

SCATTER: A SHORT NOVEL

by

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Scatter explores the complicated relationship between text and reality. In particular, it obsesses over ways in which reality can be fictional, constructed, or controlled. The novel uncovers ways in which life is manipulated by text, but it also suggests that although text may create reality, individuals are capable of creating text to take control of their own realities. As a work of fiction, *Scatter* strives to embody this potential of created text. Ultimately, my novel grants the individual sovereignty of the protagonist, allowing my harassed creation the opportunity to continue in relative peace, released from both the puppeteering grip of my writing, and the unblinking gaze of the reader/audience.

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Every time I happen across a fellow HC senior whom I haven't seen for awhile, the conversation piece is the same: the Thesis. Ideally, the other person is using his or hers to explore a subject about which I know something, in which case I can generally feign enough expertise to focus the conversation on that other Thesis, and entirely avoid the subject of my own. Inevitably, though, the diversionary questions reach an endpoint, and unless the other person has to rush off to class, I find myself on the other end of the microphone, faced with that big money question: "What about you? What are you doing?"

My response has not changed at all over the last year. I am writing a novel(la). (If only audible parentheses were so easily inserted.) There is, of course, a standard follow-up question, because the viewing public will, for obvious reasons, remain very dissatisfied with so broad an answer. That second question is offered reflexively, with the clear expectation that it will answered easily enough. "What is it about?"

The only verbal answer I've managed to come up with is that the novel(la) is about a guy. This revelation is generally met with an expectant silence. Everyone clearly knows that a novel(la) will be about something more. If pressed, I sometimes confess that it is about a bus driver; pressed further I might admit that it is about me. If the conversation gets to this point, it gets no further, mostly because the other person has come to the realization that finding out anything more will be an ordeal. It is clear, however, that every one of them went into the interview hoping to hear something of a plot.

Thinking about it in writing, the plot seems fairly easy to summarize. Burt Maverick, the hero and/or protagonist, begins the novel(la) by losing control, and spends 160-plus pages wondering whether he ever actually had that control, and looking erratically

for ways in which to (re?)claim it. A little bit lacking in specifics, perhaps, but as plot summaries go, I think it is nicely to the point.

I suppose it would be possible to condense that somewhat, and say simply that my novel(la) is about control. To give this answer, however, would be to diverge a bit from the pertinent issue of plot. Although I believe that the novel is about other things as well, that response strikes me nevertheless as accurate enough, considering that any satisfactory answer must presumably be restrictive. (To say that the novel(la) were about life, for example, would hardly make the interviewer any happier, and would have the added disadvantage of making me sound like a presumptuous fool. Besides, I'm not even sure that it would be very true.) In other words, saying what the novel is about must necessarily imply that it is *not* about anything else. I'm taking that from some famous thinker, I'm sure of it, though I honestly couldn't give you a name. Regardless, there must be some sort of irony, or maybe it is poetic justice, in the fact that my first restrictive answer would be control. Nevertheless, my narrative persona is clearly obsessed with control, and enjoys manipulating Burt. Burt senses, or perhaps imagines this puppeteer from very early on, the first mention being on the fourth page, but even at this early point the suspicion is clearly an old one. Such a suspicion is, of course, a paranoia—Burt believes that his life is being manipulated.

Perhaps one of the novel(la)'s chief faults is that it is so clearly obsessed with Thomas Pynchon. His influence is particularly strong in my intellectual defense of Burt's paranoia, where I refer to James Clerk Maxwell's hypothetical demon, à la *The Crying of Lot 49*. This defense, perhaps because it draws so explicitly on Maxwell and Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, and so implicitly on Pynchon, began as one of the

roughest sections of the novel(la). Hopefully, by presenting the information in essay form, an inserted document from Burt's all-important university past, that awkwardness will not seem so out of context.

After all, an intellectual defense of paranoia is an awkward beast indeed. Burt struggles with this awkwardness, attempting to reconcile his paranoia with moments of apparent free will. He reflects on his bus driving as something which allowed him to "screw the system," pointing proudly to moments of supreme inefficiency. He recognizes his own impulse in walking from the bus stop to his apartment. Most importantly, the Tunnel has provided clear evidence of Burt's ability to exercise control over his own life. Not only did the Tunnel exist without traffic regulations, but it also existed underground, metaphorically obscured, by the earth itself, from the Demon looking out of the windowed tower. Finding the Tunnel closed by the military, Burt loses that one solid proof of free will, feeling himself thrust into this situation, the victim, as he tells his mother, of a conspiracy.

Of course, Burt is absolutely right. He has been a victim. More specifically, he has been my victim. This fact cannot be helped, since Burt is ultimately a fictional character. But the my earlier assertion that the novel(la) is about me makes this ultimate reality something of a problem. To be honest, I am not yet sure how to read this aspect of my own work. The novel Burt himself decides to write should ideally shed some proverbial light on this question. Unlike my own work, Burt's novel has two characters, one of whom is presumably real, the other of whom is presumably fictitious. The presumably real character presumably creates and controls the presumably fictitious one, much the way Burt creates and controls the presumably real character, and much the way I create

and control Burt. This sequence can presumably be extended further, but my author is unknown to me, just as I remain unknown to Burt. The issue here is one of constructed identity, a theme common across a broad range of liberal scholarship. Of course, one has one's suspicions regarding the author of one's identity. DNA, parents, media and texts are among the usual suspects. Burt and I share this list, and to Burt's I would add Thomas Pynchon and that other Thomas, the bartender from the Olde Towne.

Thomas himself, behind the rhetoric of AA, suggests that the creator is, in fact, THE creator. On the one hand, this is a conscious decision to re-draw the old connection between the author and God, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," according to John 1.1, NRSV. Blasphemous or not, I serve as the immediate God of my own fiction, supreme ruler of the universe, etc. &c. All of which sounds magnificent, but does not make me anything close to divinity in this real world. In addition to playing with notions of authorship and godhead, the possibility raised by Thomas is meant to represent a genuine possibility, and a hopeful one at that, suggesting that "the whole thing" has some meaning that might not be corporeally evident, that the events of Burt's recent life are divinely ordained.

Officer Pauline, of course, is interested in the good works which must accompany faith, and is probably a flag waving patriot, buying so clearly into the AAmerican myth of individual responsibility, exhorting Burt to examine his own role in this so-called conspiracy. The clearly articulated realization that his role to this point has been strictly passive is novel(la)'s turning point, and it comes at the end of the second act.

The third act belongs, for the most part, to Burt. He flees the tyranny of the police, works his way secretly to the underground, walks miles beneath the city, exerts him-

self physically and mentally, shares an apparent moment with a beautiful woman, does his laundry, and finally returns to his apartment, to put away his clothes and to write. The significance of these actions is, for the most part, unclear. It turns out that the officer he flees is not chasing him; his walk through the sewer covers him in excrement; the Tunnel is in the process of being regulated, and he doesn't even manage to walk its entire length; the woman with whom he seems to share a moment is Mary, who is implicated in the conspiracy which has yet to be dismissed; and his role in washing his clothes is limited to a ritualistic one as the machine actually cleans them. Nonetheless, these are actions, and the fact that Burt at least appears to have control in his life is significant. The writing especially is patently fictitious, and yet it is my hope that this fiction can be seen as something real. In my prospectus, I posed the problem thus: "These myriad influences, which I think are rather diverse, must all come together in my novel, for they are the basis of a profoundly impaired ability to relate to what might loosely be termed reality. . . . [The novel] must finally figure out how they all fit together, and how an everyday hero can survive their coincidence." (I admit it. I've misquoted myself. But the syntax is much improved.) I was ambitious. And yet, in a limited sense at least, I think I have succeeded.

Riding the city bus home from the bizarre AA meeting, Burt ponders the possibility "that the sacred texts are wrong" but has no way to assess this possibility, and furthermore can think of no solution to such a problem. According to his own reading, his sacred texts glorify "a struggle of individuality against societal control." There are, of course, other sacred texts, texts which often serve the opposite purpose, but these are not sacred to Burt. His writing, at the end of the novel(la), is becoming a replacement for

what he had lost earlier, as “the unbound margin curls in. . . the page tunneling around itself.” This ending is set up by the narration throughout the novel(la). My narrative voice, the voice which tells Burt’s story, has already been characterized as controlling and manipulative. And Burt, subject to that control, has also been subject to whatever disorder I have felt appropriate. By the end, he has resigned himself to exercising what control he can; that is, he has made an effort to clean up the mess. He has also invested thought in the story of his novel, has considered the complexities of a fictitious life he is about to create, and has mercifully abandoned the notion that he will know the characters’ fates before the end is anything close to near. The author, using a pen rather than a computer, can see the heartbeat across the page, the result of the consistent up-and-down, left-to-right motion of writing, which presses through onto the following pages. Burt will exercise control in writing, and at the same time he will write in the spirit of his sacred texts, refusing to assign a final destiny to his characters, allowing them, finally, to go on beyond the end, the heartbeat of his creation continuing into further and further pages , without being overwritten by the tyrannical author’s words.

If we were looking for a moral to the story, a way to translate the message into some sort of profundity, it would have to be that individuals are constrained to a certain degree, but beyond that must choose, “To be, or not to be” free. Four years of studying literature have made me wary of morals, however, and the derivation of this platitude overlooks some of the ambiguity and the complexity which seem truly inescapable. The obvious problem is that in some ways, Burt ends the novel exactly the way he begins it—as a fictional character. Perhaps the heartbeat at the end is mine rather than Burt’s, transferred through my pen to the paper on which I am writing. Perhaps there is no heartbeat

at all, just wishful thinking, my imagination's equivalent of Burt's search for the muted post horn amid all that restroom graffiti. In fact, I know that there is no heartbeat. The cardiogram was a poetic choice, a hopeful way to end the novel(la), hardly a verifiable truth. Or perhaps the wave approximates the letter M, as does the light shining down into the Tunnel, and in that way can be interpreted as an affirmation of authorial control, this imposition of my initial—which is also my mother's initial, and my father's middle initial—even on the very end of Burt's story.

I have hopefully been careful to avoid the term conclusion. The decision to end the novel(la) without tying up any of the various strands was a conscious attempt to lend weight to the more optimistic reading. Although the reader knows that Burt will be in court on the Ides of April, and that he will be at next Tuesday's AA meeting, his future is left mostly undetermined. Besides, proceeding from Baudrillard's assertion that text creates reality, what better way to combat determinism than to refuse to conclude the fictional life which I have created. The same goes for Burt's treatment of his own novel.

To this point, this introduction has focused loosely on issues of control and determinism as they relate to constructed identities. My final thought on the subject is that regarding identity as a purely constructed entity is a short step from viewing the universe with a theistic (and specifically Calvinistic) belief in predestination. The significant difference is that the mechanisms for constructing identity can themselves be manipulated (at least in theory), so that writing serves for Burt both as a means of acquiring some control over his life, and as a forum for rethinking the idea of a deterministic story. These benefits are complicated by the accuracy of Burt's assessment that he is also being read, and, in that sense at least, doomed to repeat the events of the novel(la).

Or perhaps he is being watched. The television camera of the opening section, and its consorting television program broadcast Burt's moment of dissolution to the entire city. Burt's paranoid suspicion: that he is being manipulated for ratings. In a recent Peter Wier film, *The Truman Show*, Jim Carrey plays the role of Truman Burbank, a man who has, for his entire life, been the unwitting star of a TV show that has posed as his life. His friends, his wife, his mother and father—all played by professional actors. Unlike Truman, Burt is painfully aware that he is being watched; nevertheless, the audience remains almost completely unknowable. Burt senses its presence as a pressure to perform—thus the jig, thus the obsession with his own heroism—and at the AA meeting he voices his concerns that his speech been (poorly) scripted.

It is no coincidence that Burt is, for all practical purposes, alone. The relationship between performer and audience, particularly on television or film, is one devoid of interaction. And the audience, especially, prefers it that way. Our movie and TV stars belong on camera. Thus the paparazzi, thus the thousands of private cameras lining the red-carpeted, velvet-roped walkway on Oscar night. Burt becomes a star of sorts, granted the fifteen minutes of international infamy Warhol promised. (and yes, our infamous too belong on film. Besides *Cops* and its copy cats, mug shots and based-on-a-true-story crime movies come to mind). What change this notoriety brings about for Burt is, however, unclear. From before the beginning of the novel(la), he is alone and detached, having lost his respect for humanity. The occasion of this loss was, naturally enough, the period Burt himself spent as an audience—observing the busriders on his routes. The effects of this 'cult of observation' work both ways, rendering inhuman both watcher and watched.

The adjectives that come to mind are ‘objective’ and ‘detached,’ both of which words reek, appropriately enough, of science. The subject of the universe, physics, and mathematics are recurrent obsessions of Burt, and this preoccupation certainly relates to his paranoia. His implicit assumption is that the universe makes some sort of decipherable sense, which, by extension, would mean that his life made some sort of decipherable sense. The idea is not as Newtonian as it perhaps sounds—laws of probability, even, would be acceptable. When even those seem to break down, however, the attempt to rewrite the universe becomes both necessary and problematic. Given his familiarity with literature, his initial attempt to find a ‘prime mover’ is inevitable. This suspicion begins as a vague one, accusing first ‘the man,’ then in his conversation with his mom, ‘the audience,’ and finally, with that audience whittled down to twelve recognizable faces, he suspects Thomas.

These suspicions remain unresolved. For one thing, they are not resolvable. Great conspirators, if such exist, would be untouchable. If Burt’s life serves as a spectacle for ‘Their’ amusement or entertainment, the likelihood of Burt ever coming face to face with ‘Them’ is nil. ‘They’ must exist in much the same way the television audience exists, perhaps exerting, like the physicist, some undetectable force on the photons which Burt reflects, determining even such minutiae as the polarity of their spin. Or perhaps ‘They’ would be those selfsame texts responsible for constructing Burt’s identity. In which case Burt’s writing once again emerges as a possibility—not to create something entirely new, which Burt recognizes as an impossibility, but to at least create something unique, to discover a way to make some limited individual imprint on his own life.

This is the novel(la)'s best hope, the reason I chose to end it with (what the author sees as) a heartbeat on the blank page. In a postmodern world, a world ruled by texts, whether those texts be the Constitution of the United States, *Gravity's Rainbow*, or *The Oxford English Dictionary*, writing new texts seems the most effective way to make change. The notion is, I suppose, very American. Contracts have been the legacy of this country since those Mayflower pilgrims dropped anchor off the eastern coastline to hammer out their *Compact*. But such overtly governmental documents have been consistently subject to revision. These are not the only texts which affect the world, however. Some history, some philosophy, some science, and some fiction must provide the foundation for such documents. The best way to discover how these various genres of text relate to you is to see what you come up with when you try to write your own.

SCATTER

ACT 1.

The entire thing starts simply, a muted ding, and Burt, our hero, swerves, thinking shit towards the curb, and the bus stop flagged right there—these brakes aren't quite that good, I'm afraid, and it's up off the tar, ten good feet on the concrete, and he's piloted the bus over a hydrant so that its full force of water is shooting straight up the bottom of his Pneumofort 200, finest driver's seat the city could find for its fleet of busdrivers to spend whole days sitting without losing the comfortable feel of ninety nine mattresses—no exaggeration, even the princess wouldn't feel that damn pea under all this padding, only now all the padding is saturated, absorbing, apparently, the hydrant water which has somehow, in water's way, found the gaps between steel plates to work its way up, a fountain, gallons per second must be at least double digits, so that Burt's rearend is completely soaked and he can even feel the pressure against his rectum—good God, it's huge.

Burt, of course, has been drinking, but he's not that drunk, as far as degrees go, so it only takes a second to realize, looking in the rearview, that the fire hydrant is spouting off 3 feet behind the bus's length, 30some feet from him. Well, how far had he been driving on the curb, anyway? Which meant of course that there was no soaking Pneumofort, no pressure on his rectum. A quick piece of induction, but then again there it was, though; the seat, even his slacks—a pacific pair—and that lump of the cushion forced up against his—and then with the smell he realized, maybe he's somehow a little more drunk than we all thought. But he'd never hallucinated before, not from the booze, and that one trip on the lucy, his sole experience with doses from way back in high school wouldn't be flashing him back now. Besides, who hallucinates that meager sound, the one Burt and every other bus driver in America hears when some commuter recognizes his block and wants to stop the machine, wants to get off? But if hallucination is impossible, then

where from came the sound? The bus is quite obviously empty, OUT OF SERVICE for the night, as a matter of fact, but there's that plastic square of red light, glowing to illuminate, mysteriously (the visual message which the aural one cues) in yellow letters: NEXT STOP. So, there had been a ding. But with no one to pull the pullcord?

Unfortunately for our hero, the solid one isn't the only red light; another, more menacing, alternates with blue, and it is bright, God, almost blinding.

"Evening, officer. . ." struggling here to make out the name, ". . . Pauline."

Only Burt says it "Pauline" with an easy "lean" sound, as in the Christian name, feminine, the way most of us might, and this is certainly not a Pauline-rhymes-with-bean whom he's addressing, barrel-chested like fictional cops always are (real cops only often), a giant of a man. Almost, I named him Goliath, even Samson, but the way he shines the maglight, full force into Burt's rapidly constricting pupils, correcting him, forcefully, "PauLINE," emphasizing the straightness, the white paint of that word LINE. . . .

And now Burt is failing, ridiculously, to put foot after foot down straight along that namesake roadpaint, the white lanelines drawn with the yellow to distill the traffic, centrifugal, pulling the autos whose velocity distort mass most noticeably to the inside, leaving a lane for bicycles to buffer, then the curb, and finally pedestrians.

God, this is embarrassing. Starting on the white, Burt stumbled a good five feet off the path, tripped over the four inch rise, and is, at this instant, face down on the concrete, about to remember that he really needs to change his slacks. As soon as he retrieves that thought, he laughs, and it's a mean, degrading laugh of the variety you're only allowed to laugh at yourself, and if he were a little more sensitive he might still even be offended. But he was remembering Cops—should that be in italics, the teevee show?—

on an episode of which the Camera had pursued two officers-(they, perhaps, were officers Samson and Goliath, certainly the names can be used here, on television, where they belong)-in-pursuit. Finally, naturally, they caught their prey. It doesn't really matter which one of these made the tackle, just that it was, in the sports jargon, bone-crunching, and the suspect, nose to the concrete as Burt's is now, had started to whine, "I'm gonna pee, I'm gonna pee," and then, an end-of-the-world whimper, "I peed."

It's doubtful, though, whether Burt would be laughing, mean spiritedly or otherwise, if he'd noticed that selfsame lonesome camera crew extracting himself and gear from the backseat of the squad car, and indeed when he does notice that camera, with its special floodlight adaptations, once again beamed into his eyes, the laughter transubstantiates quickly to lamentation, God, why don't they just leave him alone, he's just a little drunk, a busdriver yeah, but college educated if you'd believe that, and the central character of someone's—he thinks perhaps of his own—world of fiction. Who the hell are they, anyway, and what are they doing here, staring at the hero like some sort of curiosity, like he's a news item in his fundament-stained breeches, can't they see he's been ordained, heroically, for something more?

Nope. No saintly halo, no cheeky radiance beyond the one that's alcohol-induced. Fiction, being some approximation of life, requires interactions, and if there are heroes left they're hardly exempt from those moments of embarrassment; in fact, it seems they sometimes have more trouble than the rest of us, when it comes to things as ill-defined as relations, why Jake Barnes appreciated the French, but regardless this is a difficult position to begin from, for a hero, because his dignity has been—well, shit on might be the appropriate term—and what the hell kind of hero begins his novel drunk, plowing a bus

over a fire hydrant, losing functional control in the process? And what is this genX bullshit, anyway, a college-educated, tirelessly alluding busdriver?

Maybe it needs to start over. But it is an unavoidable place we've come to, and this literal gutter is as good a place as any. Besides which fact, in a couple weeks of Burt's time, we'll have a hero of THE national joke, as this footage presently being shot will go everywhere (did you notice the fantastic lighting and the superior professional camerawork?) and it might as well be something we're prepared for. After all, that's the mystery at the heart of the thing—how does Burt get to be the hero of his very own novel?

Eventually, Burt may become quite adept at getting ahead of himself, but that skill is dormant, at least for now, which means this whole section is a bit out of focus, narrated at too great a distance. Better jump back, nosedive into that concrete, quiet on the set, please. . . Lights. . . Camera. . . ACTION!

And that hurt. Life has worked like this: constant sequential fuckups. Not just sequential, either, sometimes exponential, rising like an erection, slope starting gently and exploding to the limit, where it's all undefined. Of course, the University of Oregon taught him, if anything, that fuckups generally don't matter, since everyone is always fucking up, usually obliviously and better off that way, but when you do notice, you can just laugh at it, and it goes away. Or, it's even more fun to drink and wallow in it a bit, confide in your drinking buddies or, should buddies be lacking, at least in the bartender. Somehow actually being fucked up makes fucking up feel okay, almost good. Good and trashed, it's easier to play fuckups off as anomalies and ignore the one giant, constant fuckup that fits us into this system.

Burt is thinking something about this convoluted, and it's monumentally difficult to convey the intact logic which the thought loop contains, so hopefully you can do what Burt is no longer, and just laugh it off, or if you aren't particularly amused you can always just shrug, but Burt no longer laughing is where the narrative jumped off a bit, and if you'll remember it had been, just a second ago, a 'way to fuck up, asshole' laugh, the kind that's damn good for you every once in a while.

Of course, the camera and the searchlight are out now and he hasn't been laughing for a couple of minutes, thinking in an even shorter awareness hook, "Oh shit, there goes my life" and then, drunk, moving instantly into the true medium of the born again, "Smile for the camera."

Now Burt, stumbling, putrid, nosebleeding Burt, his slacks drooping in the rear and plastered down in the front, is up on his sealegs (even drydocked for all of his 28 years, Burt knows these are sealegs) waving, then dancing for the camera, a full-fathomed five seconds of jig, a dance of ridiculous, and mostly assumed (as in not genuine) joy, a desperate jig of "my life just lost its cohesion" and the officer Pauline is right there, flashlight and stern voice, apparently he doesn't like the dancing, and soberly sizing up the man (only actions performed by an intoxicated subject can properly be modified by the adverb soberly), Burt decides this criticism has some weight behind it, not to mention a nightstick, still on the belt, but best not to push things, eh?

Ay, and the motion passes by a unanimous vote. But there are some problems to its interpretation. Mainly, the fire hydrant, still ejaculating, its white spray gushing at least fifteen feet into the air, and straight up at that (well, nearly, the slight parabola a matter of single digit degrees, owing to gravity and a slight breeze); and of course the city

bus which is, if you'll pardon a little vulgarity, all fucked up. The penal committee is not quite in agreement about what to do here. Obviously, Burt's vote goes towards lenience—no internalized superego at work here, baby, no way. But the social one seems willing to exercise a bit of force—not fighting force, but a grab, a pinning of hands behind the back and forcing Burt to his knees, then the wristcuffs, and nudging the drunk towards the squad car seat heretofore occupied by the amazingly adept cameraworker—

But wait, here's another problem. Seems officer Pauline is less than keen (no, keen and Pauline do not rhyme) about coating his vinyl-coated interior in the stink of piss and shit, and there's a moment's deliberation. Finally, the cuffs come off—Hope!—and what's this, is Burt to go free, saved by the body—well, the stench of it at least—salvation through involuntary excretion?

Not a chance. Once the cuffs are off, Officer Pauline, gesturing with his now-exposed penis—no, sorry, that would be his nightstick—barks, like cops do, dominant, forceful, fatherly, male—something that sounded remarkably like “take your pants off.”

Pardon me, could you repeat that? I thought you said—

As it turns out, that is what he said, and the nightstick seemed to grow a bit more menacing with the repetition, so Burt, camera now trained, it seems, on his genitals—see how the light seems to be in perfect focus there, right over his cock, so that it can diffuse gently—his saintly radiance, perhaps?—lighting his face (God, how he's hoping they'll at least scramble the pixels of his face—wait. His face has pixels?) and the rest of him, if anything matters beyond the face and phallus. Burt actually has to take off his slacks, then strip his boxers too, peeling them, sticky with his pisswater's cohesion, an affinity

H₂O has for itself, so that it feels like he's taking off a layer of his skin, like the officer, the camera, and the world must now be able to see the whiteness of his bones. . . .

What was that about bones? Having never realized that he was—either an exhibitionist or susceptible to fantasies of homosexual submission, Burt is rather surprised at his erection, or rather his drunken version of one, not terribly stiff, but definitely longer, plumper, and a few degrees closer to horizontal. . . .

Apparently it isn't enough to have the pants off. Officer Pauline seems a bit concerned by the remnants of his defecation, still pasted around his midsection, and there, not more than fifty feet away, is the fire hydrant.

Well, why not. The pants and boxer shorts go first into the fury, the slacks sounding like they are being torn as the water smacks nonstop, drop after infinite drop against the fabric in indistinguishable succession, spraying the fecal matter off at various angles, projectile bits of shit leaving little brown splotches, scattered watercolors across the bus, the cop car, Burt, Officer Pauline even, and across the lens of that damned camera, although Burt can't really see any of that. . . . On stage, in high school productions of Shakespeare, Burt was amazed at the effect of the lights, which effectively removed from the actor's vision all hundred and fifty or so parents who made up the show's nightly audience. And this one light, pure, harsh, and bright as divinity, is even more potent. Burt has trouble making out the officer, maybe ten feet away. Unless he slits his eyes just so, at this angle, the cop is no more than a well-built shadow, and occasionally a voice behind that blinding light. And he certainly can't see the millions who will eventually be audience to this wash—even if he could peer through the camera to the film, then back up to its eyepiece he couldn't possibly see them. He'd still need to oscillate his gaze

across the wave signals spanning the continent, an intricately woven blanket, holding houses comfortably in place, touching down at each antenna.

Well, this is going to hurt. A fire hydrant shower, attacking from underneath, undeterred on its path to his ass, to his free-swinging balls, to his semi-erection. . . A strike of inebriated genius, Burt decides to makeshift a shower, holding the more-or-less clean slacks over his head, directing the water down at himself, still spraying with enough force, but no hands free to scrub. He knows he could, theoretically, at least, do the shower with one hand, letting the water pressure balloon the intermediate cloth into some approximation of Ω , using the other hand to wipe free the most tenaciously clinging particles, but he's just too drunk to try it, so instead he lowers the slacks two handed, increasing the water pressure, and when it becomes too great to increase, the slacks are released, carried by the flow, and forgotten, while the boxers serve now as a handy washcloth.

Eventually, his skin has reclaimed its color, beachhead after beachhead won against the offensive brown, until Burt, naked, threatens to dissolve into the spotlight—good God this man is pale, a condition remaining from childhood that any mother could tell you about, the result of too little sun, indoor hours—library hours, perhaps—go outside, its beautiful out there.

Satisfied with Burt's scrubbing, but a bit put off by the man's persistent half-erection, even after that cold shower, Officer Pauline might be forgiven for an accidental shove, one the camera somehow doesn't manage to record, jerking Burt's forehead into the steel doorframe of the squad car's rear passenger side.

When Burt wakes up, the beer has at least worn off, though one of Newton's more famed laws seems to be holding, the one about equal and opposite reactions, as in Burt is nowabouts experiencing, on the fulcrum of feelgood, the inverse of last night's intoxication. Put in plain English, his head hurts. He hasn't had a hangover like this, not ever, but then again wait, that's right. The bruise raised his forehead from one end to the other—he can make out, even, the three dimensions of the doorframe with his fingers, marked in his cranium, if that's possible. It feels like his skull was nearly split, and for just the first instant that's his explanation for the segments in his vision, the dark lines banding the light, separating the room from itself, but almost right away his focus centers on the bars and he realizes that he's actually in jail—well, a holding cell, technically, but it amounts to the same thing, doesn't it? He's never been behind bars before, and it's an interesting realization when it comes, not the panic you might expect, no sudden sense of lost freedoms, no caged bird syndrome, no blues. It is, actually, a rather dull moment of epiphany, and all Burt can do is think what might, in a certain kind of person, find articulation as a “hmm.” He's surprised to find that he doesn't feel at all like crying. But after all, the bench he's lying out on is more or less comfortable, no Pneumofort 2000, not a Sealy, not even a mattress, but a padded bench with some sort of vinyl covering, like the cab of a pickup, a few holes in it where the foam peeks out, white through the rust-orange cover, and there isn't really any reason for him to get up right now. It's not as though he needs to bother showing up at work.

One concern, you can't really escape it, is his job. Of course he's not exactly in love with the busdriving profession, but a Lit major really doesn't have the world open up for him after commencement, especially a lazy Lit major, who (for reasons of laziness, of

course) was never interested in coupling with the system, her bitch-in-heat, won't-you-please-fuck-me, spread-legged welcome, mostly meant for studious future businessmen and economists, please you know you want to and I'll make it good for you, somehow Burt just couldn't bring himself to putting that much of himself into it, maybe it was that Christian aversion to fornication. Then again, not exactly, because Burt was certainly not opposed to *fornication* fornication, a good bedroom frolic, but he wasn't about to get up on that Scarlet Slut, that Babylonian Bitch, as he liked to think of her. Sex is lovely, a blast, so long as the girl is a girl and not some sort of whacked-out metaphor where you have to pay for it. And not just in money either, that is one demanding bitch, never satisfied, even when you're fucking her forty hours a week, for the rest of your life. Cross country runner back in high school, Burt still doesn't have that kind of stamina. So, Burt drives busses. Partly, it was the appeal of the masses, a chance to observe a Spectrum, defracted humanity. Foolish romance, retrospectively. Busriders, like workadays of all sorts, had all adapted in one of two ways: they introverted or they looped. Sure, some of them would smile, say good day—mostly the loopy ones, but a few of the introverts as well—but no conversation ever came up beyond how long the winter might last or how nice it was to finally see the sun. This from the introverts. From the loopies, general silence, a Bernie Goetz demeanor, paranoia of a decidedly non-intellectual sort. Not a very wide band there. Certainly nothing to draw on for his masterpiece, *THE American Novel: A Novel*, by Burt Maverick, to be written pending some sort of divine inspiration. Even when the bus had been reduced to its true monotone, however, he hadn't given up his job. Again, this was partly out of laziness, but it was also a philosophical stand, a belief—wonderful faith—that he was somehow fucking somebody, a couple of people, even, for

example people who make cars and people who sell gasoline. And then there was the pollution aspect of this metropolitan ride share, a decrease in carbons Mon and Di oxide released into the atmosphere, decline in numbers of sales and toxins, reductions of the State, of Ford and GM, not to mention Honda, Toyota, Nissan, and Mitsubishi—the entire archipelago of Japan was getting it up the ass, although Burt is quite aware that his pecker has been completely imperceptible in that immense hole, and the loose bitches never knew. At least he did.

Now, of course, he has certainly lost his job, which will deny him his little rebellion, won't it. But he can lie down here, useless and lazy on a comfortable enough bench, not being fucked, contrary to what you may believe about prisons, even if he's no longer doing any fucking.

Eventually, of course, he does have to get up, because as bland as the oatmeal smells, he's getting damn hungry. And that series of actions, stretching, contracting, releasing the appropriate muscles to get himself off his ass and across the cell, even the spoon-to-mouth drudgery of eating the gray sludge, all of these expenditures set off an inevitable chain of reactions, sequential events impossibly gaining momentum from this minimal energy he's expending to eat, from this one basic and inescapable decision. . . .

As an immediate result of which he is led, stuffed full of the dense stuff, and cuffless, out to a wide corridor, dead-ended by an even wider monolith of hardwood, something resembling a desk, only tall, armpit level on Burt, who stands a good 6'1, but is nevertheless staring, chest-level (and a nice chest it is, too) at Ms. (if she's an officer, can I be a gentleman?) Mary Cummins. Cummins? You've got to be kidding me. But that's what the nameplate says, Mary Cummins, and the rigidity of its lettering suggests non-

fiction, that the inviting name and those lovely breasts were, somehow—cosmically, perhaps—linked.

Unfortunately, our hero is standing in prison-issue before her, and the wooden plaque hanging above the mammoth desk monster reads, in letters even less playful than those of Mary's—er, Ms. Cummins'—nameplate, BOOKING. That's right folks. It seems that destruction of public property (a fire hydrant, for example, or a city bus) is some sort of criminal offense for which Burt can be booked. Even spend some time in jail, up to a year, at the judge's discretion, and boy have they ever got him. Now he's beginning to feel a bit of that panic, a new sensation, but amazing really, how similar, symptomatically, to being in love. The heartbeat accelerated, the cheeks a bit red ("flushed" would be the conventionally concise term) and most striking of all, a sudden steel casing, and a bit too tight at that, around his lungs, making it impossible to fill them to their usual capacity, a vice-grip which narrows the tissue sacs, damn irritating because it makes his breath shallow, forcing him to breathe in awkward places, fragmenting his speech into ridiculous fractions separated by misplaced pauses, and—worst of all—raising the pitch of his voice by a bit more than an octave, so that it sounds not only high-pitched, but off-key, either flat or sharp of the proper tones—at least to my inexpert musical ear. And here he is talking to Ms. Cummins, sweet Mary!

"Mr. Maverick?" is a rather unpromising beginning. We will see how our hero's charms shall work. Burt is, after all, a handsome man—certainly above average. A little skinny, perhaps. But he's a charmer, boy, and always willing to give it a whirl.

"Oh, please, you can / call me Burt." A rather conservative opening move, cautious, but quite possibly masking a potent onslaught, impending. . . .

Ms. Cummins counters with a devastating volley, “Mr. Maverick.”

The periods, both of them, are audible.

Not much to say now but “Yes, ma’am?”

“Are you aware of municipal code BS 13.18.666, which addresses crimes entailing the destruction of public property?”

Jesus, Burt had not known they were making robocops with such nice knockers these days. But “Yes, ma’ / am, well, no, actually, not / really, not / exactly. I mean I / know there must be / some sort of / a law, but I couldn’t / have cited you a / number, or” Burt is suddenly thinking that he should shut up now, so lets that thought drift off and tacks on an “I guess so” for the sake of closure.

“Good. Then you know that persons” Persons? Who talks like this? “convicted under said code face up to one year in prison and/or” Burt is again amazed at how distinctly he can hear the punctuation in Mary’s speech, this time the slash between and and or “fines up to the dollar value of the property destroyed.”

“I guess so.”

“Very well. Because of your intoxicated state, the officer investigating the scene did not believe that you would be able to understand your Miranda rights, and did not arrest you, or charge you with a crime, which would have been the usual procedure in this case.”

“If he didn’t / arrest me, why did I / wake up in jail, in a cell?” This lung casing is really getting to be quite a pain in the ass, isn’t it. Imagine poor Burt, who has to talk like that.

“Because, Mr. Maverick, you were taken into protective custody. The city is not in the habit of allowing drunks to drive themselves home from the scene of an accident. And you passed out before you could be arrested. Regardless, it now falls on me to arrest you, charge you with this crime, and book you. I am now going to read you your rights.”

Yep, she sure does, although Burt is hardly listening. At this point in his fledgling panic, something unexpected, although understandable in retrospect from any number of varying Freudian perspectives, is happening. Burt has lost any awareness of the world (which continues, not perceiving his retraction) outside of the narrow focal point—well, the narrow ellipses containing the two focal points of Burt’s consciousness. These foci are, of course, Mary’s incredible breasts. Gradually, Burt takes note not of any particular sound, but of the new absence of droning nasality, and remembers (was it in time?) to look up at Ms. Cummins face.

Which, after looking at him expectantly for three seconds, repeats. “Do you understand these rights, Mr. Maverick?”

Apparently not, but, “Oh. Oh, sure. Perfectly.” As soon as it is said, Burt, not stupid, thinks, now that was a stupid lie, but what was he supposed to say? Sorry, I was staring at your breasts the whole time? Besides, he’s seen plenty of cop shows. He knows those rights, more or less. Silent, have an attorney, etc. Like on Charlie’s Angels, did they ever read people their rights on that show? Burt is feeling he must be in such an episode, to have this divine Mary reciting rights, and now he’s wondering about her legs, which, under that gargantuan desk, would be about the right altitude, perfect height at this moment to wrap around his midsection and squeeze. There’s not even any way to be sure she’s wearing pants, maybe this power trip turns her on, her stenciled rigidity makes her

wet. . . . Burt is erecting quite a reaction to her voice, is it possible, to her Fran Drescher voice, so incongruous with her Fran Drescher looks, because she's still talking, something now about a blood test, and sure enough there is a bandage on his left arm, but all Burt is thinking is that he'd love to slide his erection into her pretty mouth, and touch her, index and middle fingers sliding into her, Jesus Burt, this is probably important, now what is she *saying*?

“free to go home.”

“Really?”

He sounded a little too excited there, and Mary, glaring, asks, “Were you listening at all?” and doesn't even wait for him to answer, “The charges are misdemeanors, type A misdemeanors, and Deputy Riley will be here soon to take your fingerprints and some mugshots, and then, if you can write a check for bail, you will be free to go home. You will receive notice of your court date through the mail.”

“Oh.” Hey, that little fantasy of his seems to have eased the vice-grips from the lungs, sounding a bit more like himself, isn't he, maybe he should try again, be more direct. “By the way, Mary? I was wondering, maybe, if you wouldn't like to have dinner with me tonight.”

Remember, now, that the man has been shot down before. And, as soon as he has said that, he knows to expect a “No, I don't think so.” It was hardly the smooth line he might have hoped for, after all, and the weird power dynamic of the relationship already works against him. So, a simple no, or some sort of “I'm married / I have a boyfriend” excuse would be no shock. Intrepid, like heroes are, he's faced that danger again here, sized up the fiend, swung on his bullwhip's arc into the melee of postmodern dating. But

even Indy, one suspects, has been reduced, in a misadventure to which we've never been audience, to tucking his free-swinging manhood back between his legs, and walking, small-stepped, over the precipice, not the faithfully crusading leap from the lion's head, but apologetic, like Burt now backing away from the mahogany, from an incredulous, insulted, gorgonic glare, no response at all from that pretty mouth, hardly even a change in its angle, just a complete crystallization of Mary's green eyes, is it possible they've turned full granite gray, and are now radiating petrifying particles? He can feel his fantasy shrivel flaccid and die, although it would be silly to suppose it couldn't be resurrected, infused with a new lifeblood by the right touch, there is something very sexy about a cop, a Mary Cummins, uniformed over her breasts, but everything down from the close triangle of her hair uncovered, and wet, if one could only grow through that thick wood. If nothing else how sexy to think (for reasons not at all related to reality) of her own touch, and her face, thinking of you while her fingers, her fingers, her fingers. . . .

I'm getting carried away. Burt, meanwhile, is thinking Irigaray stitches into that exposed. . . nothing. She has been, for the right now, sewn.

It takes almost thirty seconds of timid waiting in that silence before Burt, no hyperbole here, turns to sprint, turns to actually run away from this woman and the frigid asexual virginity of her non-response, up the corridor, but there is Deputy Riley, and Burt has to pose for the crime camera, have his likeness recorded onto the city's database, and then the fingerprinting, and then write a check, a \$570 check, all the while wanting to escape, not the prison, but Mary and her frigidity, and finally, bail paid, personal property reclaimed, he flees, following the green runes toward that other world, the EXIT signs

leading his spring down the corridors, the trash-masher corridors, and the whole architecture of the place is an ancient booby trap threatening to crush our hero. . . .

And outside. Where, checking his wallet, he finds two dollars, not nearly enough to sport a cab across town, which means, well, it is nice to be familiar with the bus routes. Unfortunately, however, his reclaimed watch seems to be short on battery, and for some reason, people he approaches shift their eyes city-style, looking away so that later they'll be able to say, "I didn't see" should anyone bother to ask. Not that the argument will necessarily hold any weight at judgment, but as far as comfort goes it's a fine fit. Burt, bright-eyed, and (so he's been told) shapely-skulled, has generally this smiling way, easing even strangers into the distant city cousin of country trust. Naturally as looking everywhere for the hat on his head, there are some fifteen averted gazes before he remembers, noticing the bright orange of the armstripe, that he's outfitted in prison grays, wandering free streets in the uniform of a transgressor, his own clothes having been left, presumably, somewhere along thirty-sixth avenue. Normally, Burt might reflect here on the idea of a freedom which can somehow be transgressed, notice that his own prison jumper negates the possibility of passersbys' freedoms, and indeed Burt begins, but is interrupted by a faint ding dong dang dong sound of church bells, and then the deep dong of the hours, this one being rung as perhaps ten or eleven in the a.m. The final bell was fainter even than the rest, suggesting to Burt an echo, shadow sound bounced off of some high-rise and finding its wave back to timpani, pianissimo, in Burt's eardrum.

Ten or eleven doesn't really matter anyway, what with the sixty-minute regularities, busses working from stop to stop, round and round, like a child's train set, or that Mitsubishi commercial—perhaps it is Dodge—where the white cars, a line of them, open their doors to let the passengers in, then zoom sportily off along their preset and inalterable pathway, cut through hills the green of astroturf. Car after identical car (Burt is

thinking now that they were all Dodge Neons) pulls to a stop to take on passengers, even the driver side door takes on a passenger, then the car zooms off and another one pulls to a sudden stop until finally you noticed that the four getting off were the first four you'd seen getting on, their ride over, their seats claimed by four eager newbies, whom you would soon hear screaming (presumably out of glee) as the commercial suddenly cut to black screen with bold white letters. . . . Thinking Mucho, Burt entertains briefly the notion that Pynchon penned that script, an impish prankster mimicking the ash-suited men who had so diligently drawn out the bus schedule, a friendly paranoid wink to say, "I'm on to you."

The most practical bus route to his apartment requires that Burt, in seven minutes, make it three blocks across relatively light late-morning traffic. Still, he'd better run.

Which, on city sidewalks, requires sudden stops with sideways leaps and starts as swift again, while always the extras, the figurants, look to Burt, then behind him, afraid this prisonclad runner might be pursued by trigger-happy Harrys, and indeed the fleeing former inmate does, at last, draw the attention of two beat walkers, but manages to make a swashbuckling escape into the 52.

Of course, there are faster ways to flee than by city bus, and the dedicated dicks manage to catch the bus at the obligingly red traffic light. This round of cops, officers Taylor and Pyle, are naturally suspicious—the man was, after all, running in the city. And twenty-five impatient, transit-minded citizens are forced to withstand ten minutes of delay, whilst Burt tells of his misadventures, which tale must subsequently be confirmed via short-wave. This done to the officers' satisfaction, the two men offer a game apology,

sportsmanlike, you understand, mentioning at least twice the public safety, and finally disembark.

Burt, polite, is morally obligated to sit in the front seat on the right-hand side, where he can chat with his colleague—well, former colleague, it is so hard to get used to the idea that he doesn't work anymore. Burt's not quite sure, but thinks the man named Josh Medsker. The Josh part he's more certain of, and so decides to hazard it.

"Well, Josh, what's the word at the station?"

If he didn't get the name right, the driver doesn't seem offended enough to correct him. Which is possible.

"Hear you wrecked one of the new GRE4s, driving it drunk, back to the hangar."

Hmm, that sure got around fast. Josh, a bit scatterbrained when it came to anything not directly correlated to his busdriving efficiency and the well-planned mechanics of the schedule, would hardly have been the first along the loop.

"Well, something like that. I stopped by over on the other side of the" why Burt chooses to lie here, decides not to say "Tunnel" is unclear. It's possible that Josh is already aware of the Tunnel, that he's a regular user, but something reforms Burt's tongue, mid-sentence. . . "tracks" is, unfortunately, the replacement he comes up with, the way it flows with "the other side of the," off the tongue lightly, an accustomed muscle formation.

"The other side of the tracks? How did you manage to plow over a fire hydrant on thirty-sixth, coming to the station from the other side of the tracks? And what were you doing over there, anyway? Weren't you returning from a number 10?"

Shit, what the hell is this, an interrogation? First he gets arrested by a nonsense beat patroller, then he has to endure that frigid virginal beauty, then officers Larry and Moe, flatfoots, whatever the hell their names were, and now Josh, if Josh is even the guy's name, is playing interrogation games, doubting his story, probing for the truth, a confession? Ridiculous.

"What do you mean?"

"You were coming back from a number 10, the last 10 of the night, that's your schedule, so that would take you out Muldoon and thirty-sixth, and the train tracks, they're on the opposite side of the hangar."

"Oh, I didn't mean literally, the tracks, as in the train tracks, just a figure of speech, a cliché, you know, it's posh over there."

All things being relative (if such a condition needs articulation in our postmodernity), route 10's terminus, in the Glenview district is, metaphorically speaking, the other side of the tracks relative to the central station, which is downtown, only ten blocks from the harbor. But something Spocklike in Medsker's brow suggests a question, dissatisfaction. We can choose to ignore that for now, as Burt does, but somehow it seems ominous, suspicion and disbelief from such a station. Perhaps it is a clue?

Burt, declining to elaborate, thinks to ride the remainder in silence, but Josh endures only so much of that before it occurs to him, "Why did you stop off?"

"What's that?"

"You said you stopped off on the other side of the tracks."

"Oh. Yeah. Well. The route was dead, no passengers, no stops. Carriage completely empty. And so I had a little time, afterward, anyway, before the bus had to be

back to base, about forty, so I thought I'd have a beer. Which, I know, we're not supposed to."

"Sounds like you had more than one."

Here Burt is struck, because, well, he hadn't thought about it before, but remember how he hadn't believed himself that drunk? He'd only had three pint glasses, three pounders, amber microbrews, generally a pinch more potent than Bud, though hardly enough to occasion a first DUI, nevermind lost faculty control, a plowed over fire hydrant, and then those non-hallucinatory registers, the ding and sign. "Yeah, a few," is the only response Burt offers, and finally Josh doesn't seem to have anything to say, the arch flattened from his eyebrow, thoughts steered to traffic.

In silence, the bus takes on unsettling aspects, something Burt had never noticed from his Pneumofort, the glass slab directly before him, his grip firm on the wheel, all the proper pedals under his feet. For the first time, Burt, not driving, is fully aware—beyond a fullness, his awareness has a feeling of enchantment, of inhumanity to it—that he is being taken for a ride. The stops, the turns, the accelerations and lane changes, even the frequency at which the wiper blades sweep the water particles from his line of vision, every aspect of his movement, all of these things unexpectedly removed from his power, surrendered. And all that is left to him: the decision over which seat to occupy. Burt is, academically, thinking further about Pynchon and television, wondering about the nature of screams and their relationship to glee, wondering even about glee itself, and masochism, having been set adrift, rendered incapable of altering the larger course. By whom?

Burt wonders, too, how many nervous passengers had been opened by such revelation, thinking that if only one other person would notice, could let him know with a

conspirator's glance, then the bus could be hijacked, control wrested and (re?)claimed, the meticulous autonomy forced to come to a stop at any random point, even in the middle of the street, whether or not the proper aluminum signifier were posted along the curb, and the passengers released, given leave to overrun the freeway, a little bit of chaos along that worn stream of commerce.

But there is no such glance. Burt, marked by his jail clothes, is alone, as he was in the cell, his revolutionary phantasies emasculated, an uprising perhaps conditioned to go limp so that prolonging its arousal takes not a little bit of well-lubricated effort, subversive masturbation, and leaves him (once the cord has been pulled and he has either: A. exited the bus; or B. been ejaculated by it) with the feeling, comfortable in its familiarity, of a wasted load, a hand spattered with aimless sperm, drooling into his palm, meaningless, insubstantial, the phantasm, the object, pursued to its limit but still not satisfied. . . .

"I am not free because I must get off the bus here," is his quasi-conclusive thought. But it feels like his own volition walking him down the street and up the cement stairs to his third-story apartment, and his own key fits perfectly in the knoblock, and the twist of his own wrist is enough to open the door. Exhausted, Burt peels the prison cloth from his epidermis, and not bothering to retrieve even a pair of boxer shorts, lies immediately on his bed, where his last quasi-conscious thought, on that border, that twilight of consciousness, is that he's spent the last 14 hours having drunken sex. Then, he's asleep, hand around his erection, a grasp of defensive ownership, staking a claim against who- or whatever might have property ideas to the contrary. It is not masturbation. In his sleep, he is feeling himself, solid, singular, masculine, intentional.

When he wakes up, three hours later, he is turned over, stomach down, both arms extended in a crooked V, a lazy approximation of the pose the robber strikes when the cop, handgun trained, yells “stick ‘em up” and the robber, back turned, has no choice but to drop his weapon and obey. . . . His hard-on, although never stimulated to climax, has completely disappeared, his limp cock now cold with a light sweat. Rolling over is a decision, and a slow one, but necessary if Burt is going to get out of bed.

As always, the apartment is a mess. Too many clothes heaped sporadically around the cubicle, clothes collected and kept, a wardrobe dating back to high school, every article of clothing that still fits him, years and years of clothing, like sediment, organic byproducts of so many years, settling cyclically to the rug once worn, waiting there to be compressed, wrinkled by heavier sweaters, jeans, limestone settling to the seabed, only they never quite have the time to cement before laundry day, before all those years of accumulation are swept up with the Tide, sent through the wash, and brought home to be folded and hung, painstakingly, symbolic of a fortnightly resolution toward order. Somehow, once they are worn, that care seems superfluous, and Burt rarely thinks to tidy the fast-growing stalagmites.

Eyes dry beneath mucus-coated contact lenses, he stumbles around these homey obstacles to the bathroom, where he removes the artificial corneas, welcoming the sudden blur, the new fluidity of photons, which trickle across what had in the previous instant seemed rigid delineations of light. The evening shower, gentle and lukewarm, recollects that cold one of yesterday—he hasn’t even had a real shower since the accident—well, accidents, plural, many in one, and simultaneous—and damn but it feels good, the shit still crusted to those hairs of his rectum softening and being carried in the steady stream,

down along the gravitational curves of the universe, and away into the black, grated hole, who knows where to? Who cares?

Clean, Burt dresses, a Mars-red polo and khakis, sharp, before reinserting his vision, pulling the world back to its center.

On his way to the garage, it occurs to him that he's not quite sure about the status of his license, undoubtedly one of the things Mary mentioned, but he hadn't been paying attention, most likely it has been suspended or revoked, they'd always told him that driving is a privilege, not a right, so perhaps he shouldn't drive. But the thought is annoying, reminding him of his transgressed *liberté*, and rekindles some of that revolutionary flame. Light of my life, fire of my loins, what did H.H. want, really, that was so monstrous? Burt, always sympathetic, had defended the pedophile once, to an entire class of New Historicists or some such bullshit, who "love Nabokov, absolutely, *Lolita* is a work of genius. . ." but could not accept, as a hero, that disgusting man. . . . Without the proper lexicon, Burt had understood that *Lolita*, for H.H., was more signifier than sign, that her twelve-year-old nymphet voluptuousness was somehow an answer, a compensation—true compensation—for a man who had coupled with that whore America and had not been satisfied. The reader, and the narrator whose introduction serves to frame the story, work together, conditioned by bus routes and time clocks, to condemn and deny H.H., deny him his *Lolita*, that recompense which does the unthinkable, the impermissible: it makes him happy. Time clocks and bus routes depend for their sustenance upon a populace willing to strive toward what visions of happiness they pitch—incomplete and upgradable without limit as time approaches infinity. Burt, lacking the words to explain it impromptu, nevertheless understood that H.H., having lost *Lolita*, had lost a true happi-

ness—absolute, stumbled upon, taboo, and destined to be lost—and Burt admired the man, felt sympathy and respect, while his classmates were left wondering about Burt’s own potential fetishes, more than one with a suspicion of pedophilia. Their puritan tongues could only say that “Nabokov had an immense talent, *Lolita* being so stunning a display of fictioncraft, so convincingly had he rendered the voice of a disturbed man.” Or something.

Yes, Burt had empathized with that hero, loved him as Nabokov himself must have. And now, driving back toward last night, Burt remembers that empathy, feeling in the twilight a promise for his own happiness, sensing that he is embarking on a quest, perhaps for something equally antisocial or equally taboo. It is there, destiny, to be stumbled upon, driver’s license or no, and Burt can feel it pulling him back through that Tunnel.

The surterrainean drive across town is not quite uneventful. Although nothing technically happens outside of the usual stops at traffic lights, the well-regulated yields and merges along the freeway, there are a few paranoid moments, a motorcycle cop who seems to be following Burt for at least two miles, he's talking on his radio at a red, and Burt's pretty sure he catches the officer looking at him unconsciously, the way we do because it's easier to talk about something—anything—if you are looking at it, centering it in the primary of our senses. It is hard to tell, though, in the dark and through the black helmet, and soon after this suspicious near-behavior has been noted, the motorcop takes a left while Burt rolls right, irritated with his irrationality, head clearing a bit, why would anyone be following him? Recognized, he would be pulled over, cited, perhaps dragged back to the desk of officer Cummins, but not tailed. Though he may be our hero, he is no Mobfather, no suspect on any American's Most Wanted wires, not nearly important enough to attach a second shadow.

If anyone had been trailing him, however, he (or she) could only have been as disappointed as Burt is, seeing the empty parking lot and dark windows of the nightclub. Our hypothetical tail, perhaps expecting some sort of crackhouse or secret Mafioso swing (Burt, playing at his earlier paranoia, is having difficulty imagining motives for these G-men), would most likely decide not to bother pulling off the road at this miserable establishment. Burt, in fact, is not quite sure what he is stopping for. Very clearly, no one is here. And just last night he'd parked the peplemover here when this place was *hopping*, and had those three beers before heading off under the Tunnel. But hope springs eternal, they say, and Burt is hoping to see the proprietor, somehow get a few questions answered, perhaps, although he has already told himself, can't come off cop-like, and asking incon-

spicuous questions has never been a forte. In the game of goodcop/badcop, an undoubtedly effective interrogation technique made cliché by every police drama ever filmed for broadcast or distribution, Burt could only be badcop, lacking as he is the faculty which enables certain officers of the law to deceive the citizenry at large into the belief that they (the goodcops) are “on your side,” so to speak. Tonight, the shortcoming is of no consequence.

Doors being boarded shut, Burt is forced to climb through a broken window, requiring that he first break out jagged glass pane edges. Not carefully enough, apparently, because putting his hands down to lift himself on the sill, he feels a prick of glass in the hollow of each palm, not deep enough to draw blood, but probing into the soft outer layers of his hand, reddening tiny areas on each, almost extracting symbolic blood, but it is just contained.

Inside, dust. Thick enough to have wasted a lifetime dedicated only to accumulation. The bar, wood splintered to expose rot and—is that a termite?—yep, termite infested, mirror shattered, has obviously sat unused for years. . . . Obvious disuse aside, Burt is quite aware that this bar, in perfect condition, was the very one he leaned his pint glasses on. A reverse shining, a living bar playing dead? Burt is thinking of Jack Nicholson, of the empty, dusted ballroom in that immense, bloody hotel, animated by the return of its groundskeeper, spirits of the swinging twenties taking their shape from that dust, living death. Here—deathing life.

Narrative authority is called to the stand, Burt’s sanity being not merely questioned, but put on trial. So, hypocrite reader, brother, friend, whoever you are and whichever side you are on, be assured. The night before, Burt sat, by anyone’s perspective, in-

deed at this very bar, drank three pints of fine ale, and shot the breeze with a sufficiently friendly bartender, a man whom we will meet, eventually, and who may have answers to just a few of those questions, though certainly not to the objections you may be making over this heavy-handed prose. Those must be taken up with quite an intimidating history of characters, from Lyotard to Heisenberg to Bordo. Objectivity died years before my birth, and, truth be known, I never did know it. This narrative interruption is, therefore, an unfortunate necessity: there is to be no other way to affirm the relative truth of Burt's certainty, to avoid the speculations of insanity, of delusion, the reading wherein the novel's entirety spirals into lunatic delusions. Strongarmed as I am, however, I can do little beyond making the assurance that even the sanest of us would share Burt's certainty.

Most likely not his lack of surprise, however. He has no idea why this reverse shining has taken place, but leaving his house hadn't he somehow known that his quest would be something epic and involved, weaving across circumstances perhaps Hitchcockian, an intricate design fronting, initially, as chaos, waiting for the proper focus, one of those Magic Eye 3D renderings hanging in the mall, a jumble of color and accidental geometry, until one looked, properly, and then the precision of that jumble, the absolute necessity of every inexplicable detail, would be clear. Yeah, he'd known. He'd read it before.

The only thing he lets get to him, with a good sense of humor, of course, is the below-the-belt blow of this single, perfect detail: for some reason it was necessary even to empty the beer taps. He hadn't planned to drink, though he was expecting that the bar would be open; the eyedropper in his pocket is to vial away some of the gods' elixir, vaguely expecting that he's find someone to test it, a lab, a chemist, a friend—he has to

have an old University friend capable of chemical analysis. Now, he supposes, it doesn't matter. Here were no clues to anything but his own insanity, the answer he was meant to deduce. Thanks mostly to the X Files, however, Burt has seen enough conspiracy plots in his twenty-seven years to know that this impressive large-scale wipe was a bad move on the part of—whatever. Simply overdone. Three decades worth of dust and dry rot, collected in about twenty-four hours? No, they want the hero to think that this place had been shut down years ago, that he'd somehow been delusional, walking into dust and decay but imagining dancers and drinkers, even downing a few of his own, put it on the tab, eh bartender, I'm getting wasted on my own psychosis, subtract it from my mental health balance, cuz I am *drinking* tonight, my man.

Well, that's a strange detail, but Burt remembers now that, come to think of it, the bartender had asked him, "Should I just put them on your tab?" and he'd responded, sure, why not, although he'd known that he did not have a tab, that he'd been there only a few times before.

Suddenly thrilled is Burt, realizing that he's catching a scent of authorial foreknowledge, suspecting that perhaps he's more than his own fiction. From the flavor of it, there's a Pynchon influence, if it isn't the great paranoid himself who has scripted this conspiracy against him.

Now, this isn't exactly a serious thought, in Burt's defense. It's more like a game. Burt gave up his ideas on freedom years ago, noticing chains in everything. He'd taken up photography, brief and half-assed, but through the camera he'd learned to make out the bars. His greatest moment of artistic purity had come with a moonlight realization, looking out his barless window. The moon, he saw, was intersected by wires—telephone

wires, powerlines, television cables, and Burt understood that real bars were generally unnecessary because these thin wires, seemingly detached from any physical consequence, are in fact more effective than any number of armed guards or literal obstructions. That any number of malevolent groups of conspirators, from the government to mail-order retailers, would always know exactly where you would be. Oh, you could move, of course. Like he could have moved on the bus. But wherever you went, those same wires would be right there, plugged into your new house. The collar is the house itself, the simple fact that your things—your bedroom, your television, your toilet, your clothes, your wife, your children—would need those walls and that roof, and the deadbolt on the door. In this Panopticon, you can easily see—well, no, that won't do at all, a very confusing syntax. But what will suffice? It is obvious, apparent, clear—all these words, like the verb 'to see' itself, contextualize the structure (the Panopticon) in terms of sight. But it is their language, those conspirators, Burt knows, and they've rigged it to conflate subject and object, so that saying, "It is clear that you can be easily seen" assigns clarity to the vision of the understood object, confusing everything, as in "It is clear to you that you can be easily seen." This feels comfortable, more comfortable than it should, at any rate, implying that the 'you' of the sentence has some sort of clear vision, is also seeing. It is certainly clear to Burt. The true subject, much more mysterious, the entity or corporation which is doing the seeing, the entity by which you can be seen. Perhaps the idea would be best paraphrased, as it was in a paper Burt composed during his undergraduate career, thus: "The watcher sees very clearly. That much is obvious, even to the watched, who can see very little." Now Burt might shy away from this, Kafkaesque as it sounds, because it seems somehow too simple. Never mind the implication of language, the tire-

some but necessary postmodern preface in which language must be preemptively exposed, lest anyone reading suffer under the absurd delusion that he understands what is being said. Nuances like these are difficult to convey. Stream of consciousness is imperfect. Thoughts, millions of them, escape. But one unchangeable rule is this: the more difficulty incurred in signifying a thought, the more complex that thought must be. A straight proportion, one to one, pure. And Burt's thoughts about this wire-extended Panopticon are, indeed, quite complicated. But they occupy head space:

Burt Maverick
English 419
24 November, 1993

The Demon in the Tower

The mechanisms by which a society controls the individuals who compose it have been the subject of conjecture and investigation scientific, psychological, and religious. For centuries, religious imperatives provided an ultimate answer, a final authority from which secular law and order derived. And then, God died, and the order did not collapse. It survived, thanks to more patently mechanical controls and constructions. Not surprisingly, these artifices attempt to imitate the supernatural in methodology as well as effect. This paper will illustrate these parallels by comparing two entities of control: James Clerk Maxwell's supernatural and sentient Demon, and Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, a prototypically modern construct.

Maxwell's Demon is a complicated hypothetical entity, which spends its presumably numberless nanoseconds observing and sorting particles based on their energy levels. Once sorted, these particles have lost dynamic equilibrium, a scientific term describing a state of muddled constancy, where a high energy particle in one place is, for all practical purposes, balanced by another one in some other place, so that the transfer or movement of the energy of the former is counterbalanced by the opposite movement of the latter, resulting in approximately zero net usable energy. What the Demon allows is a well-ordered system, which means that all of the transfers work to the same direction, which in turn creates harnessable energy. The only input required is this Demonic sorting, a mere gathering of information. This is, in short, control of the universe. The formation of stars, the conception of life, even the weather—all of these are dependent upon having the right amount of the right kind of matter in the right place at the right time, which is in turn dependent on energy.

The Panopticon is an architectural structure more noted for its philosophical implications than for any aesthetic value or historical usage. Basically, it is a hideous prison construction which consists of a high tower ringed by shorter buildings, wide windowed on the side facing the tower so as to allow some supervisor, sitting in the center,

to see without being seen in return. In Bentham's day this would have been the work of venetian blinds; technology improves this design by inventing one-way glass, mirrored on the tower's outside, so that the inmate who tries to see his jailer can only see a terrible reminder of his own stark visibility. The watcher sees very clearly. That much is obvious, even to the watched, who can see very little

As with the Demon's endless sorting, the effect of the central tower is order. Prisoners must stay in their assigned places, and must go where they are told. If they are disobedient—if they step 'out of order'—the figure in the tower sees. At this point, there is an important distinction between the Demonic control and the Panoptic, because for the human sitting in the tower it is not so simple to see and sort. More input is required. Guards, probably armed, must be sent to restore the intended order. Order, of course, being vital to production in society. (The Panopticon is not only a prison. Factories, schools, sanitariums—Bentham saw numerous applications for his design. Foucault points out that the structure is in fact a metaphor for the State, which may not have the physical structure, but does have detectives and police which watch for evidence of disorder, and agents to correct disorder when it appears. . . .) Perhaps rather than production, an old term which requires that one doff the cap to Marx, the word commerce is

appropriate, as it implies motion and transit, not mere order but an orderly flow.

Because the man in the tower is real (more real than mythic, at least) and because the active role of the guards in maintaining/reinstating order requires real work, the Panopticon initially fails in reproducing the divine. Order is maintained through force, an input measurable in ergs. But what Bentham theorized was a moment when that mundane enforcement scheme might metamorphe into magic, thanks mostly to the venetian blinds or one-way glass. This moment is a matter of classic conditioning, making certain that in its infancy the Panopticon is iron-fisted, detection and correction working mercilessly and immediately. This infancy is caterpillar, constant and enduring, until the structure has wrapped itself in sufficient mystique. Once this has happened, the Panopticon can function magically. Some days, perhaps, the tower will be unmanned. But the populace of the periphery will have learned the important lesson that the tower sees all, that transgressions do not escape unpunished. More than likely it will be a long time before anyone decides to wonder about the old stories. The tower is there, phallic, invasive, inescapable, palpable. And when that cocoon has been so thickly woven, when society has at last become free from the hassle of finding the right person to thrust up the tower, all that is left is order,

self-sustaining, ergs or laborers arranged ideally, and what is more, continually rearranging themselves, perfect every time, unaware that the tower is, in fact, empty.

This ordering force, which requires minimal input of energy, is the man-made equivalent of Maxwell's Demon. It is the crowning achievement of industrial society, more impressive than the steam engine, assembly line, or factory robots. An artificially produced, fully functioning Demon. As generations pass, children grow up in the shadow of this magical tower, accustomed to its effects, not even realizing that they are being sorted, manipulated, aware only of the pillar of law which stands at the center, having been taught since birth to follow the commands which were forcibly programmed into their great grandparents.

For all of its power, this artificial demon is imperfect. Indeed, all that is needed to bring it down is one hero, one brave thinker who is willing to question the magic of its order, who is willing to step out of line, risking the tyrant's wrath. One hero, challenging this authority, will discover that the watcher, no longer requiring armed guards, does not have a sufficient number under hire. Looking out from their windows in the shadow of the tyrant, this hero's fellow ring-dwellers will then realize that the power of their oppressor is more fable than truth, that no artifi-

cial Demon is a match for the righteous power of popular revolt.

Familiar with his own treatise relating the Demon to the Panopticon, most of these thoughts have fired across Burt's synapses in allegro. But the concluding paragraph feels important to his quest. A hero. He has never been that hero. Now? Perhaps that is to be the busdriver's quest, breaking through the window in a bull's run to the tower, Kamikaze or Geronimo to see who emerges, gun in hand, to shoot him down, hoping that someone is watching at some other window, recording, observing in spite of Panoptical protocol, to find out who created this Demon. To show the world that its power is not absolute.

Slightly megalomaniacal, Burt has occasionally wondered whether he might be the antichrist. His dislike—sometimes hatred—of religion has often warped itself into novel ideas—ideas, that is, for novels—in which he, Burt Maverick, might single-handedly discredit and destroy Christianity.

But tonight, looking among these bone-dry kegs which refuse to dance, Burt is wanting to turn some water to wine (not that he has any water, but that is a detail), and it strikes him, gently, that maybe the Demon is truly from hell, and that Burt himself is the antithesis of what he has sometimes hoped and sometimes feared. He is a prophet, perhaps even the returned messiah, the man who will cast it back to its pit. . . .

It bears repeating that these fantasies of Burt's are exactly that, and he is mostly certain that he is, in fact, a very insignificant person cursed with intelligence and a creative flair. Busdriving is boring, understand? And Burt is prone to what he calls Wishbone episodes, so named after the irrepressible canine of PBS fame, who is always jumping between acting out protagonist's roles from great works of literature (he has

been Romeo, D'Artagnan, Huck Finn, and God knows who else), and his real-life identity as a bright dog. Burt isn't sure, but he imagines that Wishbone knows, even in the midst of his role-play, that the dog-reality is the underlying one. And every so often he'll forget that, maybe, for a second or two, but that can't hurt anyone. Of course, this scenario is further complicated by the fact that Wishbone is a dog playing a dog who plays an actor, but the consequences of this ultimate reality hardly seem worth pondering over. Especially since we're talking here about a dog. The point is, busdriving is boring. Much more interesting to be the protagonist.

Readers will most likely be losing patience with this place, though: no action of any kind, not a cute skirt to smile seductively, hell there aren't even any buffalo girls here, it is just a dead time at the Olde Towne tonight. Where, somebody tell me please, do I find the villains? Who are the Moriartys, the Dr. Dooms, the Montonis, and where does a busdriver go to track such men down?

The only reason for Burt remaining in this grave pub is a little bit of self-conscious naiveté, a hope that such men might be cocksure enough to drop a business card, the way television serial killers have been known to carve into the breasts of the their objects a recurring pattern, maybe astrological or religious, any symbology will do, just so it is a clue, something to aid the bumbling followers along the trail.

Actually, Burt is a little embarrassed to admit that what he's really looking for is the post horn, the damned Thurn and Taxis post horn. Ridiculously, he has decided to decide that Thomas Pynchon, old TP, is playing actively in this delusion he's having. Scoured front entrance to rear, however, the rubble yields no scribbles more sinister than a sloppy 666 scratched to the sidewall in the men's room shitstall. Hardly what we were

looking for, is it, Burt? Obviously not. Remember the eyedropper in the pocket, for the beer? That was what we came in search of. Objective unachievable, he just wants to keep those eyes peeled.

But what next step should he take? This place feels like a dead end, not only to the evening's adventures, but to the entire endeavor. Burt, were he Scotland Yard, would be making, tomorrow morning, that familiar house call to Baker Street. Better yet to be Commissioner Gordon, with spotlight access to the System's dark soul, the black bat, a man whose idea of justice might fall closer to Burt's own. Or Hercule Poirot, who, come to think of it, ended his career with a murder/suicide. Aw, hell, why think about it Burt? Just. . . go home. Tomorrow we'll pick up the trail, just. . .

Not until opening the cardoor does he remember to take the Tunnel home. Unfortunately, however, it appears that some rat sold the Tunnel up the river. At its entrance, hidden cleverly behind the earthquake rubble in the lowest level of what was once the J.C. Penny parking garage, a newly installed checkpoint, one of those roadblocks which raise and lower mechanically, sprang up over night. Manning the obstruction, two soldiers, Marines, perhaps, or more likely National Guardsmen, *sit at attention*, if that's possible, large guns visibly leaning against the window, there at their sides.

Burt thinks better than to try his luck here, but decides to do it anyway, slowing his well-bruised Tarsus up to the crossbar, not looking at the camo-clad gatekeepers, expecting (you have to appear unconcerned, come off like you belong here) the machinations to commence, the road to open before him.

That tapping is a nine millimeter Glock on his window, and turning his head, Burt finds its barrel, the huge urethra, at exactly eye level. The soldier's other hand (in vague focus thanks to Burt's left eye being forcibly penetrated by that huge gun) seems to be gesturing—oh yes, the 'roll down your window' gesture, well used by strip-cruising high school good-timers, looking for some action from the cute girly in the next car. Although in this situation it does seem a bit less flirtatious. Here's a slightly unfortunate circumstance, as part of the bruising which Burt's Tarsus has endured resulted in a mashed driver's side door, the window of which no longer rolls down. Slowly, what he hopes is reassuringly, Burt cracks the door, meekly offering, "My window doesn't work, sir."

"Okay asshole, who are you and what are you doing here?"

The man's voice and demeanor with these first greetings offer very little to social niceties. Burt gladly forgives these shortcomings, however, as the man (the Man?) does

condescend to lowering the gun. Still, how to answer the questions? He doesn't really have a choice, so he decides, quickly, to affect the American honesty.

"Burt Maverick, sir. I drive this tunnel most every night."

Like most military personnel, most people in any enforcement-oriented position, Sergeant Jinomichi has been trained to reward self-incriminating honesty. Someone important, perhaps a pope, seems to have recognized that forgiveness can be as effective a deterrent as punishment. It is a theory dependent of a few basic Freudian principles, most importantly the superego. The basic idea here is that our transgressor (in this case Burt) has done the 'socially responsible' thing by confessing his wrongs (driving the Tunnel every night). Confessing your crimes to your Father (for all you Freudians or Catholics out there) or your Big Brother (for you Orwellians) generally means an expectation that you will be punished. Granted a reprieve—can you believe it, you've been forgiven!—you, Joe Citizen, realize tearfully that *your Father loves you*, and that you have betrayed that love by your sin. What a sweet and merciful Father, to let you off with a warning, stern, but still a reminder of that agape, go your way and sin no more. . . .

Well, that can't quite be what the Sergeant said, can it? Said something more like, "Well, the tunnel has been shut down. It was never properly regulated. In fact, the authorities just found out about it last night. You are all lucky that you never got hurt down there. The thing could collapse. It doesn't appear to have been engineered to code." Not even a "Can I see your drivers license, please, Mr. Maverick?" and he's waving Burt back up toward street level.

Here I must digress at some length, as Burt pauses just briefly to consider running the barricade, his thoughts again far more nimble than my pen, a heroic escape through

the darkness of the Tunnel? It's perfectly safe, Burt knows, having driven it for six months. But it is unregulated, there is the problem. In the Tunnel it is respect for life which governs the few drivers, the knowledge of freedom—a sort of freedom, at least, which comes with the possibility of death. The wonderful thing, besides the fact that an hour's busdrive across rush hour freeways takes twenty minutes or fewer underground, is that the control is truly self-inflicted. There are no yield signs or lanelines. On the surface streets, it might not work. But underground—the Tunnel is indeed underground—the only drivers are people who have been called, principled anarchists, or fellas and dames with leanings in such direction, people who understand that freedom, in its purest form, lives hand in hand with death, and have the simple desire to be self-regulating, to be individuals in a whole new sense of the word.

Personhood, the seemingly straightforward state of being a person, is, in fact, a very twisted issue, full of historical obscurities, confusions with occupation, wealth and family joining restrictions of race, age and sex, and these Tunnel drivers are people who have questioned the certainty of the definition and, Burt supposes, come up with their own, in contrast to the one most of us not only accept and live by, but find so fundamental that we don't even know it exists. Confused? What kind of person are you?

All of these wonderfully philosophical questions being of tremendous importance to poor Burt, it is with a McVeigh anger that he pulls the lever into reverse, intimidated by the visible automatic weapons, ruing all the while that he is presently, right this second, deciding against what might have been a Clydian ending, the cinematic spectacle of a bullet-ridden automobile a diminished, if not completely discarded possibility. No, Burt won't be gunned down beneath the heartless city by the Man. Instead, he'll cruise

back to the surface level, pissed at his cowardice and at the world, sit through red lights of excruciating length, merge meekly into the freeway's low entropy flow, where his destiny will be well illustrated on the standard issue stainless signs.

His flat is, no surprise, still a mess. No helpful elves to clean while he's away. Laundry day, which comes every three weeks or so, depending largely on the boxer level in his underwear drawer, is always the day of reset, and it is getting close. Naturally, the last few days are always the most chaotic, pyramids of socks and jeans, and shirts of various color and cut erected thoughtlessly in a configuration a misguided, new-age astrologer/alien seeker might eagerly connect with the Cassiopeia constellation. After doing his laundry, he won't have to wonder at the myriad interpretations to which the piles might be subject. Shirts hung in the closet will be categorized by sleeve length, then further subdivided according to the easily recognizable Roy G. Biv principle, who is a not terribly clever, but quite effective mnemonic hook for youngsters learning the colors of the rainbow in proper order, from outside in, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. Not quite sure what to do with white and black he is only moderately satisfied to hang the whites outside of the red and the blacks inside of the violet. Not that he has a single violet shirt, but theoretically, they would be hung there, next to the blacks. That last bit with the blacks and the whites is his own addition to a neurosis he had transmitted to him from a college girlfriend, with whom he briefly lived. So far as he knows, it is his only neurosis, although it is probably safer to say it is the only thing he does regularly which annoys him every single time he does it.. The stupid closet. He'd been well warned, going into this first serious relationship, of dangers such as pregnancy and AIDS, but not one of his so-called protectors or educators had ever told him that obsessive-compulsive behavior could be contagious. But what can you do? At least the thing is fairly regressive, only one true day of that insanity well-balanced by the proceeding mess which it inevitably spawns. A little fancy footwork to avoid stepping on the piles is really no trouble at all,

and the mess is quite welcome, comfortably erasing the empty sense that pervades when the drawers are shut snugly, and the closet door is even closed, and all Burt has to look at is the monotony of gray carpet and drywall.

The carpet, in particular, is frustrating. Despite its singular color, and an amazing uniformity of texture, it has somehow snared his peripheral vision on more than one laundry day aftermath, the entire picture, liberated from the interference pattern emitted by his dirty clothes, seeming to reveal an actual design, deliberation disguised by the sheer monolithic immensity. . . . Of course, as soon as he looks at it, the damn thing disappears, leaving Burt to feel sneered at. . . . Floor patterns are rarely a mystery. In public rest rooms, Burt rates the tile configuration of more interest than the graffiti, which he only scans, hoping to see, at least once, the Tristero's muted replica of that Thurn and Taxis post horn he sough back at the pub, or even the simple design of the Raketman, something from some sort of counterforce. He has never seen any such sign, but he has noted all sorts of patterns in the tiles beneath his feet. Crosses, swastikas, pentagons, hexagons, all built quite simply, his mind drawing in the proper borders. And each shape, once discovered, can be enlarged, a proportional net product of (xn)tiles in each direction, and a constant value of observational ingenuity. Apparently, that constant is no longer the appropriate value when it comes to Burt's carpet, leading the hero to hypothesize that carpet and tile are, in fact, separate universes, not subject to the same laws of mathematics, physics, or observation. The mess is welcome indeed, this genuine chaos, the organic distribution of discarded clothing, Burt's wavelength. So why is he looking forward to laundry day?

Nothing to do, Burt decides to go to bed, remembering once they're removed that his contacts have been in his eyes for a bit over 38 hours, excepting the twenty minutes of this evening's shower. It is comfortable to be nearsighted at bedtime, especially when 20/20 costs so much, dry eyes, susceptibility to dust, and any pretense at independence. In his Hobbesian state, Burt would be lion food. Actually, by now he's be decomposed lion shit, lacking the eyesight Savannah humans must have relied on so extensively for survival. And it isn't like he's got that bio-radar shit a bat's equipped with either. Now that would be something. For a bat—get this—for a bat, the world is completely a function of self. The reality of, say, a stone, is completely invisible to the little fuckers. All a bat knows is the way its own voice reflects and returns to its own ear—the stone is simply a shape of the bat's own voice, its echo, projected by the bat onto the world around it, no invading light of truth. But while Burt, lenses out, has certainly heard the phrase “blind as a bat” applied to him, he is aware that his own reality is not nearly so subjective. One reminder is this nightly ritual, removing from his eyes the doctor-prescribed, stranger-created contact lenses on which he is so totally dependent. That fucking bitch.

For all of his incessant thinking, all this paranoia, this rampant fantasy and apprehensive curiosity, Burt is asleep pretty much as soon as his head hits the pillow, no border crossing this time, just a discreet quantum leap into a sleep whose dreams he will not likely remember, with the exception of what couldn't be more than five minutes worth, a dream taking him back to the church choir of his adolescence, robed and singing, between his father and his brother, right on key. A strange dream for our hero to be having, don't you think?

ACT 2.

When morning comes it is bright with Händel's Messiah streaming in the sunlight slanted over the clock radio. Choral rejoicings. Burt, still dreaming, believes nonetheless that he's awake, which is also true, the music stabilizing wormhole synapses between consciousness and sub. He's both thinking about and re-dreaming what it was to be so young, singing in church. He really did, a long time ago, and well, but he could never sing rock and roll, his voice was suited to hymns, only to hymns, which he eventually regarded as a curse rather than a blessing. But there had always been a girl, sitting in a pew, a girl to smile at, who would smile back, and since his father had decided that he had to sing, he had decided that the girl's smile was worth it, and one time he had even consented to sing choirless, with his brother and his father, acapella, the three of them, and his voice had shaken. After, she had asked him why, and he hadn't really known. He was not in love with her. His part had maybe been just above his range, no longer attainable, except in that shaky falsetto. Was that it?

All literature seems to struggle with issues of sexuality. The smiling girl had lost her virginity in the house of God, Burt had been there, some overnight youth event. Maybe fifteen kids had been there, and they had been jealously ignorant, at just such an age. Of becoming. Only, it had been that girl who was becoming, and her boyfriend. But that was the age, and his part had been written over such a range of octaves so as to be too high at one end and too low at the other for Burt's natural singing voice, and the slightest falsetto had shaken. Was that it?

Rock and roll is the sound of three—maybe four—consecutive generations. What it has supplanted is far older. No, not supplanted, not entirely. Genetically, and even temporally, it is more a mutant offshoot, connected to the larger whole, through ballads

and symphonies, one of so many nucleotides representing somehow the copulatory union of Gaea and Uranus, along that mysterious waving curvature, carrying also over the earth in radio the magic by which Burt is granted to wake up, one fine morning, to the Messiah.

When his radio is on the classical station, that realization of full wakefulness always comes late, and without suddenness, a comfortable dawning realization, so that Burt realizes not just that he is awake, but that he has been awake without realizing it for an indeterminable amount of time. He considers, briefly, the snooze button and its seven minutes more of sleep, but then can't bear to cut off Händel. His Messiah lasts two hours, give or take, so depending on what part of the work he's awakened to, Burt might be lying for some time in bed, And He shall live for ever and ever. King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

In a certain section, the violins seem to climb endlessly, an impossible illusion, almost every step a further ascension, sustained in their inconceivable rise by the sudden sheerness of their drops, an imperceptible cliff of octaves, from which zero they can again rise, Phoenix or Christ, an M.C. Escher masterpiece, climbing to the same place over and over again, as though unable to escape the sheer gravity of that spot, whether by fault of their own, or of the very structure of the universe, the very curvature of space time, perhaps, so subtly and unexpectedly do they arrive, each time, at zero. Somehow, though, Händel's structure, like that of all good music, has none of the Sysiphan claustrophobia of Escher's stark surrealities. Burt is content to listen, to be lifted again and again, and then come, the long-awaited Hallelujahs, and still Burt is not ready to rise.

He has never before listened so intently to music, and certainly has never before been so attentive through two hours of religious oratorio. When the climatic moment has

come and passed and the monumental oeuvre has been resolved, sitting up from under the green comforter, Burt is ready, as the saying goes, to face the world. His vague feeling is that he has been given a tool, and that if he can just figure out how to use it, the shape of things will be now accessible. But why and when was he thinking of rock and roll? Yeah, that's right, it was his voice, his dream must have set that off, because it wasn't that he wanted to be a rock singer, although at one time he had Legos, and one of his favorite make believes with the little plastic men was that they were rock stars, he even recorded a couple of times the hits off the radio station and played them back, his Legomen set up on a stage, like they were singing the songs, and then after their concerts, they would each have a girl. Plastic sex. But he had never really wanted to be a rock singer. It was just that riding in the car with friends, he had a tendency to sing along to the radio, poorly, despite his good hymnal voice, which was often commented on as regards its rock and roll shortcomings. Music is a morning thought, which is why we sing, so many of us, in the shower.

For Burt, this morning, the water is running to Händel's refrain, but by the time he twists the spigot to off, the music is finished, perhaps it cohered to those sticky H₂O molecules, running with them down through the steel disc which grants passage to the water and whatever has bonded to it, screening for pubic hairs and other large sediments which might perhaps cause a premature clog in the pipes, and then Händel is hard to formulate any thoughts about, especially once Burt decides to turn on the television over his classic breakfast of bacon and eggs. Hardly the stuff of novels, I'll agree. But the bar, the Olde Towne Tavern, was a dead end, or more appropriately, a repeat sign, *D.S. al coda*, conveniently sealing everything important off in one seamless circle. So, it is not

the stuff of novels, watching television and eating breakfast. In my defense, Burt is quite aware of this, and in fact his philosophical hatred of television makes for an interesting moment of hypocrisy, which is very self aware. Besides, speaking of codas, look who is on the late morning news.

There he is. Technology has made Burt immune to what would otherwise be a moment of mythic import, watching himself, the night before last, he's lying there drunk as he was on Saturday and then again he's watching someone else, obviously, because Burt is right here, eating his All-American breakfast. And even drinking O.J.

Questions of reality and the possible sentience of the magnetic pattern recorded by that camera aside, it is most certainly Burt, in full drunken stupor, lying down, and now rising to a precarious six feet, no distorted pixels in his face and he's looking right at the camera, right at himself, if that is possible, and at the very moment when his eyes lock with his eyes the dread vanishes from the screen in a goofy smile and now he's watching himself dance. The cameraman was truly heartless. The lighting and the camerawork are too perfect—neither a shiver nor a shudder. The focus. Somewhere, his mom is watching this shit. Everyone seeing an instant of Burt's life. And laughing. How long can this go on? The shower scene, too, and although they at least condescended to blur his cock, Burt believes there may have been a second where his ass was perfectly visible, brown stain to the world.

Yet another way in which that one liminal moment has been sealed off from his life, granted its own immortality. A rite of passage, Burt thinks, the hero's story, liminal. Only the story, as it is being told on the television, is incomplete, because Burt did not pass through a door, but walked rather into a Tunnel, and when the tape reaches its end,

about to step into that squad car, Burt is still not through. The story has no conclusion, it merely fades to black, and then a talking head, a media personality Burt misremembers as Kent Brockman.

Non-Kent's cruel laugh sounds twenty years younger than his speech, which is more unpleasant, if such a thing is possible, than that 60 Minutes jackass. "Now we all know," the man is saying, "that destruction of public property is no laughing matter, not to mention a public servant driving a public vehicle in such a state. But" and here his pokerface begins again to crack "this imbecile is dancing a jig, ladies and gentlemen, a jig in his own filth." And his mother, somewhere, is watching this. Without knowing all the facts, would you say that it's time to panic?

Why certainly. The response comes from the telephone. That dreaded ring. Even at twenty-seven, Burt is afraid of his mother, whom this must be. A concerned mother strikes him as decidedly unheroic, something with which he's not quite sure how to deal, since she is, after all, his mother, and entitled on the strength of that claim to whatever sorry apology or explanation he can come up with. Should he answer, or should the machine?

He knows he must himself, of course. But the ringing, his mother, forces him to confront that it was the goddess who dressed Achilles, and the embarrassment of that warrior when he was sniffed out by Odysseus, even under that heavy parfum, and dragged off to fight and die. For so it had been written, the practical counsel of mothers amounting to cowardice. Which, but really, could it be any worse that this Demonstrative introspection, this fear of his own fifty-two year old mother's mortal voice?

On the fourth ring, the tape will loop his wave pattern and start recording, one two, there have been three rings so far, so with a steeling fear Burt mutes his television, grips the handset to whiten his knuckles, calls on all his heroic courage, and incredibly manages to master a chivalric battlemanship, the kind believed dead since that great War defined a new century in pragmatic moderation. Picking up the phone, and managing to sound genuinely as though he doesn't know who this could possibly be, or even why whoever it is might be calling, "Hello?"

Of course, good chum, there must be a pause prior to engagement, the briefest second while mother attempts to arrange her forces of concern and love and disappointment so that they will work out in a properly unified front of anger and forgiveness. All mother will say also is, "Hello, Delbert."

Burt to all his friends, Burt by choice, Delbert Michael Maverick has been Delbert to his family for as long as he can remember, a name he once hated but has recently come to appreciate, and even eagerly anticipate, the disyllabic formality, something.

"Hi mom." And he'd love to tack on right now a how are you? and dodge just temporarily what presumably real issues of importance lurk foremost and foreboding along the necessary course of the conversation. Small talk is an enchantress on whose island he'd gladly dally. But God knows there's a time when it's straight to Ithaca, and Burt falls heavily silent.

It's hard to know what a mother will say here, already angry and concerned for her son's future, a woman who once for Burt's sake—well, for the infant's sake or the sake of that chance to form Burt from what personal materiel was there, the way his very cells had already formed of herself—for some sake of ideal or norm, she had gone into

labor, had forced a fat firstborn son, ten pounds of infant, through her. . . . Her lack. Out of morbid respect for Freud, Burt is unwilling and perhaps unable to conceive a vagina—labia, clitoris, and multifoliate rose—for his mother. Only a lack. But that must have been pain, after all, and what can a mother endure after that to see her firstborn dance away in five fast seconds his life and livelihood, whatever the degree of synonymity between the two.

Directness seems unlikely, and yet a pause will only sustain itself so long.

“Have you been watching the teevee, mom?”

“Oh, Delbert. What? How did you do this? Why didn’t you call me? I have to see on channel thirteen, my son?”

Of course, mother is not going to hold herself together, her forces crumbling despite her best efforts under the weight of Burt’s least sentence, something which the hero finds uncomfortable to say the least, the way all pretense falls to shambles and his mother truly inflects. If only she could maintain a voice or a stand, something theoretical which Burt could approach cautiously but with firm footing in abstract, impersonal terms. Her voice is nowhere near tears, at least. Only concerned, that’s really the best word for it, and at the same time, motherly eager for Burt to offer her a version, something to believe. A brilliant woman, she is nevertheless unsure what to think, unable to form any thoughts, beyond the fundamental simplicity of, Delbert is my son.

So Burt imagines and it seems an imagination accurate enough, from a man’s perspective. What do gender and sex mean to such a conversation? Something mythic or even premythic, perhaps, the distinction, distinct as it is, between creation through the

magic of words, and creation through the magic of the body. The ancient struggle of gods and goddesses, again, and their ever-quarrelsome copulation?

Certainly not. His mother is perfectly rational. In fact, Burt has seen his father cry too many times to really remember. But noticing now that his mother's voice is concerned and yet not tearful, Burt can only think of one reply to that question, his mother's long-ago question (at least four seconds of pause—enough to notice, try watching your watch, thinking 'beat. . . beat. . . beat. . . beat' with each jerky leap along the second hand's mondial arc), and that response seems a non-sequitur:

"Mom, I don't think I've ever known you to cry."

Should be no surprise that this is what has come to mind, not to avoid the question, and not to provoke those tears which he has just noticed that he's never seen, only a response to his concerned mother's dignified stability. His tone is envious and pitying and nonchalant, nothing reproachful, the voice of a soft revelation and genuine observation made twenty years too late. And it is a surprise.

"Well, Delbert. I don't know. I guess, maybe you are right. We haven't shared any tragedies, that I can think of. Why, when would I have cried in front of you, and why?"

This confessional conversation, something Burt associates with Plath and death, how can he bear to hear it continued? And yet his father, in that very church where the three of them had been singing just this very morning and years ago, had revealed to the congregation the apex of his own Christian faith, in tears, remembering that Burt, eight years old, had told him (father) that he (Burt) wanted to be a missionary. That must have

been the family apex, that revelation which Burt cannot even remember, but which he could never retract. Was that it?

“I lost my job, mom. I was drunk, I guess. And there was the camera crew. I don’t really understand it, the entire thing I don’t understand.”

“And so you just danced, for the camera.”

As the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD and she despised him in her heart. Perhaps it was true that Delbert had once wanted to be a missionary. He had no recollection, though, of such a drive.

“Yeah. And I don’t know how all of this is related.”

“All of what?”

Allusion, illusion, allegory, allegation. Paranoia, concern, and dreaming. “Nothing, I guess. It is just that I think I’m being set up. I think that I was meant to do that dance on television. I feel like a pawn or puppet, someone wanted me on camera. For ratings, maybe.”

Burt, are you okay?

“Delbert, are you okay? I don’t understand.”

“I don’t understand either.”

Who could?

“Well, you need to go and get your job back, you need to be doing something.”

“Look, mom, I am really fucked here.” His mother has probably never heard him curse before. “And they aren’t just going to give me my job back. I was driving the bus,

under the influence, and now on top of that it is a publicized case, the morning news, they are not going to give me my job back. I can't go and ask them for it."

"Well. Why not? What else are you going to do, pray tell?"

A direct blow below the belt, there, eh mom? Something we've been sidestepping gingerly for several chapters, and now, like this, sudden and on command, Burt is just to have the answer? Parental expectations, magical incantations, demands to be met.

"Mom, I don't know. Yesterday I tried to figure it out, what had gone wrong, and I got nowhere. But I think it is important. This shouldn't have happened to me. I don't even know how to explain it. But I need to deal with this."

"Delbert, you are being ridiculous. You don't even know what you are talking about. You need to do something with your life. You talk like you are on television, 'I need to deal with this,' as though reality were just going to stop while you solve some mysteries of life."

". . . ."

"What are you going to do with your life? It isn't like you wanted to be a bus driver, God knows. But at least you were doing something, making some money at it. Why don't you start writing? That's what you wanted to do, that's what you've wanted to do forever. I mean, why did we put you through school? To drive a bus?"

"I don't drive a bus anymore, mom."

A pause, perfectly enunciated to carry sympathetic weight. "No." And again. "No, you don't. So this is your chance. Start doing something you want. Start writing. Don't waste your life."

Mother, alas, has never read Pynchon, has been no party to the scripted reality of these last days. And worse, she cannot perceive that perhaps her son lacks the strength to undertake these labours she has set for him, again the goddess. At least she is not the one knitting her son a dress, not Thetis, and here he shall have no shortage of foolhardy courage.

“Okay, mom. You’re right. I will. I have to go now. I’m sorry, for all of this. I wish I had a better excuse. Thank you.”

“Okay.” She is completely appeased. “I love you.”

Burt has always found it difficult to say it back, “I love you too,” but always has just the same. And this time was no different. Why?

He's grateful instantly of this reversion to monologue, even before the handset's sound, set down in its cradle, has clicked its finality. Ah, relief in small things, surreal conversations more meaningful in retrospective pondering. He is presently coming to understand that his mother doesn't particularly want him to have a job, just to do something. Specifically to write. She made that clear enough, right?

Dialogue is too trying, the reason why even in his first, his freshman year away from home, the infrequency of his phoning had hurt his family's feelings. It isn't that he's antisocial—he just finds it hard to understand others' words in any real way, which is why even when he listens carefully he sometimes seems to forget—almost immediately—whatever it is he's just been told. If you'll simply remember Mary (that shiver which just climbed the column of Burt's spine was undoubtedly associative, coinciding as it did with my mention of that Narnian winter queen), and the way Burt seemed to turn by accident some mental switch and translate her words to mere nasal babel, you will have some grasp of this problem.

But hell, even Burt's monologue isn't so very mono. Sometimes suspicious of his own schizophrenia, he nevertheless enjoys the fairly constant internalized arguments which he manages to construct. They are often hypothetical, and oftener stupid, although they are only rarely resolved and never worth remembering, except for the occasional turning of a phrase, by one side or the other, useful to his pretenses at fiction or poetry, but hardly to his interpersonal relations.

Well, he has promised to write, has he not? And it is what his mother wants. The practical demands of this promise are a pen and several empty pages, not to mention a little bit of inspiration.

First, he's got to clear off that desk. An easy enough task, I suppose, since they are only articles of clothing which are draped across it, and Burt has no qualms over tossing them to the heaps which already dominate the landscape of his floor. He hasn't sat to write in several months. But the first two necessities are easily obtained, not even requiring him to rummage in the neatness of his desk drawer. The pen needs some help in getting its juices to flow, the usual mad sequence of loops in the corner of the page which start as mere etchings, but eventually run dark with ink. Red won't do. He'll want another pen, a simple black bic. And now, he's waiting for the breath of that third, his muse, sweet sister.

He's got a title, at the very least, one he's actually rather proud of. Did I mention before? If so, you might have misunderstood. He writes, large print in the top margin, slanted so as to appear italicized, *THE American Novel: A Novel*. This done, the remainder of the page should fill itself. No?

Burt is lacking inspiration, and it is such irony too, our hero, the empty page and he can't think of a single damn thing to write about. Of course, it is partly circumstance. He's got maybe two months of rent and groceries saved up before he's another artist starving on the street, which is quite a deadline for so ambitious an endeavor. Still, he mustn't hear our sniggers at his so blatant oversight, the hero of a novel with no novel ideas of his own, no muse even in the events of his preceding days. But then how could he?

The unmolested blue lines are too much to put up with for too long, so Burt decides to just take the plunge, a half-pike with a high level of difficulty. Unfortunately, if I may make so strong a condemnation, there's more splash than you would think possible

with so slender a pen, something about skyscrapers and a Cadillac and a private investigator ridiculously named, Colt Walker, the first page written with dry description and dialogue of the kind imaginable in the mind of an author who himself lacks the simple ability to converse. As soon as the penmanship has once worked over the entirety of that original page, Burt tears the leaf from its three rings and compacts it into a violent singularity, heaving it wasteward with the decision that perhaps he'll work on some sort of idea. He looks at his halted watch. He turns on the television.

For the nanosecond during which the electromagnetic pulse leaps from the remote controller to the main console, Burt is very much afraid that this will be a mistake, that his own ass will once again be on display for him and his city, but then the picture comes into focus and it is just Ricki Lake with a bunch of transvestites, men obviously confused who nevertheless have the sheer audacity to invoke, in Burt's hearing, that tedious commandment of daytime teevee. "Just be yourself."

Is this once again what message mother Maverick might have been trying for, only her invocation, in the style of all mothers, was less fascist? In the style of all mothers, what does that mean? Is there an aural hyphen between mothers and the all, as in All-mothers? Burt cannot believe his mother's could have shared substance with the guest's message. Perhaps the oracular electronic orifice was recasting sound advice in its own Demonic voice, shifting subtleties of nuance in the translation.

"Just be yourself," in this Age of Arnold (although of Kevin rather than Matthew), is empty counsel. How do a generation of men who grew up with such a crush, all of them, on Winnie Cooper, distinguish each one from his fellows? We expect, clearly, that

wonder years spent gleaning from hyperreality have nonetheless nurtured a real individual identity. But there's no way to know that Burt is not of a lost generation.

In which case, what. Burt must embark on the quest for self, but's run to Buddha and Nirvana. But how unlikely, western, rational Burt to abandon those precious adjectives and find himself.. No offense. It's just that this suggestion seems as tiresome as the preceding. Burt has no idea where he would even begin to look. He's already tried the Olde Towne, to no avail, and to be quite honest, if his self were sitting lost somewhere, waiting simply to be stumbled upon, that tavern would have been the locus. Or, in a second of doubt, would it have been the Tunnel, dying a criminal death? Could it be still? Where access is denied. Denied. Denied.

Wait, what questions of self are even necessary? Corporeally, and even cerebrally, the pieces are all well-bound in bone, muscle, and epidermis. So why is it that we won't take as Burt this rational (if confused) being with which we are presented: seventy three inches tall, near sighted, with brown hair and greenish eyes? Why won't he?

And maybe he would, but he has the slightest sensation that we are reading. And he himself knows what is expected, knows why we read, since he's read about character and heroism and knows the integrity of a protagonist's voice and even knows how the reader also falls apart at Slothrop's dissolution. . . . And then, if we are reading, he has been written.

A list of potential inward journeys might begin with Siddhartha and include peyote-induced animal quests. Or perhaps would skip to more modern times and rely on Deepak Chopra's bestsellers. Then of course there are the simple things: social services, travel, meditation, therapy. All of these are ways which have been pointed at eightfold,

mechanisms for the discovery of self. Burt knows that along each of these avenues he would find a foreigner.

This is basically a distinction between finding and deducing. What he'll work on is simple sorting, a rational system of folders and filers, sifting meticulously through ideas and turn-ons to maybe find which are his and which aren't, and then how do the two large categories subdivide and relate? A novel is the documentation of such an exercise, why he's writing.

Which, well, he's not. He's actually right now watching Ricki Lake. It's because even bad teevee is so much more entertaining than the best sort of work. It isn't at all as though he turns his brain off to, in the eighties lingo, vege out. His only rationalization, in fact, is that watching teevee, especially in the middle of the day, is an exercise in mockery, sharpening that edge. When he'd lived with Heather, college days, they'd sat there eating lunch and interjecting caustic witticisms, directed towards the teevee, but also showing off for each other, and they'd been quite witty, even with Beavis and Butt-head. Burt can't remember a single thing either of them had ever said.

And now, for some moments of magical freneticism, innocuously spawned as usual, this time by a disinterested rummaging through the stack of carbon papers with which he was armed on release from prison, and one of them, of course, has a line
CASE SET FOR PLEA: _____

on which has been scribbled 4-08-99 1pm, which would be in, yeah, approximately two hours. How come nobody had told him?

Well, the question is not at all the righteous outrage Burt believes it is, because he actually was told, and if it hadn't been for his libidinous excesses, he perhaps wouldn't be

tearing his tee shirt in the frenzy to dress appropriately, nor would he miss a step in his sprint down the stairs, a near disaster, but balance restores him with the aid of the hand-rail. And again he wouldn't even be in such a hurry if he thought he could drive, but everything takes forever with the bus making stop after stop, each block, as though its riders would be incapable of even the shortest walk. So, then, Burt rides the reverse of the one he made—could it have been only yesterday?

On a weekday, the bus is a bit more crowded, and Josh doesn't have time for more than a small howdy, what with passengers clinking down change, clamoring for transfers, and making chit chat about weather and business, and how come Josh is so good at that anyway, Burt's regular riders rarely cared to say so much as hello, much less talk about their daughters and days at work.

52 Eastbound is the model of inefficiency. The streetlights, set on timers to preserve fossil fuels by ensuring the fewest stops and the least volume of gas consumed per-capita, minimize also the time spent on the road, as you wait only for one light to turn green, with all subsequent signals set so that if you observe the speed limit, they turn green as you approach. But with the bus, the system backfires completely, since the signs for its stop are so conveniently located at each half block, meaning that the bus makes only minimal progress with each new start before pulling out of traffic either to collect or deposit a passenger or two, and must invariably wait a near eternity to slip back in so that the successive signals have each again turned red by the time the bus has arrived.

These were the routes Burt enjoyed the most, driving. A-whole-nother way of dicking the system, disrupting sometimes entire traffic flows, clogging his Demon's arteries just momentarily. And of course irregularly, because if he worked it just right he could occasionally make even four or five straight greens, which would throw him off schedule as much as four minutes so that he could sit parked along the sidewalk, a bus full of passengers, and for the briefest of times he would get paid for doing nothing, and then who was fucking whom, bitch, even if it is just a quicky.

But damn it is annoying if you are a passenger, especially since good old Josh here seems to be a bonafide expert at this shit, not only stopping for each light, but some-

how managing each time to have exactly two cars ahead of him at the red. Aesthetically, it is impressive work. Hey though, Josh, please, will you hurry the fuck up and get me to point B already, for Christ's sake? What's with the dilly-dally?

Finally, forty-five minutes later, he tugs the pullcord and he's there approximately, see you later Josh, and an hour early with only three blocks to walk. He's always doing this, overzealously hurried when it comes to presenting himself, a nervous habit he's never figured out, considering the laziness with which he leads the better part of his life. At least it means he's got some time for lunch, or how about just a hot dog for a snack, if he's not hungry yet from eggs and bacon, the smell of which he loves in the morning.

In late morning on a weekday, the fact that he's wearing a tie does not stand out until he is actually in the courtroom, and then he discovers that he has apparently overdressed, because everyone else looks as though blue collar were an aspiration. This is the busriding rabble which occasioned the disillusionment of his aesthetic imaginings about humanity. There isn't one of them who would pay five dollars, an hour's pay perhaps, for a Breughel, except of course if he could sell it for ten, each of them concerned with eating and his own suffering. To an aspiring artist, their rejection of any but the basest kind of aestheticism was once fatal. And now it is an unwelcome and ugly obtrusion of reality into Burt's artistic afterlife. No concern at all for style.

After fifteen minutes of audible silence—florescent lights, a distant boiler—a skirtsuited bailiff comes wheeling in a teevee and vcr, completes the circuits and disappears again through the chamber door. It's a home video production, a judge reading verbatim from a sheet entitled ADVISEMENT OF RIGHTS, with a pink copy of which Burt was provided on checking in, and which he has read perhaps eight times in the last fifteen minutes, with nothing else to do. The judge on tape takes the next fifteen to get through it once, and then there's a second of bluescreen, followed by a non-judge who renders the same spiel in Spanish, with English subtitles so that it is closer to two o'clock when the same dame bailiff reappears and calls out the all rise.

It isn't the judge from the tape, but what is the difference? The procedure is: the judge reads out your name and you step up to bar. Of course, it is in alphabetical order that the cases have been sorted, so no matter which end of the pile we start at, the unlikely name Maverick is damn near the middle, meaning that Burt never has to go last, but then he's never been first either. Not surprisingly, the legal system begins at A, and so Burt

can watch disinterestedly as some twenty other unfortunates plead their diverse cases. Lucky Burt. It is surprising, though, that these people, who mostly look as if they couldn't possibly have anything to lose, nevertheless address their judge with such marked deference.

Finally, "Delbert Michael Maverick," and he's on stage, with a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino.

"You are Delbert Michael Maverick?"

"Yes."

"Well, you've been charged with Driving Under the Influence of Intoxicants, as well as Destruction of Public Property. The former is punishable by ninety days in prison, a fine of up to one thousand dollars, and a one-year suspension of your driver's license; the latter by up to 100 days incarceration and fines totaling not more than the value of the property in question."

Oh thank the heavens for small mercies, not more than the value of a bus and a fire hydrant.

"Because these are crimes punishable by jail time, you are eligible for a court-appointed attorney, should the court determine to accept a plea of indigence. If you wish to do so, you must fill out the proper forms."

Burt is by now quite familiar with this statement, and could perhaps offer a fair crack at reciting its Spanish rendition. But he'd read it before without the proper context, assuming that it was written for other eyes only, and hasn't filled out the proper forms at all. "Yes sir. I mean, I plead indigence. That is, I'd like an attorney."

"Have you filled out the forms?"

No, he admits, and the judge invites him to join a few others who're busily working at declaring themselves indigent, and Burt realizes that maybe everyone else is dressed like shit knowing that they need to convince the court of their worthlessness. This doesn't exactly forgive them though, don't be ridiculous.

In the end, despite his suit and the \$1200 in his savings account, an honesty which the superego won't let him evade, the court is willing enough to accept his defamation of his own character, embracing his self-adhered label of indigence. Let's go easy on the moral outrage, though, and remember that the form reflected his unemployment, and anyway it really isn't much, \$1200, when held in the scales against fender damage to a very nice bus, not to mention the fire hydrant. It would barely be enough for an attorney, for that matter. And then there's the small matter of \$10,000 in still-outstanding student loans. In these matters, perhaps, the court judges out of mercy.

His referral to the Public Defender's office is printed on carbon paper, his copy pink, and he looks carefully this time to notice a revised entry on the CASE SET FOR PLEA line item, which makes sense, since he did not in fact enter any plea at this appearance. He and his attorney have a week to decide what will be said before the court. Through some unspeakable good fortune, or perhaps mere planning, the office of the Public Defender is only a couple of blocks from the Municipal Courthouse, and Burt has not got anything better to do than walk down that way, so he does.

It's suddenly a long walk, though, because Burt thinks that he sees where all this is going. Something about that future date and time etched into that ridiculously bright paper seems just too final—he will be there then—and how much more of his life has already been written? It's actually possible that he's not being written, but rather read,

which would mean that (barring hypertext or Choose Your Own Adventure) the reader has just one course to follow and will come across words in that helpless way that must really be something like being whisked away in one of those Dodge Neons. And since he can certainly make out the direction of his spiral, is it not a forgivable pessimism that claims to see Burt's death in pages ahead? How else do heroes end? They must either die or attain some idealized state, there to continue in an eternal present, the reader, hypocrite twin, watching his hero brother approach the black hole's event horizon and then seem to—stop, but for the hero himself the fall to the center is practically instantaneous, a strange relativity of reader and read.

There's also a third possibility, which sends any hero like Sisyphus to hell, and Achilles is condemned to suffer disgrace and what must have been a humiliating death not once, but an infinite number of times, since Homer once wrote him and since then he's kept on just being read. Which means that possibly Burt didn't even exist before that bus wreck, but sprung at that moment full-formed from my forehead, with simulated memories, and he won't come ever to any end at all, just to a mother fucking : and no that is not a colon, remember to think musically, and the next thing he'll be conscious of is a muted ding, but it won't be like déjà vu because he'll have not even the slightest recollection of anything, just living again, more blind words. I certainly can't remember him from before. Can you? Only Burt does, and his mother of course will say she does too, but perhaps that's all just another creation, mother meant to reassure, to sedate.

Can you call these notions ridiculous? Yeah, but they come with enough momentum to stifle any imaginable hope. Besides, Burt will be in court, April fifteenth at 1pm, perhaps even again at 12:45, there's no reason for him to imagine otherwise. Is

there? He's been everywhere either on time or early where authority is concerned, and sometimes like today even overdressed, which is an uncommon affliction in the busdriving ranks. In his head, on accident, literally against his will, he just picked out, just now, the tie he'll wear next Monday, which sort of cements the whole thing further, wouldn't you say?

But this is an intolerable debate, once maybe settled by Chauntecleer and Pertelote, but who the hell could remember a verdict that old, anyway? Assuming I'm right and there was one, which even that doesn't seem that important, a fowl resolution, all apologies for the pun.

Burt's lawyer is named after an island. Cyprus. Either that or after a gangsta rap group. But Cyprus Ritter is too old to be named after B. Real's crew (which anyway is spelled Cypress, like the plant) even if the afro (overlooking its blonde) might seem to support such an assumption. The hair is a strange detail in these law offices, which are more immaculate than anything we've seen in the movies, where passionate PDs maintain with vehemence the innocence of their freeloading, but wrongfully accused clientele. It's because the real files are so slender, no fictitious paperwork spilling out onto the desk, each case distilled to a two page information sheet, which Cyprus is filling out with Burt's kindly help, asking for dates and details, and when the form is full there doesn't seem to be much more to say.

What I forgot to say in between is that the lawyer immediately assured Burt that he wouldn't spend any time in jail. It's an assurance bladed on both sides, once again some flavor of predestiny, a formula, maybe, into which he, a mere character is being plugged. . . . The more practical response, and the overriding one, is simple relief. Al-

though, remembering only a few minutes ago, a hundred day sentence could possibly skip by, assuming that either author or reader approached the time with sufficient disinterest.

These are starting to become a real annoyance, these theoretical fictions. Back in Burt's reality, AA is looking like a good possibility. Since Cyprus doubts that any technicalities sufficient to exonerate him will materialize, he suggests that an effort to deal with drinking "of your own volition" will likely minimize potential fines. Which, it just so happens, Cyprus himself attends meetings Tuesday nights at the Millennial Church of Christ, formerly the New Church of Christ. Burt imagines the circle of once-boozers gathering weekly to smoke their American Spirits and sustain each other through their strong urges to drink. Burt attending? A gesture like that, Cyprus assures him, could just about convince a sympathetic judge to dispense with fining all together. Burt promises, he'll think about it. All of this I almost forgot to say, and Burt was already on his way out.

He's just got home to go for a week, and even that small mercy is not all that it might sound. Well, you know that, it is just the same damn apartment after all. If he weren't twenty-seven, he might go to his parents, just north of the city, and stay there, and his mom would drive him to court next Monday, but he is. Twenty-seven. And not even innocent, which he won't want his mother to see. Bad enough that she knows without having to face it. It seems impossible that Burt cannot recognize in himself this desperate son's resolution to be the reminder that his mother's womb was once perfect, and is instead thinking of independence and how so much depends upon finding his own way. If the city were New York, he'd take a cab or ride the subway; he's sick of the bus and its prices which seem so fair, even cheap, until you remember that you first paid for all of

these busses, and for their fuel and drivers for that matter, and now you are made to buy back the fruits of your own labor.

The question is, how does he spend the week in his apartment while Cyprus negotiates with the District Attorney, trying to arrange the realization of whatever probability seems to Burt most lenient. That is work, something Cyprus has been around for what seems an eternity, while the only work now permitted Burt himself seems to be the daily struggle against nothing on blue-lined pages, a struggle which daily seems more difficult to win. Well, daily since only earlier this morning, that makes a lot of sense, when he resolved finally his mother's resolution to undertake this thing he's always claimed to dream of undertaking. But he found even one page hard to fill with coherent meaning, while a novel must be—how many? A novella I suppose, might suit Burt's purpose, but that is still perhaps a hundred pages.

For lunch, late as it is, Burt decides on Andrew Smash, where the vegetarian burger tastes nothing like the beef for which it is supposed to be place holder, but still suits Burt's taste just fine. It's oddly, in fact, the best burger he's ever eaten. And the drink which accompanies it is real fruits and ice, smashed together by an industrial strength silver-cone blender, and is also excellent. The reason this lunch strikes him as significant must be the way nature sits à côté d'art on the purple plastic tray, the non-burger and real shake conspicuous because the relationship is precisely opposite at, say, McDonald's, where the interaction between real beef and frozen gelatinous beverage is so everyday as to be unnoticeable. Burt enjoys Andrew Smash because the meal is fiction while reality is served as a beverage, on the side. For a few hours, while he can remind himself of this

enlightenment, it makes his existence significantly less problematic, and he's smiling the fool's smile all the busride home, the same dancing smile as in his long-ago jig.

Lunch and its implications now well digested, the problem of writing nevertheless remains. Burt's mental crosshairs sighted just earlier that Demon in his tower, but perhaps TP wrapped that possibility already, even if it was inadequate or inaccurate, and who wants to read Maxwell infictioned again?

He'd once had a great idea, the story of Christ in the 1990s, told by twelve AA apostles, gospels not only of Matt and Mark, but of James and (not the rock star) Paul Simon (Peter, you know, and as an alcoholic a character whose famous name would be a joke in the group) and Jason Thaddeus too, and the other seven, writing in essence a dozen short stories. But then Wallace had pretty much said everything about AA plus about 900 pages more than Burt had in mind, in *Infinite Jest*, so that writing now the novel he'd been too lazy to undertake seven years before seems pointless. Another novel he once had in mind was written by Franco Ferrucci, an autobiography of a god who is incarnated endlessly because he enjoys mortality, his death generational, an idea derived from Frazer. But it was written as well, before he had been ready to do the writing himself.

In all of his accumulated scribblings he has then the beginnings of only two potential novels. The first is an idea dating way back to high school, the discovery of the Ark of the Covenant, without swashbuckling (and unlikely) archeological heroics, focusing instead on characters and changes—a physicist struggling with quanta and the meaning of light, a pope of image nonpareil who dies touching the Ark, preventing it from falling over, dies to protect the fragile truths inside. . . .

The second long piece he started as a play, the story of fire. Well, more a fictionalized history of its uses, beginning with mythologies of origin.

What he wants is to begin something entirely new, a desire he recognizes right away as fundamentally impossible. Perhaps it would work if he hadn't been a Lit major, and before that hadn't loved to read, the story of each of his college classmates from what he could remember. But to demand that Burt know what is in his mind of his own, and what is of others' fictions, is unreasonable after so much reading. Which is why, as I've said, this first novel must be a fiction of simple sorting.

Burt in the last few days has become too obsessed with the subject to miss the necessary connection between himself and the Demon, whose work is also sorting. But he can't imagine what to make of the connection, so shelves it for future consideration, something to ponder at some point en route to that determined point next week. Should he ever get there. Which, as he sits at his desk to write and looks at his watch, does not seem so inevitable after all, the damn thing not working, and is it possible that this is to be Burt's eternal present, sitting to write, needing to shit, but his story has come to this dissatisfying close?

Since he can still move—can, in fact, get up to take that shit—it does not seem so. Still, staring at the frozen second hand spawns a curious possibility, that the universe itself could end in a mere second. You see, there are two types of watches, as Burt is coming to realize. The distinction is not between digital and analog, which are simple matters of presentation, but instead addresses the treatment of seconds. All digital watches (and some analog) pause at each second's cusp, and then leap instantaneously into the next. Others of the analog variety, however, have second hands which move in a seamless circle, no second precisely defined, but each melting into the next, as its predecessor melted at some point into it, the sixty indistinguishable.

Burt's watch, a Fossil cleverly designed so that its face is actually a metallic replica of a fish fossil, bones cast in mineral, is (when properly working) an analog watch of the former variety. And since it isn't functioning right now, it is possible to recognize the implications of its influid circle as quantum, a view which treats time the same as photons or electron valences. Basically, Burt is postulating a universe which exists precariously, requiring some minimal energy to continue to exist in time, energy without which all movement would cease, unable to crest the present moment and enter the next, the way the hands of his watch are frozen, the battery short on juice. And with each second, as entropy in theory increases, the harnessable energy source diminishes. And maybe it is even the decay of that energy that is literally what allows Burt to see, so that light itself is the byproduct of a universe which is literally dying to propel itself forward, which would mean that all Burt can ever see is death, the way each of our heartbeats works desperately and futilely and even counterproductively to preserve life and change, and only we are aware that someday everything must freeze.

Remember it well, said the villain, for it is the chilling sound of your doom. The villain of course is none other than Mr. Freeze from that Batman movie, another Arnold, this time Schwarzenegger, in a laughable role, and Burt's pop-culture association is extremely appropriate as he is unwinding several sheets of toilet paper to wipe the fundament from his rectum. After the first couple of wipes he starts checking the TP for whiteness, and when he's finally satisfied that the fully processed remnants of his lunch have been expelled, he flushes and resumes his seat at his desk. It is still 5:49:17, of which day God only knows. At this rate, his savings account should hold out forever, his debts never come due.

How do you rewrite the universe? Burt's no physicist, and so more to the point he wonders what Barth's fictitious fiction writers write. He'd like to read their work. It would perhaps give him an interesting place to start.

As it is, he hasn't got too many tools. The only lessons he can remember from fiction writing classes back in his university days are platitudes: write what you know, show don't tell, etc. etc. He never did care too much for such prescriptions, but he's not unwilling. The problem is postmodern, and we've been over it before: he can't say for sure what he knows. To say the least, he's got some issues to define. A fictionalized autobiography, then? But what happens if Burt and I write the same novel? Am I to race with my own creation? For now I have little to fear. Burt suffers under what I can only hope is a delusion—that no one will want to read about a busdriver. I think he's failing to see his own significance. But it is a disagreement which I won't make too loudly.

In a worst-case scenario, this seems perhaps to be going nowhere, but diligent Burt is sitting in there, patiently en attendant Godknows what inspiration to greatness, when giving up again could be so easy. Especially with his literary aim set so high. . . . The irony of all those Air Force commercials is that the military is for high school kids who couldn't make it. But if you're good at school that's supposed to mean great things, or at least average, and here look at what this has all come to, and all because of a combination of circumstances, which we are hardly to blame on diligent Burt; that is, he has high goals but no hope, and as a result he's quite prone to watching television or turning to his computer for entertainment purposes within moments of sitting to write. But not tonight, with a Hemingway by God, tonight he starts on the novel. In fact, the temptation of his computer as an entertainment can be used to begin, and it will be the story of 1999,

launching itself, on the eve of the millennium, from the start button of Burt's taskbar, and running with Ultima Online, which game Burt has never played, but he knows what it is, a fictional game of living. It is a novel promising incomparable relevance, and the mere fact of its basis in cyberrealism assures an audience, hopefully. Burt's protagonist will not be a novelist exactly, but a player—an addict, even, of this incredibly engrossing game, obsessed with his created likeness in a predefined world, a representation, in short a character of himself, whose accomplishments and failures reflect or compensate for the protagonist's own. No, not reflection, inversion is the more interesting relationship, a failed protagonist whose character succeeds almost incredibly, and the protagonist himself must be drawn steadily to the reality of the fiction, must realize that the accomplishments of his character have as much validity as his own failures, and likewise that the dollar is as much a fiction as the gold pieces which his cyberself has managed to amass. Borrowing from *Infinite Jest*, perhaps, and all those studies addicting rats to their own endorphins, his character's meals will start to seem enough for them both, the game so believably detailed that it becomes the only thing of any importance. And then the realization, the protagonist's realization that if the accomplishments and the food of the fiction are real, then the character too is, and either he must be himself living in Britannia, or else he is God or DNA, controlling in either case the behavior of the individual, determining at least in a large part the destiny of this unwitting mortal. And then, a little later, he realizes another possibility, that the character he thinks he has created is in fact controlling him, and the protagonist has to figure out which one is Victor and which the monster. Needless to say, the whole thing becomes an incredible tangle. And finally, the question becomes whether or not he can turn his computer off for good.

This is the story he's chosen, a frightening reflection on reality and addiction, and we'll leave him in a little while to write it in peace. If he can figure out where to begin. The way Burt sees it, there are two possibilities. He can begin in the fictional reality of his protagonist's life, or in the fictional fiction of his protagonist's character's life. The choice is monumental because it will, in a sense, determine the novel's ultimate decision. To begin with the protagonist's character is to frame the entire work in what is presumably fiction, so that the protagonist, who is ostensibly real, will actually speak only within the frame of the unreal, a disorienting, and again I say frightening scenario. But to begin with the protagonist seems somehow less interesting, seeming to negate the possibility of the character's fundamental existence. Burt believes that the novel's first sentence will determine its entire course, unraveling slowly over however many hundred pages.

The work of writing is generally uninteresting to description, and I don't think it is necessary to describe in any detail the sentences which Burt crafts. So I will simply set him to writing and tune in the television.

On channel eleven, the reggae singer is just beginning the refrain bad boys bad boys whatcha gonna do, whatcha gonna do when they come for you, and although Burt can't watch it right now (and indeed has no idea even that it is on) this is the episode of Cops wherein he'll make his international (US+Canada+Mexico=international, technically) teevee debut. It isn't clear at all what rationale determines that several of the stars will have their faces obscured by blurry pixels, while a few retain their true and open countenances, but once again Burt is very clear, apparently having been very unlucky, unless the small and dubious consolation of having his genitals obscured is given undue gratitude. But we've all seen this before. The question is: who else is watching?

Obviously, this show, which has spawned dozens of copycats, literally creating its own genre, has some sort of audience. But a demographic is difficult to imagine. Is it possible anyway that the viewers will ever be any more than an audience, that some sort of mutually cognizable interaction will occur? Well, one person at least has seen the tape already and called to communicate, Mrs. Maverick. But these innumerable others seem important only in that they watch. Which, what kind of importance is that, anyway?

The evening can just whisk by with the teevee on (although Burt's, I should emphasize, is off), probably because of the old saying that time flies when you're having fun, and what is fun if it isn't the simple sensation of freed endorphins? Baywatch and bouncing breasts, Bob Saget and America's Funniest Home Videos, Letterman sipping straight whiskey from his Late Show mug, and before you know it, it is time to get Burt up out of his chair and puppet him through his nightly routine.

In exchange for these last hours, endorphins. A fair trade by literal laissez faire principles, but the problem is I feel like I've been exploited, as though there's some sort

of addiction that has been played on, and if that free endorphin release is my reward for what hard work I have put in today, it is also my sedative, holding me in contentment and letting me put off until at least tomorrow any intention I might have had to revolt today. I'm not even capable of anger anymore, just sorrow, and not an inadequate embarrassment at this impotence, which seems to be growing, if you can picture such a thing, forgiving reader.

Perhaps the problems stem from starting to allow Burt his writing, and worse, giving him nothing else to do. It is a fabulous novel I've inspired in him though, wouldn't you say? Well, promising at the least, and now it will be a matter of dedication to constructing sentences. And of course I need to worry about my own problems, like where to make our Maverick go so that all of this can once again become interesting. The fact is, tomorrow will be different, and these last sections we will regard retrospectively as necessary intermediaries, since thanks to Joyce I feel some obligation to follow Burt faithfully, reporting on what details there are. Trust me, this extended lull tries and tires me as well. Though it hasn't been dull, not on this end, anyway, just more work than I'm used to, but I guess Burt's life had no choice but to slow some from that bang-up beginning. And he has been so alone. . . .

Yeah, tomorrow will be different. Things will happen to bring again confusion and the mother fucking ruckus, direct and unavoidable, and I'm thinking that the television might even end up the way of that Fossil, television being a death of sorts to literature. Could you forgive me for killing the television, if it were done in the interest of being interesting, rather than out of some righteous rage?

All of this tomorrow, so stick around folks, don't touch that dial. What you've been listening to, this apostrophe, has been more station identification than commercial break, something to give us all a breather in a literary sense, because the freneticism of the earlier pace could otherwise have meant cardiac difficulties. Some pulses have undoubtedly suffered from the adjustment, a sprinter's heartbeat trying to maintain its rhythm across the forested terrain, and will be eager to find again the flat track and lanelines. I need just a little more rest, and there are likely those who would agree. Tomorrow I will run again. But right now I think I will sleep. If you are willing, you can put this down and join me. I'm lonely and would love the company, whatever you want that to mean.

Who expected a starter's pistol to begin the morning? If I misled you I'm sorry, you perhaps mistook my pillow talk for something more sincere, because despite what has been promised, Burt wakes to the assurance that his radio doesn't have a gun, no I don't have a gun, no I don't have a gun, and thinks Nirvana in an unpleasant tone. How his clock radio manages to go off on a different station every morning he has no idea. Anyway, today he will invest some time and money into research, heading to the mall to pick up Ultima Online and figure out just how to play. Basics, nothing detailed, and frankly the game interests him only thematically. Choosing a profession and then going to work. What's the point, especially on the computer screen, where pixels are the only entities affected? Eating, playing, writing the day runs quick, and then it is seven already and the AA meeting Cyprus was talking about starts in an hour.

Although he's not an alcoholic Burt has been interested in AA for years, always planning to do some research for the novel he'd write, but now that there's some incentive that's a little more practical, he'll actually go. Unfortunately it is to the time in the evening that the bus route frequencies are down, and so he'll have to take the 66 now or be late, and God knows when the meeting is going to end and how long he'll have to wait for a ride home. These are inconveniences he hasn't had to endure since before he was licensed to drive.

When Burt brushes his teeth, which he does whenever he leaves the house, as well as each morning and night, he counts down from sixty. He never spits until he reaches zero, although sometimes, if he's in a hurry, he counts a little faster.

So he takes the 66 across town to the Millennial Church of Christ, an immense and very modern-looking church, which even from the outside resembles a mid-sized

sports arena more than any of the churches Burt attended as a child. The first choir he ever sang in, actually, was the children's choir of a log chapel built along a lake, with perhaps seven rows of pews. Here, at the Millennial Church, God is on awesome display for the world, or at least the city, every Sunday morning. And come to think of it, wasn't the tube in his holding cell playing the service just this Sunday? He wasn't really paying attention as he suffered through the worst headache of his life, but that seems like it could be right. Feeling his forehead, the bruise is still there, although it is not the knot it once was. Fucking Officer—

Pauline is among those seated around the circular table in the large conference room. Also there is Mary, Officer Cummins, and Cyprus. The judges, both from the courtroom and from the videotape. Josh, our hero's former colleague. Those two flat-foots, Larry and Moe. And the channel eleven guy, not Kent Brockman, but what the fuck is his name? Then there is that deputy from his night in prison, Riley wasn't it? and the only man who has ever held a gun to Burt, the guard from the barricaded tunnel. And finally, rounding out the circle, the barman from the Olde Towne, the very man Burt had been looking for, only the day before yesterday, sitting right here in this meeting, a perfect chance for any sort of confrontation.

Asphyxiation is the effect, crushing pounds of psychic force and a sudden recollection of a paranoia which lately has been lacking. Here is the *dramatis personae* of these liminal last days, everyone who has spoken. Except his mother. Mother Maverick, who has been only a voice. Everyone, then, whom Burt has seen. But then if the newsman and the videotaped judge are in that number, why not Ricki and her transvestites? They would make for interesting characters, surely, an injection of comic buffoonery.

Trying to decipher the relationship between himself and this cast, our hero momentarily spins mental wheels, his last attempt at sense merely a further convolution—they are the people whom he has seen and heard talking to (or at least about) him. With only one exception, the bartender, the great conspirator, who perhaps opened these gates but has not been any sort of tangible presence during Burt’s subsequent adventures. And then Burt just gives up, because whatever sinister truth may be here will escape him for now, too unlikely for Burt to even begin guessing at, analytical as he believes himself to be. For now, he can just know that some relationship exists, and sit suddenly in the only empty seat around the table.

It is really unclear whether he’s addressing the group, the bartender, or God when he says, “Here we are now, entertain us,” but there is no angst in his voice, just a little tremor to make me suspect the poker face and his tone, which clearly expects revelation. Not surprisingly, no one jumps to respond, although someone yawns. The comment must then be either so bizarre as to be unanswerable, or so expected as to be uninteresting.

Eventually, as Burt expects, the bartender takes charge. But only after all present have been seated for a while, and then he clears a rattling phlegm from his throat before beginning. One thing Burt didn’t remember was this unassuming a voice. “Well, it looks like everyone is here who’s going to be, so we might as well get started, and anyone who stumbles in late. . . well, now there’s a poor choice of words, let’s hope they don’t actually *stumble* in late.”

It isn’t possible to tell whether the joke was planned or spontaneous, but it is AA humor, dependent upon the context of a room full of people who have all stumbled around one time too many, and Burt is surprised that it doesn’t win any laughs, or even

any smiles for that matter, except the wary one which he himself smiles. Burt, I mean, who is having trouble remembering the last time he smiled. Riding the bus home from Andrew Smash?

“Anyone who *wanders* in late, then, can just join us when they get here.” During this briefest pause, each person at the table produces a cigarette and lights up, a strange synchronization which only Burt seems to remark, although he hadn’t even noticed the ashtrays before, so he’s clearly no Sherlock Holmes. “We seem to have a new visitor, so let’s go around the table, and have everyone introduce themselves.”

An expectant pause and a look to his left before the realization, “Oh, I suppose I should start. Okay. Well, my name is Thomas and I’m an alcoholic. I hit rock bottom ten years ago when I woke up in ER after I’d nearly drowned in my own vomit. Luckily my roommate was out late and when he came in he saw me and I was all blue and he called the ambulance. Even though I’d already vomited, they had to pump my stomach. I’ve been sober ever since I went to my first ever AA meeting the very next night, just taking it one day at a time. . . .”

Immediately to the left of Thomas is the judge from the videotape, whose name is James and who has been sober for seven years, so he claims, and who tells the story about having been left by his wife, who of course took with her the kids.

And on to Mary, my God that woman is beautiful, brown hair and blue eyes looking like Liv Tyler but her story is almost too revolting for Burt to suspect. And this is the brief version, which she offers by way of introduction: a girl born to teenage parents and given up as an infant for adoption who the last time she was drunk got raped by a man who turned out to be her biological father, sick Oedipal-type shit, she had been

twenty-one, daddy thirty-eight, and what she had really wanted to do afterwards was drink tequila like Nicholas Cage going after it in that movie about Vegas, but she already knew her drinking was a problem and a friend had invited her to 'come in' and she had, and she hasn't touched but a few shots of Cuervo in these three years. But to Burt's mind the worst thing is she hasn't had sex since, and she hadn't had sex before, so that the girl's only experience between the proverbial sheets has been being raped by daddy dearest, which, that has just got to be scarring.

Apparently, everyone else has heard the story before, because Burt is the only one at the table whose hand moves to his mouth, like he's going to catch his own vomit when Mary lets slip that the rapist was her daddy. Well, she uses the phrase 'biological father.' Same difference. Maybe it is that kind of scientific detachment that allows her to seem more comfortable in the telling than Burt would have believed possible. It isn't as though there's no compassion, however, because Thomas reaches around James, his honor, to pat Mary on the back, and several of the assembly offer reassuring looks and mumbled slogans, and anyway how could Burt possibly doubt so unlikely a story? Which means that he's now hooked into this meeting, more than he'd like to be at least, even if he is still fighting. All that they need is the hook in you, he's telling himself, and they've got a good chance, remembering a fish he once caught despite that his hook had snared only a thin millimeter of lip and the salmon was perhaps sixty pounds. An event from his own life to make what is actually only metaphor all the more important. How can they hook him when he realizes the unlikelihood—more like impossibility—that these people would simply happen to be assembled here in this AA meeting, and the next in the circle, Offi-

cer Pauline, whispers kindly to Mary and begins in a predictably barrel-chested way his own introduction.

“I’m Timothy,” well actually, that wasn’t so predictable, since the cop seems more the kind of man who would go by Tim, or even initials, T.J. perhaps, “and I’m an alcoholic. I’ve been working hard for months to stay sober, and it is tough going for a cop, let me tell you. Too many movies that seem to say a cop’s problems can be solved taking straight shots after hours.” He says it with a smile, and it is a joke, but at the same time it is truthful enough that while everyone smiles no one is rude enough to laugh. “But it isn’t like I’m that Lethal Weapon guy, no one is after my badge, and I’m not married so I don’t have a wife to leave me—reality hasn’t been that cruel, but I was getting sick of dreams where I was swimming up from the bottom of a bottle of scotch, and then one night I made it out of the bottle’s neck and everything was bright. That very day my brother Paul talked to me about my drinking, said he’d been trying for years to work up the courage to confront me with it, said something about my body being a temple, so with the dream and my brother I figured it was time to change my life. And so I’m here.”

At this rate, introductions alone could take a good hour, and there must be more to these meetings than that. How come there are no empty chairs if others could potentially wander in late? And no one has lit a second cigarette yet, either. In fact, Burt hasn’t noticed anyone actually smoking, though he wouldn’t necessarily pay attention to that kind of detail, and the stink is pretty strong. The word pungent is often applied to cigarette smell.

Meanwhile the judge from yesterday afternoon, the one who accepted Burt’s Declaration of Indigence (well, indigence), is talking about hitting his young son so

hard that he broke a rib, and he hasn't had a drop since that drunken rage, believe you me. The kid had to lie at the hospital, he did it to protect his pops, and this is another story Burt's heard before in a general sort of way. Is that just callousness, an inability to respect that certain things happen to several people, an unwillingness to accept common experiences as anything more than common fictions? It seems like an inhuman pretension, especially since the judge—his name began with a J, Jason, or Jake, or maybe even another James—is crying, looking down at the table.

Since he's never been to another AA meeting, Burt isn't sure whether this all-out introduction is as unusual as it seems, with everyone's condensed story offered alongside the standard "Hello, my name is _____ and I'm an alcoholic." That is another thing, no group "Hi, _____" in response. And he has to pay more attention to the cigarettes—is any one of these people actually smoking? Well, as he's wondering two-thirds of the room puff in unison, which settles that question in a very unsettling way. But is it possible that he is putting aside the larger improbability (namely the meeting itself), even if it is to examine the suspicious details?

If Burt's life is a fiction, someone has broken the cardinal rules. Burt distinctly remembers being taught that a probable impossibility was much better suited to fiction than a possible improbability, under which category this meeting would seem to fall. But then again what else is the paranoid novel but a sequence of possible improbabilities? And on top of that, the distinction between the two is not always obvious. At what point does improbability become impossibility? For example, in physics, it is theoretically possible to walk through a wall, but for the subatomic particles to actually align perfectly—well, the likelihood is low enough to be impossible. As in, the chances of it oc-

curing in a person's lifetime are somewhere in the order of $1(10^{\infty})$, or zero. Same with a person walking on water, unless you want to be a smart ass and talk about ice. So in real terms, does that describe an impossibility or an improbability? What is a miracle? Something between?

Well, right now one miracle would be paying more than cursory attention to these alcoholic autobiographies. Yeah, okay Alice B. Burt has been listening to each speaker enough to hear the words at least, even if he's sort of skimmed over ninety-eight percent of each story's body.

After Judge J. the second went Flatfoot Larry, who has been sober for six years, and for whom rock bottom was exactly that cop story Timothy debunked as fiction fewer than fifteen minutes ago. Wife left with the young daughter, himself demoted to foot patrol and then his badge suspended because he was supposed to be on duty but was drinking instead and there was a meaningful look to Thomas at this point in the story, how many meaningful looks has Burt failed to pick up on, undoubtedly all directed towards this bartender. Having his badge pulled was the best thing that ever happened to him, because he 'came in' then to AA, and he's been sober since, which has been enough to reunite him with his family, and even if he is still on foot patrol he thanks his higher power every day because he has back all of the most important things, his family and his job, and the ability or maybe just the common sense to appreciate them like he never could before.

That look at Thomas is really bothering Burt. The bartender, where all of this began on Saturday night. Slipped something into his beer, that must have been it. Or

maybe the kegs were spiked so that everyone in the establishment—was it an episode of the X Files, where the protagonist’s paranoia was once explained by his having been exposed to some paranoia-inducing chemical which unknown powers were planning to loose on the world, or at least Baltimore, through asthmatics’ inhalers? Yeah, it must have been. Fox. And was this then some similar plot, only instead of inhalers, kegs. . . . What a confusing track to follow. The assumption that there was a plot to plant the paranoia suggests that the paranoia would be justified, if perhaps misguided. Anyway, in Burt’s case the paranoia has needed no inducement beyond the recent coursing of circumstances. He isn’t paranoid because of some drug, but the drug is part of his paranoia. But he has always had more than his share of paranoidias. Hadn’t he written about Demons and Panopticons even back when he’d been at the University, a good six years ago?

And who has been introduced? Oh, well, there was fellow flatfoot, officer Moe. Who has been sober two years since a suicide attempt, of course, which was unsuccessful because his car had run out of gas before it had produced enough carbon monoxide to make the atmosphere of the two-car garage lethal. He passed out, but then woke up again and he felt “totally like a fucking pussy” because his police issue had been right there but shooting himself had proved more than he was capable of, and now that he’s sober, he thanks God for such inadequacies. And then Josh, who eight years ago lost his apartment and actually lived on the street for awhile, begging change which went towards more of the same—booze and pulltabs. If the story is true. And then he had been given another chance by—Ah! another meaningful look, my dear Hastings, and again directed towards Thomas—an AA member who bought him a haircut and some respectable clothes, brought him in, and set him up with an interview for the job he still holds today—here an

anomalous meaningful look, directed at Burt—and although he has fallen off the wagon a time or two in these first seven years of sobriety, he has also been beating it slow-like, one day at a time.

The story doesn't conflict with any facts Burt knows, not knowing Josh all that well, but seems pretty damn unlikely.

The guy Burt keeps wanting to call Kent Brockman is unfortunately named Kent, and since this is Alcoholics Anonymous, emphasis on anonymous, Burt has to wrack his brain for the right last name, and just can't seem to stumble on it. The story is predictably predictable. Something from an episode of some soap opera, a drunk driver killed his kids, but the worst thing is that it could have been Kent himself who had done it, with just a little more bad luck, since he had been driving drunk at the very spot only ten minutes before the son of a bitch who had run the stop sign.

Somehow, perhaps because his attention has been in and out, Burt didn't even notice the circle skip over him, but sitting between Larry and the second judge, he should have been called on awhile ago. Guess the newbie gets to go last. If he's going to give a story, he's got just a little time left to prepare it. Three more members in line: the soldier, the Deputy, and then Cyprus. It is possible that Burt is merely mistaking the next guy for the guardsman, he hadn't exactly looked intently past the glock, but then who else would it be in this company, this

officer Bailey, an alcoholic sober for six years. And a story more like we might expect at a real AA meeting, a genuine self-realization not precipitated by some magical moment of drama or tragedy the likes of which few of us have ever faced, or at least I've never had to, knock on wood. A sobering morning too many, and a dedicated decision to

quit. Ditto Johnny, the deputy, also sober for six. And finally Cyprus, for whom both work and drink are all too affecting, so that he's addicted to both, a classic workaholic heading to the bars when he's finally finished in the office. But not for the last six years. Their tragedies have been stayed by self-resolve and timely recognition of their own problems. They saw that even the potential for loss was simply too severe. Or perhaps their stories are to repair some of the damage done by the others to the laws of probability, satisfying slightly Burt's insatiable disbelief. Tragedy may well occur more probably among those addicted to alcohol, but a frequency of one hundred percent would have been ridiculous indeed.

And now the dozen are done with introductions, and all of their talking has just been prelude to this further liminal moment, but Burt must find resolution, either to play the game and tell his introduction like a story, inventing tragedy from circumstance, or else to call this bluff and force finally some confrontation. Even Burt can tell that this is a rare moment of choice, and perhaps as well the first time in his life that his right to monologue will be uncontested. He is on the air, and these twelve at least his audience. Like Galt he could ramble for pages—wait, no, hours—if coherence over such a span would be possible. But how to make such a decision, and what to say? He knows: they are assembled. He suspects: the barman and his own old Demons. And beyond that is sheer bewilderment, and a sudden adrenaline which pushes him past stage fright and he says:

“I don't know what all of you are doing here or why you want me, or even what story about alcoholism you expect. You,” meaning Thomas, “gave me the drinks on Saturday night that brought me here, and now I'm stuck in some Shakespearean moment,

talking to people I've met in passing at best, some sort of audience because, or like the guy in that movie about Soylent Green, maybe, to people I hardly know, but something is going on and I have to accuse you here in front of no one, with no venue for your indictment, so what I want to know is, why?"

Who is in charge of the casting that a hero can be so inept? Is that really the best you are capable of, Burt? There are so many details to strive for—why sink so soon to everyone's favorite unanswerable question when so much science still remains? Do you expect God from the machine, that your desperate question will be answered, after ignoring innumerable thousands of generations? There is an answer of sorts only because the silence begs it. If it were possible to write that moment *ad infinitum*, I would do it and have done with the whole thing. But not until Burt has entertained the possibility of spending eternity here, conscious of a silent audience.

Eventually, it is Thomas. "Well, Burt, you are here because you want to be here. You came because you wanted to come. Although you were invited."

The hero is thinking it over now and the problem seems to be a matter of approach. Desperation and frustration make it tough to sound tough, which I'm assuming was his earlier intent. He's got to make better choices, approach this mystery like Matlock might, or Poirot, asking small questions and piecing together the answers like one of those new puzzles that you put together in 3D, each piece a thin slab of cardboard so that they all stack together in a certain order around an axis to result in a famous bust. Jumping to why? is just too ambitious. And that ambition, really, is the why of his frustration, needing to know answers. It wouldn't make for much of a story, so I can't wholly endorse this view, but as the Bard once told Marge, trying is the first step to failure.

In Thomas's answer, Burt picks up a tone of voice confirming that the attorney's invitation has never been the one at issue, as though Thomas knows something show-stopping, inviting Burt to the center of the conspiracy, or at least admitting its existence. Unless Burt is hearing wrong. Anyway, such an admission would be redundant, remembering where we are and whom we're surrounded by. The AA group is not very anonymous, including Burt, hard as they might try to keep up proper appearances. In short, Thomas says what he says spiritually, "you were invited" sounding more like "you were called," the way we might imagine Jesus calling James and John from their father's boat.

The intrepid investigator, having by now thought better of his previous approach, has a moment of Columbo ingenuity. "You mean, by Cyprus?"

"Well, yeah." Thomas is clearly disappointed with Burt's literalism. "But that's only part of what I said. The important thing is that you want to be here. Or else you would not have come."

"You mean that I realized I needed this."

"Why are you interrogating me, Burt?"

In a movie, these questions back and forth would probably resolve in an incredible revelation—perhaps Thomas and Burt as long-lost brothers, separated at birth and Thomas has only now found Burt and perhaps had various members of his circle work over the past few days to facilitate a reunion, never mind that the bar that night could have accomplished the same end with superior simplicity. And why not? Improbable or not, it would make some sense of things, this explanation, and be everything Burt wants—*Deus ex machina* and all of that, and in that way ground these events in a familiar motif of unrecognized relation, like how Oedipus is fucking Jocasta, or how Luke and Leah turn out

siblings after they've tied tongues only once, a taboo fantasy we're allowed to realize only on Tatooine, or at least in its orbit. And why not? Some answers from the stars, since the ones he's unearthed terrestrially have been less than satisfying.

"Say you are right. Say I need this."

"You said that."

"Okay, yeah. But say I need this. What, exactly, is this?"

"Well, for me, at least, it is an answer. And people. And a theology. I guess that goes with the answer."

"But you are just talking about twelve steps and a bunch of slogans. What if I'm not an alcoholic?"

"If you didn't feel that you needed to be here, you wouldn't have come." Thomas says it smugly without sounding smug, with a peaceful certainty commonly associated with Gandhi or Gautama. But Burt has a retort, has he not?

"Maybe I am here because my lawyer said it might motivate my magistrate to mercy." Wonderfully alliterated dialogue, a surreal moment which makes Burt stop despite his defensive tone and laugh a little, in disbelief.

"Well, isn't that the same thing? You felt that you needed mercy, and you found it here."

Burt's first response to that is violent, but he manages to keep it penned. What a bunch of bullshit is what he can't bring himself to say. A minute ago, he would have, but his response to Thomas's serenity has been consideration—he doesn't want to disturb the man by his own violence. It is a Hegelian approach at best, and at worst puts Burt in the

position of any number of Socratic dupes. He's conscious of this, and I think will proceed attentively.

"Look what I've found here. You, the bartender at the Olde Towne Tavern, who more than likely spiked my drink on Saturday night. By Sunday night, the bar was deserted. Tim, Timothy, whatever, Officer Pauline, who arrested me, and I might add is responsible for the lovely purple shading of my forehead. And Mary, she read me my rights and booked me, and Deputy, Johnny, is it? took my mug shots and fingerprints. Josh I've seen twice since being arrested, and now tonight, and these officers chased me down on a bus after I got out of jail that morning. The point is, there was one seat in this room, open for me. Like I was expected to show up and listen to a bunch of hoaky stories. I have a million questions that add up to a big why? and you talk shit about. . . what? Destiny? I don't know. And now I monologue like some fucking puppet, and even compared to your ridiculous stories I am still just another terrible actor reading verbatim from a script. A disjointed script, and these words have just been written on my tongue."

He notices that the faces of his audience begin to reflect displeasure, and realizes that this is the first time he's speculated aloud about his own (possibly genuine) artificiality. Genuine meaning that he is truly artificial, rather than merely superficial, which would otherwise be a common gloss of the term.

It is uncanny that Thomas's response vocalizes the one slight doubt which Burt has allowed himself during the course of this meeting, as though the man has been reading Burt's mind all along. "Perhaps you are mistaking a miracle for a conspiracy."

It would seem at least some sort of hope to hold on to, what victims of tragedy depend on in the midst of whatever violence of man or God. Adapting somewhat the definition of miracle previously proposed, perhaps it is nothing more than a divine conspiracy. And maybe, in order to survive, Burt must come to believe in such miracles, all rationality to the contrary. At least it is a Western faith, one with foundations etched literally in stone, and one with which Burt is not wholly inexperienced. It isn't easy, though, to relinquish tools of reason. You relinquish at the same time the potential of domination, the power of certainty, and any authority of self. Even if that faith establishes some primary cause, that origin will always be too mysterious, you see, and in addition the mystery itself must be sacred, so that any examination demands light footfalls, and consequently reveals nothing. And where faith is subjective, its object exists outside of it, conceptually at least, and to trust God or even to trust in the existence of God is too radical a step to take in two minutes, despite the benefits such a step may bestow. Which, to recap, consist mostly of the fact that the theoretical God's subjectivity is absolutely true, and that therefore the unraveling of Burt's static existence has gone according to some plan.

This resurfacing question of miracles can of course not help but reflect Burt's Olde suspicions about that Demon, and Thomas's pious comment in that sense at least raises the question again of a real Demon ascended from hell. Presumably God and any Demon, granted existence, will see corresponding realities, and in fact from a mortal perspective, the problem of distinguishing the two entities might well be impossible without resorting to presumably fallible judgments of value—specifically, does this entity work towards a good or an evil end? We can only hope that the serpent in the garden was not

lying and that the tasted fruits of that tree allow us to be like gods, knowing good and evil. It seems like a long shot, that hope, but otherwise we may be damned.

Granted all of the above, would the wise bartender then explain how Burt is to draw the faithful conclusion which has been forwarded? Perhaps if Burt could formulate the question Thomas would give it a shot, but that is, understandably, a problem. So all Burt says after this lengthy pause for consideration is, “I don’t believe in miracles.” Which is true anyway.

If Thomas had no reply, perhaps the meeting would move forward into some sort of body—what do they do during these meetings, anyway, Burt would like to know—but of course there is another question. And Burt isn’t ready for this one either, as though the bartender were purposefully goading him into a position he’s not truly prepared to take. “Well, what happens when you can’t find another answer?”

Burt sees through the ploy and refuses to play along. “I’m still looking for answers. I mean, I just started.”

Who would have expected Bailey’s to be the voice that replies? “Is that why you came to the Tunnel?”

Until now, the other eleven had been the audience. The question shatters that pretense, however, and at the same time acknowledges the validity of Burt’s recognition of these figures, a candid confirmation of what he felt in that instant when he pushed the conference room door from ajar to open, and had to take in these dozen faces of marginal familiarity. Because Bailey’s voice is baritone and smooth, displaying none of the sharp edge of Sunday night’s encounter, the question is settling. Is Burt aware enough to suspect that he too has been conditioned to forgive those who confess? Aware or not, there

is compassion manifesting itself in his thankful silence, and his eventual “Yes” is non-threatening, seeming to forget that he found no answers, and was in fact prevented from even seeking those answers by the guardsman he is now addressing. Because of this, he forces himself to add (after what he realizes retrospectively was a long and strange hesitation), “But I wasn’t allowed in. You, actually, refused me access.” Still, he couldn’t inflect the addendum with the accusatory tone he would have liked to. Even when he adds further, “But it wasn’t just you. Everyone here’s to blame.” There is no lack of conviction, it’s just a tired, hopeless conviction. Unimpassioned, we might say.

Now that the floor has been opened to everyone, it is naturally Officer Pauline—er, Timothy—who asks, intensely inflected, a question already sure of the truth, whether this ‘everyone’ includes or excludes Burt himself, who after all did get himself into this mess, as Timothy can well attest—driving drunk, Burt is fortunate to even be still breathing.

So they seem to know, each of them, that this Burt before them is not in that position for the first time. They don’t bother even to deny it, and although the admission of this truth validates a certain paranoia on the part of the protagonist, it also diffuses it somewhat, since there doesn’t seem to be any real denial of any truths. Besides, Officer Pauline raises a relevant question.

Is it possible to have gone so long without even wondering about his own role in this. . . well, in lieu of the word conspiracy, let’s just say ‘unlikely accumulation of circumstances,’ without having entertained the possibility of his own guilt? He takes the thinker’s pose, thumb and forefinger tracing the distinct line of his mandible, and then is afraid he’s about to enter bullshit mode, engage a debate where he will disguise his own

uncertainties behind a clever defense, preparing to adopt a position where he has none, etc. etc. The pose is a physical manifestation of an old trait, one he once lost as an English major, but for years prior he would feign consideration of an opposing argument while stroking his ungrown chin hairs, a mannerism which he found could suggest not only ‘that is interesting,’ but more importantly, ‘however, your argument has the following flaws:’ which, of course, is true of most any argument he’d ever faced. That is one of the most important things he ever learned, that all arguments, including his own, are generally flawed, and proceed at some level from more or less arbitrary assumptions. On reflection, he drops the pose.

“The thing is, though, I only had three beers that night. You” again meaning Thomas “served them to me—and three is not enough to get me drunk like that.”

“But,” and this is Josh now, “you were driving a city bus, and drinking even one beer is enough to get you fired.” The observation, although keen, seems to Burt to have nothing to do with the subject at hand.

Plot explication through dialogue, revelation upon revelation until the one word has been incarnated and the fictional universe makes sense—in other words, until the word has been spoken as an answer—these endless exchanges are possible in fiction, though undesirable. Tonight the important thing is to encourage Burt to look to his own salvation, here in the Millennial Church of Christ. Is it not, after all, the dawn of a new millennium? For strength of sheer belief, which is Baudrillard’s hyperreal forge, the chances of a second coming have not recently been greater, and in failing to examine his own life adequately, does our hero not risk being sifted out with the chaff, sorted to the savior’s left, sentenced to scalding in the subterranean sulfur pit for ceaseless centuries?

Do I alliterate too heavily, perhaps, this silly superstition? S is the sound of the serpent's fork-tongued hiss. As though centuries and millennia were more than man-made, and the universe itself cared, or could even remember, how many times our sun's third planet had spun its circle since the birth of Christ.

And yet Burt is gathered here with the twelve, or is perhaps one of the twelve gathered here with the redeeming one. He has, after all, wondered about such things, and recently even. And it is a new way to look at his novel, as a gospel. The gospel according to Delbert Michael Maverick. Is that his role in this conspiracy, why he was called?

Most likely, Timothy simply meant that for his own actions, Burt must take responsibility. These other thoughts are eager delusions, fantasies of a Christian culture, every individual wanting to be the one who will save us all, Messiah, Redeemer, King, Lord, God. With Burt am I writing God again on earth, textured, textualized, given context in a world that sees itself as facing its two thousandth consecutive year of reading the same story, and, confused by its own rhetoric, eagerly awaits the sequel? In the meantime, we have all deconstructed language, trying to understand, and it took that to realize that the prophecies were, in fact, meaningless—mere words, their magic self-constructed and self referent. Nonetheless, those prophecies speak to us still, Celestine or otherwise, which makes me suspect that there is perhaps some Power of Babel after all.

But the story is really about a one-time busdriver, and I seem to have left him for some time at this meeting, participant in some dimly enlightening conversation, which I must admit is my own fault, because the situation called for no surprise—was, in fact, a confirmation of admittedly vague suspicions Burt derived from TP and from his own helter-skelter reality. They've been talking for awhile, actually, seducing Burt with their

counterintuitive but intellectually attractive possibilities of his role, a personal role, in the chaos of these days.

And so here we are wondering about the nature of the universe, how electrons can communicate information instantaneously across spacetime, whenever there is a scientist seeking their knowledge. Is it possible, as contemporary physics asserts, that the seeker himself affects, perhaps even determines, the results which he finds? Whatever your doubts, this is indeed the scenario facing Burt—one of them at least—this entire conspiracy merely a consequence of his own belief in it, his own search for reason and structure, and once again we are at Baudrillard's forge, needing to remember that for Burt the sacred texts are mostly about individuals victimized by complicated and even arbitrary constructions—Pynchon of course, but we would be wrong to overlook Freud, Chris Carter, and Francis Ford Coppola, for example. Said intellectual attraction exists, in other words, because of the interesting notion that Burt's general belief in conspiracy created conspiracy in the present instance. Well, this is what Thomas and Burt have been talking about, hashing it over to the point that no one else even seems to be listening anymore. But Burt finds the idea interesting on a theoretical level, although impossible to entertain with any sort of seriousness. It is another mental exercise, like he tells himself about the witticisms he sometimes will direct toward the teevee, in this case employing the structure and rhetoric of logic to talk about something which Burt ultimately disbelieves. With the room reverted to silence, the two of them have had plenty of opportunity to articulate their diverse points, while mistaking the bored quiet for attention, or perhaps for feelings on the part of the eleven that they themselves are intellectually inadequate to play a role beyond listening to the important audience arranged for Burt with this enigmatic barkeep.

But to any outside observer, the way photons reflect off of the audience would seem clearly to refute the idea that they have any interest vested in this masturbatory philosophizing. The paradoxical possibility being that the outside observer creates the disinterest through his own. Which would certainly be understandable, if given the details of the discussion. These generalities should make that obvious.

The term Burt coined in his college years to describe this exercise is “waxing the intellectual wiener” and the phrase is admirable accurate even today. It is a dangerous exercise, Burt knows, because if he thinks about it he remembers that suspending various disbeliefs for the purpose, he has often been subsequently unable to resurrect them, and consequently he now either believes in, or is unable to disbelieve in, the original proposition. Such as the existence of God, for example.

The point is, he has been very invested in this conversation, taking it seriously, even if to this point he has lacked any interest in actually unearthing his own culpability, which has made for a very interesting evening indeed. Well, interesting for Burt, in an intellectual sense at least.

Tonight’s so-called AA meeting never advances beyond this conversation. Which is fine by Burt, since he has talked for about half of the two hour time block eaten away by the proceedings. His voice feels dry by the time it is over, from talking too loudly and with too much forced eagerness, and even though he doesn’t consider the debate resolved, he is quite happy when Thomas insists that really, they can’t stay here any longer, their meetings being scheduled for only one weekly hour in this room. When Thomas continues the thought by inviting that Burt join him for a bite to eat, however, Burt hopes that his facial expression is simultaneously skeptical and reproachful, in order that it might

remind Thomas of the last time Burt partook of any sort of sustenance provided by the bartender. We didn't see it happen, but Burt is certain: that's when the shit hit the fan. It just took awhile for that shit to rain back down and scatter across his life is all.

Burt has to refuse a ride home from every member there, save the one whose ride he'd be happy to accept, which of course would be Mary, who conspicuously fails to thank him for coming.

The night air is—night air, same as the day air only colder, and for that reason, Burt supposes, more invigorating. That is the adjective generally employed in description of any air cold enough to remind you, oh yeah, I'm alive, and I had better get inside soon if I hope to stay that way. He's got twenty-seven minutes to wait for the bus, and Thomas had to lock the church doors on his way out, since obviously no respectful Christian would be out to worship during the dark of night.

As Burt's circulatory system runs its standard prioritizing program, cutting back on the supply of warm blood to unimportant appendages (fingers and toes to name only twenty), he continues to entertain various of the possibilities hinted at during the meeting. At first, it is precisely a continuation, merely more of the same, reflecting on what exactly was said to him, what he said, what he meant, etc. etc. until suddenly he is thinking in a new direction about his precious Pynchon, and characters like Mucho Maas and Tativy Muffer-Maffick, whose ostensibly individual identities are exposed as something more complicated (and less attractive), and in these cases especially, the characters do—don't they?—play a real role in destroying them'selves,' working into some larger system of their own often accidental volition. Well, perhaps. And but they are both, these characters, relatively minor, and ultimately prevented from interacting with the heroes, who

seem to be generally seeking that opposite thing, a way to escape those sinister, super-egoistic systems. Burt Maverick, having such a heroically individual name, has to be the hero, though, doesn't he? That has certainly been the assumption all along. Is this, the Gospel According to D.M.M. actually about one of the other characters? Thomas, perhaps, or Burt's mother? The beautiful Mary? How does one know whether one's life is in fact measured by one's proximity to greatness, rather than by greatness itself? The way Boswell wrote *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* and all of the gospels actually center on Christ.

Panicking slightly, Burt tries to retrace his thought progression, looking for that all-important consistency of logic. For his own record, then, the premise is that Burt has somehow played a role in the conspiracy in which he has become entangled, and has perhaps even created it himself. From this he infers that he is involved in somehow destroying or damaging his individual identity. The evidence for this is fairly straightforward—the conspiracy has cost him already his livelihood and the ability to be taken seriously by any stranger on the street who has seen either the morning news or the most recent episode of Cops. The conspiracy also threatens his freedom, although Cyprus has assured him that this threat is in reality not very menacing, a case of a dog whose bark is louder than his bite, as it were. Now according to his sacred literature, that individual identity is priceless. The role of heroes? To protect that identity (even if that protection requires some sort of tragically ironic self-sacrifice, which is however a digression). If he is doing otherwise, how could he possibly be a hero?

Before he bursts out any answers to that last question, it is worth mentioning that the premise, when clearly articulated in his mind, relieved him immensely, since he re-

membered that in defense of said premise he has accumulated no physical evidence whatsoever, and even the evidence of the circumstantial variety is anorexic, shall we say, at best. But Burt's question was, granted this unsubstantiated premise, how could he possibly be a hero?

The first answer would have to be that the sacred texts are wrong. It is a notion that is really hard to fathom. Hell, forget the word 'fathom,' with its implication of well-charted depth and an ability to see beneath the surface. Accurately seeing implications buried at a depth of even one foot behind this possibility seems impossible, since there is really no way of knowing how to adjust for the textual refraction of truth. Unlike staring into a stream, we simply do not know the equation necessary to compensate for the change of medium, the changing of the text. If the texts are wrong, everything is wrong, the very assumptions on which all else is predicated, those fundamental words from which all else arises. And Burt allows the possibility, but sees no way of acting on it, and lets it go.

The other answer he can come up with, out in the cold, is that perhaps he could be part of a rewritten story. This is thinking specifically about Tom Stoppard, and the way he rewrote *Hamlet* from the perspective of two minor characters. Of course, to call Rosencrantz and Guildenstern heroes would be something of a stretch for Burt, and the fact that they are virtually indistinguishable as characters is at least partially to blame for that, so perhaps the terms of the question need to be revised a little bit. 'Protagonist' seems an appropriate word with which to replace hero.

Once it is done, however, the change hardly satisfies Burt. "How could I be the protagonist?" seems too easy, allowing whim to be one potential answer, in lieu of any

more meaningful. Searching for answers which better please him, he unexpectedly comes full circle. It happens almost right away, actually, as the first answer to the new question (excepting the unsatisfactory whim): that he can be the protagonist if he takes, or has taken, the central action of the story.

But in his version of the events, at least, he has taken no action whatsoever. He has been passive as heroes go, hasn't he, his life in the last few days just happening to him, nothing has been really sought out, not with any sort of tenacity, no action has been taken, and really he seems to have allowed himself few opportunities. Thinking back on it, Burt sees that very little of the excitement would be phrased using active verbs and with his name as the subject of the sentences. This realization is his new reading, with which he is far from well pleased. And the worst part is, he cannot escape the Tunnel, that desperate scene with the gun, early on, when everything could have been different. Or even if he could not have gone into the Tunnel amid the blazing gunfire, at least he could have acted on that distinct anger—do you remember the adjective?—bought some fertilizer and a few gallons of gasoline, rented with Ryder, and kaboom, no more government check point regulating the underground. That would have been action, strength of conviction, derring-do. Whatever the ultimate consequence, it would at least symbolize, and tangibly, a struggle of individuality against societal control, thus satisfying those sacred texts. As long as he had not killed anyone. Even the two-man National Guard squad, if it were to suffer casualties, would cause the 'heroic individualism' aspect of the action to darken in the shadow of the human tragedy, the social tragedy of two men dead. Arguably, that shading would be media-constructed—the idea that these National Guardsmen had dedicated their lives to protecting your freedom and mine simply a lie of

propaganda, since they are, after all, pigs, in the business of continuing that social oppression of the hallowed individual.

If Burt could truly believe in this kind of power of media, could truly believe that his reality and reactions were being constructed through social conditioning, he would have long ago become one of the revolutionaries. These are, after all, truths which he has been taught. Truths which he has been taught especially in college, intellectual theories on identity and media. And he believes them enough to consider himself a prophet of some vague future revolution, where the individuals unite to throw off the yoke of society, if that is somehow possible, or at least to create a society which allows for greater individual freedoms. A brave, and truly new world, still an undetermined number of years distant, but coming eventually to a neighborhood near you. Ultimately, though, he does not have the kind of faith that is required to pick up an assault rifle or build a bomb out of a minivan. Probably because the stories on the other side seem equally compelling. Burt imagines for the unknown guardsman a beautiful young wife, a two year old daughter, and perhaps a son rising in the gentle arch of the widow's belly.

This is the line of Burt's thought, engrossing enough that the slow busride back to his block has seemed only a couple of minutes, and from the bus stop his walk home, including the ascension up two flights of stairs, feels like autopilot, and he is inside his apartment, where it is at least warm.

In his closet, Burt keeps a giant green duffel bag, something he bought during his college days to pack his clothes to and from Eugene, Oregon. Now, the night before laundry day, he uses it to accumulate the strewn piles, sorting whites, colors, reds, and blue jeans into imprecise areas of the bag. While he's working, he flips the teevee on,

still alive after all, and turns it to PBS. Burt loves nature shows. But tonight, there is something Zen. He is completely absorbed in the meticulous separation of the chaotic heaps, feeling the soft thick cotton of each sock as he pulls it rightside out, oblivious to the mindless swarms of ants, bound by scent and nature to the bidding of their queen, worker castes building bridges out of their own masses that the warriors might march on, selfless, heroic ants, perfect soldiers and citizens. The narrator is audibly awed. But Burt is otherwise occupied.

ACT 3.

After his morning shower, Burt pulls on his last clean pair of boxers, last white tee shirt, once-worn, socks, and the only pair of jeans he didn't zip last night into the duffel bag. From his closet, he retrieves his traditional laundry day sweatshirt, a soft, blue Champion, on which his grandmother embroidered a sleek yacht, in fine cross stitch. Its arms are a little short, but not enough to detract from the shirts superior comfort. Laundry day. The duffel bag, full, must weigh seventy pounds, an intimidating mass. It is heavy on his mind as he fries his egg and bacon breakfast. At least those clothes are all together, though, one big labour now that the gathering and separating have been mostly finished. Still, seventy pounds. A lot to pick up and carry down those flights of stairs. Much less all the way to the laundromat, a full four blocks, dragging from a shoulder strap over his unheroic build. There is just no way he is walking.

After staring for awhile at the bag, Burt finally musters the will to exert himself, bends properly at the knees, guides the strap over his shoulder, and stands up. As well as being weighty, the bag has bulk, and he sort of stumbles through the door, then down the stairs, the bag grazing against the protective iron railing the entire way. After the final step, Burt sinks to his knees, easing the weight off his shoulder. If he had a backpack, he thinks sorely, some way to distribute the mass more evenly, it would be an easy enough burden. Slung over his shoulder, though, the strap rubs, while the bag itself drags against his thigh, forcing him to hitch up his pants every few feet, and he is happy to relinquish the burden to the back seat of his Tarsus. He feels relieved, both physically and symbolically, as though he really just might be able to fly, to walk on water, to ascend, now that he no longer carries the pounds of the clothing he has worn for so many years. If there

were anywhere to go he would love just to walk away. But there is nowhere to go, and Burt has laundry that needs cleaning.

With only half a block between Burt and the laundromat, his rearview mirror lights up in those familiar alternations of red and blue. He realizes right away that he's cruising at forty in a thirty-five zone. Speeding. But he hardly needs to think about it, after last night, and his right foot jams down the accelerator. There is at least going to be a car chase.

The Tarsus is hardly a high performance machine, but the speedometer leaps past the orange sixty as he slaloms through the two lanes of one-way traffic, hoping desperately that none of these other drivers decides to be a hero. The cop car, naturally, stays right behind him. A destination might be a good idea, and he determines resolvedly, the Tunnel, its west-side terminus. He'll need to go left—right here, and he hammers the brakes, jerks the wheel, feels the rear end slide out too far amid the various squeals of tires and brake pads, thinks, I'm going to flip over, but manages to keep four wheels on the pavement, and then the car rights itself smoothly—all of this in maybe three seconds, and the cop, unbelievably, didn't even try to make the turn, apparently having something pressing more anxiously on his attention. Burt is relieved and disappointed and also excited, enjoying the dizzy effects of all that adrenaline. But why hadn't the cop chased him?

Behind the Mr. Cleanjeans, the steam vents face an eight car parking lot. Burt pulls in slowly, angles the Tarsus into a space, and contemplates the great green dumpster. The green matches exactly the color of the heavy duffel burdening his back seat, and it is a very real temptation to throw out the whole thing and start over on his wardrobe. First of all, because he hates doing laundry. But second, because by this point Burt feels rather unhappy that the police officer had some other focus. During the few seconds of the chase, he would have put money behind his hunch that, if the cop caught him, Timothy Pauline would turn out to be the officer behind the wheel. What this has to do with throwing his duffel in the trash is uncertain. Nothing really. Except that the bag is just about bursting, so full, in fact, that he had some trouble closing the zipper, and now it threatens to explode again into that same chaos, big bang and all that matter into a universe of strewn clothing, random disbursements or even if everything does follow some natural order-slash-conspiratorial hierarchy, is there any meaning even in that? Scattered clothes are just scattered clothes, and all the religion or philosophy or science in the world won't make any more sense of them than that. Ultimately. That acceptance, too, sounds vaguely Buddhist.

These are the same clothes from his floor, about which it has been noted that he has collected them since high school, although most of them date back to the University. Financially speaking, of course, there is no way he could afford to cast the lot of them into the trash. But the financial answer is too easy. This is more an ethical dilemma he's facing, and he is determined to answer the question with some sort of stand. To be or not to be. Isn't that the question? Whether it is more nobler etc. etc. to suffer again and forever the inevitable chaos of these clothes, accept them for what they are, as it were. Or to

take the duffel as a singularity and have done with it, and all of its possibilities, once and for all. It would be a lot to throw away, more than money—has he not found comfort in those strewn piles, the way they camouflage the insidious pattern of the underlying carpet?

He shifts into reverse, and manages—against all odds, miraculously—to follow the exact line of his entrance, so that watching the parking from above, the scene resembles a strip of film played first forward, and then back. Of course, Burt can't know that he traces the route so perfectly that each tread touches where it has touched before, all the way back through the turn he made off the one way. Then, at a familiar point along the trajectory, the tires come to rest and begin to rotate slowly in a forward direction, past the alley of the laundromat, headed for the Tunnel, a tangential divergence from the fortnightly arc: .

By the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Slothrop, der Raketmensch, is more or less invisible, capable of almost spectral manifestations in the gaze of only a few others. Disintegrated, basically, and in a literal sense. That kind of stealth, while perhaps a curse, would at present offer undeniable advantages for Burt, who sits in his car, parked at the southwestern corner of the only station ever built for the city's subsequently aborted subway network. He knows that there will be an armed guard and a checkpoint, not only because of his experiences at the other end, but because the gate to the chainlink fence has been left wide open, a dereliction of individual duty which no Tunnel driver would ever commit, liable as it is to attract the attention of the outside, the authorities. He no longer sees any point to being shot in the dark of the Tunnel, where no eyes will witness,

without even the potential for that one careful watcher, sitting attentively at his window, eyes on the tower, waiting for whatever man or beast to emerge.

Why, then, has Burt come to this place? A vague suspicion? A hunch? A questing spirit? A question? A beginning? Well, yes. All of these things we already know. And because he thought of it while trying to evade a pursuit which turned out to be illusory. For whatever reason, he needs to see what happened to the Tunnel, and what They are doing, underground. For my part, I can't blame him.

The problem of getting underground, however, complicates this curiosity, which is why Burt seems willing to weigh the costs of a Slothrop invisibility. Although he would hate to compromise his integrity. This ain't your basic moral stand, either. The sense of integrity here, in this context, means wholeness, individual completeness. An ironic absence of gaps, lacks, or holes. Anyway, he discovers that he's incapable of dissociating himself after giving it a half-assed shot, seventy seconds of identity deconstruction, reminding himself that he is every woman (well, that's typical of Burt's attitude toward this process, isn't it), identical to anyone else who has ever uttered aloud the phrase "rich, chocolaty, goodness." Wonder where that is from. Finding himself still intact, he turns his mental focus to coming up with more practical ways of getting below ground.

And has trouble keeping the guards off his mind. He's thinking obsessively about that 9 mm, thinking about blazes of glory, and then about the hearse that happens by, which in all honesty could have been a limousine. But Burt makes the association with death anyway, which is incomprehensible at twenty-eight. For that matter, at least from what Burt has gathered from the teevee and from literature, death does not become any easier to comprehend as you age. Unless you are one of those enlightened, philosophical

motherfuckers who is sure that life's own mysteries have been already yielded. Anyway, the whole death train persists in invading and interrupting any creative thoughts which might otherwise be locomoting. He tries hard to keep the wheel running, but the only part of the engine he gets right is the rhythm and the whistle: "What should I what should I what should I what should I do-woo do-woo? What should I what should I what should I what should I do-woo do-woo?" Die?

Finally, unable to stoke those proverbial coals, Burt gives up, re-ignites the six cylinders of his Tarsus and pulls back onto the street. Where immediately we hear the heavy metallic cha-chink of the manhole cover adjusting to the car's weight. A way underground. Throw her into reverse.

The cover is a bitch to remove, especially with sporadic 10 am traffic, because of which Burt experiences not a small amount of self-consciousness and fear. After a few attempts interrupted by closely passing cars, he decides to pull the Tarsus back onto the road, behind the hole. Better flip on the hazards. Just to be safe.

The cover is still heavy, stuck to the street by both gravity and friction, and after struggling fruitlessly for a few minutes, Burt resorts resourcefully to his vehicles lug wrench, and manages to jimmy the seventy pound singularity onto the pavement. Replacing the wrench, he grabs the reflective red caution triangle from his trunk and sets it up behind the now loosely-capped gap in the road, so that he can park his car. There's a flashlight in his glovebox, where he locks his wallet, figuring that the one will be handy and the other useless,

underground. As soon as the heavy iron cover seals out the fresh air and daylight, with that first lungful of sewer, Burt believes he might actually pass out, and has horrible

visions of death by defecation. He slides the plastic switch forward on the flashlight, which is gripped between the thumb and the palm of his left hand. His nine remaining fingers grope for the ladder's steel rungs, as he descends. The splish at his feet soon tells him that he has found the bottom, with its ankle-deep filth. Luckily no more than that.

Burt had no idea what to expect, having never before had reason to wander around the sewer. Well, he had still expected the smell. As far as that would have been possible, at least, considering it reeks beyond any possible context. But he had expected the darkness, too, more or less. It counts as darkness, doesn't it, the faint blue light that brightens movie sewers so audiences might see? He had expected that much, but then we never expect the darkness will be so total.

The sewer runs west to east, parallel to the Tunnel. Burt sets off to the east, hoping to come across a perpendicular go between, with the conscious assumption that there will be passage between the sewer grid (which he imagines must be extensive) and the Tunnel. To fight the smell he holds his shirt bunched to his nose and mouth, and imagines that it does some good, filtering out at least a few of the fecal particles permanently suspended in this gelatinous atmosphere. The flashlight's sphere of influence extends perhaps twenty feet, but with very limited diameter, preventing Burt from taking in much of the scenery. The meager light can't prevent him, though, from doing a little math in his head. The sewer's diameter is about ten feet. Along the top runs an array of various pipe. Two feet from the sewer's edge, the solution of water, shit, piss, and assorted other, runs let's say three inches deep. Well, it is a circle, so the math is complicated. Burt imagines a triangular trough, four feet across, and Burt is going to guess two feet deep at its center. For every foot of sewer, there are then four cubic feet of filth. And Burt is

down here, trudging around in it. About a hundred feet later he comes to an intersection and heads right, south, the direction of his destination.

This first person walk through the sewer, with its narrow circularity, makes Burt very uncomfortable. That old feeling, you know, two-dimensionality, predetermined passages, back and forth, left to right. Plus, of course, there is shit throughout. Once more the convergence of water, shit, and destiny, the second time in his life, although this time the shit belongs to unknown intestines, unfamiliar assholes, the product of an entire city's act of living. He can feel it starting to soak through the waterproofing of his shoes, touching the cotton of that last clean pair of socks, this on top of a damp sweaty feel against his foot. Indomitable, he sloshes onomatopoeiaetically through this concoction until the whole thing presses too weightily around his stomach and he squats then retches, puking up what he believes must have been his breakfast, although he can't see or taste the eggs this time—feels the sludge-like, the slick solution of the sewer, splash against his legs, and touch against his own ass just a little, just enough that he can feel its surprising cold. He squats there, knees in his armpits, his ass above the tideline but still touching it, in the tangential way of Christ walking on water, so that the capillary action spreads the sensation across the seat of his pants, remembers that initial vision, considers now just letting himself fall to drown in our collective feces. He's like that for maybe five minutes, and then realizes that the stench is gone—miraculously, by the unknowable physiological power of the human brain, with its stubborn refusal to heed or translate the signals which the dogged nose will not cease to send. He farts loudly, and the expulsion creates ripples—waves, even—which splash heavily against his aftside, and propel him to rise.

Risen, he resumes his southerly march, following the beam of the flashlight against the complete darkness, searching along each side of the sewer for a promising exit. He has to walk slowly, each footfall carefully firm against slipping on the wet iron and its treacherous liquid, which allows him the opportunity to survey every horizontal inch along to narrow parallel lines of the sewer's alternately flashlit walls.

He walks maybe half a block south is all, in city distance, before he finds, to his right, a door he hopes to have been seeking. It is a sewer door, and so of course is opened by turning a large iron wheel, righty tighty lefty loosey, so to the left, which Burt attempts first with his left arm, then, exchanging the flashlight, with his right. Both of these failing, he grips the flashlight in his teeth, and strains at it with both arms until they are tired and his mouth has accumulated so much vomitous saliva that he gags, almost losing the flashlight along with a little more of his breakfast from the feel of it. But he holds it all in, the flashlight just long enough that he has released the wheel and succeeds in catching it in his left hand as it falls toward the sludge. He catches it with the beam pointed up, illuminating the thick pipes bolted above him, water pipes most likely, and not out of his reach, either. Putting the flashlight in his pocket—beam still facing upward to provide some light, although that is mostly eclipsed by his own mass—Burt gets a foothold on the iron wheel, steps up quickly, and grabs the pipe with both hands. He forces all of his weight down on his left foot, intent on turning the wheel. When the friction gives, it surprises him, and for a second he's afraid he's going to fall, but his hands grab tightly and his arms pull taut, and he manages to regain his balance. Distributing his weight gently between his two feet on the wheel, Burt releases the pipe with his left hand, which he uses to steady the wheel before jumping down with a loud splash into the

deeper sewage. Without the pressure of Burt's entire mass, the wheel is still tight, and it takes both arms and a renewed effort to finally make that last revolution.

Which does not mark the end of these struggles. The door itself is heavy and frictioned to its frame with rust. Burt plants his feet as firmly as he can and leans into the iron, which scrapes and groans before swinging suddenly open, just as Burt's feet slip and he falls momentarily forwards and backwards at once, as the end result of which Burt bangs that same bruised forehead against the thick iron lip of the sewer's doorframe, as his feet, ankles, and shins are covered with still more sewage, this mishap eliciting a loud Fuck. The word echoes below the city, up through pipes and drainages, into as many homes as the local news at least, rippling bath and toilet water into a meaningful pattern of waves and interference, raising eyebrows between husbands and wives all across the city.

The open door hangs out over a six foot drop into still more blackness, in which Burt perceives, for the moment, hallucinatory pixels of streaking white light, something like the Millennium Falcon entering hyperspace, or the Tarsus doing sixty five in a snow storm. These fade after a few seconds, and Burt pulls himself forward, retrieves the flashlight from his pocket, and has a look-see. No ladder. Fortunately, the surface onto which he must drop appears to be dry, if very slightly curved. When he has eased himself down, he can ascertain that he is, indeed, standing in a sort of joint between the sewer and another tunnel, hopefully THE Tunnel. The joint is vaguely L-shaped, a cylinder bent so that its open mouths relate in a right angle sort of way. For the first time in his journey, Burt recognizes an analogy to the plastic piping of a rodent's cage, or a McDonald's playland, and wonders whether he shouldn't maybe be having more fun. Like a giant slide spilling him out into a roomful of soft plastic balls, or at least a wire wheel and a handful of unshelled sunflower seeds.

The door into what Burt expects will be the Tunnel opens the same way the other subterranean door did, with a wheel to turn. This one is under his feet, however, which will make it difficult to get any leverage, should this one prove as difficult to open as the last. Fortunately, the stainless steel of this door is genuinely rustproof, and in much better repair. Burt hardly strains to turn the mechanism, and he lifts the steel door away from the concrete in a quick, back-jerking motion.

The light, flooding instantly upward, swallows the ray of the flashlight. Burt, whose pupils have by now dilated fully, steps back dazedly from the relative glare, presses his eyelids together firmly, as though to squeegee his corneas, opens them squintingly, hoping that those pupils will contract to the appropriate diameter.

You will remember that no lights shone in the Tunnel, save the headlights of its motorists. This comparative brilliance discourages Burt, but he eventually lies flat on the ground, peering down the opening, using his palm to shield his slow-adjusting eyes. It is the Tunnel below him. Forty feet across, and flat at the bottom. The ladder here is contoured to the wall, so that Burt must cling fiercely to each rung for the first 3π feet of his further descent. Ten feet, Burt thinks. Ten feet.

Standing at long last on the floor of his Tunnel, Burt takes in the impressive advances made by whatever men have been at work. Above him, at well-regulated intervals, two rows of long, white florescent lights hum and shimmer in their uncomfortable way. These lights shine down on three parallel and reflective paintlines. Two of these are white as well, and run a shoulder's length from their respective edges of the Tunnel. The space between them splits at lane width, divided by a yellow, reflective yellow, almost golden line, whose task will be Demonic, to sort the flow of vehicles and ensure effective transfer. The three lines run the tunnel's length as far as Burt can see, the whites converging in the forward distance as the Greek Δ . Only the golden line does not appear to veer in its course, waiting patiently for the entire scene to condense to its own singularity, confident of its own irresistible pull, as the walls and bright white bend gradually to the golden will, which itself takes on, in the distance, a whitish or platinum hue.

Walking east, into the Δ , Burt is able to keep its collapse at bay, although he can see it, inevitable, at every step. It doesn't take long in this light, with the warm, distant smell of blacktop tinting his own sewer pungency, for Burt to start sweating under his filthy blue Champion, and itching under his shoes, which are still heavy with thick, slow-to-dry membranes of clinging feces. After maybe a hundred yards of forcing back the future, Burt decides to take off his sweatshirt, which he ties awkwardly around his waist. Not good enough, because a lugubrious sweat under his jeans begins to rehydrate the gradually drying damp patch left by the sewer on his ass, and as the sweat itself dries it leaves a crisp of salt to starch the jeans. Walking, simply walking, Burt feels as though his skin is chafing to open, seeping sores. At a certain point, he decides he has suffered

enough, and, convinced by the relative silence that he is alone in the tunnel, removes the sweatshirt from his waist, kicks off the hot, soggy, shit-smelling shoes, peels away his socks and then his pants. The keys are in his pocket, which he is glad to remember, and rather than carrying them he works the metal point of the key ring through the fabric of the tee shirt, just above the hem, and continues on his merry, jingling way, stripped to boxer shorts and a plain white tee.

The subway tunnel extends only so far, and the frontier is impossible to miss. The smooth gray cement ceases abruptly, a straight end, and there is only a thin linear indentation separating it from the rough blacktop. The walls disintegrate as well, into something indeterminate, so that the Tunnel opens literarily into a womb of earth, newly paved. The lane lines remain at a consistent width, and there is actually more distance between the white and the walls of the Tunnel, but the steel bars of scaffolding which scale (presumably for structural support) the earthen walls mean that the shoulder's practical width has been narrowed. The darker color of the road surface makes everything dimmer, and, viewed from above, accents the shape traced out by the light from the high florescence, which is projected downward in the pattern of an M made slightly less acute. Which, naturally, Burt can't see at all.

Without the sturdy, seemingly inerodable concrete, Burt's position seems somehow tenuous. Although he's been here before, it has always been in the dark, which rendered visible and therefore unimportant the small accumulations of loose dirt lining the left and right along the Tunnel's base. So, on the one hand, Burt is fully aware that the Tunnel will not collapse around him, since it never has before, but he also experiences the pleasant nervousness of a hero who is doing something mildly dangerous. Like, say, run-

ning a red light at midnight, sixty miles an hour with no time to slow down and look either way. Only, it is more than that, more meaningful at least, because Burt is walking through a sort of traffic anomaly, where there are, as yet, no rules to break, and the protective, restrictive hand of civilization has not managed yet to erect its cement grip around this natural, or at least primitive, opening. Even if the Tunnel is experiencing in Burt its final act of uninhibited intercourse. Actually, if you think about it, the pioneers who have been making such progress in the name of civilization must work continually at the edge of the reckless, the unimpeded, with no law or destiny before them but the one printed on their precious blueprints, the one which they have daily made flesh, and which will be, in the near future, repeated, repeated, repeated, fating millions of motorists to the same safe patterns of traffic. Burt doesn't think about it, exactly, but instead about the inevitable congestion, once the reinforcing walls and lane-defining lines have been completed. Although the Tunnel skips nicely under the east-west stoplights, rush hour traffic is bound to back up. Most likely, it will follow the lead of all science, and work itself to equilibrium, with exactly enough drivers deciding to drive underground that the routes will become indistinguishable, in terms of driving time. Where will Burt be driving anyway, come rush hour?

We know he's hopeful that he'll have a publisher or an agent, although he has no idea what those things entail, and a better term for his feeling might actually be wishful. For all his accumulated hours of writing (interspersed, of course, with hours spent thinking about writing), Burt has very little on paper. Not that too much should be expected from such a fledgling author. The first nights of his novel have already produced a character and a situation, which make for a good start. Of course, the end he sees is not the

happiest, nor the most likely to sell a lot of books. Suicide, it's a suicide. Kurt Cobain style, shotgun in the mouth, only with a framed canvas set behind, to really capture the moment. Not to give too much away. Because I do think, really, that you should buy it, if you ever get the chance. Besides, the story is in very preliminary stages, and Burt hopes to be surprised along the way. He, for one, is no great admirer of blueprinted lives, be they fictional or what, finding the idea especially cruel given his own oft-voiced suspicions regarding his own relationship with reality. Anyway, he has a long way to go for that publishing contract, and might want to look into a more stable career. Preferably one which has something to do with his Lit degree, maybe like an editor. Which career could conceivably be where he would rush to, morning and evening, making twice daily an impossible decision between sur- and sub-terranean possibilities, until finally force of habit relieves his mind of that exercise. For any of this, really, he has a long way to go.

He hasn't had his timepiece fixed, so he has no precise way of measuring the seventy minutes of his walk to this point. Where, for the first time, he notices that the distant collapse of paintlines is incomplete, and that, beyond the five sill distinct delineations (two of light and three of reflection), there is darkness. Still at this point a little ways off, but hopeful enough, and inspiring enough, that Burt sounds his barbaric yawp from beneath the floors and sewers of the city, runs forward two steps, slips on wet—WET—paint, catches himself on his hands, scraping his palms on the blacktop beneath the yellow paint, jumps again to his feet with a faintly reflective yellow line adhering to the center of his tee shirt, illuminating the path of his spine, and restarts the easterly run.

(Were he less directional in his quest, less singular in this. . . eastering, paying closer attention north and south, who knows but that our hero might have discerned, at

some point along the earthen periphery, a narrow cave, perhaps a burrow, dug out by unknown hands or more bestial appendages. And, were our theoretical hero to approach, stoop down, and then, on his knees, maneuver his cranium cautiously into this—apparently shallow—cave, the unavoidable observation might be that the flashlight's beam continues deep into the earth, whose angles are deceptive, hiding some sort of secondary—nay, by now tertiary—tunnel, dug to a width which is almost precisely that required for Burt to snake his way along it, pulling with his arms while his feet provide what impetus they can. This tunnel, though initially leading north, rounds itself gradually around an almost right angle so that Burt's direction becomes less a matter of compass and magnetic force than of the fall and cousin gravity. Along this downward bend, the tunnel grows wider by increments almost imperceptible, and yet before long Burt could stand, were he actually here, and were the ground below this theoretical double less sheer in its drop. He—that is, the double—having managed to turn himself around, is instead sliding, heels dug in before him, nearly bareassed, if you will remember, the boxers perhaps more painful than useful, as the conflicting vectors of gravity and friction conspire with these to create the mother of all wedgies, almost as painful in its hypothetical version as it could be in actual manifestation.

This imaginary descent comes suddenly to a temporary halt, thanks to a fairly sizable wooden pole, what the devil is *that* doing here? which Burt would meet with his feet. Bare and dusty, however, it is not at all surprising that they might slip off, one in each direction, and the rest is imagined easily enough.

Burt, perhaps in this pain having lost his consciousness—his senses almost certainly—would then come to, in one way or another, with this giant treelike protrusion

between his legs, the king of all stiffies, which, as soon as he feels up to standing, he will be able to use for support, a brace against further painful descent.

In fact, he could climb it—well, not climb exactly, since the pole's angle relative to the vector of gravity's pull is maybe thirty five degrees; Burt can walk up it, and find—no treetop, for the pole is simply swallowed by the earth on either end, but, attached by a rope which circles around the thick wooden pulleys and plunges from there into the indecipherable Below, some primitive wicker approximation of a gondola. Perhaps a little creaky for immediate comfort, the gondola nevertheless seems to support Burt's theoretical weight well enough, and the descent is well enough regulated by the various sources of friction as to be leisurely, even though by now the tunnel's progression is strictly vertical.

Eventually, this imaginary Burt realizes that the flashlight hasn't been necessary for some time, these bowels of the earth seeming to be lit, if that's possible, from below. . . . There would no longer be any evidence of tunnel, it having opened by now into an expanse islandic, if not continental, perhaps the dinosaured realm of Verne(Hey, Jules, who else?)"s fiction, the ancient elevator needing no further supports save those which hold it out from the one remaining earthen wall, which has become, actually, no more dirt, but solid black stone at Burt's hypothetical back. With no lower destination in sight, Burt might reasonably be expected to attempt some sort of acceleration, which he achieves in theory by leaning out over the gondola, and assisting the opposing rope on its climb, until finally, land ho! or rather horizontal land ho! since he still has not exactly been at sea. . . .

As this destination draws steadily near, Burt begins to hypothesize shapes—houses, roads, farmlands, purposeful geometries of all sorts—and eventually even people, a fairly large contingent of whom seem to be congested directly below.

“Good day.”

“How are you, man?”

“Not looking so well today.”

“Howdy.”

“Going down?”

And nine of the waiting party climb on from all directions, trapping Burt at the center, and raising in his throat a conjecture obviously fearful. And only in part because the wicker engineering remains to Burt’s mind somewhat suspect. It holds nonetheless, holds the weight of ten people all told, as it bears them further downward after so brief a stop, this ancient contraption carrying our hero to hell, almost literally in a handbasket.

And it is hell. About that there can be little debate. Notice, though, that the phrase “little debate” does not completely preclude disagreement, a conscious decision on my part because hell happens to look quite a lot like the geologists’ theories of the upper mantle—magma rising, moving, sinking—in a word, writhing—in patterns more or less consistent with convection. What makes Burt—or rather this fictional version of Burt—so certain that this is, rather, hell, is the way the magma holds its own form, divided into separate entities, specifically serpents, long, thin, glowing hot red, but with easily distinguishable heads and tails, a great mass of serpents tossing together beneath the surface of the earth. And, of course, it is hot as hell.

(So hot, in fact, that the real Burt, whether composed of paper or flesh, would likely combust. I suppose we are fortunate after all that the true hero is so damnably. . . well, *true* to his one quest, since otherwise would this novel come to an untimely end among blackened pages and the unavoidable damage of fire, turning to ash on your complicit fingers which might edge still forward in the hope of one more page.)

As it is, even the wicker manages to hold off ignition. The hypothetical Burt, already deep in fear, does experience a brief moment of genuine panic when his boxers begin to smoke, even spark a little along the hem, and he jumps, screaming, which would rock the boat were it not for one of two possible circumstances—he is either become weightless or else standing at the gondola’s exact center of gravity.

“Eh, are you trying to get us all killed? Take those off.”

Burt isn’t sure how he failed to observe the prevailing nudity. Perhaps because they wear it so naturally, so proudly, that Burt was somehow conned into seeing something like the emperor’s fine new suit. That realization, once come to, sets off a series of others. For instance, their accent, which Burt took naturally for Scottish—these being, to Burt’s mind, some kind of human-sized dwarves—is, in fact, Chinese, as are the people themselves, who have in fact been chatting amongst themselves in Chinese—perhaps Mandarin, perhaps Cantonese, and perhaps another dialect entirely, let’s style it Deihah. Looking again at the basket Burt recognizes it not as wicker but as bamboo, and is struck with the absurdity of his having—not dug, but fallen to China.

These people can only hold his thought for so long, backdropped as they are by the horrific wonders of hell.

“Is it. . . safe?” He wonders aloud.

“We got to be careful. We are in great danger, of the heat, as we walk across the dragon’s backs, or we may be pulled under and drowned. But the dragons only feed on the souls of the dead, which are burning fire.”

Having no background in Chinese spirituality, Burt has no idea whether this deep faith is consistent with that which persists on the surface, but is willing to accept it as true nonetheless, as much for the assurance it offers him as for the confident if stoic self-composure of his basket mates.

In what seems an impressive proof of Newtonian mechanics, the elevator, now crowded to a mass of ten, continues its descent at Burt’s earlier rate. Although, actually, since friction must factor heavily into the equation, and since the downward pull of these ten should theoretically register ten times greater than that of Burt alone, the compensatory force of friction should logically be more than overwhelmed. These theories, pure math, can quickly become dizzying, and indeed as soon as the theoretical hero has realized the error of physics, the entire contraption lurches downward toward its terminal velocity to no screams save Burt’s own.

It feels like the first time

feels like the very first time

that Burt has fallen, suffered some sort of skull-jarring impact, without even a temporary blackout. Maybe because this Burt is theoretical rather than factual. But then there is the relative fact of his shin, bent awkwardly in half, and the tibia bloody and exposed. The Chinese, apparently much sturdier, are unhurt—indeed, they are shocked that the hypothetical hero has suffered while in their care.

One of them—some sort of medic, Burt supposes—tends to him as the others circle around.

“How did this happen?”

“What do you mean? We fell. We fucking fell.”

“Please do not shout.”

“Look at my fucking leg, GOD DAMN.”

“Well, it is good at least that you are breathing. Indeed, if you fell, that is something of a miracle. That you are breathing.”

Suddenly not shouting, feeling distant, struggling to breathe. “What do you mean. ‘If I fell.’ We all fell.”

The elevator, it turns out, works on the principle of faith. These subterranean Chinese learn from their earliest childhood to believe in the ability of the elevator. The really bizarre thing is that the faith does not need to be communal, but merely individual, so that while Burt, disbelieving, fell, the other nine men, with him the entire way, descended in that same leisurely float, as though somehow time itself had proceeded differently between two loci so nearly touching, running to fit more seconds into the descent of the Chinese, so that these last two seconds of Burt’s life took, say, thirty seconds in all of theirs. Burt hypothetically wishes that his watch were both working and being worn on his wrist, a true measurer and binder of time, that he might know and present evidence of the truth to these faithful others.

One of whom is this medic, passing a stone over Burt’s still frame, head to toe, then along his arms, and then again to his head, where he holds it intently for a good

thirty seconds before making tender stroking motions, caressing the air, it would appear, with the stone.

“What are you doing?”

“It is a magnet. I use it to heal.”

“Try on my leg. I think it is broken.” Theoretically, a hero would be so deadpan, don’t you agree?

“Your field is in disarray here, energies scattered uselessly around. I must first put your spirit in order.”

Giving up, though not the ghost, the hero closes his eyes in favor of more comfortable sleep, which comes with surprising ease, and a welcome lack of pain. What we call shock. Burt, incredulous even in this hypothetical sleep, dreams he is dead, and awakes believing it.

But of course he is not. This theoretical self is actually still on the elevator, going back up, and he’s glad to stop at the. . . well, it wouldn’t exactly be the ground floor, now, would it, rather the level of the Chinese village, his hypothetical leg in a splint of hypothetical bamboo. The party, returning, is greeted by the rest of the village, and everyone works together to free the colossal egg, which is tied to the gondola’s bottom, a dragon egg, it seems, and the object of the journey below.

“They eat our dead, we eat their unborn. Yin/Yang, that sort of thing.”

The voice, American without accent, comes from an old man with features wrinkled and dusty, but undeniably African.

“I was the first person to fall down here in hundreds of years. Year was 1973, in fact.”

The old man, who claims no name but Leroi, was, at the time, a 41 year old graduate student at the local U, and found himself quite naturally caught up in the Black Power movement. A fellow revolutionary. The plan had been to set off a few bombs in the path of the then newly conceived subway project, just as a sort of 'fuck you' to the Man. It's a sentiment that brings to Burt's hypothetical face a smile of the comradely sort in spite of the pain. Leroi anyway had been assigned reconnaissance, and so was wandering the Tunnel, looking for appropriate bomb placements, when he (or was it for Leroi, too, a theoretical double?) stumbled across the opening, and well, Burt should—theoretically—know what follows.

Although not 'the rest.' In actuality, there is quite a bit—more than twenty years—between Leroi's arrival and Burt's, an entire life, but that must Burt learn over the course of his own hypothetical life here, through his own experiences and through hearing others tell of theirs, in the happy years that await him here before death.

And they will, in theory, be happy years, if mostly uneventful, spent first in erecting for himself a farmhouse, with the generous assistance of the entire village, a good old-fashioned American barn raising, even if the architecture be distinctively Asian.

... With the others, Burt will grow mostly beans, and venture below to gather an egg from the earth, whenever his assigned month comes around, having quickly learned to trust the wickerwork. Er, bamboo. This hypothetical happiness the presumable effect of a life spent in the task of living, continued existence dependent upon his own behaviors and decisions, what he wished for so long ago in the Tunnel. Of course, there would be women, and if Burt has not been a fetishist with that one eye raised to the East, neither has he been disposed against an Asian beauty or two, which he will, hypothetically, en-

joy, and perhaps meeting some soulmate or Mlle. Right, even marry. Who's to say? Antisocialism, misanthropy, whatever it is that haunts our mortal Burt would in theory remit under the influence of a society small knit enough that neighbors must relate to each other as individuals, as people, and yet with ample area that they need not be an imposition. And so Burt would surmise himself generally happy here, in a life lived out underground.

This general state would, like that of any life, be punctuated with countless moments of suffering, bliss, boredom, and excitement, all to varying degrees. The most illuminating occasion by far will come on one of the egg hunts, when Burt, by now comfortable walking on the backs of the unstable serpents, strays alone beyond the usual search area, and comes unexpectedly to solid ground and an imposing red wall, whose impressive iron gates stand directly before him.

Possessed, even in hypothetical guise, by that fickle, jiggling spirit, Burt ventures a knock. Not unexpectedly, the gates swing open. What is unexpected is the rapid outward vector of their motion, which but for Burt's reflexive jump backwards, would have crushed him against the walls, and ended—perhaps mercifully—this hypothetical tangent—or rather tangential hypothesis. How drastically meaning can change at the simple inversion of syntax.

Burt dodges the gate, however, and despite knowing that the potential list of rulers is very short indeed for a walled city situated in the very depths of hell, hops across the threshold. Or perhaps his curiosity and hypothetical sense of indestructibility carry him across. Either way, he finds there a river, which he recognizes as somehow Greek, although he's curious about its placement within the walls.

On its banks, appearing live. . . uh, well, in concert at least, *Nirvana*. Uh, that is, Kurt Cobain and some other guys, probably not the original band. Everyone is moshing, dancing, leaping, diving into the river only to re-emerge—man that is a trip, I don't remember nothin'—and re-enter the moshing fray. Seems Burt has stumbled on the best of all possible entrances, the river being Lethe, lacking any ferryman or three-headed dogs.

Seeing as the revelers are the dead, even this hypothetical hero has no difficulty finding his way to the base of the stage, where he is soon engaged in the frenzy, dominating the mosh pits, accidentally smashing not a few disembodied souls who find themselves beneath his feet, until suddenly the music cuts and Cobain, mad as hell, yells through the microphone, "Hey!"

Which may have been his plan all along, to get Cobain and crew to shut the fuck up, not too fond of him, musically speaking. But now, surrounded by the angry dead, he's not so sure it was a good idea. Luckily it turns out that they are incapable of hurting him, and eventually the narcotic pull of the river proves more powerful than their anger, so that Burt and Kurt are left alone, face to what's left of a face, and Burt shudders just a bit.

Cobain first: "What are you doing here?"

"Well, I could ask you the same question, right?"

Kurt thinks about this for awhile (Burt, meanwhile, thinks about *that*—Kurt thinking—how??), deciding that perhaps they need to start over, that this place we've come to maybe isn't so inevitable after all, and the blue of his famous eyes goes soft, soft (Burt is struck by that—the eyes remain, eyes here after all in this valley from which the stars can't even be seen), and Cobain sounds serene as Thomas, saying, "All apologies,

friend. Have you come on a quest?” And plays, on his guitar, just one note, a soft and tremulous. . . ding?

Burt, disconcerted, wants to answer the question: Well, actually, no, see, thing is I was just out wandering, the egg hunt a regular thing in this village where I live, and I had no idea Satan’s stronghold was in the neighborhood, but all that comes out is “Uh. . . .” and so Kurt gives Burt the grand tour, perhaps not rhyming in fluid Italian verse, but he makes for a more than adequate guide all the same.

Among an assortment of facts geologic, geographic, and architectural, the most interesting spiritual enlightenment passed along by the deceased Nirvana frontman relates to the spirits of the dead, which it turns out are *not* flame in and of themselves, but *are* flammable, being protected inside these walls of Satan’s, most for no discernible evil purpose—the few in the innermost circles, though, are clearly kept so as to facilitate more painful experiences than mere burning. Burt, during the tour, catches the merest glimpse of these atrocities and must pause theoretically to vomit. Though he vomited watching both *Schindler’s List* and *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, so perhaps even here is no evil beyond human conception. Anyway, these flammable spirits can escape—most are, in fact, free to leave—but outside these walls they exist at their own peril, spontaneous combustion or serpent attack always possibilities. And then there’s the question of destination: where else to go? Some, heedless of the danger, make their way across the serpents, back to the surface, usually citing unfinished business, the imperatives of revenge, or undying love. There they haunt the living whilst trying to avoid the nearly infinite pitfalls of daily life. Or, rather, existence. Of course this surface activity is mostly hearsay, for those who once set off in the upward direction do not return. There are legends, stories of a few

who have come back down, but those from a long time ago, especially when you remember that the Lethe is right there.

As a result of this coincidence of contradictory evidence—the many who do not return and the legends of one or two who have—intense debate has arisen among the Rememberers as to the eventual fate of these spirits, some Rememberers going so far as to postulate another protected city somewhere vaguely above, and without the unpleasanties found at the center of this particular one. . . . Seizing on this idea, a few radicals proposed that the route to this city was not physical but mystical, leading through fire. This group, which came to be known as the Combustionists, died out shortly after their founding, for obvious reasons, although there are still those Rememberers who *believe* that the combusted souls go to heaven without having the strength of conviction to make the Jonesian leap of faith.

Um, I'm sorry, but what is a Rememberer?

Rememberers are the underworldly scholars who abstain from the waters of the Lethe—where so many find salvation, release, and spiritual cleansing—a society in which Cobain is an initiate. Not that Kurt didn't hop right in upon his sudden arrival—else would death not have been the escape he'd hoped for—but unlike most, he was unable to forget himself permanently. This wasn't due to any special immunity against the Lethe's waters, understand, but rather to the fact that, thanks to MTV, others recognized him—*everyone* seemed to recognize him, telling him stories of himself, teaching him his old songs, alluding to pains of his past life—and as a result his identity was rapidly, if imperfectly, reconstructed. His voice is haunting as ever—perhaps more haunting than ever, and his concerts have become quite the hit here, although he has

trouble understanding some of the passions which, in another lifetime, proved so irresistible. A significant step, incidentally, on the path to true Nirvana. What's more, Cobain is decidedly anti-Combustionist, believing that it is perfectly possible to be happy in the here and now. In short, he's better off dead.

After this day, Burt's hypothetical life will take on a subtly different aspect. Assured of his immortality, his relationship to his crops, to the annual cycle of farming, becomes poetically abstract rather than functional—becomes spiritual, actually, in the fashion of the Romantic ideal of a farmer, so that his work becomes part of the land rather than some form of distinguishable and lamentable toil. . . . He's not sure why exactly, or at least he can't verbalize the reasons, but tilling, for example, seems easier, as though it is no longer an act of penetration but rather one of joining. Same with sex, for that matter, which seems to last almost forever at that crux, and require less. . . work, it used to be work, than before.

One day, inevitably, our theoretical hero will die, and while his spirit remains free to decide its own fate, the younger generation of villagers—perhaps even Burt's own offspring—will carry his body to the traditional burial ground, where it will decompose rapidly to the surrounding black ooze—which surface dwellers will one day extract and refine to fuel. . . .

His spirit, in the meantime, will have become a Rememberer, unliving in the great walled city, caught up in the scholarly problems of the dead. One morning—if such it can be called despite the neverpresent sun—with no particular reason, he suddenly finds this work empty and meaningless, contextualized as it is by hordes of Lethe-dippers, an unworthy audience indeed.

“Great minds here go unheeded,” he tells Cobain. “There has to be something more.

Kurt, over the years, has given up speaking altogether, and moving as well for the most part—once a day he lies down to rest, and once a day he sits up to meditate. The intention, as Burt figures it (Kurt has never said), being to find through focusing inward, deaths other kingdom, she of the planets, galaxies, stars, and black Holes. Lately our hero, who attends Kurt once a day, has begun to notice eerie changes which seem to suggest that it might be working—Pynchonesque changes, a sort of fading around the edges, an uncanny ability to locate himself, without moving, in Burt’s blind spots. . . .

Burt shakes it off, takes Cobain’s non-response as a sign, and turns to leave, walking back to those iron gates, stepping cautiously across the backs of serpents to the bamboo elevator, and up, up. . . .

He finds, not surprisingly, that the earth has shifted some during his subterranean years, but he comes up nevertheless into a dark tunnel, lit faintly from the west, and Burt—hypothetically—begins his trek into the light. Which grows consistently brighter, and finally splits distinctly into two as Burt draws nearer, nearer, nearer, and then it is too late, the spirit is caught in the intake, mixed in the carburetor with his own flesh made fuel, the combustion engine a modern Prometheus, God, or Frankenstein, combining lifeless stuff with that elusive spark of spirit.

The result? Death. When has creation had happy results? In the beginning, perhaps, with Adam or the Promethean man, although Auden says not to be born is best. . . . The Greek gods tried four times to get it more or less right, Jehovah himself brought the flood, and Victor’s monster may have meant well enough, but was surrounded by violent

deaths, an ill-gotten creation, and Burt, mixed and made strangely liquid, passing through this unholy artifice, is burned to heavy exhaust and expelled, staggering through lengths of pipe and muffler to hang suspended in the thick atmosphere of the Tunnel.

Or perhaps those Combustionists were right after all, the spirits of sinners must be purged by fire, consumed by salvation.)

We left the real Burt running for darkness: his shape isn't such that he can make the two hundred yards in a dead sprint, having walked so far already, so he does not burst into the darkness as he'd like to, imagining that at some indeterminate point he were breaking through the yellow tape. Instead he pulls out of his run sucking a little wind, hunched over at the back, yellow and red palms pressing on his knees, and wishing for water. It isn't really as though he's in a race anyway.

And if he were, what matter that he would finish last? He would still step like this into the cool, comfortable dark. And he would still change his mind about the comfortable part, almost as soon as the sweat dries, and wish that he'd had the foresight to carry his sweatshirt, because forget about cool it is cold, baby, probably with a capital C, for a guy in his underwear. Which Burt is, at the moment, lest you had forgotten. A man walking through a tunnel in the middle of a weekday, wearing a white tee with subtle armpit stains, and flannel boxers printed in a plaid pattern of greens, blues, and violet. Smelling (to overstate this point would be impossible, trust me) as though he has recently lost all sphincter control. Burt seems to feel that this observation merits a laugh, which strikes me as healthy, if not necessarily sober.

Ahead of him, in the dark, something rumbles.

Even though the ray is aided by the few photons straying east from the more finished section of roadway, re-acclimating to the flashlight's dwindling light takes focus. Sweeping the light from side to side, along the Tunnel's unsupported walls, Burt finally discerns ahead of him the source of the sound: two surfaces of reflective reds and yellows, brakelights and turnsignals on a monstrous scale, and then Burt is gagging in the thick cloud of exhaust, choking on his own theoretical mortality, on the fate of his own soul, and the feeling in his stomach is once again of impending vomit. The truck is one of those road painters, but here it is four hundred yards into the dark, far from the last trace of wet paint. Abandoned, but running. Burt, finding the doors unlocked, turns off the ignition. Why has the vehicle been left here?

Because of the nearby ladder, of course. From the ground, it appears to lead only to the solid ceiling. The fact that the rungs are wooden, and indeed feel very dry, inspires something less than confidence, especially considering that it is uncertain whether this is, in fact, an exit. The decision: to risk life or limb in such an unwarranted ascent, or to continue along this subterranean walk, which Burt guesstimates might take another twenty miles. Without water. And right now, in this exhaust cloud, he is craving a little H₂O. The long trek under the heat of the light, the dehydrating sweat, and then his all-out, 175 yard sprint, these are human chemistries tempered by that compound's cooling presence. Physically, it would be possible—maybe healthier, by the looks of that ladder—for Burt to go on. But with the thirst comes a sudden desire to be standing in the comparatively open air of the city. On one hand, the decision to climb feels like an abandonment of the unarticulated investigational purpose behind his Tunnel walk, but Burt rationalizes it by telling himself that the climb too will be an act of exploration, and pos-

sibly might lead to a moment of unexpected discovery. Although these discoveries, as Burt is learning, seem never to be answers, which are perhaps too much to hope for. Even when he thinks he's found them, he finds they don't make sense. For example: Thomas, the bartender, set up the entire drunken incident. Why? And so what, really? Just for example. Following the scientific lead, answers aren't even possible. There are theories, hypotheses. But these are just possibilities put into words, tentative. They can be supported, but ultimately never proved. The result of this method is that only the notion of disproof gives meaning. That is, a hypothesis which has withstood numerous attempts at disproof is likely a right answer. But not necessarily, as Newton managed to prove over his 218 years.

What that has to do with the ladder is no longer clear. Perhaps the falling apple could be Burt, when these brittle branches snap, which they look like they could do. The ladder is built into the wall, a series of protruding wooden planks, which extend some four inches from the dirt wall. This means that Burt can't grasp them firmly in his hands, and his feet fit only to their balls before his toes are up against the earth. But Burt is insistent: he's going up. Despite the dry rungs, which splinter into his hands and bare feet. Despite even the ominous cracking of wood grains, which have do not appear to have been required to exert themselves quite so strenuously in recent days, or decades, maybe, judging from the covering dirt. At first it isn't so tough, but as he scales higher, the skin of his hands and feet accumulating slivers, the strain on his triceps increases. Burt, who has by this point decided to trust the old wood, begins to fear his own weakness, three fourths of the way to the top.

ting his head against it, gently, then pulls the steel strand and is amazed to find that the filament is unbroken.

Light to dark to light to dark to light. The bulb swings gently, bound to its small arc by the very source of its luminescence, waxing and waning the room into shadows, until its eventual zero point finally rests at the approximate center. To the north, directly opposite the descending ladder, a rickety flight of stairs runs up along the wall. Nowhere else to go.

The door at the top is locked, but from the side that Burt stands on, so he simply flips the lever on the deadbolt, turns the knob mechanism counterclockwise, and voila, no need to bust down any doors. He emerges into another cement room, this one definitely a basement, complete with boiler, custodial equipment, and one more flight of stairs, a bit sturdier than the last. Sturdy almost to the point of inducing claustrophobia, in fact, encased on both sides by walls of still more cement. Burt drinks from the large plastic basin, grimacing at the metallic city taste of the water. Like touching the tip of his tongue to a nine-volt. The water leaves a dry feeling in his throat and mouth, even after drinking enough to feel the swishing tides in his stomach, and his lone burp is wetly sour.

All of this, combined with his long walk, puts Burt in the mood for a little rest, at least a few minutes worth, so sitting on the stairs he has a chance to reconsider his decision. It would not be too late to return to the Tunnel and put off this upward course. He pulls carefully at the splinters lodged in his skin, digging with his fingernails where it is necessary to get a little below the surface. In fact, his clothes are down there, and although he's not naked, the idea of braving the outside world in boxer shorts gives him goose flesh. Something about his thighs he's not really comfortable with—they are really

pale, for one thing, and the little hairs there seem pretty unattractive, too coarse and too short to Burt's way of thinking. If he secured some water, the Tunnel wouldn't be so bad. Not bad at all, really. And he could complete the transaction. But then, of course, he remembers that he was naked on the morning news, and his fingernails pinch too tightly around the thin wooden shaft, which breaks off, leaving some good length of it under his skin. Well, if they have already seen THAT. . . . Burt understands that these circumstances allow him quite a bit more control, but the remembrance of things done to him invites a rebellious, devil-may-care-but-I-do-not kind of attitude, something a double dog dare might elicit in a rambunctious youth, and the mind is made up.

Walking the entire Tunnel would be overly ambitious anyway, so Burt can shove aside the slight twinge of guilt that suggests he has backed down from some minor office. Who is disappointed here? Hopefully not even Burt himself. I mean, what can *we* expect of him underground? Some profound realization, understanding of the light, reconciliation to the universal truth of conspiracy? Or, more likely, more curious wanderings, punctuated sparsely with vague philosophizing about the advancing lanes of civilization, the diminished individual responsibility caused by the distancing of decisions from survival. And hopefully, somewhere beyond the range of the last penetrating photon, a rage, rage, against the shining of the light. Burt can sit on these stairs and think these thoughts, connect them loosely to the very concrete beneath his bottom (and that, for that matter, above his head), but with the lighting of the Tunnel, Burt loses something irreplaceable. Buildings and streetlights he was born into, and if he distrusts them instinctively (or should I have said intellectually?) he nevertheless takes advantage of their convenience, by habit or force of addiction who can say. The Tunnel, at least, had been an escape,

Burt's theoretical stand against a society in which we have all always been trapped. Blacktop, lanes, and lighting—these are things hard to endure underground. His primitive—perhaps we might say prepubescent?—Tunnel, made common property, no longer a passage of private and mysterious beauties, but being made now into a thoroughfare upon whom all would be free to trespass. Hard to endure.

And yet his lack of clothing was almost enough to keep him here, in the purgatory of this second basement, or drive him back underground, sent to that mortal wilderness by his sense of shame. He is indeed so bound.

This is why he sees suicide as the end to his novel, because of this paradoxical interaction of what he feels himself to be, and what he feels himself addicted to. In the novel's context, the fiction of the game stands for every rule Burt himself is forced to play by, laws, mores, even things like clothes and powerlines. These, you see, are the programs, the command inputs which we have accumulated since the beginning, artificialities designed to lubricate human interactions both with one another and with lady environment. And just as the character in the game will be hard-pressed to decipher the constructed nature of his world, so we too somehow manage to live, for the most part, without ever seeing the fraud of central parks and office buildings, without a second thought for telephones. Beavers build dams; people put up high-rises. Adapt nature to our needs. But of course there is an important difference of complexity, and the result is an economy wherein we *don't* make high-rises, you and I, we make money. More specifically, we make each other's lives more and more convenient, rewarding each other in dollar amounts for that service, and those dollars we can then use to pay rent in those high-rises, which might as well appear through magic for all of the real effort we our-

selves put into them. And we exist for a long time, happy and healthy in this convenience, but the question at the heart of Burt's novel is: do we *live* if food and shelter appear magically, independent of any direct effort we make toward them? Are we still somehow more than the characters of our fictions?

Burt is no Luddite, though. All he has needed over these years has been that one vestige of reality, that Tunnel where life and death were real estate, his lot directly dependent on his own choices, which in turn were not determined for him by law, but by his own unwritten contract with the other individuals he encountered. This moment of reality is the suicide of Burt's protagonist, at least as he sees it now. The shotgun is artificial, true, as is the framed canvas. Brains and blood, though, these are real. Disgusting, true, especially when scattered violently across the artifices of a fictional world, but real. Inescapable. And unique.

Hopefully this will be properly interpreted (and to this end Burt has considered an epilogue, purporting to be an art critic's review of this mortal work of art) as a call to arms against the postmodernity of the world. Unless you have a better adjective for a world that seems to insist on the primacy of fiction over reality (you Thomases in the congregation can take this debate up with Baudrillard, who is the more profound). Burt can think of no better term, although he would of course qualify the statement by asserting that the world has long been postmodern, the product of fictitious and arbitrary blueprints, an early historical example of which would be the Code of Hammurabi. More contemporary, and more relevant to the situation at hand, would be the endless exhortations of the Apostle, who seemingly failed to grasp his personal, Christ-taught lesson that too much light makes us blind, that we need darkness to see.

Taking heed of Paul's flawed teachings, the two millennia which followed have been characterized by a quest for more light. Particularly luminous examples have been the light bulb and the atomic bomb, but the idealization of light over darkness (which can be traced into the dim recesses of prehistory, and undoubtedly owes something to human beings being diurnal by nature) has penetrated everywhere.

Write what you know. Excited at these ideas, eager to get them down in ink, where they will serve well as substance for his novel, Burt jumps to his feet and rushes up the stairs, sure-footed despite the dizziness and loss of vision which result from having sat so long and risen so rapidly.

The knob turns, no problem, and the heavy metal door swings easily outward on its graphite-lubricated hinges. The corridor is familiar to Burt as the generic lobby of any apartment complex, with a wall of mailboxes, a single elevator, and another metal door, the singularity of this one interrupted by four square feet of wire-reinforced window, through which Burt can see the staircase promised by the door's black stenciled lettering. Directly in front of him, the double glass doors lead outside, and on his way through them Burt smiles neighborly at the elderly mailman, whose face registers a somewhat contemptuous curiosity, no doubt due to our hero's rather inappropriate attire for the out of doors. While we have been underground, it has become quite a day.

“Howdy, pilgrim.” This is how the city greets its prodigal on his return, with a circle of hard-hatted construction workers who have also just recently emerged from the depths. They: to lunch.

Burt mumbles hello and shades his eyes.

The sun stands out in a noontime sky that is not entirely without clouds. Across the street, the bank lights scroll out 67° F, and invite Burt to enjoy the benefits of refinancing his home. It is almost the kind of weather Burt might normally wear shorts for, but that does nothing to assuage his feeling of nakedness. Part of it is the pee hole in the boxer shorts. There is a little plastic button on this pair, to hold the flaps together which are not one, but he generally keeps it unfastened, for the sake of comfort, and so now must fiddle with it for a second, working the button through its hole, which serves, in Burt’s imagination, to focus the attention of the entire sidewalk on his genital region, another second time around. With all these eyes, he can easily picture his cock slipping out. Once he finally fixes that problem, though, the tight white undershirt is more of a concern. He’s a thin guy, Burt, but he likes to think of himself as wiry, so that especially wearing a torso-hugging short-sleeve, he’s prone to tensing his muscles for the visual effect. Even with his chest fully inflated, he wishes there were more meat up there, and curses the mysteries of genetics even before he considers that he should really start working out.

He came east via the Tunnel; now, then, he heads west, back toward his waiting Tarsus. There is lunch hour traffic on the sidewalks as well as the streets, furloughed workers out for grub or sunshine or, as Damascus Drive reaches its western terminus at Station Park, a quick stay-in-shape jog. At first, Burt was smiling at the curious

passersby—but the unfavorable expressions flashed in return ranged from haughty smirks to angry grimaces, something Burt tires of pretty damn quickly. In the city, respectable citizens (a category which would, under control conditions, include Burt) are understandably terrified by a certain facial expression, and will go to greater lengths than their usual to avoid eye contact with anyone displaying it. The phrase is, in its infinitive form, “to get a mean on.” And Burt is getting a mean on.

Walking the park trail, the slight breeze stokes the coals of his eyes. No, that is not the “mean.” It is his contact lenses, actually, which seem to have caught rough particles in his eyes, both at the same time, which is a fluky sort of occurrence, extremely rare. So Burt’s fists rise to his eyes and rub, as he continues on his way. And then he catches a toe, stumbles, manages to keep his balance, and opens his eyes painfully to see a human blur, and he jumps back almost quickly enough, quickly enough that he gets mostly out of the way, but he catches the rollerblader at the ankles and sees her pitch forward, onto her wrist and knee guards, which make a ghastly scraping sound against the rough blacktop, while she somehow manages to stay up on her hands and knees.

She? It couldn’t be anyone else, could it? Although Burt has not caught a good glimpse of her face yet, since (a) his eyes are fogged by tears and (b) she fell facing away. But Burt is almost sure.

“Mary? I mean, Officer Cummins? Are you okay?”

Yes. What? I’m fine.” and she looks back over her shoulder, over her incredible, inviting— And it is indeed Mary.

“Let me help you up.” He does, taking her hand, trying to show off his strength, straining without letting the effort show. “I’m sorry, I tripped, I didn’t see you. Are you

sure you're okay?" Burt realizes that he hasn't yet released her hand, which is cold, especially where the plastic protects the palm.

"Oh, I'm fine. I wear this stuff so I don't get hurt. Because this happens to me all the time."

"Do you remember me? I'm Burt." It is doubtless an unnecessary introduction. That thought makes him immediately suspicious of this apparently chance encounter, and he turns his head, expecting to see Thomas—or another of the twelve—somewhere around. But there is no one.

"Of course. I'm Mary." She pauses for just a second, realizes that Burt is not dressed, "What happened to your clothes?"

It isn't especially friendly, the way she blurts that out there, but it is at least direct, and it must be funny as well, because Burt smiles broadly, even gives a short laugh, and then a loud, long inhale before telling her that it is a long story.

She looks a little relieved, to be honest, and says, "Well, I'm actually on lunch right now, but I need to get back to work."

Blown off again? But they are still holding hands, and continue to do so for maybe three seconds of a silence which just has to be awkward, before Mary slips out of his grip, looks down at the scratched up plastic of her knee guards, nonchalant. Her voice is friendly, almost hopeful. "I'm sure I'll see you again. You coming Tuesday?"

Yeah, of course he is. But Mary, don't rush off. Burt is thinking porn star sex, at least a kiss, maybe kids, whatever you want, just STAY. Burt could ask her out again, but he's hoping she will venture, timidly, to ask whether the offer he made last time is

still good, which YES YES YES YES YES, of course it is, so all Burt answers to her question is, “Probably.”

And there is another two seconds, just giving him every chance before she says, “Okay, well, then, I’ll see you there,” turns, and skates off in the direction of sunrise.

Despite his racing heart (is it possible? Our hero with a crush?), his mind is turning its detective wheels. Mary is a good distance from the lockup, where he knows that she works. Maybe four miles. And now working on the return trip. Who looks that good after a four-plus mile rollerblade? Who takes eight mile rollerblades over the lunch hour? It isn’t even as though there’s a continuous trail. She would have to be rolling on the sidewalk, across intersections, around pedestrians. And yet how could this have been set up? Not thirty minutes ago, he emerged from the basement of an apartment building in which he had never before set foot. One hundred and fifty minutes ago, he had dropped through a manhole into the intestines of the city, without a clear idea of where he was going, and with his eventual emergence in some doubt. And how about the breeze that blew the dust into his eyes, which sent him stumbling across the sidewalk? Who could have planned that? It comes down to the *Jurassic Park*/chaos theory: too many variables for an accurate prediction. Burt’s verdict? A random encounter.

At least in part, he’s willing to accept it as such because it legitimizes the moment he just shared with that beautiful woman. You can’t deny it, though. His arguments are solid, difficult to dispute, and impossible to disprove. Once he makes up his mind, the walk floats beneath his consciousness like so much jetsam, Burt thinking all the while about next Tuesday’s AA meeting, playing out various scenarios in his imaginary effort to win a smile, a kiss, and better. He doesn’t have his mean on anymore, and his own

smile seems to have become somewhat contagious, more powerful even than the public's disapproval, so that Burt wins not a few smiles in return. Even the glares seem to bounce off him, harmless. I'm walking on sunshine, yeah-ah, and don't it feel good Hey! All right back to his waiting Tarsus, and what the hell difference does it make that he can't get his keys off his shirt without tearing the hem of the white fabric?

His wallet is still in the glovebox, and the great green duffel still occupies the rear seat, which means that nothing has been stolen. He pulls a pair of jeans from it, then turns the key and it's go go go, cruising down the street with the window rolled down, eager to wash, eager to write, and especially eager for next Tuesday's AA meeting, which, unfortunately, will not happen until next Tuesday.

The change machine accepts bills in one, five, ten, and twenty dollar denominations. Burt, with seventy plus pounds of laundry, and no cash, is relieved to find an ATM across the street, and withdraws himself a twenty. Eighty quarters make for quite a bulge in his front pocket, but he feeds them, four at a time, into nine separate machines. He uses liquid detergent, and is careful to ensure that it mixes adequately with the water before he heaps the clothing into the mix, which takes a little time, but makes doing the laundry feel a little more important, adding a suggestion of ceremony.

Once every load progresses beyond the point where Burt's participation is required, he wishes that he had thought to bring his manuscript. Well, his work in progress. There's a notebook somewhere in his car, he's sure of it, but it isn't the one he started on a few days ago. Better than nothing, right? Besides, an hour and a half after brilliantly defending his notion of a final suicide, he is having second thoughts. Third thoughts? Whatever. The kind of thoughts that even a mistaken perception of the potential to pro-

create can produce, thoughts of life and love, and, perhaps subconscious thoughts of a future generation. DNA, right, always interested in the possibility of its own transcription. It is hard to maintain with due seriousness the philosophical position of oppressed individuality at a time like this. Which, of course, Burt recognizes laughingly as the very beauty of the drug, its pleasurable addictiveness which makes even the realization of its destructiveness feel unimportant. Burt remembers again those rats who were given some sort of drug, maybe heroin or coke, and they would sit there pushing the little drug button in lieu of drinking or eating or fucking until they all died. Not that they would have lived forever.

Suddenly, Burt sees the difficult necessity of writing so that his protagonist isn't just a big loser. It isn't a very intellectual term, that, but it is the proper one. If life is serious, live, enjoy it. And if it is fictitious? All the more reason to do the same. The purpose of a game is, after all, to have fun. But then the reality is—or, wait, is it the fiction? Well, whatever, Burt is used to being confused on this point—that you can't just have fun and live, because you have to work to eat and you have to eat to live so that fun is pretty much suicide, like the rats, and THAT was why he saw death—suicide, specifically—because death seemed inevitable, and a character who is alone anyway, tortured by his inability to have real, meaningful fun at the game, not to mention his inability to connect, well such a character might as well, anyway.

Was that really his idea? I did not know he had undone so many. He seems to have had too many ideas to sort out into any kind of sense, and thoughts too disparate for him to have any singular focus. Which he assumes he will need, if the novel is to come off. Something simple that tracks a progression without too many regressions, twin arcs

or pyramids of Freytag, plotting the growing awareness on the part of the protagonist as well as his character, lines meeting finally at the climax, violent and perhaps messy.

The trick will be holding off for the right time, building pace consistently up to that final loaded instant. What will he have to write before? The game itself is pretty uninteresting. What Burt has the most to say about is the aftershock, the effect of such a sudden knowledge. Doesn't *Hamlet* work that way, beginning with realization, and struggling from there to make sense or use of it? Burt's work as well will climax prematurely and dwell—obsess, even—on what went wrong, and how or if it will be redeemed.

Finding a sufficient number of dryers demands vigilance. The inconvenient design of the Mr. Cleanjeans establishment provides only half the number of dryers that it does washers. Making it even worse is the fact that clothes tend to take more time to dry than to be cleaned. So, as soon as the final spins begin to cease, Burt holds off on thinking and takes up position along the row of dryers. There are four empty, and of the full ones, three toss no more, occupied by static heaps of scattered clothing. Burt is never sure how long such clothes should be left in waiting before he has the right to disturb a stranger's load. In the meantime, he digs the damp bundles out of four washers. These, the first borne across the laundromat, also the first he initiated into the washers, are the essentials: socks, boxers, tee shirts. He launders these first because he has sometimes been too lazy to wash anything else, since he sees his pants and shirts as being wearable repeatedly, not requiring a wash in the interregnum. Four shiny quarters inserted into each slot, Burt recommences his watch, staring vacantly at the tumbling whites, his eye unwittingly caught by their indecipherable promise of truth. . . .

Full again, the dark color of the great bag conducts the dry heat of its contents. Burt, sweating in that convection, and from the long upward struggle of stairs, lets it fall heavily to his carpet. Surprised at the sudden impotence of its mass against the solid floor, the duffel assumes a flat, deflated look. After a long hot shower, Burt takes it by its end-straps, dragging it to his dresser, where he ladles out handfuls of the still-warm clothes. The shirts emerge first to hang in his carefully arranged closet, followed by the pants, for which he has pant-hangers. Separating the socks from the tee shirts is tedious. He works diligently, finding for each sock its proper match, and folding the tees meticulously, always making the first fold from left to right, tucking in the sleeves, and then finally folding each in half, top to bottom.

His boxer shorts are soft flannel, and when they're clean he likes the smell and feel of them, pressed to his face. These he stuffs uncereemoniously into his top drawer, struggling mightily when he has finished to secure the drawer's proper closure.

On most days, when it is all done, there's that frustrating time to ponder the meaning of this carpet, but today it seems to be blank. Not meaningless, just unplanned. Chaotic. He considers running the vacuum cleaner, thinking about the distinct lines it creates. He decides instead to write.

The sharp point of his pen etches into the paper beneath, that forceful handwriting grooving its own lines between the faint blue ones, sometimes overstepping them entirely with impatient disregard. The pen is an instrument. It isn't so much the ink as the infinitesimal point that is its greatest beauty, impressing future pages with its subtle nuances. The marks, blue on the surface, scar deep into the strata of future pages, where, without the assistance of their emphatic color, they are easy to ignore. But each page,

even next Tuesday's, bears the wounds of every page that came before. In the beginning, this inscription is merely apocryphal. But as the preceding pages pile up, the indentations shallow and multiply, rapidly becoming indecipherable. As Burt, his protagonist, and that protagonist's character come together to the bottom right corner of the present page, the unbound margin curls in, drawn by the force of the pen-compressed pulp, the page tunneling around itself as the author turns literally to the next leaf, noticing among the noisy interference of so much accumulated story, the faintly emerging trace of the cardio-

