x 4 chairs = 72 chairs; 72 chairs ÷ 2 (that is, half, as there are exactly two chairs facing toward, and two chairs facing away from, me) = 36; 36 (visible) chairs - 1 (i.e. the chair I'm sitting at—or is it on?—discounting the one next to me, which is obviously not obscured from view) = 35. It would, of course, be much easier to simply glance at any of the thirty-four chairs which face me than to torque myself around to look at my own, or alternately to look at the thirty-fifth chair; that is, the chair directly beside me, though did I mention that it doesn't have any chintzy red material attached to it? Indeed, it looks as though someone tore it off and replaced it with this reddish-orange patterned cushion...

The woman who has just sat down with her back to me has dark hair worn in a bun; a pair of what appear to be either knitting needles or

metal chopsticks of the kind used in Korea are weaved through it, forming an X, which glimmers for an instant in the staid white light as I shift in my seat to catch a better glimpse of the man who has just entered the room; he, too, wears a dark, double-breasted suit—black, or perhaps dark navy-blue—and has on an equally dark tie; further, he carries a dark briefcase, identical to the one the lady had been holding up until just a moment ago, which he places on the chair directly beside him (to his left; my right), before tossing his black trenchcoat over its backrest. I self-consciously clear my throat, but neither of them seem to notice as the woman suddenly and inexplicably stands up; the two figures then move in a counterclockwise direction so that the woman is sitting down across from the man; i.e. so that she now faces me (which is what I had hoped for, to tell the truth), and the man is seated on the chair the woman had earlier been sitting at (just long enough to calmly place her briefcase on the seat to her left²) with his back to me... And now they have both leaned forward in an almost ritualized fashion to gaze fixedly into one another's eyes. During this brief-but-intense moment in which the two are frozen in a sort of metaphysical embrace, eyes probing eyes, I, too, am allowed a moment to observe—albeit from a limited first-person viewpoint here in the corner of the room—the features of the woman's visage, of which approximately two-thirds are clearly visible, the rest being covered by the back of the man's head, which reveals a silver dollar-sized bald spot beneath which the scalp glistens ever-so-slightly.

² I said *right* earlier, didn't I? I meant left. Left.

The woman's features are difficult to describe, so indistinguishable are they from so many other women of approximately the same build and height I've frequently encountered in my travels (even lain with on occasion, I might add) as to make my description of her features sound somewhat clichéd in advance of my uttering them. Although, admittedly, I'm tempted to generalize here, it simply wouldn't be accurate for me to state, at least without qualification, that she appears "middle-aged,"³ for if I shift in my seat a bit, squint my eyes, or close them for

a moment to accurately reconstruct her image in my mind's eye, she appears to be barely of legal drinking age and, at the same time, at least old enough to be a newborn child's still-youngish grandmother. Though her hair is jet black, as stated previously, it is very easy for one to imagine silvery streaks running through it; certainly it will only be a few years (few being a relative term) before they start to appear, along with crow's feet, liver spots, and so on. As can be observed in any aging person with dark hair, the gradual loss of pigmentation tends to turn the hair an almost brackish hue before it goes completely white (or gray). This inevitable lightening of the hair pigmentation could conceivably, in future – by softening her, dare I say *unforgivably* sharp, features – make her appear slightly younger, certainly more feminine. The lines of her face are all hard, uninviting, like a sexless statue, to the extent that – had I not earlier seen that her hair is in fact long and feminine, held firmly behind her head as it is by those two stiff metallic rods – I might initially have mistaken her for a vaguely feminine-looking *man*. The double-breasted suit makes her chest appear flat, while the briefcase is of the kind I often see salaried businessmen carrying around; it is rare for a woman to carry such a briefcase in this country.

³ To qualify/quantify this a bit, my definition of “middle-aged,” which is such an imprecise term in itself, is somewhere between the ages of thirty-nine and fifty-seven, depending on a variety of factors too numerous to elucidate here.

...I haven't the time to describe her features further to you now, nor the man's (whose face is hidden from me anyway), for the two figures seated at the second desk in the first row – or, rather, the second row; forgive the slip – have just unlocked their eyes and have leaned back, in perfect synchronicity, in their respective chairs; at the same time I, too, have leaned back in mine, or so it would seem, for the seat of the chair has creaked, and when I look up again both of the briefcases that had been lying on either of the respective chairs to left and right⁴ now rest flatly atop the beige-colored desk. I take a breath⁵ and then quickly release it. As I discharge the air from my lungs in a single puff of CO₂ the indistinct buzz from the ceiling, or possibly the lights, from earlier

begins once again to hum. I silently extract a pen from my pocket, my eyes still fixed on the man and woman, whose eyes are interlocked as if by an invisible chain, or by magnetic attraction (+/-), as before, though now their faces nearly touch, so that I can only view approximately one-fourth of the woman's visage.

⁴ Though please remember that, from my position at the desk in the corner facing them, the briefcases would – or did – appear as though they were on the right and (again) the right, whereas, in reality, the briefcases had been on the woman's left and the man's right, respectively.

⁵ It is a shallow breath. Something instinctively tells me that it is best to remain quiet, despite the distance between me and the two dark-suited strangers, and the fact that neither so much as flexed a muscle – at least not visibly – when I cleared my throat earlier. Perhaps I'm just being paranoid, but isn't it generally better to be safe than sorry, as the saying goes? Not that I have any reason to be suspicious, certainly, of these people's motives (I haven't even any clue as to who they are or what they're here for, other than an exchange of meaningful glances and possibly some sort of business-related paperwork?), or that there's any risk of me becoming some kind of voyeur-suspect (the mere thought that someone might mistake me for a spy is enough to make me break up; that is, to laugh hysterically), for certainly I am committing no wrongdoing simply by existing in this public meeting space on this particular day at this particular moment in time; further, I'm "out-of-sight, out-of-mind," as I learned to do (or to be) as a child.

Smoothing out the slightly crumpled paper on the notepad beneath my elbows I begin to write out the following memo for my own personal reference:

Memo

Date: April 2, 2006
Time: 4:35 p.m.
Location: Meeting room of building 3B

They are seated across from me, directly beneath a trio of fluorescent

lamps (second row, third desk), hands folded in lap (i.e. laps, respectively), gazing into one another's eyes, briefcases on desk, mouths shut, another couple enter room, look identical, though not exactly identical, hard to tell exactly, both wearing double-breasted suits, ~~both male (?)~~, I blink and⁶

⁶ Here I stop writing because—well, the narrative continues below. Please continue.

I look up from my notepad to see that another couple has entered. When I say “couple,” I mean merely to imply that two people have walked into the meeting room, not that they are in any way romantically involved; in fact, they both appear to be men. Or, rather, I now see that one of them is in fact a woman, but she—like the other woman I described earlier, the one who now holds her hands folded atop the briefcase on the desk in identical fashion to the youngish man⁷ with the dime-sized bald-spot on his head who now faces me (when did they switch positions again? and why do the metal rods in the woman's hair now appear to be dull, like plastic or stiff rubber?)—is wearing what appears to be a double-breasted man's suit. I blink⁸ and shift my gaze to the entryway, but no one is there. I exhale again and grip my pen with the slightly damp pads of my forefinger and thumb. The buzzing sound from above abruptly stops as I find myself leaning back a bit in my chair, which does not creak this time, much to my surprise; by all means it should have creaked as before! Or was my angle of backward leaning so different this time from the last? It is possible. But I'm getting off track now, which I cannot afford to do...

⁷ In reality he is perhaps closer to middle-aged than “young,” though it's a subjective call to make. His hair is still dark, at any rate, with not the slightest trace of gray anyplace other than the faintest smattering in his mustache; as for the small bald-patch on the back of his head, well, that isn't really indicative of anything except that he has a particular genetic tendency inherited from his father's side of the family (or was it the mother's side? I don't remember, nor is it of any consequence).

⁸ I did blink, but only for the briefest of moments. Nothing had perceptibly changed in the interim, though the airflow seemed to have shifted ever-so-subtly.

The man and woman who just entered a moment ago (I was still thinking about the creaking chair at the time and so missed their entrance) have sat down across from one another at the second desk in the third row, directly beneath a rectangle of triple fluorescent lights, one or two of which now flickers as though a tiny army of moths were fluttering about inside it; this produces an almost eerie strobing effect which makes the beige desk beneath it appear alternately gray/tan. I note down in my memo pad that there are two briefcases sitting on two identical chairs beside either individual, just as with the earlier “couple” (two briefcases, two chairs beside man/woman respectively, etc. etc.). The woman sits on the far side of the desk facing me; her countenance is ageless, for lack of a better descriptor, though she is not exactly what one would call a “classic[al] beauty.” The back of the man’s head – which is completely bald, though it looks as though he’s wearing a flesh-colored cap (perhaps he is an actor? or perhaps it is the inconsistent lighting...) – bobs up and down rhythmically, though the bobbing is subtle; he is also, I now see, tapping his foot in 7/16 time beneath the desk/chair.⁹ I suddenly perceive movement out of the corner of my eye and turn my gaze over to the far table where, once again, the man and woman are in the act of changing places; I am only able to catch the tail-end of their strange dance, however, and so cannot say whether they have moved in a counterclockwise – as earlier – or a clockwise half-circle. More importantly, perhaps, my eyes fall upon the two dark briefcases on the desk, which are both open slightly, though unfortunately I cannot see what is contained inside either of them¹⁰; all that is revealed to my insufferably curious eyes is a dark crack, a chasm of about one inch (2.54 centimeters) wide. But this is not of any real concern to me, for I am simply here to write an essay on business practices in Japan, based solely on my own experiences.¹¹

⁹ I only recognize this odd time signature because I once played drums for a

progressive jazz/rock fusion outfit. He must be a drummer himself; no one else taps his foot in 7/16 time!

¹⁰ This would obviously only apply to one of the briefcases; i.e. the one facing me. Incidentally, the briefcase on the far side appears to be completely open, though of course I can only see its flat cover from where I sit.

¹¹ This is called “creative non-fiction,” apparently, a label with which I had not been familiar up until being given this assignment by my boss, M.S.

As the man – henceforth “the scribbler,” for the sake of convenience – wrote these explanatory, if blatantly false, words in his notepad, the lights flickering above my head went out: the outer two were the first to go, followed by the center light. The scribbler seemed to notice that something was wrong, for he put down his pen and turned his eyes to the desk at which I was sitting across from my colleague; we closed our respective briefcases, which were still partially open – albeit empty – and locked them, then stood up and changed places, navigating the rectangular desk in a three-point pattern as earlier (what we call, alternately, “the triangular twist” and/or “the triangular tryst”). The other lights in the room then began to flicker and die in succession, and a strange buzzing sound I hadn’t noticed before began to vibrate through the meeting room; the somewhat disorienting noise seemed to be coming from the general direction of the dual vending machines which lined approximately a fourth of the wall opposite the back row of desks, i.e. where the scribbler sat in the corner and tapped his foot in a spastic fashion, as if he had arrhythmia of the sole. Just then I blinked and, scratching the rubbery skin of my scalp, noticed that two more of our people had entered the meeting room, which meant, of course, that it was time to proceed as planned; they sat down at the desk next to the one in the corner where the scribbler was sitting. This appeared to make him quite uncomfortable, for he shifted his position so that he was soon practically facing backwards, as though trying to view the plastic backrest of his own chair. The contortion looked painful; his legs still faced front/center, and he still tapped his foot in the same fashion as earlier.

The room, at this point, was almost completely enmeshed in darkness; in fact, the only lights that still flickered lethargically were those above the man's desk and the desk directly beside him, where our agents— who wore dark, double-breasted suits so as to blend in better with the “real” businesspeople who worked in this sector of the building— were now seated, briefcases placed carefully on the seats beside them. The dubious scribbler's chair creaked and then groaned as our agents stood up to circle their desk in a clockwise direction, using the three-point “tryst” technique (as previously instructed by yours truly), and then¹²

¹² Here again I am interrupted from my writing, though this time it isn't because of any external stimuli, as when the man and woman had changed places a second (or third) time earlier, but rather because the building has begun to tremble. It's an earthquake. I hastily gather up my notebook and toss it into my briefcase, then close and lock it. When the building stops trembling a moment later, I resume.

Who can say where the scribbler is now. Last I heard he had been committed to a spacious mental ward where he did nothing but roam about counting the multiple rows of desks and their accompanying chairs all day, over and over, tallying and re-tallying his figures to make sure all of them were accounted for, subsequently noting any changes in their appearance from hour-to-hour, day-to-day, week-to-week (i.e. scratches, tears in the off-white upholstery, etc.). It is also rumored that he frequently drew sketches of what, in Freudian terms, might be said to have been a sort of idealized mother figure with asexual features and clothing; a distinctive feature of these drawings, purportedly, is that the woman's hair was almost always tied back with two “phallic-looking” dowels or, alternately, rods, though in rare cases he portrayed it “loose and wild”; in one such drawing she (again, apparently) wields one of these dowels (or rods) menacingly in one hand, as one would wield a weapon, while from the other a paper-thin briefcase is said to dangle incongruously. This might serve, it seems, as a fitting example of a “wild-haired” type (genus) of sketch, though only partially so; for, as only one of the rods would have been removed from the bun at the

back of her head, the hair should have been (or was? or is?) depicted as flailing about her visage *only on one side*, either the right or the left, though who can say which is more accurate...

In a later sketch, believed to be a part of the same series, and one that is now quite [in]famous in certain underground collectors' circles, the contents of the briefcase are revealed full-on in the foreground, while in the background an indistinct—i.e. blurred as if intentionally for “artistic effect”—figure who resembles our scribbler lies supine atop a row of three perfectly aligned desks, the rod (or dowel) from the earlier photo lodged in one of his eyes, his head contorted backwards so that it faces the place where two wall panels meet to form a two-sided, open-ended triangle (or, to state this more simply, the corner of the wall); the blunt end of the probably-metallic rod is shown to be glimmering slightly, though the light source refracting off of the surface—and we should keep in mind that the scribbler was known for his attention to detail—is not revealed in the drawing; some have argued that it would *have* to have been produced from a natural light source, since the mental institute where the scribbler is believed to have stayed was designed with rows upon rows of sunroofs in the ceiling, in lieu of standard electric light.

(The head physician at the aforementioned mental institution strongly believed that all artificial forms of light, especially of the fluorescent variety purportedly described in the scribbler's notepad, were responsible for a number of modern-day mental illnesses including depression, insomnia, and premature dementia in office workers and university students, the latter of whom he was convinced spent too much of their waking lives teaching and studying in windowless classrooms and libraries.)

In the bottom corner of the paper on which the macabre drawing of the briefcase is sketched, in small, slanted print, are the words: *It was all a lie. Don't believe them.* (This comes from a reliable source, though to disclose said source would be a breach in confidentiality, not to men-

tion completely dishonest.) Further, the reverse side of the paper had apparently been smeared with a bloody fingerprint, one that has since been identified by the police as the scribbler's, though the blood-type (B) apparently did not match his own (O). Although I have not actually seen the drawing or the fingerprint, and though I'm unaware of the current whereabouts of the accused, I can state with a fair measure of certainty that this last bit of information, at least, is completely accurate.

Strange Things

I think about her a lot. I love her. Don't laugh. I'm not feeble-minded. I just wish I had more courage.

There is a baseball field outside my window. It is a deserted field. I have never seen it inhabited by people. I've witnessed strange things, though. Don't laugh. I'm not crazy. I've seen strange things, but I'm not crazy. The field is covered in leaves. The leaves are dry; they make crunchy noises when I step on them. A rusted metal can sits in the center of the field. It appears to be empty. I reach in and pull out a stick. It is an ordinary wooden stick, the bark damp and peeling. I cannot see the house from here for the layer of fog covering it. I know it's there, though. I'm inside the house, looking out the window at the field, a stick in my hand. Don't laugh. I hate it when people laugh.

I'm looking outside at the field but it's foggy, and I cannot see the house. The stick is wet in my hand. It feels slimy, as though covered in raw eggs. I hate eggs. They remind me of her. I am walking toward the house, though it is impossible to make out its contours in this fog. I use the stick to guide me, or it uses me to guide it. There is a crow in the distance. I'm certain it's a crow. I can see it from my vantage point behind the window in the kitchen, where I am making eggs for her. I hate her. Why won't she let me speak? I am making eggs for her, and she is talking. What is she talking about now? I can't hear anything for the sound of my heart thumping as I walk toward the house, trying to make its contours out through the fog. The stick is stuck to the palm of my hand. Don't laugh. It's simply stuck.

You never listen, she says. I flip an egg. That's it, I'm leaving, she says. The yolk oozes out, spilling onto the hot Teflon coating inside the pan, hardening instantly like gelatin. It sizzles, seethes. I'm listening, I say, straining my ears. I flip another egg. It sticks to the side of the plastic spatula. From where I stand I can see the empty baseball field. It is cov-

ered in damp leaves: damp, silent leaves. No one is there, but a black crow is perched on a rusty metal can on the (left) side of the field. It is eating something. I approach, taking extra care not to startle the bird. The stick is in my hand, drawing me forward like a magnet. I turn to look at the house. It is still there, obscured by grayish mist. The bird blinks its eye. The eye is like a giant black marble staring back at me. I flip an egg. It breaks; the yolk spills out, bubbles, a trail of smoke wafting up from it. My eyes water, I can't see. Don't laugh. I told you I couldn't cook, didn't I? I can't see anything dammit, I say. Damn it.

I just want you to listen, she says. Forget it, I'm leaving, she says. Don't leave, I think, flipping an egg. Things used to be different, she says. You've changed, she says. I lift the stick off the ground. It comes into contact with a dry leaf. The leaf makes a crunchy noise as it takes to the air. The crow turns its head. There is a piece of egg hanging from its beak. I swing the stick, not knowing where it will land. It collides with the edge of the metal canister on which the bird sits. I choke back tears as the egg burns, the edge of the plastic spatula melting in the pan, sending off plastic fumes. The bird does not fly away, however. It is still staring at me from the other side of the kitchen window, blinking its big black eye; its wing is caked with dried blood. I cannot see the house clearly, though I am walking in its direction, the stick still stuck to my hand. I am sweating now. Don't laugh, I say. Her hands move to cover her mouth. The corners are turned upward toward the ceiling. Don't laugh, I repeat. I'm not crazy, but I've seen strange things. What strange things, she says, laughing.

The crow's eye appears larger now. There is a piece of hot white egg trailing from the corner of it. The edge of the egg is black, crispy; it makes a crunching sound when I step on it. I cannot see the other eye from where I'm standing, my back to the house. I raise the stick again, bringing it down in one fell swoop. It lands on the handle of the pan. The eggs fly into the air, the pan clatters to the floor, sending off even more smoke. She screams, turns her face away. The egg squishes beneath my shoe. She is still laughing, laughing at me as she covers her

eye. The crow turns its head. I cannot see the house for the fog, though I know it's there. I cannot see for the smoke. I am standing at the window, holding the stick. Shards of glass crash onto the floor. The crow's black eye falls out, rolls away. She is gone now, gone.

I think about her a lot. I love her. Don't laugh. I'm not feeble-minded. I just wish I had more courage.

Success

He wasn't the talkative type.

September 7, 2004. 5:57 a.m. Takeshi Nishihara picks up his briefcase with his left hand as he combs the fingers of his right through his short, ink black hair. As he leaves his fifth floor apartment he mumbles "*itte kimasu*" under his breath and acknowledges his wife for what he knows may be the last time. His son, Fujio, is in the kitchen, eating a piece of toast with jam. The toast is made from day-old bread from the bakery. He makes eye contact with his son and tells him to work hard. Then he opens the door and steps outside without looking back. His wife tells him to "be careful," but he's already on his way down the stairs.

6:07 a.m. JR railways, Sanyo Honsen line. The train is not too crowded at this hour, and he is able to find a seat between a sleeping "salaryman" and an *OL* – or "office lady" – applying makeup. Before sitting down he takes an already-read section of newspaper from the overhead storage compartment and glances at the headlines. The typhoon that has ravaged the southern island of Kyushu will arrive today, and it is said to be the worst in thirty-some years. He knows why he's on this train, but can't help wondering to himself why others are even bothering to go out today. Don't they know that all of the trains stop running in a typhoon? Why even try to go to work on a day like this? He shakes his head imperceptibly from side to side when he thinks of his son, who will be on his way to school soon. *Japanese people work too damn hard.*

6:23 a.m. He has arrived at his stop. It is not windy or raining yet, but he senses that things are already beginning to stir beneath the calm surface of the sky. People look the same as always as they move toward their respective destinations – neither particularly slowing down nor speeding up, except for the occasional *salaryman* who, rushing to work, weaves between the others, the tails of his suit jacket flapping as he

clutches his briefcase. It is cool outside, yet beads of perspiration have formed on his forehead and upper lip. He feels a chill and wipes his brow, wishing to shake off his nerves along with the sweat.

Everyone stops in front of the tracks as the train from the station rushes past before continuing on automatically when the light changes color, as if they have been programmed to do so. He makes his way along the bridge that traverses the *Senogawa* river with the others and, glancing below for perhaps the first time, notices that the water is a filthy shade of gray. He surveys the ground as well. It is strewn with crushed cigarette butts and plastic wrappers, despite the prominent signs that explicitly prohibit littering. The smell of burning garbage – *moeru gomi* – permeates his nostrils. Yet no one else seems to notice. Why hasn't he himself noticed until now, he wonders?

By the time he reaches the bakery an acidic mixture of bread and coffee from this morning presents itself on his tongue. Once inside, however, he's all bows and smiles. "Good morning. Thank you for your hard work. Let's do our best." Etc. etc. He ducks into the bathroom and splashes some cold water on his face, then looks at himself in the mirror. Dark ringlets under his eyes speak of long hours and lack of sleep. Soon it will all be over, though. This thought comforts him as he heads back to the office for his section, puts on his frilly white cap and prepares mentally for the monotonous task of sorting today's baked goods. He knows that if he starts now he can take a lunch break in the late afternoon, which should work out fine. He slides two white, sterile gloves over his hands, bows to his co-workers, and begins to sort. It is 6:29 a.m.

1:36 p.m. The power at the factory has gone out due to the typhoon. Small generators provide enough light to continue working for the time being, however. No one protests.

2:05 p.m. He wasn't the talkative type. He simply bowed, picked up his briefcase from his locker in the office, and walked out the door.

As he walks along the familiar path bullets of rain pelt his face and body. Though he can hardly walk in a straight line for the wind that threatens to topple his slender frame over, he feels more awake and alive than ever. Starting next month the bakery is to cut over a hundred jobs, and his is to be one of them. For what has he worked so hard all of his life? For whom? His family, who he hardly ever sees, hardly even knows? For himself? The thought is too ridiculous to even entertain.

There are no cars or trucks on the road, and he can see from his vantage point that the trains have already halted in their tracks. The smell of burning garbage no longer permeates the air, having been carried away earlier by the winds and rain. As he comes upon the muddy hill leading down to the river, his mind a jumble of concepts and images that somehow don't seem to belong to him anymore, he is suddenly pelted in the face with a wrapper from the bakery. Although he cannot breathe through the wrapper for a panicked moment, he soon begins to laugh. The river awaits him below. Without thinking he quickly turns around, losing his footing in the process, and tumbles headlong into the polluted, disturbed waters.

September 8, 2004. 12:43 p.m. When Takeshi Nishihara wakes up in the hospital the next day his wife and son are there by his side. Seeing the looks of thinly-concealed concern on their faces, he realizes that his suicide attempt has in fact been a success.

A Good Example

“Follow me,” the principal says, leading me down a long, dimly lit corridor, where she proceeds to recite the names of every room we walk past (“This is the ‘Art Room’; this is the third graders’ homeroom; this is the ‘Science Room’; those rooms to your right are the washrooms...”). Finally, we end up in the principal’s office, where an unhealthily thin man with wispy hair gives me coffee that tastes like peat moss and tells me to *relax*. The principal is of modest stature; I reckon she weighs at least twice as much as she ought to. Her eyes scan my body from head to foot when she talks, as if trying to determine whether or not I’m fit to teach at her school. She offers me a small chunk of dark chocolate from an oversized box of candies, and as I reach for one (I’m allergic to chocolate, but I don’t tell her) I can feel her gaze lingering around my crotch.

“So, this is our humble school. What do you think? The children are all very excited about your visit today. They’ve been talking about it for weeks.”

I force a smile and try to divert her attention away from the lump of chocolate I’ve enclosed in my loose fist by loudly slurping my coffee. She is peering at my forehead now, which is slightly damp.

“It’s very impressive. I’m sure I’ll enjoy teaching here.”

A sound like a gunshot rings out from the hallway and I jump in my seat, my fist suddenly constricting like a sphincter muscle and squashing the chocolate in my hand. The principal laughs, her uvula dancing.

“Oh, don’t worry about that. It’s just a blank. We do it to shake the rotten apples up a bit so that they won’t spoil things for the rest of the kids. You know the expression, don’t you?”

I nod my head nervously, the smell of chocolate in the air.

“Would you like some more coffee?” she asks, gazing at my crotch again. “How about another chocolate? There’s plenty, so don’t hold back.”

“No, I’m fine,” I say. My stomach begins to gurgle. Another shot rings out. This time I yelp. The principal closes the door behind her, laughing more violently than before.

“You silly man, I told you we use blanks! Why are you so tense? Are you sure you wouldn’t like another cup of “joe” before class?”

“Actually, I’d like to use the washroom,” I say, feeling sick. The chocolate has half melted, leaving a dark, sticky mess in my palm.

“Of course. Remember that class begins in ten minutes, though. Don’t be late, or we’ll have to shoot *you* with a blank too. We wouldn’t want to set a bad example for the children, you understand.” She smiles, revealing a mouth full of silver fillings.

I nod and make for the toilet. The window is open, and as I tumble out of it an onto the ground another shot goes off inside the school, then another, this time louder than the previous one. I turn around for a moment to observe that the entirety of Class 2-A is after me. Drops of chocolate, like blood, stain my pants as cries of “Shoot the deserter!” ring out. I run, taking cover in an abandoned school bus with bullet holes in the windows and partially gutted seats, until the noise dies down. When I emerge there is a body lying on the pavement, motionless. It is the principal, still clutching the box of chocolates under her arm, a look of astonished horror on her face. A furtive grin begins to tug at the sides of my dry mouth, and as I head for the nearest bus stop I am laughing so hard I can no longer breathe.

Sleeping Pills

Intro

Tonight I will sleep. Tonight I will sleep.

This was his mantra as he laid his head on the pillow, stared up at the ceiling. The bottle of sleeping pills his doctor had prescribed for him sat on the small night table across from the bed, beckoned to him, but he didn't pay the bottle any attention, ignored its almost enticing invitation, tried to put the idea of taking the pills completely out of his head, that crazy head of his which was overflowing with so many other thoughts that it was hard, hard not to think of the pills or of sleep. In order to sleep he would first have to stop thinking about sleep. This was the conundrum left for him to work through, to untangle for himself, and if he could only do so, if he could only figure out how *not* to think about sleep—or about the pills, or about the ten-thousand other things that kept him up at night tonight as on every other night, things like the couple next door whom he had overheard discussing a threesome with the man wearing the red turban on his head, or the eviction notice he had received from his cranky old landlord in the mail last week—who he was convinced had something against him for being both a foreigner and a professed bisexual—or his latest Art experiment, a shit and urine smeared canvas with the words *Fuck the World* carved into it with a stick, or the fact that, along with the sleeping pills, he had also been diagnosed with a rare form of schizophrenia—albeit, a “mild” form, according to his doctor—and was told that it would be in his best interest to check himself into the hospital for about a week or so, so that they could run more tests to determine what the best combination of medication would be, or—and there was much more, always more—that disturbing telephone call he had received from his mother the other day, who sounded as if she had finally lost her dementia-riddled mind...If he could somehow stop the thoughts from flowing like this, endlessly, then he wouldn't need the pills or the medications,

wouldn't need to see the doctor anymore, if he could just sleep then he would be well-rested enough during the daytime to hold a steady job for once, and then he'd be able to pay his bills and maybe the landlord wouldn't hate him quite as much as he did now, and he'd be successful (but what *was* success anyway?) and would have enough time to paint and to promote his paintings the way they needed to be promoted so that people would finally begin to take his work—his *Art*—seriously, and then he could escape this shitty town, maybe invite the next-door neighbors along, since they were pretty cool (not to mention “sexually liberated”) and since they could (perhaps) help him to promote his *Art*, as he was sure a couple like that would really dig what he was doing, and then maybe he'd have enough money to put his Mom—who had lost her grasp of reality after Dad died of a metastasized liver—into a nursing home.

But he didn't want the sleeping pills, didn't want the drugs. Drugs were bad. They made one's head all fuzzy, and the drugs used for depression (phew!), now *they* were the worst. He knew this because his friend had been on P— for years and had told him (in great detail) how much it had dulled his mind, how it had made him lose his interest in sex for six and a half years—*SIX AND A HALF YEARS!*—no, fuck that, he wasn't going to take the medication. He wasn't going to take the pills, but he *was* going to sleep, he was going to fall asleep tonight if it killed him. He'd count sheep if he had to, onetwothreefourfive, and then the counting begins, yes he's watching them right now, watching them as they go up and over the fence and into the neighbors' small yard, watching them go in through their unlocked front door and up the stairs to the master bedroom where the couple are lying in bed, lying in wait for someone or something, and he soon notices that there is a third person in the bed as well and that that third person is him, that *he* is there in the bed with them and that his painting is hanging on the wall above the bed, erect and proud, and when he peers into the mirror opposite the bed he reads *dlroW eht kcuF*, and before long he is tied up and blindfolded and beaten (with tender but firm strokes that make him cry out in his sleep) as the couple *fuck* each other the

way he knows experts are supposed to *fuck* (he has always fantasized about a threesome), rivulets of sweat covering their bodies, the sheets, crawling up the walls as if captured on a roll of film that is now being played back for him in reverse, and then reversing again, flowing ever-so-slowly down from the ceiling onto the gelatinous red ball of flesh on the bed (they are experts in the Tantric art of *yab-yum*), and soon, very soon, the sounds *dlroW eht kcuF* have drifted into his ears, and he understands their meaning – it is as clear to him as if he were listening to an alarm bell – and the voices that chant these incantatory words inside his head are beautiful, they in fact resemble *angelic voices*, and forever hereafter (he realizes with a start) he will never, ever want to wake up from the dream, never want to wake up again, and so on subsequent nights (and eventually during the daytime as well) he will take the sleeping pills religiously, he'll take the goddamned sleeping pills so he doesn't ever have to wake up again to answer the phone, or to read the eviction notices that will continue to come in the mail, or to face himself – the tortured young artist nobody understands – in the mirror anymore but, nonetheless (of course) he still has his pride, his *amour propre*, and therefore he will never touch those other drugs, never give in to the temptation (temptation?), for he knows they are indeed bad and that they will kill his creativity and make him lazy, make him lose his interest in sex, make him boring and useless and dull. No, he'd rather be dead than take those kinds of pills, he'd much rather be dead than do that.

Outro

Tonight he will sleep. Tonight he will sleep...

Time Bomb

12:25 p.m.

Toru lifted a hand to his brow to shield his sensitive eyes from the sun. Unlike his more Japanese-looking brother, he had inherited his father's almond-shaped blue eyes – unmistakably those of a *gaijin*, a foreigner. Where were his sunglasses? He must have left them at home again, on top of the plasma television console, beside the screenplay he was still working on thirteen months after completion of the first draft. Rivulets of sweat ran down his face, while beneath his starched white button-down top – cinched at the neck by a dark blue tie – his undershirt was stuck to his chest and back like wallpaper. He ran with his one hand at the level of his eyebrows, the other clenching his overstuffed briefcase, and ignored the glaring *Don't Walk* lights at every street corner – this wasn't any time for propriety; he had to be in front of the bank by 12:30. Or else...

12:26 p.m. – 12:27 p.m.

He ran past young men and women handing out free packets of tissues plastered with advertisements on practically every street corner; past a Buddhist priest wearing a dark robe, his eyes covered by a headpiece, a begging bowl and bell in hand as he chanted and bowed repeatedly to whoever might contribute a coin or two; past a middle aged man propping up a sign advertising “sexy women”; past a stand selling freshly made custard-filled fish-shaped *taiyaki* cakes, and another beside it selling fried *takoyaki* balls with small pieces of octopi inside, covered with sweet sauce, *nori* seaweed, and mayonnaise; past a young girl dabbing tears from her eyes with a McDonalds napkin; past a large, noisy pachinko parlor, where businessmen sometimes gambled away all of their savings in a single evening; and, finally, up the stairs leading to the bank at exactly

12:28 p.m.

No sign of them yet, thankfully. He paused to catch his breath, taking a step backwards into a small, slanted rectangle of shade beneath the entranceway of the bank, and lit a cigarette; then he withdrew a small *tenugui* from the inside pocket of his jacket and wiped his brow with it. The briefcase sat beside his right foot, its handle shiny even in the shade. With each drag of his cigarette he felt somewhat calmer, though his heart beat rapidly and his hands trembled. He smoked, savoring the slightly sweet, acrid flavor as it spread throughout his mouth, enjoying the burning sensation that passed through his sinuses each time he blew smoke from his flared, mildly inflamed nostrils.

12:29 p.m.

He carelessly crushed what remained of the cigarette with the heel of his shoe and kicked it beneath the small metal lip in front of the entranceway (there was no designated smoking area nearby, and he did not want to forfeit his spot in the shade to find one). Only one minute left now; there was just no way they would be late for something as important as this! The streets buzzed with activity – people shopping, entering and leaving movie theaters, karaoke rooms, local bars – and the smells from nearby food establishments, body odor, and tarry exhaust from cars and buses filled his nose and lungs. He thought to himself that, once he had enough money to retire, he would move back to the countryside. A split second later

12:30 p.m.

there is a screeching of tires from the opposite side of the street. He squints and sees the girl, then the car as it drives straight into her and through the glass, coming to a sudden halt in the center of the lobby, where people now scatter in all directions. Soon it is over: a crowd has gathered around the vehicle, the alarms have sounded; a strange energy pervades the entire area surrounding the building (another S___

bank?). He recognizes the black sports car that just crashed – it belongs to the men he was supposed to have met at the bank at 12:30. Which of the two banks was it, though? Why on earth are there two S____ banks located directly across from each other? What is going on here? He needs to investigate further. Without another thought he grabs the leaden briefcase and, looking both ways, sprints across the open highway, where the traffic lights have quickly changed from orange-red to blue-green to blinking yellow-orange.

12:31 p.m.

As soon as Toru reached the S____ bank opposite the identical S____ bank, he paused for a moment to light another cigarette (his hands were trembling again; he needed to calm himself). All around him the smell of rubber – combined with something else particularly foul – and the speculative chatter of bystanders: “Did you see that? My friend was hit by a car once. Yeah, he spent a full month in the hospital and *still* has to take morphine daily for the pain.” Etc. The weight of the briefcase, combined with the heat and the crowds, made him woozy, as if drunk. He stepped onto the pavement, walking over bloodied fragments of glass. *How festive*, he thought as they crunched beneath the soles of his new shoes like pieces of dehydrated bone.

12:32 p.m.

The masses of bald-headed geezers, queerly dressed teenagers, housewives, businessmen (resembling him superficially, sans smirk), old women with purple hair, midgets, people in wheelchairs, *chimpira* punks, hunched-over elderly, foreigners with blue eyes (these he secretly despised the most), prostitutes from Southeast Asia, and all manner of curious observers made way for him the moment he flashed his badge and shouted, “Let me through! I’m an investigator.” The car in the middle of the display floor was a dark, smoldering mass of polished metal, barely scratched, stained with a splash or two of human blood. And, although the smell was enough to induce spontaneous

retching in any man, he was a professional; he knew how to repress his emotions, as well as his vomit. When he

12:33 p.m.

crouches down to peer beneath the grille of the vehicle he sees the head of the girl, which is turned away from him; her hair is like a wet mass of seaweed, fanned out on the marbled floor. He stands up again, a bit too abruptly, and has to reach for the small mirror nearest him (the passenger side) to steady himself. Someone grabs him from behind, wrenches his arm backwards; he tries to resist, but then notices the headless body of the young girl, seated on the driver's side with both hands wrapped tightly around the wheel; the passenger seat is empty. His other arm is now twisted behind his back, and handcuffs are slapped on his wrists. Where is the briefcase? He panics, his eyes scanning the floor of the room, but does not see it anywhere. It must have slid beneath the car when he crouched down to peer at the girl's head. It is too late: the men (of which there are two, apparently) are already dragging him back out into the street...

12:34 p.m.

The car was waiting for them beside the curb just outside the bank, where the crowd of bystanders still huddled and spoke among themselves in hushed, excited tones. A brusque voice instructed him to get inside; a moment later the door was slammed shut in his face, the engine roared, the car rumbled. "What's your name?" the larger of the two men asked. "It's Callahan. Toru Callahan." "And what business have you at S___ bank today?" The car pulled away from the curb, and soon they were headed away from the city. "I was investigating the accident, since there were no other cops around to do it." "Oh? And you're a cop, I presume?" "I'm a Private Eye. An investigator. Speaking of which, I'd like to see your identification cards, dear sirs. Both of you." The men

12:35 p.m

laughed. "You must be kiddin'! Who do you think you is, feller? We're here to save your sorry ass. Do you have any idea of the trouble you're already in?" "Frankly, I don't. That's why I was having a look around for myself." The men laughed again, louder this time. "Are you Jeremy Callahan's son?" "Hey, how did you know that?" "We know everything that goes on in this city. And you call yourself a detective!" The other man spoke. "What's in the briefcase, Mr. Callahan? It weighs a ton." "You know about the briefcase, too?" "It's in the trunk. Hope there isn't a bomb in there. It wasn't ticking, at least." He chuckles to himself. "No, of course not! It's...It's..." "Well?" "I can't talk about it unless I know for sure who you both are." "Is that so?" "Yes. You aren't _____, are you?"

12:36 p.m.

The car skidded to an abrupt halt, and the men got out. The larger of them (the one who had been driving) withdrew a gun, cocked it, and then placed it against his head. "Now listen here, Callahan. I'm only going to say this once. Don't you *ever* make demands on us like you did back there, and don't you *dare* go trashing our good names like we's are just common criminals. We don't work the way others in this business do, which is why we's are still around after all this time. Understand?" "Yes, of course." "And one other thing, Mr. Callahan..." "Yes...?"

The barrel of the gun is larger and blacker than anything he's ever seen. It smells of dandelions, bright yellow dandelions.

9:01 p.m.

Kenji Zimmerman – a.k.a. Toru Callahan: no relation to the well-known business tycoon Jeremy T. Callahan – woke up in the dank basement of someone's house, his wrists and ankles bound to four blurry machines. He wondered where he was for a moment, but then, remembering ex-

actly what had happened, the muddy pool of his mind cleared. He had to find the briefcase! If it fell into the wrong hands he'd be in deep s—. But wait! What was that noise? His body began to vibrate with the sound of the four machines, to which his two sets of limbs were attached, as each roared to life. *Just what do these villains think they're doing?* "Ah, Mr. Callahan. I see that you're awake," a masked man in a long, black kimono said, as if reading his mind. *Great! I'm stuck in a B-movie from the 1970's,* he thought to himself, yawning. "Of course I'm awake,

9:02 p.m.

you've got me tied to these vociferous apparatuses!" "Voci—what? Speak Japanese, man! I haven't studied English in years. Boys, kill the mowers! I can't hear myself thinkin' here." (From somewhere in the distance a woman's voice answers, "Yes, boss," and the machines simultaneously peter out with a spluttering shudder, reminiscent of post-coital bliss and/or disappointment.) "That's amazing," he says. "How did sh—" "Never mind. Don't you know *anything*, Mr. Callahan? It's the latest remote-controlled lawnmower, which we are developing exclusively here in Japan for production in Taiwan and subsequent export to the U.S. It's top-secret." "Really?" "Yes. And this secret will stay with you until you die, which will be very soon. [Laughter.] For you, my friend, are going to be our proverbial (*big word!* he silently enthuses)

9:03 p.m.

guinea pig for a little experiment we are conducting (*the rat!*). Are you familiar with the practice of being tied, drawn, and quartered?" "You mean, like in the middle ages in Europe?" "Well, yes. We'd like to test the power of these lawnmowers, to see if they're strong enough to do their intended job. You see, Mr. Callahan (*good, they still don't know my real name*), these aren't just ordinary lawnmowers we've got here. Why would we be interested in developing regular ol' lawnmowers anyway? You know, as well as I do, that Japanese homeowners don't

even have lawns. And Americans, as fat and lazy as the news tells us they've become, don't really need a remote control lawnmower to do their lawns when they can just as simply hire a kid to sit on the riding mower and do it for them for five-bucks, which is much cheaper than what these units cost to produce.

9:04 p.m.

The truth is, Mr. Callahan, what we are developing here..." "...is a weapon, a deadly weapon." It was the sultry voice of the woman who had spoken earlier. She now stood beside the man in the kimono, brushing back her long, platinum-blond hair with a slender, pale hand. *Is she of mixed-descent, like me?* Zimmerman/Callahan wondered, suddenly desiring a cigarette more than anything in the entire world. She continued: "Yes, an insidious, pestiferous weapon. And it will be completed thanks to you, Mr. Callahan. We are eager to unveil that rare gem among gems, which we're sure you are going to tell us about right now. Boys! The briefcase!" Suddenly, perhaps due to an association between the woman's face and that of the anonymous girl who was beheaded at S___ bank just hours (days?) ago, he blurts out, "What about that innocent child you killed? Or did you send someone else to do it? Who was she?"

9:05 p.m.

He continues: "Why did she have to die? And who are you? I still haven't got any answers from anyone! Are you the ones I was supposed to meet on the opposite side of the street?" The briefcase is thrown down on the floor by unseen hands. "No, you talk first, Mr. Callahan. Unless, of course, you don't mind us testing the strength of these mowers out on you? You're somewhat slight of build for a man your age and height, aren't you. Hahaha..." It is the voice of the woman, who is now leaning back in a chair across from our hero Toru/Kenji and fiddling with a remote control. "Well? What's in the briefcase? And how do we open it?" "You can't," he says. "I'm the only one who can do it.

You'll need my fingerpr – ." Realizing his mistake, too late, he hears the roar of one mower after another, and then

8:06 a.m.

wakes up surrounded by pieces of broken glass. He must have been in an accident! Where is the briefcase now? He's been sleeping on it, which is why his neck is sore. The lock has been broken as well. Empty. As he gets to his feet, he sees a pale, white hand lying beneath the overturned vehicle and, bending down to touch it, hears a gasp from the crowd (*where did all these people come from?*) which stops him cold. The car is waiting beside the curb just outside the bank, where the crowd of bystanders still huddles, speaking amongst themselves in hushed, excited tones. A brusque voice instructs him to get inside; a moment later the door is slammed shut in his face, the engine roars, the car rumbles. "What's your name?" the larger of the two men asks. "It's...It's –"

8:07 a.m.

"Hey, you're Toru Callahan! Son of Jerry Callahan, right?" "Yes, you're right, I suppose. I was supposed to meet someone at the S___ bank, though I can't remember at what time anymore. What happened back there?" Soon they are headed for an unknown destination. "Slight concussion to the head – nothing too serious. Hey, mind the linoleum, would ya? You're gettin' blood all over the place..." When he looks down, his eyes hone in on what isn't there any longer. (The hand under the vehicle...The broken glass...The overturned car...) The men in the front seat are laughing. "Wait a second, buddy, let me get you a rag for that stump! You're lookin' kinda pale, pal. We'll see how long it takes you to confess..." (*Confess? To what? I haven't done anything wrong, have I? I need a doctor. Someone fetch a bucket of ice for my –*)

8:53 a.m.

"Do you think he's dead?" "Nah, he'll wake up eventually. He still

has a pulse." "He shouldn't have resisted." "No one can resist you, baby." "I love it when you talk dirty to me." "Should we...?" "Yeah, let's." "It's kinda kinky like this, what with the corpse over there..." "I told you, he's not dead yet. His heart's still beating. Look, you can see it." "What about the girl?" "Who, the headless broad you ran into?" "Yeah." "I put her in storage." "Oh? And what are we going to do with her?" "Leave that to me." "Come on, just tell me!" "Why not shut up and do me already. I'm drying up waiting for you like this." "Hey, I think he said something just now –"

[A gunshot rings out. Silence, then laughter.]

3:53 p.m. (Daylight-Savings Time, U.S. of A.)

Bob Morgan gives his wife the thumbs up, grinning from ear-to-ear, and takes a swig of his icy-cold can of Budweiser. His lovely wife, Thurma Hoffmann Morgan, smiles back at him and, digital camera poised in one hand, prepares to press the button of the remote control she is holding in the other. It is a hot summer's day, and the kids are out back playing in the sprinkler. "This is gonna be fun," Bob says, but then suddenly Thurma's cellular begins to play Beethoven's fifth. "One moment dear!" she answers, handing Bob the remote and taking her cell out of her shoulder bag. "Hello? Yes, this is she. Oh. That's terrible. Yes, I'll tell him, of course. Bye." They look at each other for a moment before Bob takes another long swig of beer. When he has finished he wipes away a frothy mustache with the back of his meaty wrist and shrugs.

3:54 p.m.

"So?" She grabs the remote from him. "This lawnmower has been recalled. Our friends, the Smiths, were torn to shreds by the smaller model, apparently. The funeral is tomorrow." "Oh, come on, Thurma. You must be kidding. This is a state-of-the-art mower designed in Japan! Japanese products never have problems. Just ask our new neighbor

Seiji across the way there. He's Japanese, isn't he?" "He's half. Do you know how he lost his hand, by the way?" Bob belches and then finishes off the beer. "He fought in the war, right?" "He's too young for that. His parents must have been married *after* the war. I doubt they would have allowed mixed marriages in that day and age anyhow. They were The Enemy, Bob." "Hmm, I suppose you're right. So, OK, I give up. How *did* he lose his hand?" "I don't know. But he's Japanese!" "He's half." "Same thing." "Oh, you're such a worry-wort. I say we at least try the thing once..."

3:55 p.m.

Seiji woke up. He was still jet-lagged—what time was it? Ah, nearly four. Brushing back his dark brown hair with the plastic comb sitting on the night table beside his new bed, he winked at himself in the mirror. *They can tear me limb from limb and stitch me up again, but I'll always be a foreigner with these damned blue eyes!* he thought to himself, putting on his sunglasses and limping over to the window. His new neighbors, the Morgans, were outside; it looked as though they were having an argument of some sort. What was the plastic object they were fighting over, though? And what was that thing sitting behind Mr. Morgan? It reminded him of...But it must just be paranoia. Yes, it was a lawnmower, and he would always have lawnmower phobia. He'd simply have to learn to control it; families in America all possessed their own lawns, didn't they? They were still arguing and fumbling with the device. He could swear the thing in his hand was a remote control, and that the mower...

3:56 p.m.

"...stubborn bitch. It's fine. Let's just call our half-Japanese friend and ask him about it. I bet you everyone uses this model in Japan." "Are you crazy? They don't *have* lawns in Japan, Bob. You are such an ignoramus." "I am not. Anyway, all we have to do is turn it off if it doesn't seem to be working correctly." "I don't want to take any chances, Bob."

Think about the kids." "Yes, but—" "Oh, have it your way then, Bob. I'm sick of arguing. The kids and I will just go to McDonalds and eat some American food while you and Seiji play with your new toy. Maybe we'll be back, maybe we won't." "OK, fine. If that's the way you want it. Look, it's just a damn lawnmower!"

He presses the button on the remote. A moment later

00:00 a.m./p.m.

blinding light, pieces of earth, bone, concrete, metal, blood. Everything congeals into a mushroom-shaped cloud as our hero stands viewing the spectacle from behind the melting lenses of his darkened sunglasses, wondering to himself whether good ever really triumphs over evil. But now the headless girl is driving the car toward him; she has pulled over to the curb and has motioned for him to get in, which he does. "I'm Kenji," he says to her, smiling. "Pleased to make your acquaintance." There is a worn, beaten suitcase sitting in the back seat. He grabs it with his remaining hand (*why so heavy? what could be inside?*) and, placing it on his lap, presses the pad of his thumb against the small plasma screen. It pops open immediately, revealing a heap of rusty lawnmower parts. "What time is it now?" Kenji says. "I was supposed to meet someone at the S_____ bank at..."

Public Case

You get up from the cushion on which you are seated one day and pack enough belongings for an outing of indeterminate length. The season is late autumn, and a layer of leaves crunches under your feet as you make your way to the train station; the time is midday, the sky clear and bright. A cold breeze wafts over your face, caresses it, calls attention to the fact that it is still there, still yours. You board a train headed west, your destination the center of a city far from this sleepy little town where you grew up, a big city with brighter lights, larger signposts, more worldly inhabitants. The three-hour and twenty-three minute train ride passes quickly, immersed as you are in a book with a title you can never remember. When you step out of the train exactly three hours and twenty-three minutes later and ascend the stairs leading outside, you behold a beautiful sunset, a sky stained orange and purple, made all the more beautiful by the smog the paper factory has cast across the sky's canvas in a cloudlike pattern that is almost more real than the clouds themselves.

As you make your way down the boulevard, various sights and smells stimulate your optic and olfactory senses: a wrinkled old lady walking her dog, the tang of beef emanating from the exhaust system of a run-down restaurant, a vagrant vomiting into a bag, exhaust from a bus, two men dealing drugs on a dark street corner, cologne mixed with body odor, a wandering schizophrenic talking to himself, roasted nuts from a street vendor. The sky is darkening, and you feel chilled as you pass by a police box with photos of various criminals posted on it and a large red light that glares at you like a boil inside an eye. You see, through the clear glass entranceway of the police box, a male police officer and a scantily-clad woman, who looks to be a prostitute—he guffaws and slaps his thigh as she shakes her head and pointer finger, places a hand over her bare cleavage. In that instant you feel lonely, insecure: you want to be held by someone tonight. Changing direction, you head down an alleyway that looks as though it will have what you are searching for.

The bright, flashy lights of a dance club draw your attention to it, and although you had not planned on stopping at any bars tonight the temptation is just too great to resist. It is cold outside, the sky a never-ending enigma that promises nothing but more questions, more confusion, so you decide to take shelter in this hot wooden box whence the sounds of a nameless song by the rock band Nirvana blares as young people dance in the way their ancestors must have danced long ago. Before you know it you find yourself arm-in-arm with a rail-thin woman at the bar, *l'étranger*, short black hair, a silver ring through her bottom lip, a tattoo of a symbol on her bare forearm you recognize from somewhere but no longer understand the significance of. She warns you that she "has a past," to which you reply that you don't care, that everyone has a past, that people need to forgive each other for past transgressions, to move on with their lives, to live and love and... The stranger quiets you with her buttery lips; you can taste the tongues of hundreds of other men on her breath and, despite yourself, you pull your mouth away from hers, brush her hands from your arms as if brushing dandruff from your collar, apologizing as you back away. You realize, suddenly, that the two of you had been making out behind a church, and that a tall, bald-headed man has been standing in the shadows watching you the entire time.

The Next (Previous) Day

You wake up the next morning in a room the size of a walk-in closet with no recollection of how you got here. A chill passes through you, and when you reach for a nonexistent blanket you discover that you are quite naked, your quivering flesh covered in tiny goose bumps. You stand up from your place on the bare floor, stretch your limbs, and yawn silently before noticing the crack that runs from the floor to the top of the ceiling in the far corner of the room. Curious, you approach the womblike fissure and insert the four fingers of your right hand. It is cool and humid inside, and without exerting any effort your body is drawn closer and closer toward the opening as if by some magnetic force; your hand and arm dissolve into the dark, seemingly safe space

by degrees: before you've realized it you are no longer in the small room but, instead, crouching inside of a dirty toilet stall, fully clothed. A long crack runs the length of the wall behind the toilet and, putting two and two together, you determine that this is where you must have entered. There is a message scrawled in crimson colored ink on the metallic gray wall of the stall. It reads:

What was your original face, the one before your parents were born?

You recognize this as the *koan* you were assigned by the priest at the old temple in Kyoto so many lifetimes ago (or at least it *feels* like many lifetimes ago), your first Zen-riddle, the one that has been gnawing at the back of your mind ever since you first attempted to wrap your brain around it; the one that, no matter how determinedly you have tried to expel it, keeps coming back to haunt you. Below the *koan* is another message in small print that reads:

Your destiny is in your own hands. Meet me at the bar at 12:23. I'll be waiting for you there.

You look at the dial of your wristwatch, which has stopped at 12:21 a.m. As you exit the stall you feel the presence of the bald-headed man from the church brush by you, but when you turn to look he has already gone. You are in the same bar as before; you hear the same Nirvana song pulsating like waves of ecstatic heat across the dance floor, though you could swear that it is now faster, more intense – a remix? The closer you get to the bar, the hotter you feel. Sweat runs down the nape of your neck, and for the first time since you fell through the crack in the wall you notice the almost overbearing weight of the traveler's knapsack on your back, like a large sack of potatoes. As much as you'd like to discard this sack, to shed it like the exoskeleton of a grasshopper, you simply cannot – you obviously needed these items for your journey or you wouldn't have brought them with you.

A finger taps you on the shoulder, and as you swing your body around to meet his/her persistent gaze, a dry, muffled thud rings out; your

cumbersome knapsack has collided with someone's head. What have you done? The Nirvana song comes to an end and another begins, something slow and contemplative. The very moment you look down to see *whom* it is you have so carelessly knocked to the floor (why hasn't anyone else noticed?) a hand slides over your mouth, and before you can protest you are dragged outside and blindfolded. This same hand, simultaneously gentle and firm, pushes you to the ground, forces you to sit cross-legged beside what you intuitively know to be the wall of the church where you kissed the woman with the tattoo. The cold cuts you to the bone, but resist as you may your *koan* – that damn, incorrigible riddle! – resurfaces in your mind.

What was your original face, the one before your parents were born?

You want to scream at the one who has oppressed you, at that hateful hand that has led you, through deception, to this inhospitable place so early in the morning, to tell it that *you don't know*, that you didn't *have* a face, couldn't *possibly* have had one before your parents were born, that the question is intrinsically unanswerable, inane, pointless, *dumb*. Your belly roars, fire licks the inside of your skull, your legs go numb, disappear; your body turns to ash, to ether, to the absence of ether...

The Final (Following) Day

You get up from the cushion on which you are seated one day and brush a piece of translucent lint from your sleeve. Your wife, whose belly bulges like a partially ripened fruit, lies on the bed; a sliver of warm sunlight wafts in through the space between the curtains, illuminates approximately three-quarters of the intricate design that is inked into her fleshy arm. Your backpack sits where you had placed it the night before (or was it two nights ago?), unzipped and empty beside the door. As you glance back toward the corner of the room, you catch a glimpse of your own bald countenance in the windowpane opposite the bed and, as if seeing yourself for the first time, burst into peals of inexorable laughter.



Biographical Information:

Marc Lowe's work has appeared in *580 Split*, *Big Bridge*, *BlazeVOX*, *Caketrain*, *elimae*, *>kill author*, *Farrago's Wainscot*, *Pindeldyboz*, *The Salt River Review*, *Sein und Werden*, *Storyglossia*, and other publications, and is forthcoming in the anthology *Quantum Genre on the Planet of Arts* (Crossing Chaos Press). His novelette, "Girl with Smear," was recently published by the online journal *Prick of the Spindle*:

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This e-book is available as a free download from ISMs Press:

www.kisstthewitch.co.uk/seinundwerden/ismspress.html

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