Notes of a New York Son

1995 – 2007

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THINGS FALL TOGETHER

December 21, 1995 – December 19, 2001

What a clear sky covers this place.

—Gluck, *Orpheus*

1 CITY IN AMBER

1995

Winter Solstice – West 12th Street – Late Afternoon

The cold quickens your pace. This is the moment he catches up with you: god of winter, the real McCoy, wearing his multitude of grays. You walk east together. Where's dawn now – somewhere over China? When you reach Hudson Street, you'll cross it and head north, stop at La Taza d'Oro on the far side of 14th Street to pick up dinner: ropa vieja with white rice and red beans for Katie and for you, bacalao stew with yellow rice and black beans. *Dos flanes por favor. Y un café con leche.* Gwen will share some of your food, and if she's still hungry, Katie will make her famous "instant pizza."

Snow on the sidewalk, deep slush in the gutters, thinned to soup on the cobblestones. Hardly anyone about. A block ahead, in Jackson Square Park, the bloodorange, angled sun, soon to plunge, tricks the eye, makes the bronze soldier's flag seem molten, melting round his shoulders. See? He's about to step off his pedestal and begin marching toward the source of life.

To your right across the street, the facades of townhouses cast deep in shadow. Behind a parlor window, a flash of movement catches your eye – a tiny pink and open hand floats, detached. You peer deeper, try to penetrate the darkened room beyond the frame. Make out the shape of an infant, held on hip. Then the hip of the holder, the pattern of the nanny's dress, and a vague outline of her form, nothing more. You wave back. The tiny palm moves in response, its gesture animated by a steady, unseen hand.

1996

May 22 – Le Gamin Chelsea – Early Morning

You flip through the composition book, now filled up with jottings and your eye lights on the passage above. Time to start another volume and line this one up on the shelf at the head of the parade of twelve more-or-less-identical black, red-spined journals dating back to when the '80s were young and very afraid, but you were not, and had more hair. Odd bits: songs, plays, quotes, stories, first drafts of novels, research nuggets for the World Trade Center project – an archaeology of random associations. The books are cheap enough, so you never feel under pressure to write anything important. And they're readily available at Pearl River on Canal Street, or a dozen other shops in Chinatown. Depending on the energy of your muses, each book takes a year or more to fill.

Something you like about the bit you just found. The way the city unfolds before you, yet in response to your movement through it. Most of what you've written of New York feels more static – you're here and it's there – a historical distance, or fantastical space stands in between. Could you consciously tune into that more available channel? Teach yourself to observe and record as rapidly, as accurately as possible, the dance of what happens in your ambit of perception? Wouldn't the infant's hand be as good a moment as any to start with?

Why make a project of it? And why now? "Why?" is always a silly question to ask. But if you had to square with yourself you'd say the new wrinkle is fear. You've been afraid *in* your city plenty of times, but never *for* your city – the place it's turning into. Or of what living here is doing to you. Fear has carried your anger to a new level, changed its valence into something that feels scary in and of itself. So the question is: can you transform fear and anger into the impulse to write down whatever comes of being present here?

You'll need to find a language for the changes – in the harbor currents, in the atmosphere. A mode of expression for the way the deck of your own life pitches with

the city's rolls, the waves cresting higher even than you remember them the day Jack first took you on the Staten Island ferry and the spray washed over the bow and into your face, when – forty years ago?

And then, a score of harbor-crossings later, you had your bicycle, he had his. The ferry pulled up snug in its berth, you pedaled up the ramp, and let the lay of the land take you where you wanted to go.

May 24 – Downtown C Train

Early evening. Still spring. Outside the temperature's boiled over but the subway car is chilled unto a meat locker. You sit two empty spaces to the right of a young man who's positioned directly across the aisle from a young woman with skin the color of café con leche from Mi Chinita. Makeup seamless as a mask. Slightly walleyed, huge green irises. Twin chopsticks, asymmetrical, transfix her hair. Goosebumps on her upper arms you can see from here. Sleeveless shirt, blinding white, upturned collar, knotted at the diaphragm. Purse perched neatly in her lap, fingers wrapped round its bamboo handles. Electric indigo jeans, thin knees pressed together, legs drawn up so her red platform sneaker toes stand nearly *en pointe.* A woman from another world.

The man leans forward into the aisle, elbows resting on his thighs. Apart from a slow expanse and contraction of ribs, utterly still. Hands clasped, bare arms, and face a shade browner than his silky black parachute pants. Is he staring at her? Hard to tell – he's wearing wrap-around shades. Head capped with a black do-rag – the little knot at his crown making possible the idea that he was born here, in exactly this seat, extruded out of the will-to-being of the city itself.

The car takes the eastward bend below 14th Street, swerves diagonally beneath Greenwich Avenue. Wheel against rail like a knife grinder pressing blade to stone. Full speed into the West 4th Street station. Out onto the torrid platform you go – glance back at them. Neither has shifted an iota. What is she gazing at? The man? The white, green and black-tiled wall behind the window? Or something you can't imagine? Turn away. The train overtakes your walking pace, rumbles by moving fast enough for the windows to have turned transparent stripe. But in the middle ground, you glimpse the young man, still scissored into the aisle, his face teetering on the brink of a question.

May 27 – Late Evening

Dinner party at Frazier and Stephanie's. Good company, wonderful food – the only drawback being that Stephanie spends most of the evening in the kitchen, cooking or washing up and she won't let you, or anyone, help. Amidst dessert and winding conversation, Frazier dubs cassettes for you: Albert Ayler's "Greenwich Village" and John Cale solo, accompanying himself on piano. Way past Gwen's bedtime. You gather her, sleeping, off the bed and head for the subway.

Lately, whenever you go to Brooklyn on the weekend, you find yourself waiting endlessly for the train home. Or else there's track work and a detour. Anyone with an ounce of sense calls a car service. But you, you're a stalwart for public transport. Not least because a car service costs plenty, unless you share the ride with someone heading your way. So you make for the Carroll Street subway stop, and this time, surprise, surprise, no sooner do you drop your token and push through the turnstile than a nearly-empty Manhattan-bound F train rumbles in.

Just after midnight. Katie rests her head on your shoulder, Gwen still asleep in your lap. Down at the end of the car, a heavily-muscled man in camo pants and sleeveless olive drab teeshirt sleeps too, stretched out along several seats. The train stops and your eyes pop open. You hadn't been aware of closing them. A skinny, wavering drunk steps on board, somehow keeps his balance as the train jolts into motion. With the singlemindedness of the truly stoned, he staggers over to where Camo Man lies and stands over him, rubber-limbed and aggrieved. In your half-awake state, you can almost hear his wheels turning. *Whassup wi this? Somassole lyin down my seat. Show him what fuggin' time it is –*

"Yo!" he roars, above the train noise. "Get up!" No response. He leans over, kneads Camo Man's shoulders, steps back, hands on his hips. Like a baker waiting for his dough to rise. Not enough leavening. Again he pushes his palms into Camo Man's back. "Get up, yo!" With infinite lassitude, Camo Man untucks his head, looks up and squints in disbelief – à la Clint Eastwood, straight out of *Dirty Harry*. Then he burrows back into the crook of his arm, its bicep roughly the circumference of your thigh.

But Skinny Drunk is on a mission. He pummels Camo Man's back with the insistence of one bent on redressing a grave injustice. Finally, *Bingo*. It takes only an

eyeblink, but Camo Man is on his feet, close-cropped black hair grazing the ceiling, eyes alive with hatred. The train squeals to a stop at East Broadway. Astonished by the scale of the Colossus he's raised, Skinny Drunk staggers backward, gropes in his back pocket. Doors open. It's not your station, not even close, but you're already on the platform, Gwen held in one arm, her head nestled into your neck. Katie on your heels. Bing-bong. The doors roll shut. Camo Man and Skinny Drunk remain aboard. They own that car free and clear.

Yellow cab ride home.

May 30 – Early Afternoon

You cross Houston Street and head uptown feeling triumphant. Just signed off on the blueprints for the CWA 1180 newspaper, and the rest of your birthday is your own. Jesus, how did you get to be 46? Shake that thought off. Katie will make roast beef, mashed potatoes and asparagus. Tomato juice apéritif. Chocolate cake for dessert, perhaps with fruit salad. But it's early yet so why not treat yourself to a lemon ice from Caffè Dante? A song from when you were young comes into your head, but a kink in your mind turns it to parody before organizes itself into voice: *Let me take you on a sedimental journey*. You used to bicycle all around here, at first on Jack's handlebars, later on your black English 3-speed, a smaller version of his own.

Dante sells the best-textured lemon ice in the Village, and not too sweet. But it's no better for the two bucks it costs – and being called *granita* – than the little cups you used to buy for a nickel at the newsstand on Thompson Street, just round the corner the from your old house on West Broadway. That was then, and this is the upscale Village now. The waitress packs the cup down pretty well then tops it off with a round, generous scoopful. Still it's threatening to avalanche down the sides. So you take a couple of napkins and start licking fast. Nod goodbye, glance up toward the replica of Dante's death mask on the wall. Out the door into the heat, past the basketball courts – no one's playing today. Cross Sixth Avenue, then bear right forty-five degrees onto Bedford Street – diagonals get you there faster, wherever you're going. Bedford's an old sheep path that cuts northwest through the Village to Christopher Street – the one-time Champs Elysée of Gay Liberation's belle epoch. Behind an unassuming door along the way there's Chumley's. It is said a tunnel leads from the ex-speakeasy's basement

to the river, for booze in the '20s, and before that, who knows, escaped slaves, Shanghai'd sailors?

It's a third of a mile more or less to Christopher and several streets intersect along the way. Downing Street comes first – still a tough northwestern outpost of the ever-shrinking Little Italy. Your ice lasts you past Carmine, as far as Leroy and its junction with Seventh Avenue. But it isn't until you hit Morton that the cup goes soggy and you chuck it into a garbage can. When you were a kid, a civics lesson came at every corner, on signs riveted to the trash receptacles: *A cleaner New York is up to you.* And you remember it was on Waverly Place that you first jumped clear over one of those steel mesh bins. Maybe you were nine. On your first attempt, you'd cleared it, but whanged your elbow on the rim coming down. But the next time you aced it, and afterward jumped them regularly without mishap until once, too tired to make a proper go of it, you ran up, leapt, and landed inside feet-first.

Now you're crossing Barrow Street, once called Reason Street, named in a doff of the tricorn to the *Age of Reason*, Tom Paine's post-revolutionary bestseller. By the mid-19th century Reason Street had fructified into Raisin Street. Was it a sign of Reason's fate in the crucible of the young republic, or some unacknowledged Cockney-ism? You would like to believe that raisins were sold out of barrows here, but Barrow was the surname of the artist who engraved a popular view of Trinity Church's parish, recorded from balloon.

Trinity Church used to own the land you're walking through. At the end of the seventeenth century, King William III granted Trinity its charter and a title to most of lower Manhattan in exchange for an annual rent of "one peppercorne." Queen Anne endowed Trinity with more acreage still. Come the Revolution, Trinity severed its ties to the Mother Church. A debt, however, remains a debt, and when Queen Elizabeth comes to visit New York next year, Trinity's congregation plans to pay the arrears – to the tune of two hundred and some odd peppercorns.

Over time, Trinity's holdings distilled down to thirty-one Lower Manhattan buildings. In the vertical city, it's less how much land you own than the rentable space built on top. In this case, an aggregate floorspace of six million square feet, making Trinity one of the city's largest commercial landlords. Come to think it, you were in a Trinity building half an hour ago. Your printer, Astoria Graphics, has its offices on the

twelfth floor of one of them. Incredible views over the low-rise Village to the Hudson and beyond.

Mitch and Ron run Astoria – they're sons of the son of Astoria's founder, so their grandfather may have moved there in the '20s, when Manhattan's printing industry expanded into the vast reinforced concrete structures, many with immense gridded windows, that sprang up south of Houston along Varick and Hudson Streets, the two great traffic conduits hacked through the built-up city toward the Holland Tunnel. Astoria still keeps a few presses and binding machines downtown, but the big web press, the one they'll use for your newspaper job, was moved to New Jersey. As far as Mitch knows, no one runs newsprint in Manhattan anymore. Eventually Astoria's whole operation will follow, though most of their clients are still located in the city. Trinity has taken to quadrupling rents, or refusing to renew leases altogether. Presses make a fair amount of noise. Nor is Superior printing ink the scent that landlords waft to lure the new generation of techno-tenants. Astoria's volume simply doesn't generate the kinds of revenue that would allow them to pay venture capital rates per square foot. So it's west they go. Or close up shop.

Corner of Grove Street now. There's Sharon's building – or at any rate the tenement she used to live in. What's become of her? Of Robin? Of a dozen other ex-comrades? You don't think much about those days now. Must be twenty years since you saw her. But more than once you went to meetings up at Sharon's – which was if not *the* most, then certainly high up on the short list of surveilled radical pads in New York City. At any hour, day or night, a little knot of specious-looking guys just happened to be hanging out on the block carrying off their "undercover" with varying degrees of transparency. Who can say? A few might have been authentic loiterers. But there were plenty of obvious flatfoots, absurd in their fake hippie drag and tell-tale cop shoes, ill at ease, and fooling no one.

Sharon's living room formed a kind of alembic in which every strain of the Movement converged: Young Lords, Panthers, Yippees, Crazies, John Lennon and the Elephant's Memory. Schemes were born there, amidst fumes of opiated Cambodian hash or some such visionary aid, conspiracies not so much to overthrow the state as to show it up for all its pretensions of sovereignty, send a message to whomever might care that its power could be challenged. Some terrific agit-prop emerged – ultra-

militant theater – provocative, playful and spot-on effective in drawing the cruelties, the monstrous absurdities of the war into the forefront of folk's consciousnesses, and by virtue of that, disrupting, however fleetingly, the business of aggression as usual.

How to condense so charged a moment into a sentence or two? Suffice it that as the hand of the state came down heavier, the Movement turned increasingly desperate. It was up at Sharon's, in the latter-days of an evermore rancid, refracted dream of revolution, that you just said *no* to Robin's idea of bombing a bank. You and a couple of your tightest mates backed away from that one fast, less out of fear that you'd get caught – which seemed a certainty given the scrutiny you were under – than because it just seemed out of date, a tactic whose time had come and gone. There had to be something better, though damned if you knew what it was. But Robin persisted, and it landed him in Attica, right in time for the uprising. All his co-conspirators got busted too, among them Sharon and five others, the youngest one the same age as you. As it turned out, the cops were onto Robin from the get-go thanks to an informer on the inside. But in his way, Robin was a lucky guy – he survived by sheer good luck the State Police assault when right next to him in D-yard, a sharpshooter's bullet hit the skull of his best friend, Sam Melville. Your onetime upstairs neighbor, Sam literally died in Robin's hands.

As the '70s wore on, whenever you passed down Bedford, you'd look for the fire engine red *Free Leary! Free the Panther 21!* that Sharon had spray painted on the brick wall in the space between the garbage cans and the ground floor windows. The slogan persisted long past its moment, incrementally scoured by the elements, as close to permanent as any artifact of the ephemeral city. Then one day, on your way home, you saw the garbage cans had disappeared – most likely banished to the back courtyard. Gone too the familiar soot, the gray bricks scrubbed to their original bleak off-white. In place of Sharon's battle-cry, a black-on-white enameled sign: *Co-ops For Sale*. The apartments must have sold out, because today the sign is gone. You peer through the lace windows of the commercial space on the corner, at the tables of a posh restaurant where something funky used to be – was it a laundromat? Walk on by.

June 13 – Eighth Avenue Between 23rd & 24th Streets – Midafternoon

You register them first from behind, the woman wide-hipped, a little kid walking beside her – mother and son? She's white as pie dough, ash blonde. The boy's hair is black, close-cropped, his skin brown as Le Gamin's café au lait. Something distracts you and when you look again they've gone down in a heap together just past Bassry's stand. Must have been a freak fall, their feet somehow tangled.

You close the distance fast. The boy starts crying, first with shock because mom fell, but he's busted his lip and now he tastes his blood, wipes his mouth and sees it too. Instinctively you reach out to see how badly he's cut, but pull your hand back. *Don't get bled on, bro*. See, it's come to this, reflexive fear of the substance we all share. You pull your own lips back, show him what you want him to do. He imitates. Teeth seem intact, no chips, no blood inside. Mom's landed on her knee, abraded it – already there's a swelling beneath the scrape. She tries to reach out for her son, but can't move far, she's just too big. She's crying too, but lets go a string of curses at her injured leg. Squatting there, your heart goes into a kind of freefall, you rub the kid's back, try to calm him down, but he's not buying and just as you begin to imagine their misery grown so huge it engulfs the whole world, an angel comes out of Shangrila. She bears a wad of wet paper towels for Mom's knee, and speaks comforting words, and as they quiet down, you each take one of Mom's big arms and together lift and half-drag her into the salon. The angel finds Mom an empty chair beneath a hair dryer and a stool to prop her leg up on. She brings the boy to a basin where he rinses his mouth in the cooling waters. All this as, round about, the day's frostings, weavings, waxings, nail decorations and pedicures go on.

No more to be done, at least not by you, so you leave the air conditioned paradise, push out into the prematurely ripened summer heat, and turn back to where you were headed in the first place: Bassry's stand to buy bananas, five for a buck, not too green and not too ripe. Thirty-five years you've lived a block and a half away. But never once set foot in Shangrila, until today.

June 27 – Sixth Avenue & 13th Street – Midafternoon

She daubs with blue, puts the finishing touches on her latest. Propped up or lying flat on the table that serves as her sidewalk studio-cum-gallery, a dozen variations on a theme: the Statue of Liberty set against a cloudless sky. Her palette's consistent,

the outline of the figure unvarying, the canvases differ slightly in size and proportion – you'd guess on average around nine inches by twelve. Plenty more paintings packed in cardboard boxes beneath the table. Her sign reads:

WE LOVE STATUE OF LIBERTY,
THERE ARE STILL SOME GOOD PEOPLE LIVING IN THIS WORLD.
NOVEMBER 1898 - JUNE 1996. BERTHA HALOZ.

Held at an oblique angle, her head shakes as though she's *tsk*ing something. But the motion's involuntary. It's perverse, but you nearly laugh aloud, her name's so close to Haldol. Yet as she paints, her hand's rock steady.

Gwen sits in her stroller and you bend down closer to her ear, point to one of the pictures. "Our Lady of the Harbor," you explain. But Gwen's looking everywhere, taking in the whole of her big city. Onward then, to the playground at Jackson Square. Late spring gusts blow sand your way, and the smell of linden.

July 9

Alane calls, most excited. First review of *Free City*, in Publisher's Weekly, and it's a good one, replete with quotable nuggets: "Darton's seductive fable is a stylistic tour de force, a dazzling parable about the birth of the modern age with its terrors and promise.…a debut novel reminiscent of Italo Calvino's work in its dashing mingling of history and fantasy."

Still hard for you to image that in a little over two months, after so many years, you'll have a book out. Bea was right.

July 14, Noon

Up to Central Park for the annual birthday picnic. Gwen, Gwen, Gwen, Gwen! Four, Four, Four, Four!

September 16

Berlin Verlag's bought German rights to *Free City*. There's a bit of good news.

Second call from Alane in the p.m. The review in the *Times* is a fair one – "witty and surprising" – but there's an edge of disappointment in her voice. She wishes it were longer. Still, they did put it in a box, accompanied by an illustration. Overall, your reaction is *whew!* – dodged a bullet there.

September 19 – Long Island City – Midmorning

Studio visit to see Linda B.'s new paintings. For a change you're early. Nothing to do but wait. Weather's still warm. Stiff breeze off the East river. Across the street, a door on the second floor opens onto a fire escape. A man wearing a white dust mask squats on the landing, spraying a trayful of tiny silver objects light green. The tray's mounted on a kind of lazy susan which, every so often, he rotates a quarter turn. With each spin, the bits on the tray turn greener. Occasionally a gust and a little cloud of over-spray drifts between the bars of the fire escape. The inside face of the door looks like an artwork – blotches of a hundred colors – test sprays going back to who knows when? Over and over down the street a pickup truck tries to start. A helicopter moves crabwise into the wind over the river. The sound of chain pulleys and a metallic groan as a garage door begins to rise.

• • •

Linda's the real deal. Tremendous integrity to the work. Nothing else like it. Lyrical and rigorous. But the rub is, it hardly reads in a photograph. One simply has to be in its presence for the chromatics to cohere at all. Painting in the service of light.

September 20 – Newark, NJ – Midafternoon

Another coign of vantage. Since the World Trade Center adopted you as its confessor, you make it a point to look at it from every angle you can – inscribe in your internal geography its effect upon the skylines and horizons. The Scudder Homes used to stand here: a complex of four highrise slabs, demolished around ten years ago, replaced by "town houses." From their front steps the nearly twin towers remain clearly visible. But it must've been something else entirely to look east from a high floor in a Newark tower toward its Manhattan cousins – phantoms, so vast and far away.

September 25

Would that Bea could have been here last night for the *Free City* bash. Shouldn't the dead get a furlough once in a while to be in the presence of the moments they anticipated? "I told you so," she'd have said. One of your few regrets is how you used to blow her off when she'd offer her conviction that your writing would eventually make it into print. You used to think she was just telling you some horseshit to keep herself happy and you from despair. But now? How much pleasure she would have gotten out of reading your little purple book.

November 1 – Late afternoon

Uptown 23rd Street subway platform. Three young women, office workers, wait for the train to take them homeward. Where to – upper Manhattan? Queens? One talks louder than her mates, more energetically, something to do with Halloween in her neighborhood. You're only half-listening, but one line cuts through. "Why would ya throw a toilet off the roof? That's something you're going to need later!"

1997

February 10 – 42nd Street & Broadway – Midafternoon

Subway platform. A man with a million dollar arm balls up a paper bag and wings it at the rat, foraging in the tracks. Struck on its flank, the rat starts, sits up, doesn't run. No more flying objects comes his way, so he goes about his business.

March 25 – West Village – Midday

Walk east from Frank's house, reeling as ever from his tales. The last of the great New York Jewish Irishmen – he turns eighty-two in May. Another Gemini. Whenever Frank introduces you, it's as his "Last Official Student." You carry two books on loan: the *Collected Poems* of Philip Larkin, and a tiny clothbound New Century Library edition of Samuel Butler's *Erewohn*. For your girls, a half-dozen of his currant scones. Frank keeps experimenting and this is the best batch yet. Since his wife Gloria died, you try get down here fairly often. '94 that was, Year of the Four Deaths: Katie's father Franklin, Gloria, Ellen – a close friend and far too young. Then in December, your mother, Bea.

On the corner you stop to wait for the light – pull out the Larkin, open it anyplace, read the poem on the recto page:

Water
If I were called in
To construct a religion
I should make use of water.

Going to church
Would entail a fording
To dry, different clothes;

My liturgy would employ
Images of sousing,
A furious devout drench,

And I should raise in the east
A glass of water
Where any-angled light
Would congregate endlessly.

You ford Hudson Street, then turn right to cross Horatio. Midway, the lettering on a manhole cover catches your eye: NYC SEWER SYSTEM – MADE IN INDIA. Double take. Read it again. All caps, three inches high. No, not Indiana. A new ingredient in the melting pot: cast steel from the other side of the world.

You shift your eyes to the awning ahead: MYERS OF KESWICK – pronounced "kezik." A little bell tinkles above the doorway as you enter. Here, if you're a homesick Brit, you can fill your shopping basket with Marmite, Shrewsberry cakes, tinned mulligatawny soup, boxes of Ty-phoo tea, and blends of Heinz ketchup and baked beans of a subtly different blend than their American cousins. But it's pasties for supper you've come for, and there they are, cooling behind display case glass: chicken and mushroom, curried lamb, shepherd's, pork and apple, steak and kidney. Made on the premises. Addictive too – it's the lard.

There is, in fact, an actual Myer, Peter Myer that is, rubicund face, slightly flaccid cheeks, small, sharp nose. His dark hair's going gray, thinning a bit, and he wears it combed straight back off his forehead. Always in the shop, but he never waits on customers – that post belongs to a young woman – Mr. Myer is either in the kitchen or seated at a table at the back, sipping tea, immersed in ledger books and order forms, or else he reads the newspaper, a raccoon-sized ginger cat wending between his legs. Now and again, he'll look up to survey the scene – a neutral glance, neither wary nor welcoming. There's something about him that's altogether perfect.

The customer ahead of you turns to leave. You're next. A pork and apple (Katie's favorite) and two chicken and mushroom pies (one each for you and Gwen).

The salesclerk's in her mid-twenties, give or take a year. Her accent's English, green eyes, skin light brown – Antilles in her bloodline somewhere.

She gathers your order. You scan the teapots on the high shelf behind the counter: a caricature Churchill makes the V-for-Victory sign, his middle finger's the spout. John Bull sits, Hogarthian, astride a hogshead, eponymous dog at his feet. Beneath these china giants, a row of tiny metal double-decker busses, bright red. Lying to your right stacked on the marble counter, copies of the *Sun* and *Mirror*. Something's up with the Royals – there's Di looking at you sidelong from beneath her hatbrim.

The clerk folds down the top of the white paper sack till it's snug then slips it into a plastic bag printed with the Union Jack. You give her Andrew Jackson and the old brass cash register actually sings out *kaching!* She hands you your change.

You'd like to say something British-sounding in taking your leave. Your usual "have a good one" belongs to New York – to another world. So you hesitate, and in the moment, she fills the void. "How d'ya kill a circus?"

What?

"How d'ya kill a circus?" She steps back, hands on apron'd hips.

You've never been good at riddles so you don't really try, just put on a face that makes it seem you're giving it a serious ponder. *OK, how?*

A glint comes into her eye. "Go for the juggler." You smile. She must have wanted to try that out all day. She's pretty, so you feel oddly like you've won a prize. Unlatch the front door – space out for a moment staring at the rack of bawdy postcards – pull it open. For whom the bell tinkles?

The fast way home is to cross Horatio and cut diagonally across the ball field toward Eighth Avenue. But this time you detour a few paces out of your way to confirm that you were not hallucinating. The manhole cover indeed claims it was MADE IN INDIA. *In'ja*.

April 19

Your daughter is really something. That's his mantra every time you meet him in the elevator. Then he shakes his head as if to change the subject he brought up. *But you're too young to know.* Too young to know what?

Gwen's hardly a shy child and there's nothing overtly menacing him. If anything he looks like a cherub dressed up in a suit – usually three-piece – silk tie and fedora: white hair, pink cheeks clean shaven, talcum-powder sweet like he just came from the barbershop. Yet it used to be that whenever the elevator stopped at 18 and Mr. Litwin got on, she would hide behind your leg and bury her face in your coat. It had to be his clumsy attempts at friendliness she found importuning. He'd reach out to try and chuck under her chin and say – too loud and deadpan to register as a joke – "why don't you come live with me?"

It wasn't as if you saw him every day, and at most once a month with Gwen, but so awkward were these chance encounters that you took it upon yourself to somehow turn the dynamic around. "This isn't going to be easy," you said. "But next time, the minute he gets into the elevator, before he can open his mouth, you say *Hello, Mr. Litwin!* Let's try it. See what happens." Gwen was little then, and more inclined than now to take what you said on faith. At the next opportunity she gave it a shot, and – wonder of wonders – he stepped back as if struck by voltage. And thus began their first conversation – an exchange of pleasantries that lasted all the way to the lobby. Listening to them, you indulged in a Father Knows Best moment, the sweeter for its rarity.

These days Gwen throws her arms around Mr. Litwin when she sees him, walking slowly to or from temple, getting his mail, or riding the elevator. He gives her Hanukah gelt, of course, and birthday money – always a $20 bill, and there's no deterring him. And once or twice when you've run into him on Eighth Avenue, he's bought a lottery ticket to share with her. Their birthdays are a day apart, she's July 14th, he's the 15th, so he must figure there's a winner in that combination somewhere.

This morning, Saturday, early. Gwen's still asleep, you're off to the café. Mr. Litwin gets on the elevator, dapper as ever, dressed for synagogue. You trade hellos. And then he asks: "What's today?"

You look at your watch and tell him *the 19th*, but it's a rhetorical question.

"Tomorrow," he says, "April 20th. They renamed Lodz as a birthday present for Hitler. "Two hundred fifty thousand Poles, Germans and Jews. The Germans and Jews were the richest – they owned the factories and mills."

He's voluble today, more so than usual. You hold the lobby door open for him, slow your pace down to his totter. Past the sycamores lining the block between 25th and 24th Streets. Past the shoe man, Chicken Delight, Shangrila. Past Bassry's stand. At the corner of 23rd, he stops.

"What was it like? You already know. If I told you, you wouldn't believe me. What was it like? I went up to the top of the Empire State Building. I jumped off. I got up and walked away. Do you believe me? May 1st the Nazis tried to escape, but the Americans had cut the rail lines. May 2nd we were liberated. Soon we'll all be gone. Twenty-six years old. Sixty-six pounds."

The traffic signal flashes *walk*. "Be well," he says. "Be well," you reply.

"I pray to God." He starts across the street. Then it comes back to you. Not long after you first moved in, when you were maybe thirteen, Bea whispered – as though transmitting a dangerous knowledge – something you'd completely managed to blank out in the intervening years: "Mr. Litwin was in Auschwitz." You were born in 1950. *Too young to know*.

"Happy holidays," you call after him, but the traffic drowns you out. He's already crossing Eighth Avenue toward the synagogue.

Someone taps your shoulder. It's Bassry, shining a plum for Gwen. "How are you, my brother?" *Fine. And you?* Bassry's smile widens, he glances heavenward, spreads his arms a bit as though to catch or release some invisible object. "Good, thank God."

May 1

Much of the morning spent talking with a really fascinating woman, Nancy Topf, a potential writing student via Paul. She wants to find a coach who can help her with a book about "dynamic anatomy," a method she's evolved in the course of twenty-five years practicing body work, treating mostly dance and sports injuries. Not your average student. Former Cunningham dancer. Uses visualization techniques in the service of realignment. Big emphasis on the action of the *psoas*, a complex, deep-seated abdominal muscle. All news to you.

She pulls out drawings from scores of workshops she's led. Large sheets of newsprint, bold renderings of the figure, interwoven with energy spirals, loops,

patterns of flow and return. On scant acquaintance, you get the impression she's the real deal. When you shake hands in parting, you feel like your arm's been electrified. She'd be big fun to work with and you get a sense already that she feels the same about you.

You take a sheaf of her raw notes to read on the subway. Even here, banging along in a tunnel under less than optimal conditions, her words on the page conjure images that trigger subtle shifts in how you're sitting, the positions of your pelvis, legs and spine. Weird and powerful sensations. As though the eye could be internalized, transformed into an agent of touch.

May 9, Noontime

Sign taped inside window of an electronics shop on Fifth Avenue and 27th Street: YES! WE SPEAK ANDORRAN!

March 23 – From Chelsea Toward the West Village – Early Afternoon

Frank's birthday. Eighty-two, *kineahora*, as Bea used to say. The route down Ninth Avenue from Le Gamin to his townhouse takes you past a whole anthropology of urban orders. Across 21st Street on the west side, the resolutely banal facade of the General Theological Seminary masks a quad straight out of Oxford, utterly invisible to the passerby. Then the Robert Fulton Houses: three enormous slabs thrown up in the '60s, and oriented so that the playgrounds and basketball courts between them lie in near-perpetual shadow. One foggy day, as you approached from the east, the buildings emerged from the mist like a trio of cruise ships berthed side by side – for an instant it seemed the shore had moved a quarter mile inland. It's the rare occasion though that atmospherics conspire to lend them that kind of romance.

A couple of blocks further south, across the avenue, the tall, sloping white facade of Covenant House, a once-celebrated youth shelter, now infamous for the liberties its priest-founder took with his charges. Built as the headquarters of the Longshoreman's union, the windows are round like portholes, the effect part prison-like, part whimsical. *Any port in a storm*?

Just to the south, taking up the whole block between 15th and 16th Streets, Eighth to Ninth Avenues, the behemoth Inland Terminal, built by the Port Authority in

the 1930s. Like the Starret-Leheigh building, there are elevators inside the loading docks large enough to fit a good-sized truck. Used to be a heliport on the west end of the roof too. When you were a teenager, newly moved into Penn South and prey to sliding into detached, timeless lulls between bouts of frenetic activity, you'd stare out your bedroom window and watch the choppers come and go. The terminal's outlived its industrial era intent – it's privately owned now. Swank offices upstairs, retail in the ex-loading docks. Converted, so they say, as though real estate were religion, and the building itself had found a truer faith. Long as you've got the do-re-mi.

On the cusp of 14th Street now. Gateway to the Meat District. Planted foursquare on the overhang above the entrance to the Old Homestead Steakhouse, the life-size brown and white steer. Village landmark – as close to immemorial as it gets. Never been inside the place, though it's always fascinated from afar. Jack and Bea, of course, disdained the place, and, in truth, it probably cost more than they could afford. How many coats of paint on that steer, between the fifties and now? Katie's folks had no such compunction, took her there on a trip in from Long Island. Objectively nothing's stopped you from going in for years now. Funny though how these things carry over from childhood. A kind of reverse snobbery that's made certain places feel off-limits even as an adult. You *could*, for example, walk into Brooks Brothers too – it would be possible under the sun. No one would throw you out. Unlikely they'd even sneer. But it's not part of your mental geography.

These streets, on the other hand, have worked their way into your molecules. Like most of the city south of 14th Street, all grids are off. Cobbled or paved-over streets trace native trails, cow paths, or some other pre-industrial usage. Sometimes the sequence almost makes sense. In this part of the Village, two named streets, say Horatio and Jane, fall between each numbered street, and then bam! West 4th and West 12th Streets cross one another – the pretence of regularity falls apart.

Disorder in more ways than one. And the Meat District in its marbelized shades of meaning. Until a couple of years ago, in the early hours, this maze of streets and alleys bristled with trucks backed up to loading docks, and harbored a thriving traffic among transvestite prostitutes and their largely bridge and tunnel clients. Back when you drove a cab and the night hadn't gone well, this is where you'd cruise to try to change your luck. High risk territory, but there'd always be fares at four or five a.m.,

often inclined to be generous with their own earnings. Sometimes, for a tip they'd pass a fat joint through the money slot in the plexiglas partition. If they'd had a bad night too, or if it was just their thing, they could try to run some trips down. Careful you were, and not easily marked. But one time, when you'd stopped for a light, four transvestite hookers jumped in the back seat, and the fifth, an enormous drag queen, rapped on the front passenger window. So you opened the door and in she got. Somewhere up in Hell's Kitchen, you don't remember exactly where, the four in back jumped out, while the one next to you faked rummaging in her bag, then bolted out the door with the money pouch you hadn't stashed under the seat since there was no way to be cool about it. Off she took at a gallop, one that would have done Native Dancer proud. And Native Dancer never had to run on her hind legs in five inch heels. What was under the seat was your length of galvanized pipe filled with cement, and you went for that, but by the time you ran round the hood of the cab, her lead was just too long.

It was down these Meat streets too, behind prohibition-style sliding peepholes – *Natasha sent me* – and sometimes literally underground, that the tabernacles of post-Stonewall gay and bisexual S&M flourished: the Anvil, the Hellfire Club, and the ultra-hardcore Mine Shaft, which Midwesterners pronounced as Mind Shaft. What a difference a decade makes. These days, when a meat packager closes, the building is converted to luxury loft-apartments, or its site becomes the footprint of a "luxury" residential tower. Here and there, looking west toward the Hudson River, you can still see a remnant of the High Line, the elevated railroad that once formed the spine of Manhattan's industrial West Side. Today the spine's turned skeletal and missing vertebrae. Under pressure from developers, the abandoned steelwork's pulled down, section by section, heading north. You used to be able to see it, anomalous and familiar, the rusty horizontal band running up Washington Street at the height of a second story, whenever you turned right onto Horatio. Now the view's clear down to the Hudson.

Up the four brownstone steps and ring Frank's doorbell. It'll take him a minute or so – longer if he's upstairs in the library – to reach the kitchen window, pull it down and drop the key. Shift the bag of danishes to your left hand in anticipation of the catch. There it was again, on the way down here – the mystery writing. A couple of blocks to the northeast where West 4th Street terminates at 13th Street, there's a vintage

five-story building. Messenger service in the storefront. That much looks every bit the typical downscale holdout. But the upper floors are sheathed in plywood painted flat gray, over which someone's caligraphed three gigantic Chinese ideograms so vibrantly red they can be seen for half a mile, all the way from where West 4th angles clockwise ten degrees at Christopher. Been there a year or more.

The window cracks, widens. Frank sticks out his head, then his arm. Here comes the key. Let yourself in. Upstairs. Big hug. He's looking well, brushy new haircut. Frank sits in his customary chair, you take the leather lounger on which he's draped a motorized massage unit. Pull the lever, up come your legs. Press "back" and "pulse." Frank will know about the calligraphy. Sure – it was a backdrop for a Woody Allen movie. Annie translated it. Mandarin. Means *I love you*.

June 22 – 23rd Street Near Ninth Avenue

Shadow of a seagull on a white stuccoed wall. Great city, are you conscious of yourself? Down on the corner, a police action. They are busting Sunday morning in his aspect as a black man, laughing.

June 27 – Midmorning

East Sixty-Ninth Street. Deep ritz. From opposite directions they advance towards one another. She's young and comely, dressed to the nines, the breeze off Central Park blowing back her gold-blonde hair. He's harassed, closing-in-on-middle-aged – his body language agitated as White Man in an R. Crumb cartoon. At the end of one lightly tanned arm she swings a little black Prada bag. He grasps a dozen leashes tethering him to a carnival assemblage of dogs whose owners leave home early, head downtown to where the schist rises near enough to the surface to support the fortress towers of banks and brokerage houses. Someone's got to walk 'em. And it's a living – sort of.

He's lost control. The dogs have won the day. Total victory. Ecstatic, barking and leaping, they wind him into a late June maypole. *En passant* she turns her head, tilts her chin, widens eyes and shoots him a smile. "Hands full?"

His jaw drops, his gaze follows her locomotion down the street. One, two, three, four beats. "Oh Christ, I wish."

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Midafternoon, 68th Street and Park Avenue. Another MADE IN INDIA manhole cover. East side, west side, all around the town. Well you didn't think they just made one of 'em, did you?

August 14 – Early Afternoon

Your path leads you northwest up Broadway toward Union Square. The sun's at your back and as you walk over the subway gratings, you see a flash of green. Look down to discover a trail of underground flora beneath your feet – a canopy of magnificent weeds. Somehow, ailanthus trees, dozens of them, have rooted in the coffers of the subway vents, in a soil composed of soot, cigarette butts and gum wrappers. Occasionally, a shoot pokes through the grating and gets trodden down. But *ai lanto*, tree of heaven, most celebrated for growing in Brooklyn, keeps pushing toward the light.

Across Broadway, Grace Church, designed after Wren and maybe a cut above even his best. One of Manhattan's most exquisitely proportioned buildings. On a day like today, it's easy to imagine yourself at the top of its spire, observing the bias cut of Broadway as it angles against the grid. Broadway was already a trail when Europeans arrived, and before that, long before even the schist was laid down, it ran as a river valley of dolomite.

Still walking up past Union Square, your toe hits a little upraised faultline on the pavement and you stumble in a kind *dup-da-dup* that flashes you back into the bassline of an old pop song: *The sidewalks in the street; The concrete and the clay beneath my feet; Begins to crumble; But love will never die…*

Who sang that? Don't remember. It'll come back. What year? '67, '66? No, had to be '65. By '66 songs already had a harder-edged sound, the culture gearing up inexorably for the years of ideology and confrontation to come. But '65 still had a sense of open field to it, a lighter touch.

That spring you'd failed Algebra and had to make it up at summerschool: Washington Irving High, just a block over on Irving Place, where a bust of Mr. *Tales of*

the Alhambra himself presided over the entrance gate – though at the time you couldn't have cared less who the bronze geezer was. What you did care about swung past in a diaphanous frock one lunchbreak while you were shooting the breeze out front with a fellow dragoon, a crazy bass player named Mark. All at once, a gust of wind rippled fabric against her form. Mark turned in mid-sentence and literally fell to his knees, hands clasped before him. Thanked God. You didn't genuflect, just witnessed dumbly, embodied in a passing girl, the essential feminine power within the city – a principle masked by its outer armor. Reginald Marsh painted women in dresses like that, their bodies all rolling, vibrant flesh, whereas this girl was an urban willow-child, long hair, loose and straight down her back. *Mais plus ça change, plus c'est la même robe.*

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Subway to Times Square. Hot enough to fry proverbial eggs on the concrete and the clay, but there's not a dress to be seen – strictly business suits, hiphop and whitefolks' sportswear, rigid lines or slack ones, no flow of fabric offered to the god of passing breeze. Reginald Marsh, Damon Runyan, they've all cleared out for good.

Some gear in the cosmic clock must've slipped because for once you're early. At three, Dr. Cooper's going to fill the immense crater in that lower right molar, but you've half an hour to kill. Walk west and come around to 44th Street.

Right here, into the '70s, this now-shuttered row of theaters served up three action flicks back-to-back for a buck. Crappy prints and sprung seats, but at that price, who's complaining? Steve McQueen in *Bullit*, Sinatra's *Tony Rome*, Van Peebles (the Elder) as Sweet Sweetback, Pam Grier's *Coffy*, and the two Lee's: Christopher played Dracula and Bruce, the Dragon. And on the street and in a score of bars, a cornucopia of live bodies – all styles – to stay, or to travel.

It's strange, quaint even, that given all the other ways you veered from the straight and narrow, you never hocked yourself or rented another. To be sure, a little push one way or the other could've tipped it – all states being possible and separated more by membranes than walls. Once, at seventeen, looking fourteen, hair down past your shoulders, you waited at West 4th Street, half dozing on your feet, for a late-night subway home. Someone grabbed you from behind, pinned your arms and pushed

against you hard. You wheeled and broke his hold, shoved him away. A black fella, fifty maybe, very drunk. Determined, he came at you again. You cocked your fist back and he stepped back, widened eyes and cackle-laughed: "I'm goin' up to Times Square and buy me a white boy – just like you!" The A train came then and the both of you got on it – you still shaking.

Thirty years on and it's a different Times Square, and today pretty much every marginal enterprise along the Deuce from Sixth to Tenth Avenue is closed or being gutted in anticipation of brand name stores and tourist megabucks. The "legitimate" theaters, renovated and revived, now cater to well-heeled out-of-towners. Shrinking fast, the last preserves of the three-man virtuoso pickpocket team and the sidewalk chess hustler. Still anchoring the south end of the X, though for who knows how long, a one-third-scale British Airways Concorde perched atop a low-rise roof. From atop his pedestal just north of 46th Street, a bronze George M. Cohan still offers Broadway his immemorial regards.

You've seen the picture, the iconic moment of war's end: the sailor, anonymous, dipping an unknown nurse in a victory embrace. But that was back before your day, when Crossroads of the World must have really meant something. When your ex's father came here in the '30s, it was on a steamer out of Hamburg. The minute he stepped off the gangplank, he set about discovering the place that went with the image he'd been dreaming of for years. Asked the first stranger he met how to get to "Teema Squara." Eventually he found it. You never asked him if it lived up to what he'd seen in his head and it's too late now.

That's it. Unit 4+2. *The concrete and the clay*. Odd name for a band. By tomorrow it'll be cleared from your front-line memory again. But the beat's stuck there for good.

August 18 – Midmorning

Graffito on subway wall: *GHANDI WUZ RITE*.

September 4

Nancy's churning out the pages like there's no tomorrow. She comes up every couple of weeks to meet you at Le Gamin, shows you what she's done. When she said she wanted to write a book, she wasn't fooling around. Hit the language like it was the

floor. Best of all, she uses you to push off of too, challenge her, so your work sessions feel physical, like your give and take's a martial art. Officially a non-writer, she's your most engaged student. Today you have to restrain yourself from jumping out of your seat. Nancy's invented a dialogue among a teacher, a student and a host of body parts, bones, muscles. Only a few months in and she's found the mode to animate her narrative.

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You learn of the death, two days ago, in Vienna, of Viktor Frankl.

September 5 – 23rd Street & Eighth Avenue – Midafternoon

"Hey Bongla Dosh! Bongla Dosh!" he shouts, screeches his bike up to the curbside fruit stand. Abu looks up from making change, smiles his Mona Lisa smile. The messenger's another regular customer. Coke-bottle glasses with heavy black frames, a huge-torsoed man maxing out a red stretch teeshirt. Still straddling his machine, he begins to fill a plastic bag with tangerines.

Abu works the westernmost of the twin, umbrella-covered carts. Bassry, boss and owner, mans the one across the avenue. Kesban, whose truck makes the early morning Hunt's point runs, floats between the two. Apart from Sundays and major holidays – or those rare occasions when bad weather cuts sidewalk business to a trickle – the tandem stands anchor the crossroads, from sunrise until dusk, vending fresh fruit and vegetables *à bon marché* to the tides of souls passing through.

When you stop at Abu's cart alone or with Katie, he'll pull a ripe banana off a bunch for Gwen – even if he's in the midst of making change for one of the fierce old matriarchs of the Co-op. When Gwenny's with you, she'll "surprise" Abu – sneak up and tap him in the small of the back, then scamper out of view when he turns round. Eventually, she'll let herself be caught, and then the banana goes directly to her. Of the trio, Abu remains the mystery man, the reserved one. Partly, you suppose, because he's a hired hand, not a partner. Nor is his English up to Bassry and Kesban's – he hasn't been here as long as they have – so you find yourself communicating primarily through

body language. Abu always seems tired, but one day his face looked unusually ashen, and drawn. *How are you doing?* you asked, and he tapped his heart and shook his head.

When it's Bassry or Kesban you encounter, they'll make a quick circuit of the stand, mix plums with grapes and cherries, palm an organic mango or basket of strawberries and hand her a small, knotted bagful of fruit. If Gwen's in school, or at home, they make you her bag man. You tried, the first few times, to pay for the bounty they bestow on your child. But Kesban responded with a look, half insulted, half grief-stricken, and Bassry's smile distorted into a glare – so you learned to keep your money in your pocket and simply offer your thanks.

September 7 – Le Gamin Chelsea – Early Morning

Why in hell write all this? Some bloke in a city. He feels his age – the big five-oh drawing closer like an ambivalent friend. You laugh aloud and folks at a far table glance this way. That's it, the title for your memoir: *The Good, The Bad and the Middle-Aged.*

September 9 – Midmorning

A daydream – a trance vision really – facing south toward Lower Manhattan as you work out on the Nordic Track. With each pull on the handgrips you draw the trade towers closer toward you, or perhaps it's you that skis toward them. Somehow in the process, you enlarge until you're huge – their scale – close enough to work your way between them and drape your arms around their shoulders. They smell of panic. You want to comfort them, allay their distress. *I'm here now,* you say. *Come on, let's go. I'll buy you a drink.*

September 11 – Le Gamin SoHo – Early Morning

High finance meets café society. Of the trio, the odd man out is the fellow in the suit: Steve, of J. P. Morgan. Built too large for the banquette or the toy-sized tables, Steve nonetheless appears completely at ease. Everything is as it should be. When his glasses slide down his handsome nose, they provide an opportunity for him to raise an arm, reveal an exquisitely simple cufflink. And his tan, frighteningly even, carrot-hued.

By contrast, his companions exhibit a nearly Hasidic pallor. Wraithlike, bodies lost within black garments, clothes that seem more like shrouds, their shoulders drawn forward as if encircling too-vulnerable hearts: Patti, New York's proto-punk rocker, and friend Oliver. The subject is investment, or, as Steve puts it, "the financial future."

For long stretches, Patti sits silent, withdrawn. Occasionally she lifts her bowl of café au lait and takes a deep draught, turns sideways to gaze out the window. Oliver wears a goatee and a cap that reads Snohomish Police Department. But his grunge look's a cover: he's asking questions, and from the way the big man nods, they're good ones. You reimmerse yourself in your book, and by the time you glance over at them again, the energy of the group has shifted – the couple's listening intently as Steve lays out his vision. The fingers of one hand pressed together and palm flat, his forearm traverses the marble table top, slicing something. Where have you seen that gesture before? Ratners – vanished Ratners. "How much you want?" They'd hold the knife over a length of strudel – move the blade sideways until you gave them the nod.

September 22

Little by little, grape by lemon by banana, a new morsel of the Kesban and Bassry tale. She lives in Queens with her husband and two kids, a boy and girl. Bassry's children are back in Egypt where he returns from late December to mid-May every year. He's counting the days until he goes home for good. Two years more in New York, he says, until he has secured his daughters' future. Both of them go to private school, "a school with computers," where they study English. And he must save money for their dowries. The elder is six now, the younger three, and his wife is pregnant again. From his apron pocket, Bassry produces a little photo album and there they are in situ, the furnishings of the Alexandria apartment western-suburban, an odd contrast with his wife's traditional clothes. Bassry says he will welcome whatever child comes, but it's clear how keen he is on a boy.

Bassry's day begins before sunup and finishes around eight in the evening, Monday through Friday. Saturdays, he teaches karate to a doctor and his son. He learned martial arts in the Egyptian Special Forces, shows you a snapshot of his younger self in *ghi*, aloft in a flying kick, high as the heads of his mates watching in the background. Bassry's a man of enormous energies, handsome too, but there are days

his eyes seem nearly unfocused with exhaustion. "When you work like this," he says, "I can't feel my body."

Kesban parks her truck at the meters on Eighth Avenue. If the back door's rolled open, that means she's inside arranging boxes. In which case you lift Gwen up onto the tailgate to get her hug. Then Gwen jumps off and into your arms, a trick which always makes Kesban nervous, but you've never missed yet and don't intend to. When Kesban's working the stand, Gwen runs up to her beneath the umbrella. Either way, there's always an embrace and a nuzzle, Gwen's small head pressed into Kesban's neck. "I love you, I love you," Kesban says. And then, solemn, almost stern: "Be a good girl. Listen to your mommy and daddy."

By degrees Kesban's look's been morphing. First her straight brown hair took on a coppery, almost Pre-Raphaelite hue, which suits her skin – then a wave. Next, silver bracelets appeared on her upper arm, and, visible beneath her apron, evermore fashionably-cut jeans. For Gwen's last birthday, Kesban gave her a denim jumper dress with a zipper up the front. And a bag of cherries. When Kesban goes home to visit her mother in Ankara, a postcard comes – sometimes after she's already returned to New York – addressed to Gwen. The one that made Gwen avid to see Turkey showed a landscape of white limestone pools filled with bathers set against a brilliant blue sky.

Today, dusk falling, you hurry out to teach Writing X. Just before you take the subway stairs at 23rd Street, ever alert to the sound of an approaching train, you pause to shake hands with Bassry. His fingers are blunt, his palms large enough to encompass a peach, touch-read it for bruises and ripeness. He presses his left hand over yours in a sandwich, then lays it over his heart. "Peace my brother," he says.

September 23 – Uptown #1 – Morning Rush Hour

Packed subway. Two men in suits constellate around the same pole, engaged in as asymmetrical a conversation as you could want. One fellow's grand scale, straddles his briefcase as though it were an inferior sort of horse, peppers his underling with questions about the company website. The subordinate seems to shrink with every volley. Next stop's yours. Time to start fighting you way toward the door. Your back's to them now, but above the roar, you hear boss man fire off the million dollar question: "What I want to know is, do we have the wrong Provider?"

September 26 – MacDougal Street – Early Morning

Kelly green bandanna tied round her head, skin dark as Café Reggio's espresso. Olive-drab standard-issue trousers ride low on hips so ample, they've stretched the elastic band of her gray sweatshirt into submission. She drives a huge rusting white Sanitation truck – persimmon-colored Barney mascot, leaking stuffing out its seams, crucified to the radiator – backward up MacDougal street. Every thirty feet or so she brakes and hops out of the cab. With one work-gloved hand, she grabs a big blue recycling drum sitting curbside, drags it to the truck, and flips it over so the cans and bottles spill into the maw of the hopper. With the other hand she pats the drum's bottom, firm and gentle as burping a baby. Then two moves in rapid succession: she pulls down the lever that starts the mechanical jaws and spins the empty bin back up onto the curb.

Poetry in motion – a threadbare trope, but true enough for her. Intention, economy and style in one smooth algorithm, the way Wally Backman and Keith Hernandez once handled the double play. Except this woman's a team of her own. One foot on the step beneath the cab, then up she swings and inside – shift to reverse, up comes the clutch, accelerator down, eye on the mirror – all energy homing in on that next patch of blue.

October 21 – Little Park at the Corner of Houston Street & Sixth Avenue – Morning

Undomiciled – who can say? Certainly all his art supplies are packed in a shopping cart. Whenever you pass of a weekday morning you glimpse him through the fence as he draws and paints, unrolls more heavy paper. Birds with extraordinary detailed plumage, felines amidst bougainvillea forests, immense orange carp. He uses the chess tables as both display surface and workbench. He's bundled up these days in a parka with a tight-laced hood. A white cardboard sign propped up on a bench, caligraphed in black: *Mirikitani, Imperial Greater Art Department Chief Director, born June 15, 1920.*

October 31 – 23rd Street & Eighth Avenue

Early morning, the week before election day, you wait for the invariably jammed downtown local. Surprise! There's Ruth Messinger, Manhattan Borough President and last best Democratic hope for mayor, orange suit peeking out from beneath black raincoat, leaning against a column and reading the *New York Times.* Her aides, four or five of them, all youngish men, pace the platform like expectant dads waiting outside a maternity ward in a 1950s sitcom. Despite their dark suits, they carry themselves like boys. If she wins, will they pass out chocolate cigars? Apart from anxiety, this entourage generates very little presence at all. No flashy campaign buttons, just blue lapel stickers that read, discretely, *RUTH*.

You approach the candidate. "Hi, Ruth. Good luck."

"Thank you." She smiles – extends her hand in a friendly way. Her aides warily converge. They seem surprised that someone recognized her. Ruth looks immensely tired, eyes bloodshoot, pancaked cheeks the color of fading pumpkin.

You head down the platform, away from the incessant electronic beeping, the tide of human transience pouring through the turnstiles. As the train pulls in, you look back. Ruth's still leaning against the column, reading the *Times.* Her aides continue to pace. These are not the guys you'd want taking point for you if you were running against Giuliani – or even, for that matter, shouldering your way onto a jammed downtown local.

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Midday at the Chelsea Gamin. Young idiots do lunch, one male, one female. Excited talk about the male's idea for a genex entertainment/financial news cable show. *Awesome!* Music videos intercut with Jakob Dylan's investment strategies. "I hear you and I'm way ahead of you!" she shouts.

"Don't tell anyone! If anyone steals this, I'm screwed!" he yells.

"This could be –"

Magnanimously, he picks up the tab over her disingenuous protests.

"One day maybe we'll work together," she barks, the swing of her shearling coat upending a water glass. Icewater pools, crests, and drips over the edge of the table. The check and dollar bills gets soggy. Out the door. No tip.

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Eighth Avenue between 21st and 22nd Streets, west side. Early Afternoon. You walk past a lot fenced off with chain link and topped with ribbonwire. The site's been vacant for nearly two years since they knocked down a row of three burned-out, abandoned, hundred year-old tenements. Some effort being made to maintain the rubble in pristine condition. Persons unknown, probably agents of the developer, have been carting away the trash that routinely gets heaved over the fence by night.

Weaving south along the sidewalk, the man pilots a train of four recalcitrant shopping carts spilling over with empty cans and bottles. His garments consist of a large black plastic bag inventively knotted, and for footwear, a weave of rags, spiraling like puttees up his red-brown legs. Alternately pushing and hauling, he raps: "I ain't got time for no bitches; gotta keep my mind on my motherfuckin' riches."

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Twilight. From nearly every townhouse in the neighborhood, from 20th to 22nd Street between Eighth and Tenth Avenues, an unearthly glow. On the brownstone steps perch jack o' lanterns, not a few carved to a Martha Stewartesque intricacy. These are the "safe houses" for the neighborhood celebrants – children of lawyers, brokers, Italian journalists, Brazilian actors, parents on welfare, health care workers, filmmakers, specialty bakers, Soca musicians, economists, epidemiologists, plasterers – who tonight have turned to bats, cats, witches, space aliens, pirates, goblins all. These kids will find nothing toxic in the Snickers plucked from Count Dracula's bottomless bowl. No pins have been pushed into the organic apples Mommy Witch dispenses from her doorstep.

It's already dark thanks to daylight savings time and taperecorded screams vibrate the still-temperate air. The trees sway, alive with the play of ghosts: ragged-edged muslin wrapped round grapefruits, hung from the low boughs of a pear tree. Light pours from the sanctuary of St. Peter's Episcopal Church, command center of All Hallows 'een. Foursquare at the gate, a hunchbacked monster doles out orange flyers listing the addresses of participating houseowners, with suggestions for the most

efficient route. Accompanying their little ones, ashen moms, drooling green out the sides of their mouths, and dads sprouting devils' horns. "Trick or treat," the kids yell at each waystation, their grins illuminated by fluorescent fangs. Reeling in delight as they criss-cross the street, they climb and descend the brownstone steps, rapturous as their bags grow heavier with loot, dizzy with triumph on their once-a-year mission against fear.

November 4 – Le Gamin Chelsea – Early Morning

Post headline: RUDI SWEEPS. Ruth Messinger has the classic witchy face, but yesterday New York City voters went and re-elected a real-life ghoul.

But truly, at the mythic level Giuliani more resembles our home-grown King Pentheus, sworn enemy of the Bacchae. Where are you, Brother Dionysius?

November 5

Broadway at 22nd Street, mid-afternoon, yet already getting dark – the street broken vertically into light and dark masses. You push your pace into overdrive to get round a slim fella, well-dressed, white, middle-aged and talking urgently into his cell phone. "It gets so dark after five o'clock… They're never going to find their way up that road… Tell them to start earlier – for their own sakes…"

November 9

Bea's birthday. She'd have been eighty-eight, like the keys on her Steinway – the one her granddaughter now plays.

"One day," said Albert Ayler, "everything will be as it should be."

November 11 – Greenwich Avenue Between 10th & Charles Streets

Gone – the hole-in-the wall falafel and shish-kabob restaurant whose sign welcomed customers in nineteen languages. And then the boast: "Open 19 Hours." The immemorial real estate tale: Landlord Shoots the Rent to the Stratosphere. No Multiple of Shwarmas Can Close the Gap.

Windows placarded from the inside with spreads of the *New York Times*. Campaign finance. Film adaptations of Brontë novels. New York's Wealth of Nature.

An ad for "Fairy Tale: A True Story." Cartier's selling watches. Pull-out section on SoHo chic. October 24th issue, already yellow.

November 15

Last night, a small round rat dashed across your feet on Sixth Avenue just north of Broome Street. From the gutter, across the sidewalk, it ran parallel to the stream of water flowing from the carwash, leapt up the steps and into the office. Anxious and self-important like he's late for work. See White Rabbit? See what coming to Gotham gets ya?

November 16 – Downtown #1 – Early Evening

The car is packed so tight, people standing out of reach of a pole or handle steady themselves by pressing their fingers against the ceiling like waiters balancing an enormous tray. Assuming they are tall enough to reach that high. The rest of us hope the density of the other bodies will keep us from losing our balance if the train jolts.

Your back's to it, so you don't see the door between cars slide open, but you hear, momentarily the louder roar. Then it slams shut. Someone's entered. Through the vibrant medium of compressed bodies, it's possible to feel him moving closer, even before he speaks. *I ain't bathed in three weeks. I'm dirty. I'm smelly. I'm funky.* A young woman embracing a pole and pressed against your arm reads, with superhuman concentration, a magazine article about a dynasty of supermodels. *I want to buy a bar of soap. I want to buy some deodorant. Any small charitable contribution would help.* The edge of someone's bag is carving out your liver. For all you know, your own satchel, which you can neither raise nor lower, may be compromising the reproductive capacity of the suited fellow with whom you are nearly nose to nose. *I want to be clean like youalls. I want a house like youalls. That's the reality. I'm trying to deal with the reality.* Ever closer. *I want to take a shower. I want to buy a toothbrush and some toothpaste…*

December 8

Exhibit on *The Motive Power of Fire* at the Electrokinetics Gallery on Lafayette Street. Exquisitely crafted models of early steam engines – one described by its inventor as *An ENGINE for Raising Water (with Power made) by Fire.*

Elemental stuff. Unimaginable the clang and rush that must have accompanied those days, so different from the kudzu spread of nanotechnology. A few years back, when you were teaching a course on technology and social change at Hunter, you stumbled on a great quote. Boswell toured Watt and Boulton's manufactory in Birmingham in 1776, guided by none other than the Iron Chieftain himself. Said Boulton to the Great Biographer: "I sell here, sir, what all the world desires to have – POWER."

December 10 – Le Gamin SoHo

Fifteen French students. Massing on the street. Not enough tables for them by half. This is a very small restaurant. They'll never fit. And someone's barricaded themselves in the bathroom. You're sitting close enough to hear the sink running. He – it must be a he – is washing his hands like there's no tomorrow. With each modulation in the roar of the faucets, you imagine him scrubbing, rinsing, cupping. His hands must be chapped – it's winter – but he's going to keep washing until the cows come home. Now it's louder – sounds like he's taking a bath in there, drowning out even the espresso machine which is churning out foam for the French students' cafés au lait.

Somehow, they've all made it inside the café. They're a jovial lot and thin as rails. They squeeze together, several double up on a chair. Soon they generate miasma of smoke. The first student gets up, tries the bathroom door, rattles it, and receiving no response, shrugs and turns away. Now you get up and peer into the light seeping through the door crack. Just visible, the shadow of a torso moving rhythmically, like he's davening at the sink, and the sound of the torrent. Sit back down. Occasionally a student walks over to the bathroom door, jiggles the handle. Behind it rushes a virtual Niagara of compulsion, but they are visitors to the city and thus find everything amusing and exotic. They take it all philosophically, return to their table and light up another cigarette.

You, however, are hardcore New York, so you conjure an image of yourself sliding a credit card into the crack to trip the bolt, then rousting the fellow out – raw, dripping hands and all – and heaving him bodily into the street. In your Irish cop persona, you'd stand before the door, barring it. *Off with you now, you madman – g'wan! Monopolize someone else's toilet.* The image appeals, but only now do you realize that

what you really need to do is get out of this place yourself – away from the noise, the oppressive smoke. You bundle up to leave and as you squeeze past the French students, one of them makes eye contact, holds up his camera with a hopeful are. Out you stumble, the sixteen of you, like clowns liberated from a Volkswagen. The students disarrange themselves into two rows on the steps. Looking through the viewfinder, you still can't believe they all fit inside. *Un, deux, trois – 'fromage!'* Incredible smiles. They thank you and pile back into the café. You head north toward home. And HydroMan – who knows? Will the secret of his identity ever be revealed?

December 13

Gwen was not quite three and a half when her grandmother died, so it's not likely she can access many memories of 'mama Bea. You haven't said anything about the approaching two-year anniversary, yet Gwen brings up the subject on her own, says she feels sad about it. Still, she adds, "Mama Bea lives inside our bodies because we remember her."

"Yes," you say, "she lives outside of her body."

"So," says Gwen matter-of-factly, "she's alive *and* dead."

Christmas Day

Mind adrift. What brought up such an ancient image? Long ago, when you were maybe seven, you saw a policeman on a motor scooter run head first into a truck on one of the streets below Houston – Greene Street, probably. Hard to say who caused the accident, but the cop went flying up in the air, as though propelled by a trampoline, then came to earth on the Belgian cobbles, quite luckily not headfirst. You remember him half-sitting there, staring at his broken ankle, the foot displaced, as though it belonged to someone else, and his visored hat, upside down on the sidewalk.

December 27

Reading a Gore Vidal article in the *New* Yorker, you come across a wonderful 18th Century word-concept coined by J.G. Herder: *Einfühlen* – to feel one's way into the past, as *through* a mirror.

Gwen begins a series of tracings: to "make Daddy happy." Snapshots of herself with Mama Bea. You tape them up on the wall above her dresser. Gwen directs which one goes where.

December 31

Q: Is this the Gotham where the fools come from?

A: No sir, this is the Gotham that the fools come to.

1998

January 2 – Noontime

When the mechanical bronze laborers flanking Minerva go to work in Herald Square, clanging out the hour with their sledge hammers against the enormous bell, the pigeons flap off in routine alarm, sweeping round Macy's façade, the grand bastions of a former wedding-cake hotel, the squared-off neon ideograms of Koreatown, through the shadows of the Empire State Building to return, as the sounds die out to perch on goddess's head, the shoulders of her servants and the granite pedestal memorializing James Gordon Bennnett's vanished newspaper.

Walk northwest on Broadway. Thirty-fifth, thirty-sixth. Down which street was it Lily Bart sewed sequins on hats? Couldn't have been around here come to think of it – these buildings hadn't been built yet. Most likely, Lily worked downtown in the old garment district – east of Washington Square Park – near or even in the old Triangle Shirtwaist building, now classrooms for NYU.

Thirty-ninth. Your beacon to the north's a new icon of beauty: Linda Evangelista, draped across a billboard four stories high. In Lily's day, before the electric grid and neon, gaslight ruled Times Square – the signs literally on fire.

January 5 – Le Gamin Chelsea – Early Morning

You've become something of a fixture here: The man at table 4. Only a few blocks from where you live, this northern outpost of the multiplying Gamins is where you gravitate in the a.m. on days when you have no firm obligations elsewhere. Strong early light over the rooftops, through the big panes facing onto Ninth Avenue. And a window at your back too, out onto 21st Street. Here's a spot to plant yourself – lengthen your growing season.

If you're writing longhand in your book, patrons at neighboring tables will sometimes ask if it's a journal or comment on your fountain pen. When you're working on your laptop, they interrupt less, since this looks more like business than play. If

someone does make so bold as to initiate a dialogue, she or he begin by talking about laptops. Do you like your Macintosh? Later in the conversation, it will emerge that he is a writer, that she keeps a journal, attends a writing workshop, and wants to be a writer. Or that he is a newsman.

This newsman wears an electric blue cap emblazoned with his station's logo even on his day off. Wide, pale blue eyes. Lashes perennially a little damp, Kewpie-like. His skin is preternaturally tanned, but you feel the booze underneath, coke too, probably, or pills, percolating to the surface, yearning to breathe free. He assumes you invest in the stock market and wants to talk about the crazy money he makes tapping away at the keys. You touch the side of your head and tell him all your capitals is invested here and this intrigues him more.

The newsman's girlfriend sits across from him. A lawyer, it turns out. Harvard grad. By day, she teaches future DAs to throw away the key. In her spare time, she's writing a book with big ambitions: rescue public education from lefty bureaucrats and "give parents choice." She asks you a dozen questions and answers them herself. The free talk's made her exuberant and she wants to kiss the newsman across the table, but its breadth makes the move awkward. When they leave, she leads him by the hand, home presumably, past the General Theological Seminary's unassuming facade. He walks beside her like a pull toy, limbs stiff as wood.

January 9 – Midafternoon

Sixth Avenue, Avenue of the Americas. Same difference. Street with a split identity. Beginning in the late 1870s, an elevated train line rattled overhead, from Greenwich Village to Central Park, creating a valley of depressed property values below. Then, in the early thirties, Rockefeller Center rolled up against the El from the east and within a few years, the tracks were gone.

In the mid-fifties, you rode the bus up Sixth, gazed with a kid's astonishment at the modern office slabs sprouting like huge dominoes on both sides of the avenue, from the lower forties north.

Then came the medallions – brightly colored insignias of every American nation, hung from sleek, curve-topped lampposts along the whole length of the thoroughfare. The emblems looked fascinating, very official, lots of detail, but impossible to examine

properly from the street. You could read the country names though, and sound them out: Uruguay, Paraguay, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, one by one, as you walked to school up the avenue, from 3rd or Waverly to 12th Street. You didn't know it at the time, but the same Rockefellers whose name went with the Center had been busy south of the border too, sinking their teeth into a juicy melon called United Fruit. Not to mention great suckings forth of Venezuelan oil.

Over decades, exhaust fumes and the elements took their toll on the medallions. The enamel rusted around the edges, the images faded, blending into the visual noise of the cityscape. But they disappeared for good only a few years back when the lampposts were scrapped and new ones went up, sans insignias. By which time the city had pan-Americanized to the point where Johnny Colón, East Harlem native and salsa legend, could, with a wink, spin the Big Apple a new nickname: El Gran Mango. And mangos come from southeast Asia too.

At 59th Street, Sixth Avenue turns into a tree-lined roadway, exchanges its linear flow for a serpentine drive northward into Central Park. Here, in a modest plaza carved out of the parkland, three bronze equestrian statues stand high atop black granite pedestals – larger than life. They depict heroic figures in the wars of American independence, and the relationship among the triumvirate is formal, deliberate. San Martín faces east, toward the Old World he returned to. Bolívar rides purposefully in the direction of Los Angeles. Martí looks as if he was about to leap south over 59th street when his horse reared up, pawing the air. Taken by surprise, the Apostle of his people reels back, frozen in disequilibrium.

Afternoon flurries over packed-down snow. You're heading east, then north toward Hunter, stealing time from paying work to research the trade center book. Martí doesn't move. Why should he? He witnessed plenty – a New York even more spectacular than your own. Reported from the city of his exile on the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge, festivities for the Statue of Liberty, the great blizzard of '88. You evolve the impossible notion that he sees you trudge by beneath him, slip once on the glazed marble pavement. Then he urges you to go see Falencki about the occasional pains in your sternum. Falencki's a good guy, treats patients on a sliding scale, but it's still more than you can afford just now. Every xerox at the library costs a dime, same

with every microfilm print. And anyway it's not a classic heart symptom. Stress or grief, more likely.

A pigeon lights on Martí's right shoulder. José, did you know that today, two million New Yorkers, citizens of *that immense valve of pleasure open to an immense people* have no health insurance? But Martí, green and oxidized is not listening. And for the first time in all the years you've known this statue, you finally read it. It's not the taxis honking, the Lilliputian nags pulling buggies full of tourists that spooked his horse. Martí is home in Cuba, leading his column through the pass at Dos Ríos. Fixed in the moment of ambush – where the bullet found him.

February 25 – Le Gamin Chelsea – Early Morning

On the way here, you walked past a fellow dressed for office with a big gray smudge on his forehead and had the immediate impulse to reach for your handkerchief and wipe it off. But then, a few steps on, you saw another smudge, and realized it was Ash Wednesday.

At the café around 10:30 the payphone rings. Deborah answers it, beckons you over. It's Gloria. Basic Books has come back from the dead – resuscitated as the pole star of a venture capitalist's constellation of imprints. John D. has been made publishing director, and he's always liked your book. She wants to reapproach him with a revised WTC manuscript. Revised. Again? You hear the complaint in your voice. It's been rejected by what, twelve publishers? The guy at Pantheon said he couldn't find a coherent narrative line in it. The book needs an editor, simple as that. You have carried it as far as you can on your own. Gloria's voice lowers in pitch and volume. "That was an earlier draft. And Eric, you know how to edit it yourself."

Slow burn back at Table 4. No comfort out there, no hand of friendship extended to pull you across. But then something inside you softens. Gloria is right, you have to edit it yourself. You're the only one who cares enough about this tar baby to figure out its secret name.

March 9

Subway poster for United Healthcare: *Grocery stores have express lanes. Why not health plans?*

Why not indeed? And they say the art of reasoning's dead!

March 15

Comes the news *Free City* will be published in Madrid on April 18th as *Una ciudad libre*. You're invited over. You try to slow your pulse, speak deliberately into the phone: "I travel with my family." A silence on the other end that seems too long to augur well. This Darton is a more expensive package than they thought.

March 17

It's settled. You will pay for Katie and Gwen's airfare. Debate, bless their hearts, will cover the hotel, food and local travel for the three of you. Now, where to find the money for the plane?

April 1 – Early Morning

Uptown to El Taller Latinoamericano to reanimate your moribund Spanish. If Bernardo can't help you, no one can.

April 7

Dr. Cooper pulls that falling-apart wisdom tooth. *Una muela del juicio*'s what you lost, according to Bernardo, a tooth of judgment. And in the same breath, he serves up *perogrullo*, a Sancho Panza figure, wise fool. And deriving from it, *perogrullada* – in one sense a platitude. In another, a deceptively simple statement containing a profound truth.

April 15

Elena from Debate calls. On the menu, a presentation, press interviews. Big spread in *El Pais* coming out – a review by an eminent novelist. She gave your book to the American cultural attaché who read it and liked it, and offers, if you wish, to host a luncheon for you at the U.S. consulate. Sure, why not? A wonderful snowball, all started by Marithelma.

April 16 – Kennedy Airport – Midmorning

Come out of the clouds
Come out of the sun
Come out of the snow and rain
Where he's going, nobody knows
But it just might be to Spain.

May 1

Keep your splendid sun,
Keep your woods, O Nature, and the quiet places by the woods
Keep your fields of clover and timothy, and your cornfields and orchards…
and give me the streets of Manhattan!

Right, Walt. But did you ever climb the path to the Alhambra? Or wander the rose gardens of the Generalife in spring? Ten days in Spain is not enough.

May 6 – Midafternoon

The image has been popping into your head at random moments since you returned. So you take the F Train down to pay a call on the mural in the lobby of the building where your grandfather Meyer and aunt Gladys used to live, 208-212 East Broadway. Nearly twenty years since Gladys died, and on your last visits here, you were too preoccupied to notice much. A security guard opens the door and when you tell him it's the painting you have come to see, he warms to the subject. He spends, after all, much of his workday in its presence. He's logged plenty of hours studying it, taking in its nuances. *Did you know that FDR's eyes follow you, whichever way you walk down the hallway – left or right?* The guard is not happy about the restoration the co-op did a few years back. A sloppy job. Added fleshtones and shadows – destroyed the artist's purposely flat tonality. He's right. The unfinished quality it used to have feels force-ripened now.

A woman around your age enters, falls into the conversation. Celia. She's lived here in the Seward Park Co-ops since she was a kid. Every afternoon when she came home from school, for five or six months running, the painter would be there, up on his scaffold. Then one day he was gone. The mural was done. An elderly fellow comes

through the door pushing a cartful of groceries. Introduces himself as Abe Rosenthal, joins the little circle of art critics. "See," he says, "what they did there?" He directs your eye to the image you came for, the Nazi helmet, with a sapling growing through a fissure in its crown. "It used to have a swastika there," he says, and points out a crudely rendered bullet hole. "But some people complained, so they painted over it."

A pabulum-like response emerges from your lips to the effect that people are always trying to rewrite history and Abe waves his hand dismissively. "They're trying to *eliminate* history," he says. You could kiss him for those words and the vehemence of their utterance.

Built as a working-class co-op, with capped equity to keep it affordable, Seward Park Houses served as a model for Penn South, where you live. Same basic plan, a cluster of red brick high-rises set in a park. But Seward has gone market rate now. The incoming residents want to put marble over the mural, says the security guard. After thirty-eight years, Celia is cashing out and moving to Florida.

You don't drop your jaw. Don't ask her what the hell she plans to do down there. Nor mention your own history in this place, that your aunt and grandfather's apartment served as a refuge for several months after Jack chucked you and your mother out late one night in 1961. You too came home from school through this lobby, and at first you didn't understand the iconography, thought that the sapling was growing through a cracked metal basin. Then Eichmann was captured and you read – surreptitiously, because Gladys tried to hide the book from you – about the deportations, the death camps. And saw pictures, some too awful to imagine, and some of soldiers in uniform that made you realize the basin was an upended helmet.

Objectively the mural is nothing to write home about. Didactic and bloodless, lacking any sort of passion. And the rendering's perfunctory, mechanical. Watered-down WPA. The FDR portrait you can take or leave, Mona Lisa eyes and all. But to this day, the image of the sapling splitting the helmet – of nature reasserting her claim to an object whose material once came out of the ground – remains indelible, spontaneously reoccurring. Before you leave, you take photos. In case the marble goes up before you get back here.

You walk along East Broadway, past the library, the Educational Alliance, the park, the old Yiddish *Daily Forward* building, the Chinese restaurant that used to be the

Garden Café. Turn right onto Essex Street. There's your high school looming up ahead, and beyond it, the Delancey Street subway stop. This neighborhood makes you go Pavlovian. You find yourself salivating for a Gus's pickle. But where is Gus now? *Is* there a Gus's now? Out of nowhere you start singing "Hit the Road Jack." More than once in the months you lived down here, you fantasized things happening the other way around – your father having to leave the house instead of you – *That's right, hit the road, Jack* – Bea ordering him out the door with the implacable authority of those backup singers, the Charlettes. And, like Ray Charles, all he'd offer in return would be a sheepish, *Well I guess if you say so....*

Yet somehow you and Bea eventually found a home – in a pile of bricks very like the one you just revisited. And now your mother's gone, but your daughter wakes up every morning in what used to be your room. And looks out over the same city that's altogether different now.

May 11 – #1 Downtown Local – Midafternoon

A violinist, Chinese you think, attempts to keep his footing as he navigates the aisle of the bucking subway car. A montage of Broadway show-tunes, but his intonation is on the money, and he plays from the heart. Bravura finale. You excavate a dollar bill. "Beautiful."

His face brightens. For a moment he lowers his bow and instrument, leans in and whispers: "Most difficult part is keeping balance."

May 14 – Early Morning – Le Gamin SoHo

Ah what you see when you look up from your book. A woman sits at the table just ahead, her back toward you. Her hair, dark brown, is done up in a score or more little pigtails, like mushrooms, arrayed more or less symmetrically over the top, sides and back of her head, and bound with red elastics, though a wisp escapes down the nape of her neck. She's so thin her vertebrae stand out like a mountain chain beneath the cling of her brown knit shell. The diagonal lines of her bra straps and the curve of her ribs combine to suggest the shape of a butterfly. Suddenly, she sits up straight, tugs the hem of her top down, pulls her shoulders up toward protuberant ears and grasps her hair knots in both hands as though to keep her head from flying off.

A man sits facing this woman, but all you can see of him is what frames her: tanned, hairless, gym-built shoulders and well-muscled upper arms. As abruptly as she clutched her head, she rises and leans across the table to embrace him. The dominant part of you must not want to see how this goes down, so you force your eyes over to the right where two youngish women incline toward one another, speaking intently. "OK, OK – the flowers of the world…"

"The flowers of the world, brought to you..."

"Brought to you... or to your loved one!"

The woman on the banquette, blonde, jots it down.

• • •

You can look at the physical evidence of your trip to Spain any time you want to. But the passage of only a few weeks has relegated it to a dreamscape. Is it possible that you were treated so well, with such consideration, as though your work mattered? One could wear out any residual good vibe fast making comparisons. Suffice it that once upon a time, you had such a moment.

May 18

What creature has 224 million teeth and 14 million feet? New York City! Dentists, you have your marching orders! Podiatrists, take heart!

• • •

"Nobody has a worse time than madmen who earn their living from other madmen." So says Quevedo in *The Swindler*. And the anonymous author of *Lazarillo de Tormes*: "How many people must there be in the world who run away from others in fright because they can't see themselves?"

• • •

Last night, a dream. Spidery men in cheap dust masks gut the city by inches. Everywhere you look, a brick lies at your feet, broken in half.

May 30

The big four-eight.

Do you want to spend the big five-oh in New York City. Hell no. But where? Your face is always half-turned toward Europe. Paris is where, at fifteen, you felt your first real surge of freedom. But how could you pull that off – economically, linguistically, any way?

June 3 – 9th Street & Fifth Avenue – Midmorning

Amoxicillin prescription from Falencki. Your lungs are twin Achilles heels. Any head cold wants to dive from your sinuses straight down into your chest and make mischief there. According to his records, you've caught bronchitis just about every fall for years. Never noticed the pattern. Strange to get sick now. Late spring's usually your strongest time of year.

You are told, reliably, that death by pneumonia is by no means the worst way to go – it is, in fact, peaceful, narcoleptic. *The old people's friend* they used to call it. But if you have anything to say about the timing, you'll stick around until Gwen is at least sixteen. But who gets to choose?

On all your birthday cards, Bea would write *bis ein hindert und zwansich*, one of the few Yiddish phrases she knew the Hebrew letters for. *You should live to a hundred and twenty.* Sure, you'll take that.

June 5 – Le Gamin Chelsea – Midday

A young woman, hair up in a bun, sits eating an orange crêpe. With every mouthful she appears to be overtaken by a soundless orgasm. She half closes her eyes, extends her neck, rolls her head. Never have you seen anyone demonstrate such an lover-like relationship with food. Yet she seems unguarded, not exhibitionistic, as if Table 11 was an absolutely private place. After every bite she takes a sip of café au lait, lifts her napkin from her lap and demurely pats her lips.

On her way out she leans over the counter. "That was very good!" she says to Mario. He's chopping, looks up, offers her his radiant smile. Immediately she suffuses with color. Opens the door, and before stepping out, glances back wistfully toward her empty plate.

June 20 – St. Mark's Bookstore – Midafternoon

You page through Andrew Ross's *Real Love*, and discover that the artists Komar and Melamid have made a series of paintings that deliberately seek to displease people at the level of their particular national tastes. Here's a reproduction of "Holland's Most Unwanted," a venerable domestic Dutch interior. But the view from the window is not the skyline of Delft, it's the towers of the WTC.

Gwen calls them "the tower twins."

July 7 – Le Gamin – Midafternoon

All morning tangled up in the WTC manuscript. Roland Barthes begins his book on Michelet by saying that before anything else, "we must restore this man to his coherence."

But you are bent on something utterly quixotic: making a narrative for a subject that never possessed coherence in the first place.

It is my hope that these writings will initiate a process of transforming the impossible buildings from a state of looming and fearful threat – from something mythic – so big, so armored, yet uprotected, that it cannot be truly seen – into a historical object that may at last be used, and eventually perhaps, even loved.

You can't put that in an introduction. Even if someone's daft enough to publish this thing.

A young woman passes by outside the window. Agonizingly thin.

July 8 – Abingdon Square – Early Morning

Breakfast with Elizabeth. Of all your friends, she has borne the closest witness to your struggles with the Trade Center book. Unfailingly when you talk about it with her, she asks the million dollar questions. *You've come to love the WTC. How did that happen?* What to say – the biographer seduced by his subject? *What kind of reckoning will*

there be? What must be examined? She gets it, this project, what's at stake – in some ways maybe more than you do. *You want to make the buildings inhabitable, not just steel to slide off.*

Afternoon, downtown to visit them. Wander about in Austin Tobin Plaza. In the shadow of towers, speakers tinkle new age music.

Head toward the cul-de-sac formed by the Vista Hotel. All these times down here and you've never really looked at the memorial before, read the text carved in English and Spanish on the red granite ring: "On February 26, 1993, a bomb set by terrorists exploded below this site. This horrible act of violence killed innocent people, injured thousands and made victims of us all. This fountain is dedicated to the memory of those who lost their lives."

And then the names: "John DiGiovanni, Robert Kirkpatrick, Stephen Knapp, William Macko, Wilfredo Mercado, Monica Rodriguez Smith and her unborn child."

What about that as a formulation: "made victims of us all"? What exactly does that mean?

July 14

Gwen's now-we-are-sixth.

July 16 – Battery Park, in Sight of the WTC – Midafternoon

…They lie on sand and allow themselves to be buried, patted down, kneaded into the burning sand. This practice, considered a wholesome exercise, lends itself to a certain superficial, vulgar and boisterous intimacy to which these prosperous people seem so inclined.

– José Martí, "Coney Island"

The WTC, the most massive vertical structure in the world – squared. What did they use it for, those people of the late 20th century? Surely not to live in. Did it have some astronomical significance? And what strange form of stargazing did they practice anyway?

What if the bombers had taken down a tower?

July 18 – Le Gamin – Afternoon

At Table 13, two Asian women, thirtyish, compactly built, Korean if you had to guess. Each drinks a bowl of café au lait. The woman wearing the baseball cap looks the more stolid of the two. She sits rooted, nearly squatting, as though the seat were a milking stool, across from her companion, thinner, poised, wavy henna'd hair. But the body language of the heavyset woman belies her attention to style and color: the purple sun logo on her cap matches her Capri jeans. Sunglasses hang by an earpiece from the V-neck of her teeshirt. Between sips, the women focus intently on their respective magazines, *Allure* and *Marie-Claire*. Are you projecting, or do they subtly alter their expressions in response to the images on the pages they snap through, mobilize their facial muscles to a more plastic disposition?

As you stand up to leave, something draws your eyes to the feet of the woman in the purple Capris. She wears flip-flops. Her toes are bulbous, macerated-looking, the nails half-destroyed. The new world order has yet to spread its beneficence to her most distal parts. Give it time.

• • •

Six o'clock news: a crane falls in Times Square. Condé Nast building. The site's had way more than its share of accidents. A Maclowe job. He likes to step things along. Flair for drama too. Got fined back in the early eighties. The city wasn't moving fast enough on his demo permit, so he hired a company that used this monster machine to tear the guts out of a building on the square in the dead of night, kaboom. Rubble. One fell swoop. Rats running everywhere. Open gas lines, exposed wiring, the works.

And damn, that Condé Nast thing is an ugly, carnivorous-looking piece of work. Go on, leave, why don't you? Your city is always being stolen. Turn around once and whatever you think beautiful or worthy has been bulldozed by someone who knows better than you do what this place is for. You were just born here – didn't choose it. The seed doesn't get to pick its soil.

You know trees can be extracted by the roots – Haussmann lined his spanking new boulevards with thirty-year-old *arbres* extracted from the Bois de Boulogne. To dig 'em up, he had a special machine engineered that served a kind of obverse function to the one Maclowe used. The tree lifter transferred instant history to newly minted

streets, the building-ripper erases the material present, literally overnight. Gone and forgotten.

But here's your sixty-four-thousand-dollar question: You've grown here all your life, but could your roots find more propitious soil? Might you not be better off transplanted?

July 19 – Central Park

Gwen's birthday picnic on the sloping lawn south of the boat basin. Astronomically hot. And so humid, the icing doesn't want to leave the spatula for the top of the cupcakes, but somehow it all gets done. An Odyssey just to find some bags of ice – eight, ten blocks uptown on Madison.

Desultory attempts at frisbee. Distribution and deployment of water guns. Snatches of bossa nova from the Summerstage festival. Brazil's in town! Party favors and tickets to ride on the carousel for all. Squeaka-squeak. Pull the shopping cart, now laden with gifts and leftover food, through the park to Columbus Circle and the downtown C Train.

Funny connection among two of the dads hanging out, their kids both classmates of Gwen's. Chris's father designs jails, "justice architecture," he calls it. Victoria's pop works as a guard at Riker's Island. Little bright clusters in the gorgeous mosaic.

August 15 – Breadloaf, VT

Alane introduces you to Shahid Ali. Wild(e) fella. Diaphanous veiling. Acts the clown. Isn't. *Tan inteligente*, as Bernardo would say of someone so sharp-witted and erudite. And he's got a gift for one-liners:

Poets who rely on their subjects mistake their anxieties for principles.

August 25

Lunch meeting with Nancy at Le G. She hands you her latest pages: a nearly completed first draft. She hasn't come up with a good title yet, but that will come. Probably from a phrase already in the text itself. You allow yourself a moment of pedagogic pride. In just a bit over a year she's come further, faster, deeper than any other student you can recall. But then, dancers are used to hitting the ground, digging

in. Even so, Nancy's a bold one. This will be a wonderful book. It opens with an epigraph from Barbara Clark: *Each one teach one.*

August 26 – Le Gamin – Early Morning

At the back of the café, the payphone rings. Deborah gestures *it's for you*. Gloria on the line, just to say she's working to "push John off the fence." She sounds optimistic and her mood is infectious enough to get you to open your notebook and take another run at the introduction:

…At a deeper level still, by exposing the WTC to examination after thirty years of awestruck silence, this book seeks to trace the fine and at times nearly invisible line at which power meets madness, monument shades into monstrosity.

But even further down in the underlying material, questions raised by the distortions of class: Planner Tobin, Architect Yamasaki, Overseer Tozzoli – what might their energies have produced had they not fallen prey to a mania for domination? Yamasaki somehow intuited the atmospheric shift coming on at the end of the century and designed his towers as emblems of the culture of fear.

You don't remember the quote exactly, but T.E. Lawrence said something like *the really dangerous men are the ones who dream while they are awake.*

September 2

Nancy's plane has gone down off Newfoundland. Complete disintegration. No chance anyone made it. You rush to lay hold of the binder, the draft of her book – untitled, intact, just where you'd left it, on the living room buffet.

October 2 – Early Morning

Mild breeze down the curving path from your doorway to the sidewalk, and there they are, outlined against the postcard blue – towers innocent as overgrown babies. So you ask them: *Just what are you guys trying to say?* And this time they come through with an answer: *Divided we stand*.

October 10 – Early Morning

Parked on 22nd Street just west of Eighth, a bright white van. Painted on the side in stark black lettering: STUDY KABBALAH – ALEPH REFRIGERATION & AIR CONDITIONING. Beneath the type, a large, precisely rendered geometric shape that at first glance you assume is a Freon molecule, but that turns out, on closer inspection, to be a diagram of Abraham's Ladder. *The Material Universe* forms its base; the next rung is *Foundation* and, at the summit, *Infinite Energy*. To the left, reading upward: *Understanding*, *Restraint* and *Empathy*. Ascending on the right: *Dominance, Mercy, Wisdom*. Lines radiate out from *Balance* at the very center of the figure, connecting every other attribute.

For a moment you're dumbstruck by the improbability of the thing – its sheer deadpan absurdism. Yet in an odd way it makes sense. From the little you know of Kabbalistic lore, an image comes to you: the Sephirot – invisible, numberless, all-pervasive emanations of the almighty that, taken together, constitute the energy of life itself. You see them in their dance, perspiring mightily, glowing red with the intensity of performing the eternal work set out for them by the divine being. Who better to keep the cosmos from melting down than a team of ultra-Orthodox refrigeration specialists?

October 12 – West 4th Street Subway Station – Evening

You wait for a train to take you home from teaching. A rat patrols the gutter between the tracks searching for tidbits. Light down the rails brightens, intensifies, then disappears. That's the old trick the uptown F train plays. Runs parallel with the C and E just south of the station, so it looks like it's coming your way, but then diverges down to the lower level and you are left looking down the dark, empty tunnel. A miniature death of hope. Ah, light again, this must be your train – not likely there'd be two F's right on top of one another. Sure enough, it's a C, shuddering down the tracks with great noise and din. But the rat is not afraid. He has learned that no harm will come to him if he doesn't stand on the rails!

October 19 – Midafternoon

Gloria calls. She's done it. *Divided We Stand* – forthcoming from Basic Books. Due out just in time for the Millennium.

When Norton accepted *Free City*, you and Katie hugged eachother, jumped up and down and cried. This time, you celebrate too, but there's a different quality to the triumph. As though you beat back something that nearly dragged you under.

October 20 – Midmorning

Finally to the top of the Trade Center with Gwen after all these years of procrastinating. You show her where Philippe Petit walked his wire between the towers with only a balance pole to guard against the fierce, unpredictable winds. And the tag painted on the railing at the northeast corner: George Willig 5/26/77. That's the guy who used homemade climbing equipment to scale the side of Tower One, a whole quarter mile to the top – whereupon the cops promptly arrested him. A crowd of thousands stood in the plaza for hours, watching him inch his way up.

You've picked a fine day to come, visibility north to the foothills of the Catskills, and gusts that blow Gwen's hair about like streamers.

One flight down to the glassed-in observation deck. You sit in pneumatic tilting bleachers while they show a movie of a helicopter ride over the city. Zoom above Park Avenue. Whoa, you almost smashed into the PanAm building! Ah, the nightscape over midtown. Stentorian voice-over: *Manhattan – a place of poets and planners, dreamers and schemers….*

November 3 – Judson Church – Evening

Hundreds of people, must be half the arts community in New York turn out for Nancy's memorial. Everyone in the dance and movement world. A dozen perform their tributes. Then Jon Gibson, her husband, and Philip Glass improvise on soprano sax and piano. You have no idea how Jon manages – there must be something that sustains him in the playing.

The mayor's name is printed on the program, but he proves a no-show. A deputy recites Hizzoner's statement about the city's tragic loss. Jon has asked you to read an excerpt from her manuscript. Your voice comes out disembodied. The audience inclines toward her words. Nancy tapped into some kind of truth and you have become its pipeline of the moment. Your grief hits only when you resume your seat and the show goes on.

No more believable now than when you first heard the news. Same with Gregory Kolovakos's death, seven years ago. There's a translation prize named after him now – how posthumous can you get? Yet the psychic message still doesn't come home. The sense of their living selves is incommensurable with the finality of *dead*. You struggle to think of Nancy in anything but the present tense. Write a letter. Her name plate is still on the door buzzer down on Harrison Street, but if you sent it there, she wouldn't get it.

…I want you to know that I am still writing, but that I don't write the same way any more. A bigger part of me is writing as if this was my last moment – which brings me to the last time I saw you: coming toward our café in the late summer miasma of a Tuesday afternoon, walking imperturbable, crossing the street toward me, your head rotating like a radar spotting whacked-out cabs, your dress blowing in the wind and one hand holding your hat on the head that kept calmly turning to take in everything from what seemed a middle distance. Moving like Marilyn, all psoas action.

That was the day I gave you Free City *– it's a good travel book, small, lightweight and just the right length for a plane flight to Europe. And you thanked me for it in that hurrying-to-go email and then you thanked me for everything. We'd thanked one another plenty of times before, but never for* everything. *We were never that conclusive – we had a process going, didn't we? And so I thought, feeling a bit paranoid,* what does she mean? We still have this book to finish. Is she firing me? *But maybe you sensed something I didn't. It was, after all, only a plane flight to Geneva.*

You'd felt safe in the concept of Switzerland.

December 29 – Cooper-Hewitt Museum – Early Afternoon

You wander through an exhibition, *The Architecture of Reassurance: Designing Disney Theme Parks*. Pause to watch a promotional reel for the opening of the original Disneyland – from back in the day when Anaheim, California, still resonated with the aura of the Wild West. Here comes the choo-choo train, straight toward the camera. The narrator's voice crows out: *If you look down the track, you'll see Mickey Mouse at the controls!*

Aha, now it all makes sense.

1999

March 14 – Le Gamin – Early Morning

To your left at Table 5, two dotcom prodigies talking loud and big. "Yeah," says the louder, "I could get any number of robots to come in, sit down and write code for me…"

April 3

Divided's a done deal. Good as you can get it, and off to the typesetter. The more you think about it, the luckier the book got in having John as its editor. More like an ideal reader who gave notes that made you look at the text differently, detach enough to let the material speak its own mind. Very precise and attuned in his questions. Light touch, but didn't miss a trick.

He called once, early in the year, excited by the idea that he would edit it not in his office, but rather in the New York Public Library reading room. You imagined him working at one of the long wooden tables flanked by researchers of every stripe, lunatics, horseplayers and snoring people come in from the cold. There he sat, poring over your pages, an obsessively sharpened #2 pencil in hand and battery of others lined up at the ready. Above and around, the great windowlit space, embodying an all-but-vanished sense of *public*. Wonderful the idea that he'd let the qualities of this place inform his edit.

June 16 – 24th Street & Eighth Avenue

A week ago Monday, a fellow opened up a fruit and vegetable stand a block north of Bassry's. And surprise – Abu works for the competition! Truly not a prime location, but bound to siphon off some business. Bassry looked so angry and disgusted you said nothing at all. But since Friday last, no sign of the new cart. Four days on the corner before it vanished into the city, and took Abu with it.

June 20

Pilgrimage up the Hudson to a luncheon celebration at the Bear Mountain Lodge. Most all your surviving Darton aunts and uncles will be there along with your cousins and Gwen's. Aunt Maisie, now the eldest of the clan, turns ninety today. You bought her present at Something Else, the eclectic treasure-trove of a giftshop across the street from Le Gamin. It's a little painted glass bell with a musical peal. A beautiful object in its own right, it seems an emblem too of Maisie's clear, sharp mind.

July 11 – Central Park at 81st Street – Afternoon

From a bench at the perimeter of the playground, you watch Gwen negotiate a wooden balance beam. Such a grace and lightness to her footsteps. Three more days and she'll be seven. A rustling in the bushes behind you. Squirrels? No, the squirrels are in the tree. It's a couple of plump rats cavorting.

August 7 – 11th Street & Sixth Avenue

Curbside fireworks outside the French Roast café. Acetylene torch throws sparks against the window. All over town they are amputating fireplugs six inches below the surface, then cementing them over. Decommissioning red cast iron corner call boxes too. What means this? Got to be a good sign. Someone high up must have read New York's palm and seen fewer fires in our future.

August 27 – Wood's Hole, MA

Bless BJ for lending you her house. Each day, Katie paints another watercolor – land and seascapes, each more lovely than the next. Gwen has grown bolder, though she remains a wary swimmer. The water still warm, and calm at the cove beach.

Press proofs of *Divided We Stand* greet you on the doorstep when you return from a swim. They've set the chapter subheads small, and in a typeface so compressed and stylized they are nearly illegible. You make known your displeasure to no avail. The beans have been counted and there are no more left to spare. Apart from that, the book looks good. And in truth, who ever imagined these dark horse pages would see the light of type at all?

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Afternoon at the aquarium, Gwen sprints ahead to pet the starfish. You stare at the Portuguese Man-of-War arrested in time in its formaldehyde jar. "A community with one body…hundreds of individual animals joined together for cooperative living" reads the label.

Its constituent members divide into specialized groups. Some gather as sail-like floats, others tentacles, still others become stingers or reproductive organs.

Which puts you in mind of what someone told you once about aspen trees: that their root structures interconnect making a stand of them, in effect, a single organism. Each tree communicates its status to the whole. If one becomes sickened by a disease, its neighbors pick up the chemical signals it sends. Such an organism might evolve from a single tree. Over time and generations, the grove possesses the capacity to travel.

September 2 – Le Gamin – Midmorning

Sam Waterson, who acts the moral center of *Law & Order* enters the café. Something of a regular, he affects a persona that balances aspects of Jimmy Stewart and Will Rogers, but it's clear he's distressed, annoyed even, if not immediately recognized by the staff or patrons. And there's another paradox too. If the place is full enough for a buzz to generate around his presence, he takes on the beleaguered, discomfited look of a man from whom something has been stolen, for whom there is no rest, no privacy – only a plague of nits inexhaustibly ravenous for his soul.

Keep to your book. You never read Suzuki before. Via the Sung masters he asks: *Where do we meet after you are dead, and the ashes are all scattered around?*

October 20

New York is a symphony played in the key of real estate.

2 POINT OF OBSERVATION

October 22

The northwest corner of 22nd Street and Ninth Avenue has got itself a tutelary deity. An ancient man, a couple of inches shorter than you, say five-foot-five. Grizzled red cheeks, pipe jutting from between stove-in teeth, he wears well-worn clothes, pants too short and absurdly delicate shoes – tasseled loafers. Yet somehow, standing there every morning, hands clasped behind his back, he projects the air of an old salt keeping a weather eye out for changes in the atmosphere that only attuned old bones like his can fathom. So stalwart his posture that from a block's distance, in early steep-rayed sun, he looks more like a rough-hewn figurine in a seaside gift shop than a flesh-and-blood being.

The consistency of his presence on this particular corner led you to associate him with the Chelsea Garden, the outdoor nursery that took up half the block north to south and some six lots west, and aerated the whole neighborhood. Many were the times you'd stand at the gate while Gwen, wandering among the cast concrete lawn fountains and lush foliage, explored her own rilling, blossoming, miniature Alhambra.

The nursery didn't open until mid-morning, so your imagination led you to speculate, against all reason, that the old salt served as a kind of night watchman. But then, when the nursery was displaced to make way for a block of "luxury" corporate pieds à terres, the fellow still anchored his spot on the corner, occasionally patrolling a few paces along the sidewalk beside the blue plywood hoardings. Gales and nor'easters notwithstanding, when you made your morning pilgrimage to the café, he anchored the corner – even as foundation was poured and scaffolding made tunnels of the sidewalks. You'd look out for him on your way back uptown, but invariably he'd have vanished till next morning. Down the block there's a residence of some sort, the Frederick Fleming House. That must be where he lives.

Over years and through several pairs of exiguous shoes you projected and elaborated his myth. Gwen scratched her name in damp cement at the construction site's edge, another city-kid rite fulfilled. She graduated from pre-K to K and started taking piano lessons with Andrejika at the General Theological Seminary, just down the block from Le Gamin. And because you walked up Ninth Avenue together only in the afternoon, she never encountered the old salt.

Only once did you see him engaged in conversation. These days quantities of routinely beautiful women live in Chelsea, and his interlocutor was one of their number – dressed for the office and clicking rapidly east on Twenty-first Street, carrying a bundle of laundry. As she approached, the mariner stretched forth his arms as though seeking to relieve her of her load. But she held fast to it and for an instant, you thought they might embrace, laundry and all. Then she stopped short, smiled and made pleasantries for a few moments, before hurrying on.

You observed this encounter out of earshot and saw his opaque face open up, and this emboldened you to strike up an acquaintance. Perhaps he possessed a cornucopia of lore, and was bursting to pass it onto a sympathetic soul. And who knew what the future held? Once the oversize bricks piled up on curbside pallets assumed the shape of an apartment building, he might vanish altogether. Nothing to do but seize the day.

The next morning, a pleasant one, instead of keeping your distance as you passed by, you presented yourself directly in front of him, smiled and said – rather loudly since you thought he might be hard of hearing – "See you here every day, don't I?" The mariner backed up a few steps and shot you a look of primal horror – the sort a torturer might receive if he accosted a former victim in the street. Well, back to the drawing board. Some people take longer than others to warm up. You'll return to passing by silently for a few days, then try a simple nod of acknowledgment. See what transpires.

Meanwhile the building's almost up and done. Never seen construction quite so shoddy. Cinderblock columns – stacked without apparent reinforcing and poorly mortared into the bargain – support huge horizontal beams on which they've laid precast floorslabs with about a three inch overlap. Not much tolerance. Ninth Avenue's a big truck route – lots of vibrations. Seven stories and counting. Adam, an

architect who sometimes sits next to you at the café, says city code permits building up to ten stories without using any kind of vertical reinforcement. No union labor on this site either, so pickets from the building trades come every couple of weeks, set up their giant inflatable rat and pass out leaflets decrying the builder's scurrilous labor practices.

When you were a kid, the developers of those big, generic brick-faced apartment buildings used to give them high-toned names, like The Vermeer, The St-Germain, or The Camelot. For this one they should just cut to the chase and call it The Mexico City.

November 5 – Le G. – Early morning

A year since Nancy's memorial and you finally get around to reading Mabel Todd's *The Thinking Body*. She opens with an epigraph from Yeats's "The King of the Great Clock Tower":

God guard me from the thoughts men think
In the mind alone;
He that sings a lasting song
Thinks in a marrow-bone…

Soon, if all holds on course, a cartonful of *Divided* hardcovers will arrive on your doorstep. And in bookstores just post-Christmas – in time for Y2K to not end the world as we don't know it.

Would that you'd read Todd's perceptions of the body when you were actively writing the towers' story. An astonishing freshness hails across a seventy year divide: "Within a given system, we cannot have a working design for two centers of gravity." And later: "The terrified cat at the top of the elm, his muscular strength greatly enhanced by his adrenaline secretion stops digesting because of his more pressing needs. Rescue him and he curls up in his corner and is soon fast asleep, recovering his equilibrium. Man, however, being the only animal that can be afraid all the time, prolongs his conflicts even after the danger is past. Proust died of introspection long before he died of pneumonia, burned out by the chemistry of seven volumes…"

November 23 – Fifth Avenue & 53rd Street Subway Station – Late Afternoon

From the well at the bottom of the long escalator – subterranean enough to almost imagine it's the London Underground – a commanding voice rises up as you descend. The body from which the voice emanates belongs to a compact, middle-aged man who sits on a crate, leaning back against the tiled wall. Dun colored clothes, neither fresh nor filthy, the vagueness of his body emphasizes his face, round but not jowly, skin the color of café from La Taza, neatly trimmed moustache, eyes dancing like a mischievous law professor posing a hypothetical. But this man's crate is no podium, it's more of a pulpit, and his tones are stentorian, hallelujah-cadenced, inflected with mocking certainty.

"Thanksgiving," he says. "Thanks*giving!*" Pauses. Gives a self-satisfied nod. "We live in a violent society." Disgorged from the escalator, you join the tide of rush hour travelers flowing along the platform. "We *live* in a *violent* society." Lets it sink in. "Go on – plunge the knife into the turkey!" Toward the far end of the station you stride, like your fellow travelers, as purposefully as possible. "Plunge the knife *deeper* into the turkey!" After years, you know the drill cold. Make for the spot where the second door of the last car opens. That way, when you get off at your stop, you'll be right in front of the stairs that lead up your corner.

Midway down the platform, the parable of the violated turkey crossfades with open strumming. Familiar chords. A honeyed voice, this one also belongs to a man sitting on a crate. Close in age to the Thanksgiving Jeremiah, but a shade darker-skinned. His register shifts to a Gospel falsetto that takes full advantage of the tunnel's acoustics:

Put my guns in the ground, Ma
I don't need them any more
That long black cloud is coming down
Feels like I'm knocking on heaven's door.

His guitar case lies open before him, velvet lining dotted with coin offerings and an occasional crumpled bill. Here comes the E train, barreling down the vaulted nave. Add your offering.

December 17

Another notice in the elevator for yet another funeral. Esther Feinberg. You don't recognize the name, but you'd surely know her face. Probably once a garment worker. Gone, or soon gone, a whole generation of five foot tall women, most of them born in the old country: Eastern Europe, Sicily or Naples. They leave here feet first, as Bea used to say. Just like she did.

December 28

How is it that today, everywhere you wander in this most diverse of cities, a substantial portion of the white men resemble Helmut Kohl?

2000

January 1 – Rochester, NY

You made a deal with Katie's Aunt Elva. If she made it to New Year's Eve 2000, you'd spend it with her. But she's St. in Joseph's now. No more garden apartment, nor her big, beige Oldsmobile parked in the lot – the car you all drove to Niagara Falls and back when she could walk – only a couple of years ago. On the return trip you'd stopped at a farmstand to pick up fresh corn and tomatoes. Wegman's supermarket for whitehots. And for dessert, Elva knew the best donut stand in Rochester.

Now it's nine-thirty on New Year's Eve in Elva's room. You've brought champagne and herring in sour cream sauce, Elva's favorite delicacy, and she's had a few bites of that. Gwen's dozing in a chair. Elva says she'd just as soon go to sleep too, so you wish her a happy New Year, promise to return in the morning, and drive to your motel. You also promised Gwen you wouldn't let her sleep through the big moment, so as it approaches, you make a game effort to keep your word. Ten minutes before ball drops you shake her gently, try to wake her. "Gwen – almost time!" No response. Try another shake, accompanied by a louder "Gwen!" She half opens her eyes, closes them again. Deep torpor. It's the countdown now, so you roust her out of bed, march her round the room while pointing to the TV – "Look! There's Helsinki!" – as it cycles through a panoply of local revels for the great event. Her lids barely open. You give her a sip of champagne. She screws up her face. You and Katie shout "Happy 2000!" as a roar arises from somewhere outside, followed the reports of fireworks. "Happy New Year" you whisper as you tuck her back into bed.

• • •

This morning Gwen remembers nothing and is convinced you never woke her at all. Weeps bitterly because she missed the whole thing – her inclination to believe you

trumped by an absolute dearth of recollection. Seven and a half is still little kid territory. She could sleep through the Blitz.

Back to Elva to say goodbye. You've grown to love your adoptive aunt. And admire her, not least for how she manages to stay sane in a nursing home. No idea how she does it. Plus you owe her. When you and Katie were completely on your uppers she sent a check for five grand, out of the blue. If not for Elva, you'd never have been able to finish *Divided We Stand*. She'll be remembered in many an *Auld Lang Syne* to come.

• • •

Putin's military rings in the millennium by obliterating the city of Grozny. Before and after aerial photos make it clear: not one stone stands atop another. These city killers, how would they know their own power except by razing from a great height what so many labored to build up out of the earth?

January 3

A call from an editor asking if you'd contribute to a book aimed at first-time visitors, *City Secrets: New York*. You demur. Secrets? It's been years since you lived that kind of life. Well, she says, they don't have to be real secrets, just things you think are cool to do. Nice sounding gal. Why not?

January 10

Well, you gave it a go and it's gone, off in a bottle.

> Here's where you begin: Mott Street, number 17. Walk down the stairs to the basement restaurant called Wo Hop. If there's a line, wait. It's worth it.
>
> Once you get a table, fortify yourself for your journey with the world's most tender won-tons and a sweet-hot bowl of Cantonese-style beef with curried noodles topped with fiery tomato wedges. Your meal won't cost a lot, but careful! If you splash curry on your shirt, no known method

can eradicate the stain. You're deep in Chinatown, but a stone's throw from the Criminal Courts building. That's why your dining companions are cops, lawyers, guards, just-sprung defendants, bail bondsmen – and people like you.

Ah, delicious! But the time has come to walk it off. So up the narrow stairs, left turn onto Mott, then another left down the steep slope of Mosco Street. A bit more zig-zagging and you're in the Civic Center, where the massive buildings chart a genealogy of public architecture from Pneumatic Parthenon through Beaux Arts wedding cake and Mussolini Modern, straight to faux Van der Rohe. Nearby was a swamp called the Collect Pond, used way back when as a source of drinking water – not to mention pestilence – and right here, buried beneath the grim blockhouse of the Criminal Courts Building, lies the rubble of the Five Points slum, once the city's most infamous crossroads of poverty and crime.

As you walk west on Chambers Street, loop south of the Tweed Court House and check the rear wall of City Hall. As a corrective to the extravagance of using white marble on the other three sides, the city fathers had it faced in brownstone. Who would've thought in 1812 that New York would expand so far to the north that folks would routinely see it from behind? Now wend your way through City Hall Park. On your right's the Woolworth Building and just to the south, St. Paul's Chapel, Manhattan's oldest building, with the twin towers of the World Trade Center looming behind.

Let your feet carry you down Broadway allowing for leisurely excursions off its backbone and into the canyons of high finance. But keep bearing south and suddenly Battery Park will open out before you and beyond it, New York's harbor, once, only a generation gone, the greatest port in the world. At the southeast corner of the park, your next departure point: the Staten Island Ferry terminal.

There's almost always a ferry leaving soon, so you won't have to wait long. Hop aboard – only 50¢ each way – there's the horn blast – already you're pulling away from shore. Now if you station yourself at the

forward end of the lower deck, you're so close to the water that when the waves are choppy, the spray will leap up and mist your face as the ferry chugs across the harbor.

Look, a big piece of flotsam – no, it's a man paddling a kayak! And over there, beneath the Verrazano Bridge, the superships are lined up, some waiting to be piloted into the port of Newark-Elizabeth, New Jersey, others bound out into the Atlantic. To your right the Statue of Liberty, and beyond her, Ellis Island. Buoys clang, and everywhere the sky is laced with gulls.

When you debark in Staten Island you can spend however long you like exploring its museums, colonial restorations, parks, golf courses, riding stables and marveling at the scale of New York City's dump, Fresh Kills, a mound so huge that, like the Pyramids of El Gîzeh, it is visible from space. But whenever you head back on the ferry, you'll see the massed skyscrapers of Lower Manhattan approach sedately, rising before you in an unfolding welcome that cannot be described – it must be felt with wind in your face and the harbor water rushing rumbling across the hull bottom a few feet below.

Suddenly, near silence. They've cut the engines. Now comes the drama of docking in the tricky currents. No matter how experienced the pilot, the ferry nearly always bumps up against the timber slip walls sending up creaks of protest from the well-greased planks. Unflappable, the gulls, perched atop mossy pilings, look on. A clank of chains, the iron walkway descends and back onto terra firma you go. Don't worry if it takes a few moments to get used to ground beneath your feet again.

Arriving by water on this shore is an essential rite of passage. Wherever you go from here, part of you carries on as a New Yorker now.

February 5 – Le G. – Early morning

A piece in the *Times* on the real estate collapse in Bangkok wherein appears the wonderful word *anusaowaree*, literally "monument" – by which the Thais mean an unfinished skyscraper. The Bangkok World Trade Center's one of their tallest: sixty-three stories and no one home.

February 14 – Le G. – Midmorning

Surgical modifications to the face at Table 11? White-olive skin. Exquisite arched eyebrows. Immense doe-like eyes. So far, it could be nature. But lips like a duck? Day by day, it's a Todd Browning world after all.

February 26 – Metropolitan Museum – Early Evening

Exhibit on Roman Egypt. Mummy portraits in encaustic, their gazes almost breathtakingly direct. Regardless of the artist's technical skill, each face possesses an immediacy, a look of here and now – a stronger sense of human presence than you pick up these days from your fellow subway riders.

In another display, models of houses in two distinct types: peristyle, with columned porticoes on one or more sides and built around an open courtyard. The other, a multi-storied "tower" house. Both forms, it seems, coexisted side by side.

This was an incredibly syncretic culture. In its artifacts you read a nearly New York-like convergence, and evidence of a vast export of Isis-worship to the Roman world. One statuette in particular makes you do a double take, so strange and familiar all at once. Isis-Aphrodite holds the infant Horus in her lap. There before you, the gesture *avant la lettre*, detached in time and place, the prototype of a medieval Virgin and Child. Over and over you learn the primal lesson. Everything comes from somewhere.

March 21

Occasional blips of life emanate from within the black hole *Divided We Stand* vanished into. On the recommendation of someone at the *Voice*, a community activist called to ask if you would speak at a rally opposing the new student mega-center NYU wants to build just across West 3rd Street from Washington Square Park.

Felt weird even as you said yes, this return – rousing the rabble a stone's throw from where you grew up, in the same park where Bea had snapped you wearing only your diaper, soaked and filthy-happy in the fountain's spray. You'd peeked through the hoardings as they put up the Loeb Center, watched them pump Minetta Spring for over a year to get a dry foundation, watched generations of rats and ratlings use the

excavation as a playground. But the Loeb, small and incurably sixties, has to go in order for this immense beige monstrosity to block sunlight across a wide swath of the park. Standard NYU operating procedure: architecture with just enough vain detail to show true mediocrity. And their tactics, so typical of the new post-public New York, where developers of any stripe behave like feudal lords, which, in a sense, they've become, now that the age of the master-builder is gone.

Rally day came round and you stood in the crowd with Katie, Gwen and some visiting friends and their kids, good sports, who, like scores of others held black umbrellas aloft on a clear afternoon to simulate the shape of the threatened shadow. Your turn at the mike. *Can you hear me?* Affirmative shouts. *Alright.* And you slipped into whup-'em-up agitator mode, just like the Crazie days. Something like a Huzzah! washed back from the assembled multitude and your adrenaline cranked. You dropped your voice down, slowed your breath, sank into the cadences.

NYU says this is a done deal. All approved. All legal. That's a lie, but that's what they want us to believe. Dotted half-note rest. *There are no done deals!* You repeat that last, punch the "no" and raise another Huzzah!

Does anyone remember the struggle over this park back in the fifties? Huzzah! *Two women from this neighborhood – mothers with kids in school – Shirley Hayes and Edith Lyons – organized and fought Robert Moses, fought him to a standstill – stopped him from running a highway through the heart of the park we're standing in now!* Huzzah! *This isn't a matter of money or influence. It's down to whether we have the political will to stop this, and go one step further – imagine something better. Plan something better. Change the whole set of bullshit assumptions that's allowed NYU to run roughshod over this community. We have to turn the entire equation around. Take charge of planning our own neighborhoods. If we don't, these clowns will keep on doing it like they're doing it now.*

This president of NYU – shame on him. He grew up right near here, on Carmine Street. He ought to know better. Ought to work with the people in this neighborhood, not dictate terms. He needs to be held accountable – confronted every time he steps out of his office. Until he scraps these plans. Opens the planning up to a public forum.

Last thing I'm going to say is that compared to Robert Moses, this guy's a putz – a lightweight. Forty years ago, this community stopped the Master Builder's highway. We can stop this thing today! Huzzah! Huzzah!

You handed the mike to the next speaker, a good-natured Democratic pol, who thanked you for your impassioned words and then proceeded to weave a veil of amelioration so soporific that you nearly fell into a doze. When you looked out into the crowd for Katie, you found her in the middle of a yawn. So you discreetly left the stage, gathered your little party and trooped over to Gwen's favorite playground, the multi-colored tubular labyrinth adjacent to the McDonalds on West 3rd just off Sixth. At least the Village had enough Moxie, or clout, to squeeze a genuine amenity out of the burger barons.

You and Katie sat on a bench, held hands and watched Gwen and young Brendan vanish and – just when you began to worry they'd gotten stuck inside – emerge from the serpentine tunnel. Katie remarked that your hand was freezing cold and you realized she was right. Colder than the March chill. Every time a kid popped out of the tube, you felt a rumble in your innards. It took another quarter hour for your brain to do the math and conclude that you were truly sick, fever spiking, everything inside you turning fluid and all fluids petitioning for release. You made for the subway fast, where, *grace à Dieu*, an uptown C Train was just pulling in.

Two days gone and you're getting your sea legs again. And you wonder, was it an opportunistic bug, or was there something about giving that rap, that rave, actually, that whacked you out, knocked you so far off center that the only thing your body could do to restore the balance was take you down? One way or another, your fervor, when it slips its lead, turns to fever, takes its toll. Yes, the Kimmel Center is an awful building. Oughtn't happen. But why are you so desperate? To save what?

March 22

Relapse. Keep to your book. Feel stronger. Read Benjamin's *Moscow Diary*:

One only knows a spot once one has experienced it in as many dimensions as possible. You have to have approached a place from all four cardinal points if you want to take it in, and what's more, you also have to have left it from all these points. Otherwise, it will quite unexpectedly cross your path three or four times before you are prepared to discover it.

That's a hell of a metaphor for what you just went through. Nothing kicks your ass as bad as the things you think you've resolved. *Been there*, yes. But *done that*? Not quite. Or perhaps it's that the *that* isn't done with you.

April 7

Lovely bit of language in the minutiae of your research. A journalist covering the Panic of 1857 describes Wall Street as "blue with collapse."

May 9 – Horatio Street – Midmorning

Frank's currant scones improve with every batch you taste, and they were good to begin with. He asks what you're working on now, and you tell it as best you can.

He looks skeptical. "A diary," he says, "is a form of primitive self-analysis – a wailing wall. A journal is a point of observation."

May 11

Up betimes to teach journaling to sixth graders from a Bronx middle school taking special classes at the Maritime Academy at old Fort Schuyler. What's the canal or creek the el's passing over? Wish you'd brought your map. Rail line running beside it. Incredible ruined railroad building perched over the tracks, terra cotta tiles falling off the peekaboo roof. Bronx River. Dam across it. You might've passed along some of these streets long ago driving a cab, but today it looks all new. Down the steps into terra incognita. Catch a car service and ride way east.

Out at the fort the kids are waiting. You give your rap in the classroom, show them how you color code the page corners of your red and black Chinese books – purple for urban, blue for technology, pink for cultural nuggets, green for Utopias – paste in little signifying bits of paper, press leaves, insert postcards. But you don't spend long on that. Spring's seeping through the windows, so everyone – teacher and assistants included – goes outside to sense the day, disperse around the grounds and put paper and pen in the way of whatever words offer themselves from the atmosphere. You sit facing the water, back against a tree. Nearby, up on the Throgg's Neck Bridge, a truck mixing a load of cement heads toward the Bronx. Whine of its engine cuts above waves of car tires on the roadbed. Closer still, just below the concrete balustrade, slaps real water. Over west, the angle of a jet taking off from La Guardia mimics the sweep of the cables on the Bronx Whitestone bridge.

Turn around to look at the fort ten yards or so behind you – on this side, a vertical curtain of ivy. If your sightline didn't include the perpendicular wall, you could easily imagine the ivy to be a freestanding curtain. Even so, it's hard to believe that real stone and mortar lie behind that density of green.

Turn back to the Throgg's Neck. Elegant lines of steelwork, but it could use a scraping and a coat of paint. Aunt Maisie says that back in the Depression, Uncle Joe had a steady job in a work relief crew painting the George Washington Bridge. Not the ideal gig for a man with acrophobia. Dartons and infrastructure. Grandfather Arthur, ventilation contractor for the Holland Tunnel. You think of him every time you pass by Canal Street and see those aerating towers just at the water's edge on each side of the Hudson. What was it like, laboring under the river on a project no one was entirely sure would work? Once, so the story goes, water pressure ruptured the section he was working in and up he popped to the surface – amazingly unharmed.

While all this flows through your head you've been staring toward the southwest trying to figure out what those two small boxy buildings are, one with an antenna sticking out the top. Looks like a tiny suburban office park. But why build it up there, on that ridge? Finally the beautiful illusion comes home to you – how foolish the eye! Those buildings aren't in Queens at all, and they certainly aren't little – they're the tops of the trade center towers.

Walk over to the balustrade and look over at the Sound's edge. Below, dark gray cubical stone blocks form a kind of breakwater, shiny black where wet. The pathway crunches. Pulverized shells. Out there, ducks and a buoy.

Back in the classroom to hear, read aloud, what was gathered in those moments. Each student saw and recorded an entirely distinct range of sensations, with occasional specifics in common. Yet all had been able to record at least one sensation vividly and with a texture of truth.

Head home. Take your time. In the stairwell of the Westchester Square #6 elevated train station, a stained glass triptych by Romare Bearden. Late afternoon sun filtering through, oblique enough to throw sumptuous colors up the walls and columns on this side. *Untitled.*

May 15 – Noontime

Gloria mentioned you to an editor at *Wired* magazine who in turn invited you to lunch. Just say yes. Not least because it gets you up inside the Condé Nast tower, scariest building in *Teema Squara*. Pass through the gaping, massively securitized lobby – you and the others so much plankton in its jaws.

The elevator – of the leave-your-stomach-behind variety – deposits you at the entrance to the critically hyped cafeteria, designed in the same terror-chic as lobby and exterior. Blond wood veneer and brushed metal surfaces, great sheets of bracketed, pinned and tortured glass. On the other hand, you don't get striped bass for lunch every day. Delicious and perfectly done. But the grilled asparagus and potatoes are only as good as they have to be.

The editor seems a decent sort. There's goodwill certainly, but a robust volley of conversation never seems to take hold. She greets your mention, in passing, of the inevitable pop of the dot-com bubble with a quizzical look, as though no possible reality could admit of such a thing. Undeterred, you press on, pitch an idea for a longish piece, perhaps two parts, on the evolution of digital culture – drawn from material you developed and taught at Hunter. She doesn't sweep the plates off the table and dance a Kazatsky, but the energy level of the conversation begins to hum a little higher. She'll run it by her boss. You talk parenting for a bit, and thus passes a classic New York lunch: trial balloons abob in an otherwise awkward mid-day void. Waiting at the elevator bank, you watch her disappear behind the glass doors of the nanoculture fanzine – doors that are, in actuality, no different from ten thousand other portals into middle-level day-gigs dull as ditchwater. What's wrong with this picture? As the elevator opens, you imagine her avatar rushing past, hair disarranged, high color in her cheeks, the lunch hour flown in the arms of her lover.

Rocketing down in the elevator you realize that superconductivity will be achieved long before you write a word for *Wired*. But who knows, perhaps after the bubble pops, there'll be a tiny window of self-reflection. Strange optimism as you walk away. It's possible too that this awful building will transform its signification, outlive its coercive phase, and, like an empty suit of armor standing cobwebbed in the castle hall, testify quaintly to a nearly-forgotten dark age.

May 16 – Le G. – Early Morning

Read all about it – a porcelain sculpture by Jeff Koons, *Woman in Tub* goes for $1.7 million at Christie's. The artist has sliced off the top two thirds of her head, but left her signifying mouth agape. Eyeless, she discovers by other senses the snorkel head that pops up between her legs. We who see have a good laugh at her expense, since the object of Koons's humor isn't us.

Still who's the joke on, really? Surely not the bather alone. The plug's been pulled – a billion Nasdaq bubbles wash down the drain. Just like that. And what slick creature rushes upward toward the light, yearning to breathe free?

May 23 – Smiler's Deli, Fifth Avenue, Between 44th & 45th

Funny, back in the sixties, you always used to call these delis "frowners," because the guys who worked there were so uniformly surly. But there's no predicting anything for certain now. Besides the early morning breakfast rush hour. Grab a tray and get in line. The short order cook's a truly immense fellow. Lots of large-scale people in this town, but rarely have you seen so much lean human mass packed into one skin. The white cap cocked slightly to one side his head looks as if it was made for a doll. Lively eyes, intelligent, impenetrable. Running down one cheek, a scar, its keloids the width of your little finger. Genial disposition, great economy of movement. When he turns to take an order, he asks every male customer, regardless of size, the same question: "What can I get you, big man?"

Fortified by an egg sandwich on a roll and coffee, you're on your way up and across town. Today for some reason, you sense, more strongly than ever before, the toxic vibe emanating from 47th Street. Turn to walk along it toward Sixth and the atmosphere becomes overpoweringly oppressive. Something about hoarding. About diamonds jammed up the ass. Withholding. A breath of fresh air as you cross and head into Tin Pan Alley.

May 24 – Midmorning

School's off, so uptown with Gwen to the new Planetarium – a.k.a. The Rose Center. You've been trying to teach her the sequence of subway stops on the IND line for years, quizzing her each time you take the C, E or A Trains, but she's profoundly

disinterested, and the information is still too abstract for her to retain. But for 81st Street, she invented a mnemonic: *Ladies First*.

Of everything to see, she's most fascinated by the movie about black holes, described in sonorous voiceover as "the ultimate triumph of gravity over light." Sitting side by side on the bench, you draw ever closer to the event horizon, traverse the rim and, in a flash, collapse into infinite density. Three times over. Then, out of the theatre and into the big glass box where you walk the spiral of time since the universe began and note the filament's-width that accounts for all human history. If that doesn't work up an appetite, nothing will, so over to the Central Park West entrance to find a hot dog stand. Eat on the steps, in the granite embrace of the main entrance. Gwen feeds bits of bun to the foregathered pigeons. No matter how many of them crowd round, there's nearly always one perched on Teddy Roosevelt's bronze head. Perhaps it's a time-honored tradition, and they draw lots for who stands guard.

At the entrance to the park, ice cream, and next… a running start then scrambling up the rocks, handhold after handhold – find the cracks for your sandal toes – all the way to the top!

May 30

Fanfare-less, the big five-O sneaks up, pounces, and pads away silently on little cat feet. What feels worth celebrating is less your cumulative decades on planet Earth than an incremental tendency toward some species of happiness. Little by little, things fall together for you. As if by gravity.

June 13 – Rockefeller Center – Midmorning

On your way here you paused to watch the demolition of a row of John D.-era townhouses in preparation for sinking a skyscraper foundation. Only three of the old brownstones left standing, utterly benighted. Ah, well, they've got a diorama model in the Brooklyn Museum.

A picket line has been set up in front of MoMA and as you approach the striking workers start up a chant and raise high their placards: blown-up stills of Sally Field as Norma Rae. Got to be tongue in cheek, right? No, you're not museum-going today and in any case it's against your religion to cross a picket line. You're just here to browse

the sidewalk vendors on the way across town. A vividly hued watercolor catches your eye: two tiger-striped kittens each perched atop a WTC tower. You buy it from a smiling Korean woman. Five bucks. Already matted. How could it be so cheap? Sit down on a bench on the Promenade and give it a closer look. Aha! – there's the dot pattern. You bought a photocopy, not an original after all.

Unlike the one-of-a-kind kitsch masterpiece across the skating rink, looming in front of the RCA Building. Nothing naïve here, this is calculated cuteness on a monumental scale: Jeff Koons's topiary puppy dog, three stories high, sits expectantly, sprouting thousands of tiny multi-colored blossoms from its green, leafy coat. Tourists surround *Puppy*, staring up in wonder. Dads pose their wives and kids at its feet then step back, and back, and back. Intentional or not, part of the joke is that if you fit enough of *Puppy* in the frame to read it as a dog, your family's reduced to anonymous dots.

The longer you study *Puppy*, the more it strikes you that, however cynically conceived, it somehow projects authentic dog-nature. Easy to imagine that at any moment it might scratch behind its ear with a hind paw, stand up on all fours and give itself a shake. What would *Puppy* make of the World Trade Center – twin fireplugs? Which tower would he whiz on first? Sitting in their shadow, *Puppy* would bring out, more clearly than King Kong's aggression ever could, the contradictions crushed together to extrude these buildings. *Puppy*'s an innocent, like a floral Siegfried; he doesn't yet know enough to fear.

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Pick up *The Dialectic of Seeing* again and find a tasty morsel – a quote from Alfred Döblin: "New York is a city without memorials." According to Susan Buck-Morss, the book's author, Walter Benjamin considered the absence of memorials a criterion for a modern city. If that's so, we ain't modern any more, particularly downtown. WTC bombing, Holocaust, potato famine, shipwreck, African burial ground. Wherever you wander, memorials "r" us.

June 24 – Midday

A gridlock moment at Le Gamin: two women, both great with child meet for lunch, take seats across from one another at Table 15. Gradually, as they're eating, the tables around them fill up. By the time the women are ready to leave, there's no room to push their chairs back. Nor can they turn round, they're hemmed in on the sides too. Caught up in their own ingestion and palaver, none of their neighbors pays them any mind. For that matter, neither of the women takes it upon herself to say "excuse me." You watch as their bemusement shades into annoyance, verges on panic. Just as you begin to move to their aid, a young fellow at Table 14 registers their predicament. Accordingly, he stands up, steps into the aisle. Chairs and tables are shifted around and as if by magic, the Chinese puzzle unlocks. The women extricate themselves and make their way out the door, maneuver into a kind of sidelong hug, and take their leave in a lighthearted way. Two people waiting inside the door sit down at Table 15 as Roberto clears it and the café reconfigures itself again. What a city, what a delicate balance of spatialities!

June 25 – Horatio Street – Midafternoon

Elizabeth and Jonathan host a party for *Divided* at their townhouse across the street and just west of Frank's place. A grand gesture, and particularly lovely of them to do it now, a half year after publication, and with the book all but dropped from view. Hot, muggy day, more like late August than imagined June. The living room's cool, but the crowd spills out into the garden.

Elizabeth's idea to serve all sorts of vertical food. Accordingly Eric B. baked a special edition of biscuits, roughly three inches square, cunningly imprinted with your favorite image from the book: two street performers costumed as twin towers holding hands in the plaza beneath their steel and concrete brethren. You and Eric stack twin columns a hundred and ten cookies high. In the course of the afternoon, the partygoers eat their way down to the ground.

July 18

How does the great imperial city, mostly offshore, spend its energies of a summer? What to say, what to say? Well, we've never had a Cow Parade before.

Braincalf of some Swiss entrepreneur though what he's hocking seems unclear. Nor is the "parade" in any sense a procession. Rather what we've got is a five hundred head of life-size, hollow, fiberglass cows, painted according to whimsical themes and strategically positioned at tourist hotspots. Thus Wall Street is graced with a stock-ticker cow, a spattered "Jackson Pollack" cow stands in front of MoMA. A Mostly Mozart cow ruminates near the Lincoln Center fountain while twin Holsteins graze the World Trade Center plaza. By some process of symbiotic magnetism, each cow attracts a herd of camcorder-wielding bipeds – so bovine in their affect as to make you wonder if the transgenic future is already here.

Customarily you take evasive maneuvers, but occasionally you'll find yourself swept into a knot of cow-gazers. At such moments your tourist hatred wells to the surface, along with the certainty that this project was conceived in order to destroy the hopes of any surviving *flaneurs* that might still claim some corner of the city as a refuge of the imagination.

In contrast with the fixity of the cows, the sidewalks are alive with scooters zinging every which way like particles crashed out of a cyclotron. Children of all varieties ride' em – push off with one leg, balance on the other – from hulking teens to kids so tiny they have to reach above their heads to grasp the handles. Moms and dads too, legions of them – dot-commers heading across toward the Flat Iron, brokers who shove and glide their suited-up selves all the way to downtown to the buttonwood tree by the Wall. Into the past the city scoots, back toward the days when the world had a cowlick, before its voice cracked. Ideally each scooter should come with its own little dog, white with a black spot over one eye, running alongside, yapping with glee. On 57th Street the other day, you watched a lad of eight or so scoot headfirst into a bright yellow checker taxicab cow, bounce off and sit down hard on the sidewalk. For all his tears, nothing more than a shock. You pulled his scooter upright and held out your hand. *Come on – get back on, you'll be OK.*

Would that you could say that to yourself and believe it. You're so entangled with the city you can never be sure where reality ends and your projections begin. Are you a canary in the mine, or just bloody neurasthenic? Beneath the happy horseshit is this town truly gotten as toxic as it feels? Either way the relentless banality of the cows and scooters seems only to mock a series of metropolitan horror stories whose

cumulative effect has left you walking around feeling vaguely nauseous. Back at the end of May, two gunmen botched a robbery at a Wendy's in Queens. They herded five workers into the basement, put plastic bags over their heads and shot them point blank.

Next, on June 11, as the Puerto Rican Day Parade salsa'd down Fifth Avenue, a few hundred yards away inside Central Park an ad hoc pack of young men began to harass women walking or jogging near 59th Street. The pack grew and with it the viciousness. For over an hour they taunted, stripped, doused and groped dozens of women, some of whom made it out of the gantlet and beseeched the police lining the parade route to intervene. The cops refused budge or even report what was going on. Eventually the mob simply disbanded of its own accord and vanished into the multitudinous city.

Then just last week, two houses were leveled in Boerum Hill – reduced to mounds of brick twenty feet high. Amazingly, only three people killed. The ostensible cause of the blast, a gas leak. Felt like a horrific throwback to the bad old days of the early twentieth century, when the electric company was first wiring up the city's tenements. They'd run power lines through the old gas pipes, a cheaper method than putting in new conduits. Occasionally the gas hadn't been turned off properly, there'd be friction, a spark, and there went the neighborhood.

A happy thing though, from a purely personal standpoint, is that your queasy sense of a city at risk has not diminished your capacity for *schadenfreude*. In June, ConEd cut off power to several buildings on the Upper East Side when it looked like the feeder cables were going to blow and bring down the grid. Thus a swath of the country's wealthiest zip code went black and its privileged residents turned even whiter with fury. A whole night without air conditioning! And to think of all that prime Lobel's meat going funky in the freezers of 10021.

There's been subtle change too in the affect of the kids from Silicon Alley who lunch at Le Gamin – ever since last April when Nasdaq lay down in the gutter like an exhausted mule. They still order huge quantities of food and leave most of it untouched. Their chatter sounds just as content-free as ever. But a new edginess has crept into the way they punch the speed dial or lunge to grab their phones practically before they've begun to warble. Mouths tauter at the edges. Outside, under the awning, they mill about, distracted, and smoke like Europeans. You want to say *Abi*

gezint! (as long as you've got your health) – It's only stock options. But they haven't got anything else to peg their lives on. Clinton notwithstanding, they're Reagan's children. The bubble world's the only one they knew.

And still the residential tower frenzy goes on. Rare is the sidewalk in Chelsea one can walk down without burrowing through a tunnel of scaffolds and plywood hoardings. Haven't heard this many pile drivers since you were a kid and used to nod off on afternoon naps listening to the rhythm of the *boom-shhh – boom-shhh – boom.*

The fact is you're well and truly ready to move. Or at least spend a couple of years in Paris. Learn a new rhythm. Finally get fluent in another language. Gwen turned eight last Friday. Makes sense to uproot now before it's a real culture shock for her. But Katie's got her law practice here, and no inclination to leave. And how would you support yourselves?

July 20 – Battery Park City Esplanade – The Gloaming

The sunsets we've been having – and the late afternoon skies! Never seen cumulus clouds this massive over the city before. Like Venice – or Wyoming – with high-rises in place of distant mountains. And over on the Jersey side, a new skyline's uplifting fast where there never were any towers at all.

July 26 – Le G. – Early Morning

You've been a regular here nearly five years, since just after the place opened. In the early days, Robert was the *patron*. He grew up in Fontainebleau, served in the army in Africa, then emigrated to the Republic of New York by way of Hong Kong. Being of an entrepreneurial turn, it didn't take Robert more than a year of slaving in the galley of a three-star French restaurant, to figure out that what the city really needed was a first rate $3 bowl of café au lait, serviceable crêpes and – well, the only word is a German one – a *gemütlich* atmosphere in which to consume them. As well as confabulate, play backgammon or scrabble, read magazines, or, in your case, write undisturbed for hours on end.

Robert opened his first Gamin on MacDougal Street SoHo in 1995. Then, in fast succession came the Village and Chelsea – and still they multiply – hopping across the

East River to Dumbo (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass), the newly-minted upscale Brooklyn artist's enclave.

Last year, Robert franchised the Chelsea Gamin to Grainne (pronounced "Gron-ya") and Eran. She's Irish and he's Israeli. Naturally they met and married in New York. Grainne's got a daughter, Danielle, probably in her late teens or early twenties. You've heard her once, and she sings like an angel. The Gamin waitstaff tends to be Francophone, but few were born in the hexagon itself. Instead they hail from Mali, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Côte D'Ivoire, Morocco, even New Caledonia, and came here via Paris or Marseilles. The kitchen staff, including Mario, the chef, and Tomás, the dishwasher, is uniformly Mexican, mostly from Puebla. As is *de rigueur* for New York restaurants these days. Thai, Vietnamese, doesn't matter. Mayans and their descendants run the show behind the swinging doors.

Before Robert turned this corner storefront into a nearly flawless simulation of a French café, it used to be a mom and pop corner grocery, going back several generations. In photos from the '30s, a billboard for Moxie takes up the most of the brick wall facing 21st Street. The story goes that this was the site of Clement Clark Moore's dairy. The Moores, a dynasty of a heavyweight Episcopal theologians, owned pretty much all of Chelsea in the days when it was one big farm. When Clement Clark Moore subdivided the land into lots in the mid-19th Century, he donated an entire square block for the establishment of the General Theological Seminary.

Uptown, the New York Historical Society displays the desk on which Moore allegedly penned "'Twas the night before Christmas…." But who's to say that the muse didn't visit him of a snowy eve as he sat in his dairy milking old Bossie? Perhaps in the very spot Table 4 stands today. That said, it's not likely the Archbishop milked his own cows, or for that matter, wrote a doggerel about Old St. Nick. This Moore was certainly not the merrier. His other published verse is relentlessly Grinch-like in its piety, not a playful rhyme in the lot of it. But as the newsman said in John Ford's *Who Shot Liberty Valence?* "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

When you got here at 8:15, some even earlier customer had already warmed your chair and left a copy of the *Post* on the next table. Strange front page: an extreme close-up of a mosquito surmounted by the headline: *BUGGED!* West Nile Virus discovered in the south end of Central Park. The city plans to spray Manhattan river-to-river from

110th Street down to 23rd Street tomorrow night with a powerful insecticide called Anvil. Last year, Giuliani quashed the mosquito uprising with the relatively benign Malathion. See what they get for coming back? No more Mr. Nice Guy. "I'm sorry if it kills animals," sez Hizonner. "My job is to protect human life." The paper alleges that Anvil disperses rapidly in sunlight and rain but notes that its dangerous for people with respiratory conditions. A couple of Gwen's classmates are asthmatic. Make a note to call them just in case their parents didn't hear the news. As for your household, you'll just shut the windows, turn on the fans and not breathe too deeply.

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Midafternoon amble down Sixth Avenue. Between 27th & 28th Streets, the wholesale flower district. In the course of a single block, so many scents overlap one another: frying chick peas, something skunk-like, the perfume of roses carried past by a messenger. Then, in fast succession, searing Halal lamb, and roasting honey nuts!

You cross bustling, anonymous 23rd Street, press on through a two block gantlet of street vendors, turn west onto 21st Street, heading west, near the shuttered loading docks of an ex-factory building in the now high-tech Flatiron District. Inadvertently your eye's drawn to the sidewalk beneath your feet. You've traversed this block dozens of times, but somehow never registered this detail, a surviving graffito of an age long past: U.S. GET OUT OF VIET NAM – not scrawled when the cement was wet, but chiseled into the hardened surface by some anonymous, determined hand.

July 28 – Le G. – Noontime

To all appearances, the neighborhood survived the initial drop of the big Anvil. Didn't spot anyone with antennae growing out of their heads on your way to the café. Next it's a waiting game to see where West Nile mosquitoes turn up next. If you could speak raptor, you'd warn the peregrine falcons off eating the Central Park squirrels and chipmunks. Better hunt elsewhere for a while. Not worried about the pigeons and rats. They're a hardy lot, they'll get by.

George S. stops by your table on his way crosstown to labor in the fast-devaluing tulip fields of his dot-com startup. Young man looking careworn in the Age of

Everything. This is the week he's supposed to start firing people. A couple of months from now, he'll probably be told to can himself. In parting, you exchange the great urban-Utopian hope that some day soon you'll actually sit down together and have an unhurried conversation. George travels abroad as frequently as he can, and usually off the beaten path. Takes astonishingly beautiful pictures. He looks happy for a moment. "Finally," he says, "I'll have the time."

Time for you to get moving too. Grainne's at the register. You pull out your wallet and she waves you off. "Don't insult me, Shmoopy," she says. From whence springs this flash of generosity? No matter. A treat is a treat. You step out into the pulsing, fetid heat. Linger a moment on the step, swing the door ajar for the young woman entering. Taller than you by a couple of inches, copper-blonde hair extensions, high cheeks the shade of café from La Chinita Linda. Between the hem of her cropped teeshirt and lowslung waistband, a spiderweb tattoo, ovoid navel at its center. Tearless, unblinking eye of the city. Wonder of the visible world.

September 3 – Le G. – Early Morning

Newspaper accounts of the plans to close Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island resonate with nostalgia and a hint of pride at the sheer volume of crap the city has generated. Visible from space, domical like an ancient volcano, Fresh Kills spreads three thousand acres – four times the area of Central Park. What's the plan now that the time's run out? Ship the garbage by barge to a railhead across the Hudson where the township's glad to take it off our hands for a price, thence dispersed to points west and south. Fill up them old mineshafts in the coal fields. Who knows, maybe some disused ICBM silos too. Twentyfour seven, the trucks rumble west along Canal Street, dump their loads, then turn around for more.

September 5 – Le G. – Early Morning

In the movies life is beautiful, but in Gotham, it's the real estate that's drop dead gorgeous. "Welcome," the *Post* headline reads, "to the Skyscraper Bazaar." Every charismatic commercial building, every "marquee" and "postcard" property, Rockefeller Center, Lever House, CityGroup, the WTC, is changing partners, waltzing

with a pack of avid suitors. A frenzy of deals among players positioning themselves for the next market uptick and wannabees hot to get in on the top floor.

But the tune's turning frenetic, the tempo racing ahead of the steps. Says realtor Mary Ann Tighe, "We've entered a place where no one knows where we're going."

September 6

By first boat of the day out to the Statue of Liberty with Gwen. The instant the gangplank dropped, the two of you raced all the way to the crown ahead of everyone, looked up the arm at the great torch, and out over the harbor. Now you explore the museum at the base, searching for the Emma Lazarus plaque. Got to be here somewhere.

"Look!" she says, points out over the mezzanine balustrade. She has spotted the original torch, copper strips woven and riveted together, rising from the center of the atrium. Together you read the placard, a headline from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, October 15, 1887, price 10 cents:

LIBERTY'S LIGHT A LURE TO DEATH – THOUSANDS OF BIRDS, BLINDED AND KILLED BY THE FLAME IN THE STATUE'S HAND – THIRTEEN HUNDRED AND SEVENTY-FIVE PERISH IN A SINGLE NIGHT.

The accompanying exhibit note, a facsimile of the cover, renders the scene so graphically that nothing remains to be imagined. The massacre is observed from what is literally, a bird's eye view.

Downstairs, on the way out, you ask a Federal Park Service guard what became of the Lazarus plaque. "Oh, it's there all right," he says. "It's just not that obvious." Your retrace your steps and find it exactly where he told you it would be. No wonder you missed it, it's very small really, no larger than a cafeteria tray, mounted above eye level and illuminated only by lightspill from the surrounding displays. Trading lines with Gwen you recite the poem. Midway through, as you say "yearning to breathe free," you feel your throat clutch. With each word spoken aloud, the cadence and full emotional charge of these lines – once so affirming of a hope long since nullified – threatens to overwhelm you.

Gwen seems not to notice that you can hardly vocalize, continues on in a calm, clear voice. When you've finished, she examines the adjacent cases full of scale models,

antique souvenirs, postcards, plans and elevation drawings. You stare at the plaque again, trying to imagine how you could have rendered it so gigantic in memory. In your mind it seemed to take up a whole wall of the pedestal's stone interior, writ so large no one could fail to see it. Only now, as you write this do you realize how you could have gotten the scale so wrong. Once long ago, you had a souvenir model of Liberty – Lord knows what became of her – the poem stamped on her plastic base. In the intervening years, you seamlessly expanded the lines of type into something monumental. On the statuette, the poem *had* covered the entire wall. Once the genie's out of the bottle, no dose of reality can fit it back in.

September 8 – Claryville, NY

Upstate to the Catskills for a weekend reading. Dinner at Patricia and Peter's house. In the gloaming, light spills lambent from the kitchen onto the lawn. Gwen blows bubbles which land on the grass and somehow come to rest without popping – a backyard prairie topped with iridescent spheres. "Look!" she cries, "Utopia for ants!"

October 16 – 50th Street & Eighth Avenue – Early Morning

Late for therapy. On the steps up from the subway, you fall in behind fast fella, cutting a swath through the crowd. Slip along in his jetstream. Top landing and almost out into the street, fast fella gets stalled behind slow fella who, if there were roses within nose range, would be stopping to smell them. Slow fella hits the open air, begins whistling: *Oh, what a beautiful morning!* Fast fella strides into overdrive and swings around, shooting sidelong daggers, then *paum!* slams into big gal coming the other way. She's solid too, poitrine like the prow of a man o' war, Venus of Willendorf thighs. "Excuse me," fast fella says through gritted teeth, breath half knocked out of him. Big gal plants herself, deliberate syllables. "You ought to watch where you're going."

A suited young woman clicks past, double-takes big gal in her stretch pants, widens her eyes.

Fast fella, blatantly insincere. "Sorry."

No good comes from this. You shift lanes and fall in behind slow fella who's moving so glacially you can still hear what's going on back there.

Big gal: "Sorry, shit – I'll bust your head."

Fast fella: "Oh yeah? What are you gonna do, sit on me?"

He'll pay for that. You can almost feel big gal going for his tie knot with one hand, drawing back the other arm, palm open wide. Street warrior *asana*. But you'll never know the next of it, for the wormhole's already closed behind you. Parallel universes on the same block. All you have is where you are and what's up ahead: slow fella warbling *Some Enchanted Evening*. Eight o' five, a.m. You resist the temptation to rush past him. Slacken your pace, deepen your breathing. By the time you reach the awning of Paul's building near the corner of Ninth Avenue, he's made it through most of *Impossible Dream*.

November 6 – Uptown C Train – Midafternoon

A middle-aged man, tall and thin, wearing globally anonymous sportswear leans back against the doors. He coughs repeatedly, eventually bringing up a substantial wad of sputum which he plants directly on the floor between his feet. Using the sole of one white Pony running shoe he spreads the phlegm with slow circular motions. A few moments later he draws a handkerchief out of his back pocket and with great fastidiousness, blows his nose.

November 8 – Intersection of 24th Street & Eighth Avenue – Midmorning

So camouflaged by the gray macadam, you nearly tread on it in the crosswalk. Flattened to an almost two dimensional oval, yet still hirsute and endowed with its unmistakable worm-like tail. There it is: the proverbial rat's ass no one gives a rap about.

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5 p.m. Gwen's busy with homework. You're burned out with writing. Already it's pitch dark. You reach across your desk for the first book that meets your grasp. *The Burnt Pages*. John Ash. Read from "Forgetting":

I know I mix the present with the past,
but that's how I like it:
there is no other way to go on.

December 6 – Le G. – Midmorning

Symbols aplenty in the naked city, so who knows which ones truly signify? But here's a puzzlement, a glitch in the accustomed seasonal order. And though she hasn't asked about it, or perhaps even noticed, your own internal Gwen wonders: *Daddy what does it mean?*

Immediately after Thanksgiving, Christmas tree sellers from up north, Alaska, Canada and Vermont, descend on the city and set up their stands on the sidewalks near particular intersections, such as the one at 22nd Street diagonally across Ninth Avenue from Le Gamin. Year after year, the same folks work the same locations, park their pickup trucks converted into campers and nail two by fours into racks to lean the trees against. To draw attention, some inflate gaily colored Santas or Elves and affix them with ropes or guy wires to the roofs of their trucks. At nightfall, illuminated from within, these guardians of the crossroads gladden the heart, serve as beacons to armies of chilled pedestrians trudging wearily home. That's how it's been.

Recently though, at least in your neighborhood, a malady has afflicted the whole pantheon of blow-up folk deities: they appear to be suffering a collective deflationary crisis. The first incident you observed took place on 24th Street and Eighth Avenue in front of the Rite Aid drugstore, where a red and green elf, trimmed in yellow was stricken with pneumatic failure and crumpled within seconds into a flaccid heap. Then yesterday, at a larger stand visible from your seat at Table 4, a full-scale Santa precipitously lost air pressure and sagged into the street, disrupting traffic. With near heroic energy, one of the fir-purveyors clambered up onto the camper's roof and inserted a hose into Santa's valve while a compatriot on the ground revved up the air compressor.

As Santa reinflated, the fellow on the truck positioned himself at his back, squeezing and palpating to prevent air pockets from forming in his folds. Soon, Santa began to reassume his accustomed shape, swaying amiably to and fro, and the man responded by spreading his arms across the giant's vast red torso. The taughter his skin drew, the more animated Santa's movements became, until he appeared to abandon himself to the throes of some exquisite sensation, twisting and pulling evermore

forcefully against his ropes while the man pressed against him stood steadfastly at his post, containing, as best he could, the giant's wilder gestures.

For a moment it seemed that Santa might tear himself free and soar heavenward, but gradually his paroxysms subsided and at last he stood upright, trembling gently in the breeze. Satisfied that Santa had calmed at last, the man who had revivified him climbed down and returned to the more mundane give-and-take of street-level trade. For a quarter hour perhaps, all seemed well. But then, some latent fissure must have abruptly ruptured, for within seconds Santa lay supine, sprawled over the roof of the camper, one arm flung over his head in a pose very like that of the voluptuous dreamer of Fusili's "Nightmare."

Some twenty-four hours gone and Santa still lies where he fell, his slack material secured to the roof with bungee cords. Countless mortals file past, most oblivious to Santa's calamity, alive only to the bower of firs arrayed on either side of them, and the pungent fragrance of forest, come to the city for the short, happy season in which nature ends its cycle, in order, one day, to bloom again.

December 8 – Le G. – Evening

Santa's back up! Incarnate and glowing from within – Father Christmas lives!

December 12

A silly warm day pushes the mercury up the tube into the high forties. Fierce, freak winds, gusting to 50 mph, send the tree sellers atop their trucks to deflate and batten down their at-risk Santas and Elves. Then they tie the trees securely to their stands.

The caprices of the wind are a great mystery. Along some streets it rips awnings down, on other streets one hardly feels it. At certain intersections it causes pedestrians to jackknife forward and walk more or less in place until it abates. When it comes at you from the side, you must lean precipitously into it, somehow maintaining balance. Occasionally, a strong tailwind will push a car stopping for the red into the crosswalk. Yet just down the block, calm prevails. Overhead, in the visible patches of sky, the clouds race past like a special effect designed to convey the passage of geologic time.

Today the Supreme Court is to hand down its decision on the Florida vote. One atmosphere exchanging for another.

December 14 – Chelsea Streets – Midmorning

How do you know you live in today's city and not in one of the many Manhattans of the past? Because as you walk, you navigate a labyrinth of scaffolds. For the past several years, they've been multiplying exponentially. But then, so many circumstances warrant them: construction of new buildings, renovation of old buildings. A plethora of conversions too: slum to condo, school to condo, commercial and industrial to residential, industrial to office or gallery space. Not to mention new windows, HVAC, brickface maintenance (tucking and pointing, sandblasting) terra cotta restoration, all manner of facade and cornice work. In short, every form of makeover possible in a real estate culture bent on looking hot at any price. And though they signify a forward-looking purpose, scaffolds often serve to make desolate whole sectors of pedestrian life. They block out light, turn sidewalks into improvised prison yards, necessitate ramps and detours, truncate sightlines.

Scaffolding material itself consists of nothing more than simple steel components bolted together – essentially a big kid's Erector set. Made from standardized pieces, they can be assembled or taken apart very rapidly. The uprights rest on blocks of wood that compensate for variations in the street grade, and the tunnels formed are roofed over with planking. If the building is a posh one, the scaffold might feature a cutaway to accommodate the presence of a venerable tree.

The side facing the street is usually fronted with a wall of plywood four by eights upon which advertisements get wheatpasted – sometimes literally overnight – in defiance of the timelessly ineffectual injunction to *POST NO BILLS*. Unless, of course, the scaffold surrounds corporate emblem on the rise. In that case security guards will preserve the scaffold as a marquee for the developer's message. Testifying to the greatness of the coming edifice, the rhetoric will, most likely, include that most savagely abused of words: *luxury*. Almost as invariably, the scaffold's sidekick, the dumpster, stands waiting, Sancho Panza-like at the curb. Or if the project's a large one, a herd of dumpsters in varying degree.

Thus scaffolds blossom in as many variations as there are worksites. Some extend the whole length or width of a block, in deference to a large-scale project. On other streets it seems that every second townhouse or tenement is undergoing renovation, so one passes through a kind of Manichean universe of light and dark spaces, alternatively bright and gloomy, enclosed and exposed.

And when it's raining, what to do? There's not sufficient room for two people to pass one another without tilting their umbrellas to the side or collapsing them. If, like the person approaching, you proceed under the assumption that you possess exclusive air rights to the tunnel, the chances are you'll bump bumbershoots and go on your way convinced of the rudeness of the other. But because the roofs of the scaffolds leak like sieves in any sort of downpour, it isn't wise to dispense with your umbrella altogether, but rather lower it to half staff for at least partial coverage.

Occasionally a scaffold will appear to have simply been abandoned. When Gwen started pre-K, and for several years thereafter, the front of the school lay swathed in a matrix of bars and hoardings. If any work was being done, you neither saw nor heard it. Waiting with Eric B. at schoolday's end for Gwen and Becky to emerge, you shared a running joke: if only you'd had the good sense to go into the scaffolding business – a day to put it up and then, like clockwork, every day afterward – ka-ching!

One morning in second grade, a visual shock: the scaffold had vanished and the quotidian experience of dropping Gwen off and picking her up changed subtly. An ambivalence. With its mediating structure erased, the school seemed oddly naked. That's always the way it is when a familiar scaffold is removed. Viscerally, you miss it for a few days, but the dubious shelter it afforded is more than compensated for by the restitution of a bit of sky. The dimly remembered building reveals itself – beautified, or at any rate gussied up. Storefront businesses emerge from the glum twilight, their signage no longer obscured. Nor does it take long for your mind to unbuild the structures you can no longer see.

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At the café, you scan the *Times,* rustle impatiently through their dreadful, slavish coverage of Bush's coup d'état. Juxtaposed with the ugly news, a full page ad of

gorgeously smooth-skinned body parts: a hip, a knee, an ankle and a shoulder, each surrounded by its own tiny, meticulously rendered scaffold. What's the pitch? *Joint Reconstruction at the Hospital For Special Surgery*.

December 17 – Afternoon

East of Eighth Avenue, a building's being gutted by what looks to be a lumpen pickup crew, none of whom wear hard hats and only a few of them the cheapest six-for-a-dollar dust masks. This site features a kind of improvised chute you never noticed before, shaped like a cubist's idea of an elephant's trunk and consisting of multiple jumbo plastic garbage bins, their bottoms cut out, telescoped into one another and strung together by chains through their handles. Suspended from whichever floor is being cleared, it acts as a one-way amusement park ride for debris. Billows of dust escape from the joints between bins as the refuse travels downward and a fair cloud roils up when the payload hits home. If you pause beneath the scaffold when the chute's in action, you can hear a literal *musique concrète*: distant rumble high above, a galloping crescendo of plaster and lathing, then *bada-boom!* followed by a coda of soundwaves bouncing round the dumpster's walls.

December 19 – Downtown C Train Approaching West 4th Street – Early Evening

Subway car's packed. You and another fellow lean against adjoining doors. He's squat, ethnically indeterminate, legs spread, feet splayed. He munches voraciously, hand into mouth, into box, into mouth again. Welling up, the stench of falsely buttered popcorn.

Better breathe through your mouth or else you'll gag. Shift focus too. Down the end of the car, a slight man, Asian, in a loose white shirt. He doesn't plant his body against the door to steady himself like a veteran New Yorker, but grasps the curved bar at the edge of the seat row and sways with every shift of the train. He looks about with what seems a mix of wonder and trepidation, as though he was, quite literally, born yesterday, fully grown.

December 21 – Late Afternoon – Dr. Johnson's Office

Minus twenty today if you count the wind chill factor – metallic sky, but too cold to snow. Through the window of one of Dr. Johnson's treatment rooms – this one painted bilious yellow – you gaze out at the fast-darkening sky, at the cornices of the opposite buildings, then at the bundled-up folks hurrying along St. Nicholas Avenue, and to and fro across 125th. Second visit to your new dentist. First the grim evaluation. Now cleaning is in order.

Busses lumber past, ads running horizontally along their flanks: giant women three times life size, magical creatures at once angular and buxom. In languid odalisques they repose, wearing nothing but their H&M undies. You begin to nod asleep in the timewarp, your mind swooping eagle-like over the landscape of their goosebumps.

Bobbi enters and begins fishing bits of hardware out of the autoclave and snapping them together. You exchange pleasantries. Deliberately you don't check your watch. It could be ten minutes, or an hour since she called you from the waiting room. Dr. Johnson bounds in, preceded by the double snap of his latex gloves. He pulls down his plastic wraparound magnifying lenses, shoots you full of Novocain, then goes to work with an ultrasonic machine that feels for all the world like a jackhammer. You're certain he's destroyed your teeth, pulverized them in some dental analog to an urban renewal clearance, but when he's finished and you run your tongue around, the enamel surfaces feel smooth, almost new.

Downtown A Train. Jaw still rubbery, but the rest of you feels like it could shatter on contact. Avoiding faces, you raise your eyes to the stream of advertisements above the windows and doors – "car cards" in transit ad parlance. Nestled amidst Dr. Zizmore's rainbow hallucinations of flawless skin, and Trollman and Glazer's promise to be "buen abogados y buen amigos," an MTA public service message begs the million dollar question: WHAT IF YOU ARE THE SICK PASSENGER? Not *a* sick passenger, *the* sick passenger? The type below is too small to read, but the tag line at the bottom is clear enough. Is it possible that Michel Foucault never died but went underground, into MTA public relations?

IF YOU ARE NOT WELL, YOU WILL NOT BE LEFT ALONE.

2001

January 1

Turn of the year and the beginning of the oh-oh's. Nine of them in a row, starting now.

January 9 – Midmorning

The view out your livingroom window takes in the whole of lower Manhattan, but today the great towers downtown lie invisible behind low rolling clouds cover. Classic winter lighting, everything's turned some species of gray, and the smoke gusting up from chimneys blows uniformly toward the southeast. It could be an Aschcan-school painting but for the movement, or the establishing shot of a '30s movie with a Gershwinesque score. Yet down there, it's all working on overdrive. To the south, four construction cranes ply the skyline. Look east and there are one, no two, others at work. Six visible map pins in the real estate hot spots. And to the north and west there must be dozens more.

The phone rings. Tobias calling from Madras, right on time. "Hang on a second," he says, "I'm going to put you on hold while I try to conference us with Toronto."

There's a click and for an instant you think you've lost him. But then a familiar melody, merry yet plaintive, comes over the line. Sounds a bit like an electronic toy or greeting card put on an endless loop. You are new at this global teleconferencing game and so caught up willing it to work, that you hum along for a few moments before recognizing *it's a small world after all.*

January 10 – Chelsea, Flatiron District Streets – Midafternoon

A near epidemic of whitefellas, mostly business-suited, who puff cigars as they amble, generating great clouds that hang blue and dense, and, even when no longer visible, persist longer in the nostrils than blasts of automobile exhaust or the pang of

cigarette fumes. Yet despite the grandiosity of their gestures – implying proprietorship over all they survey – you sense that absent their oral exertions, these fellows would, like Santa and his elves, unceremoniously deflate, leaving piles of gray material, cast-off elephant hides to the mercy of the indifferent street.

Just there, across Sixth Avenue, Today's Man, the vast store that caters to their sartorial needs. Tomorrow, who knows? You suddenly get a sense that this few square miles of Manhattan Valley culture constitute the park preserve of a race on the borderline of survival. Who knows what fate will await them in the wild world to come?

January 11 – Dr. Johnson's Office

For every minute of engaged dentistry at Dr. Johnson's, you've spent many more devoted to waiting. Abstractly there's nothing wrong with that. Where else do you have a chance to simply sit and think? Something too about the atmosphere of this place – its pastel-colored walls and acoustic ceiling tiles, piebald with age – particularly on a prematurely dark midwinter afternoon, that's most conducive to letting your mind drift. Which you do, until it bumps against your reason for being here: the infrastructural issues one ignores at one's peril. Same for a city as an individual. Take for example, the Manhattan bridge. One either invests millions in renovating it, or closes it down and dismantles it. Leaving the steelwork to crumble into the East River simply isn't an option.

And the new water tunnel, what about that? The two extant tunnels are a century old. No one know their true condition. To really evaluate them would mean shutting off the water, but their immense valves have grown so sclerotic it would be folly to try closing them without an alternative source of supply in place.

You hear approaching footsteps down the hall. Not Dr. Johnson. At least not on his way in here. Whomever it was just walked past. Probably Bobbi. Look out the window – downtown and east. If this office were a few stories higher, you could see over the roofs to the treetops of Central Park where, a couple of hundred feet down, an enormous feat of engineering proceeds even as you sit here. Beneath the threshold of visibility – unimagined by the majority of the city's inhabitants – the incredible din, dust and mud of excavation. That's where the third tunnel's come to now – all the way

from upstate. Over a decade they've been at it. Costs billions of dollars. An average of one sandhog killed for every mile dug.

A generation ago, New York City was a democracy at the level of water. Harlemite and Upper East-sider alike could turn on their taps and out would pour some of purest, best-tasting water in the world, gathered into reservoirs from the snowmelt of ten thousand creeks and springs. And the beauty of the system was that the water flowed all the way from the Catskills via a gravity-fed system that didn't need a single moving part. Not so long ago, it could be fairly said that between its deep draft harbor, temperate climate and fresh, delicious water, this city was not just a confluence of world culture, but a site favored by nature too.

Over the years a massive wave of upstate suburbanization crested, and compromised the watersheds. All sorts of nasty runoff byproducts started showing up in unacceptable quantities. Now deals are afoot to protect key areas from further upbuilding and runoff. What it amounts to is the city shelling out megabucks to stop the big property owners from paving *all* of paradise. But if you listen closely, you can hear the upstate developers and their political cronies laughing till they piss. For the us it's a different story. If the water supply becomes further tainted, the feds will force the city to construct a purification plant, at an estimated cost of a billion dollars – read two billion in the real world. In the meantime, every savvy, microbe-conscious household's got a Brita pitcher in the fridge, or a filter on the faucet. And the signature public act, across all ethnic and class lines, is swigging Poland Spring, or some other brand-name H_20 out of bottles on the street.

And then there are your teeth. For years any thought of reinvestment in them lay beyond imagining, so you simply pretended, to the degree that you could, that your choppers weren't there. Then Aunt Elva's beneficence made it possible for you to join a health insurance plan, one that gives modest discounts on most procedures. Your first choice in dentists was always Dr. Cooper. Consummately skilled, light of touch, and a good soul into the bargain, he does not, alas, accept your insurance. He did, however, offer to look over a list of "in plan" dentists to see if he recognized anyone he could recommend.

"Ah," he said, midway down the page. "I knew a J.J. Johnson in dental school. He was OK. If he's the same one, give him a try." Indeed J.J. Johnson turned out to be

himself, and thus became the master planner of your long-postponed oral renewal – a big job that he took on with reassuring self-confidence.

So where is he now? In the porcelain basin to your left, near the plastic rinsing cup, the water eddies hypnotically. Good thing you're a master daydreamer.

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What, have epochs flown by while you dozed? No, ten, twelve minutes only. On the map in your dream, Dr. Johnson's office was nowhere to be found. That's possible in the waking world as well. Not every Manhattan map represents the whole of the island. Some relegate the northern reaches to the back side. Others simply stop at 110th or 125th Streets, shearing off the top two fifths. True, Manhattan's attenuation makes it a difficult shape to fit within a single frame. But there's something too in where the cut gets made that speaks to the mapmaker's sense of social geography – the lopped-off neighborhoods being those most distant from the central business districts and official nodes of culture. To say nothing, and everything, of the timeworn axiom that a mostly African-American or Latino population coincides with the thinning out of real estate value.

But market and demographic forces are nothing if not mechanisms for tilting the table to unaccustomed angles. And with that comes remapping, both literal and in the mind. Nowadays an influx of strategic investment has turned broad swaths of 125th Street frontage into a disconcerting emulation of Queens Boulevard. Spreading east of St. Nicholas, a host of national chains have erupted, including an immense Old Navy superstore and Tower Records. On the corner just across from Dr. Johnson, the Popeyes fried chicken restaurant never lacks for customers. Odd how you never noticed before that the faulty wordspacing in the logo would read "Pope yes" to someone who didn't already know the name.

Just one block north, it's a different story. The street's still lined with tenements, some vacant lots and a handful of storefront churches. But how long will that last? And market forces, albeit of another sort, drew you here as well, five miles uptown from your daily spot at Table 4. Eight miles as the crow flies from the WTC.

On a good day, you can cover the distance between Chelsea and Harlem in twenty minutes. You climb aboard a C or E rain at 23rd Street, then change at 42nd Street for the A. The A touches down at 59th Street, then rockets north non-stop to 125th Street. There's a funny bit in an old John Sayles movie, *The Brother from Another Planet*, where the Brother, a Candide-like visitor from outer space, wanders onto a rush-hour A Train uptown. As the subway pulls into Columbus Circle, a street-wise fellow catches the Brother's eye. "Watch," says the trickster, pretending it's his own sleight of hand, "Watch me make the white people disappear."

Today though, not all the white people vanish. Increasingly they live and buy property north of 125th Street, borne on the tidal shifts of gentrification that are also pushing laterally east to Williamsburg and across the Hudson to Jersey City. And Hoboken! Used to be working class Italian-Irish – decent housing stock too –

Dr. Johnson fairly leaps into the room – brisk, bantering and deeply intent on producing a set of impressions, top and bottom, on which he'll base the shape of crowns to come. "Hey Bobbi," he shouts, "turn up that radio." Dutifully, Bobbi cranks the Rush Limbaugh. Dr. Johnson slathers a hideous looking U-shaped mesh trough full of pink something or other. You don't want to know. "Open," he says, "wide." Rush's giggle overwhelms you. He's having more fun than a fella has a right to. "Got to know what the enemy's up to," crows Dr. Johnson. "Now bite down good. That's the way!"

January 12 – 23rd Street & Sixth Avenue – Late Afternoon

At the close of the construction, the hour of worship. Twin cranes genuflect before a tower they spent the day a-raising. In the morning they'll extend to full height again and all around the air will fill with the cries of the faithful: *All power to the sky-obliterating gods.*

January 17 – Le G. – Early Morning

You begin two story fragments that go nowhere. The first:

I am waiting for someone to appear in the chair I am sitting in, If they don't get here in 5 minutes, I'm leaving.

The second:

"Ah, life in Medieval New York."

"What? There was no medieval New York!"

"Just wait!"

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Midmorning walk up Park Avenue from Hunter to Anna R.'s. At 73rd, a van parked by a posh apartment building:

AGGRESSIVE GLASS

Windows, Shades, Blinds

A block or so later, you pass a woman walking south. Very pregnant, coat open to the chill winds, she leans her whole body sideways into her cell phone like the Tower of Pisa. "OK. OK!" Loud and breathless.

Heading east on 76th Street, another woman, in heels and a hurry, waits for the light to change. She spots a gap in the traffic and trots across the downtown lanes to the divider. An enormous yellow tote bag swings from her shoulder. Imprinted in red letters: *Valtrex.* Isn't that a herpes medication? Business-suited, she could easily be in pharmaceutical sales. But in New York you never know. Might be an identity statement.

• • •

Walk across the park to the Cass Gilbert exhibition at the New York Historical Society. Three photos from 1911 of buildings on Broadway between Barclay Street and Park Place just prior to demolitions for the Woolworth Building. One store proclaims in huge letters "The Hub: Great Clothiers." Above the sign hang banners: "Building Coming Down – Forced to Vacate…Suits and Overcoats Selling at Less than 1/2 Cost."

It still astonishes you that Gilbert designed what you think of as the city's two most powerful buildings: the Woolworth tower and the vast ultra-austere caverns of the U.S. Army Terminal on the Brooklyn waterfront. How could the same mind have wrapped itself around two such disparate forms? On the other hand, while they seem polar opposites on one level, both represent the extension of existing building types to a hitherto unprecedented scale. Both are made beautiful via an unerring rigor of

proportion. Some elements of the reinforced concrete-work in the Army Terminal, the columns in the atrium for example, look like Ellsworth Kelly sculptures, *avant la lettre*.

A revelation to see the originals of drawings you've only seen reproduced, among them, an astonishing Hugh Ferriss elevation of the Army Terminal from around 1918 – the perspectives subtly distorted, the play of light and shadow bringing out all the building's elegant menace. The structure it describes seems both material and chimerical, utilitarian and phantasmagoric, endowed with the qualities of living myth – an intelligent giant in repose, one does not wish to rouse it. Gilbert commented that "Ornament of any kind would seem trivial in so great and impressive a mass." Yet one of Ferriss's drawings shows gigantic decorative pier ends, which were never built.

Just outside the exhibition area you find yourself staring straight at an immense painting in the permanent collection: Thomas Cole's "Consummation of Empire," dated 1836. Seen one after the other like this, the link between works and minds separated by four score years suddenly becomes clear. All Ferriss really added to Cole's vision of American supremacy are technical updates like the swarms of bi-planes soaring high over New York harbor. But he also distilled down to monochrome the saturated, almost orgiastic chromas of Coles's manifest destiny. By the Great War's end, the heroic industrial machine demanded its portraiture in unremitting black and white.

January 18 – Dr. Johnson's Office – Midafternoon

Chief among the charms of this place is that Dr. J. hasn't knuckled under to post-modernity. Taking pride of place in the waiting room, a huge, empty fishtank, its tin top askew, glass sides streaked with a violently green, organic-looking substance – desiccated since who knows when. The paneling is of the sort you associate with your uncle's old suburban "den" and the Rutland, VT unemployment office – a material that tries only half-heartedly to convince you it's wood. Judging by its time-worn patina, the naugahyde covering on the chairs, and the condition of the carpeting, the room appears to have had its last facelift no later than the early '70s.

The artwork is of more recent vintage though: three framed black and white prints, roughly sixteen by twenty, signed by Michael González in 1993. Today is the first time you actually take a close look at one and immediately it provokes a laugh.

You nearly call "get a load of this!" to the other waiting patient, a slim, long-boned fellow folded into a chair by the window. But he's walled in behind his magazine, so you let the impulse pass and turn back to the images, examine them in turn. Each is a meticulously-detailed cartoon, a variation on the theme of dentistry as infrastructure in which Lilliputian hard hats labor heroically to restore a set of dilapidated Brobdignagian teeth. Cranes load steel onto a flat truck for "bridgework," a drilling rig's erected to perform a root canal, a cement mixer pours filling into a cavity. Here and there, slapstick set-pieces, almost Boschian in detail. Atop a high ladder, a workman paints a signboard: "This Jobsite has Worked 30 Days Without an Accident," even as diesel exhaust from a dumptruck below sets fire to the seat of his pants.

"Mr. Darton." Bobbi summons from the hallway. Reluctantly you follow her, exchange the big-little world for a treatment room, pink this time. She clips on your bib. A good sort, Bobbi is. Married to a fellow who recently found a high-paying job in Las Vegas. He's moved out ahead of her, but she plans to join him soon, taking their two little ones to a new life out west. She adjusts the lamp so it doesn't shine directly in your eyes. Still its warmth radiates down sun-like and you drift into a trance. Outside the window, *Pope yes* does a land office business in fried chicken and biscuits. Articulated busses, their flanks plastered with ads for sportswear and dotcom hoohah glide by. You look for the H&M models, but they must have wised up, headed south. Don't see many yellow cabs out there. A lot of them won't go north of 96th Street, so upper Manhattan relies on car services.

You can't hear his voice or characteristic springy walk along the hallway, yet you're pretty sure Dr. Johnson is out there somewhere in his vast labyrinth of rooms, perhaps in some inner sanctum. Anyone's guess when he might pop through the door, snap on his latex gloves and get to work on you. It dimly passes through your mind that in some measure you have become, however briefly, his Boswell.

A great silence pervades the office. No Rush Limbaugh, no oldies on the radio. Has everyone gone home? That question must be a common one for all his patients, which is probably why a dozen or so magazines lie spread across the window sill. All rooms here are about waiting. An image jumps at you off a *Newsweek* cover, the face of a young black man, his top right incisor sheathed in delicately filigreed gold. Bold headline: "America's Prison Generation." Then smaller below: "Readell Johnson, One

of 14 Million Americans, Mostly Black or Latino Who Will Spend Part of Their Lives Behind Bars." Dated November 14, last year. You start to read. Dr. Johnson enters, triumphant. Between thumb and forefinger, he holds your crown, a frightening molar-shaped nugget of stainless steel. "Your choice," he'd said when you ordered it. For fifty bucks extra it could have been enameled to match your other teeth perfectly. But who's to see it way back there?

January 19 – New York Public Library Main Branch – Midday

Wander among the displays in the "Utopias" exhibit and relish a rare moment of not feeling completely on the outside. A voice inside your head even affirms "you're part of this" – though you've no idea what will come out of your mouth when you give your rap on Utopian New York eight days hence. Here's a case worth a closer look: photos and documents of the '39 World's Fair's emblem-structures, the Trylon and Perisphere.

"Gleaming in the sun, the theme center…stands as a striking symbol of man's aspiration to attain a 'happier way of living in the world of tomorrow.'" While inside the Perisphere: "spectators at a rate of 8,000 per hour look down from two moving platforms…on a vivid drama of twenty-four hours in the life of Democracity" – Democracity being the fair designers' ideal metropolis of the future. Ah, the innocent hype of yesteryear, crafted by an anonymous copywriter and typed on NYWF Department of Publicity stationery. Who would even dream of such a formulation today, much less propose a utopian city as a desirable, achievable goal?

There's a funny nugget of World's Fair lore buried amidst all the ramped-up symbology: a headbutting contest between Robert Moses, the Fair's master planner, and Mayor La Guardia. Ever the pragmatist, Moses contracted the steelwork for the Trylon and Perisphere out to the lowest bidder, which happened to be Krupp. When La Guardia heard about the deal, he put his foot down, insisted that the city buy only American steel. Moses was forced to back out. When the Fair closed in 1940, the Trylon and Perisphere were torn down and their four thousand tons of steel sent as scrap to munitions plants. More ironies than one can shake a stick at. Including that of the irony of the anti-Nazi La Guardia unwittingly saving German cities, if not from injury, then from the insult of being leveled with recycled Kruppstahl.

January 20 – Early Morning

Weird optical illusion downtown. In this strange lighting, as waves of fog blow by it, the roof of the Merrill Lynch tower, tallest in the World Financial Center cluster, appears as the top of an immense box flapping to and fro.

January 26 – Early Morning

Meandering toward you down Eighth Avenue, just south of Penn Station, three derelicts of the old school engage in an animated debate. As you close range, you notice one's a woman. Lean and sharp-featured, she shakes her head vehemently and gives a dismissive wave of her hand. "Naw, it's the cardinals – *the cardinals* vote for the friggin' Pope!"

January 27 – World Trade Center – Early Morning

Friendly guy, the head of security. He's waiting for you at the check-in desk and together you swoop up in that leave-your-stomach-behind elevator you never thought you would ride again. The taping's for a series called *Modern Marvels*, which is broadcast on the History Channel. You saw one of their shows, the building of Hoover Dam. A decent enough documentary for what it was, and in any case, *Divided…*'s still technically in print and you want keep it that way if you can.

Don't remember exactly when, but you've done this routine before. A dusting of powder to de-shine your nose. Clip-on mic, check sound levels. The producer seems a nice gal – sense of humor, engaged and earnest too, knows her WTC. She's read *Divided* not to flatter you, but as part of her research. A couple of hours fly by. She seems happy with the result. It'll air in October, but she promises to send you a copy soon as it's edited. Who knows what bites will make the final cut?

Elevator down. Weird how these images get produced. There you were, in an office way up inside tower one. But the filmmakers shot you against a big color photo of the trade center taken from New Jersey. Before you left, they played back a bit of your talking head with the WTC in the background. If you didn't know better, you'd believe what you saw.

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Midafternoon. Up to the library to give your spiel. Your notion was to have fun with this piece, present Utopian New York as a series of ephemeral moments, imagined and experienced. So you began with the appearance of Henry Hudson's *Halve Maen*, the ship later described by a native who watched it draw near as "a house of various colors…crowded with living creatures."

> Hudson's mission was to find an Arctic Sea route from Amsterdam to China. After a ferocious transatlantic voyage and rough northern encounters, he arrived at Sandy Hook where his navigator, Robert Juet recorded the scene:
>
> "This is a very good land to fall with, and a pleasant land to see…" Off the south coast of Staten Island, Juet reported sighting "many salmons, mullets and rayes, very great." On Coney Island, they caught ten mullet "of a foote and a halfe long apeece and a ray as great as four men could haule into the ship…" Crossing into Bergen Neck from Staten Island were "lands…pleasant with grasse and flowers and goodly trees as ever they had seene, and very sweet smells came from them."

Then a jump-cut centuries forward into the era of the electric motor and the elevator, toward your strongest links between New York and Utopia – those that came through your grandfather Meyer:

> Together, on our rambles around the city, we'd visit several different Automats, all of which have since blended into one. What I do remember clearly is that these were the moments when my grandfather seemed most lighthearted.
>
> He also frequented the Garden Cafeteria on Essex Street – a place put on the literary map by Isaac Bashevis Singer in his story "The Kabbalist of East Broadway." For Meyer, the Garden was a kind of utopia too. But of a altogether different order. There he was a known quantity, had to play the

role of a homeboy – people who knew him greeted him as Meyer Kalish, after the town where he was born. He spoke Yiddish with them – the *mama-loshen* – with even more facility than his very fine English. But the experience always demanded he revisit the old days in an old world, encumbered with, at best, ambivalence.

Whereas, in the Automat, Meyer became a modern man. Who there knew, or cared that his craft – a kind of semi-mechanized embroidery – had evaporated even before the Depression, leaving him a skilled worker without a trade? Here, pushing through the revolving doors, Meyer was on a par with anyone. He would hand me a dollar bill and I'd walk to the high marble change counter where George Washington instantly transmuted into twenty buffaloes – and twenty buffaloes went a long way at the Automat. Meyer's essentials were coffee, either with a cheese danish, or a kaiser roll with sweet butter.

Coffee was obtained by placing a cup under the brass spigot, which I remember as having the shape of a dolphin, but perhaps I am embellishing. Then you would insert the requisite nickels and push the button. Out would gush a river of milky coffee that never failed to overflow the cup. This is how I developed my taste for – well, addiction really – to coffee and a deep affinity for the super-abundant. When I brought the cup back to our table, Meyer would hand me the saucer so I could drink the runover.

The same nickels inserted into slots next to glass and metal rotating cylinders liberated the pies, rolls and danishes, stacked vertically within. Such was the wonderful union of mechanized Utopia with pie-from-the sky Cockaigne. Beneath the vaulted ceiling, where sunlight through the big plate glass windows intersected the soft incandescent glow of hanging lamps, Meyer breathed the city air that makes one free. Not hemmed-in by the transplanted shtetl of the Lower East Side, but sitting in an open space among fellow cosmopolitans, amidst the timeless plenty, ever available, at *any Automat at all.*

A heartening thing to have such a good-sized crowd in the room. Flattered that Marshall Berman and Dr. Falencki, came out to hear you. Even Garvin Wong your much-revered, now-retired, pre-Cooper dentist turned out. Plus lots of folks you didn't know. So what was billed as a Q&A turned into an exchange of utopian associations, for more than an hour, among friends and strangers alike – a bit of Utopia in its own right.

January 28 – La Guardia to Burlington, VT – Early morning

Off to Goddard. New teaching job. First residency. Eight days. Heartsick at the though of being away so long. Best get into the visuals – distract your eye. Flash of silver brightness. On an oblique path, another plane crosses above. Twin vapor trails hang, like a tuning fork's vibrations.

Below, frozen lakes – ponds really. One's wolfish, a miniature Superior. A dam across the neck of another makes it look, snow and all, like a huge blanched chili pepper in a bed of forest green.

It's a spinous fabric these chains of wooded hills. There's one shaved in a straight swath down the middle as though prepped for a surgeon. Some of these mountains are very immodest. Those two look like stone bodies lying side by side, curved into one another – asleep after who knows what exertions?

Doze and wake up banking steeply into Burlington. If all goes well, in a few months, you'll touch down in another longitude, and the airfield will be Charles de Gaulle. And all because your daughter, at age nine and a half, invented the escrow account. What, she asked, the day before you left, would become of your Goddard earnings? You shrugged. Made a gesture of forking up food. Suppose, she said, we don't just use the money to live on, but keep it separate for a trip to Europe? How long would it take to get enough? You exchanged glances with Katie, raised eyebrows, half awestruck. If either of you had been possessed of that kind of acumen, at never mind what age – well, it hardly bears thinking about now. But later that evening you did the math and calculated that if you could live off your other gigs until the end of the semester, you might swing it.

Truth is, you've been hyping Gwen on Paris like it's the promised land for years. And if, in fact, you get there, you're convinced it will become her second city in a trice.

In the patisserie cases, so many of the delicacies are placed at kid's eye level, and the parks – the Tuilleries with its fountains, Jardin du Luxembourg, the Bois du Boulogne constitute a whole 'nother kind of child's wonderland. Beyond which, the city's energy feels sympathetic to hers, and she may find there some deeper affirmation of her own grace and beauty than is readily available back home. It should only happen.

January 31

Hanging out of a late evening with Elena at Martin Manor. She wants to have a smoke, so the two of you head out onto the porch. Brilliant cold. The field next to the house looks so inviting though that you decide to take a walk and step off the porch together. Instantly find yourselves thigh deep in snow. It's a laughing matter. But you stop when you hear the singing from the convocation gathering inside:

We all come from the Goddess
And to her we shall return
Like a drop of rain
Falling to the ocean.
Hoof and horn, hoof and horn.
All that dies shall be reborn.

February 3

You don't do this separated-from-Katie-and-Gwen thing well. Next residency they'll have to come up with you. Lots more to do outdoors in July. And then, on For now, enormous pine trees, gorgeous in their overburden of ice. Perhaps there was a partial melt, then more snow. Whatever causes it, from time to time comes the utterly weird and anguished sound of a whole tall tree going down, somewhere out there. Spookiest when you hear it after dark.

This go-round, the creative writing MFA and Masters in Psych. residencies coincide in space and time, hence both programs alternate using the same meeting rooms. Yesterday afternoon, on entering the Oak Room to teach, you found this notice taped to the door:

Due to illness, the 1:30 workshop "Receptors: or Where Do Those Molecules of Emotion Go?" has been cancelled. Where indeed? And now, will anyone ever know?

February 5 – Burlington to Newark, NJ – Early afternoon

Homeward. Last plane out in a wicked sleetstorm hammering the whole Northeast. Headsup, the pilot's on the PA. "Hey, and welcome aboard. Just want to let you know that Maria, our lovely flight attendant back there is leaving Continental. Yes folks, this is her last flight – after today she's off to be a contestant on *Survivor III*. Don't ask where she's going, she can't tell us, but tune in and you'll see…"

On the other side of the glass, whiteout. Sitting right over the wing and you can't see the props. Maria works her way down the aisle. The pilot's right, she is lovely. Olive skin, black eyebrows, wide bow of mouth. She hands you a packet of salted nuts. What would you like to drink? As she leans in to serve your club soda, a huge golden cross swings out from the chain round her neck, a diamond or rhinestone flashing at each of its cardinal points. You raise your tumbler, wish her that most precious commodity everyone needs: good luck.

Put the nuts in your coat pocket. What's that in there? Ah, Gwen's souvenir: a pine cone you'd struggled mightily to achieve – the only one you found still hanging from a branch. When you jumped high enough to touch it, your fingers wouldn't quite grip, and each time the bough unleashed an avalanche of icy snow full in your face. And still the trophy hung, Aesop-like, just out of reach. At last, a nearly desperate leap, and then the feel of it, solid in your palm. For a moment, you imagined being whipped skyward by the snapback. But then, there you stood, both feet on the ground, and all around a rain of crystals coming down.

A bump and the rush of air against the flaps lets you know you've landed. Somehow this pilot, who sounded like such a goofball, managed to find Newark and lay the plane down on a runway. Hallelujah. Home.

February 6 – Le G. – Early Morning

Unpredictable, this place. Sometimes nearly full at 8:30. But today, deserted apart from you and Deborah.

An even earlier customer has left several sections of the Paper of Wretched tented up on the banquette. Find the front page. Give it a skim. Amidst breathless

reports of barbarities, follies and calamities, a host of silences. You're in a New York waste of *Times*.

Whatever else it may be, this city constitutes a never-ending exercise in triage – that is simply accepted. It happened, move on. The plant's leaves start to yellow, whamo, out on the curbside it goes. The apartment costs too much, move out. An old friend who had been a Ranger in Vietnam told you once that before a mission, his buddies made a ritual of clasping hands and saying in unison: "Nobody dies." We're not like that. We begin with the premise that not everyone makes it, someone's bound to fail.

Overnight, a great beige building leapt up out of the lot on Seventh Avenue between 19th and 20st. Far back as you can remember, a *PARK FAST* with a huge billboard and a Getty station shared that site. During the '80s you gassed up the VW bus there scores of time, pumped free air into your bike's tires going back into the '70s. But this not-so-remote past already has the quality of a reverie whose significance never weighed much and which with every instant evaporates, to the point where frankly, you don't care to grasp it more clearly – its easier to let it go.

Deborah puts the coffee down on your table and you take in the graphic on her teeshirt: silhouette of a low-rise skyline dominated by the trade center. Above the cityscape, a crescent moon hangs amidst an arc of glittery stars. Surmounting it all, in Olde English type, *Harlem, New York*. Since the place is still quiet, she sits to talk – pulls out some contact sheets, mostly of Morocco, a few photos taken here. She hands you a loop and a grease pencil. "Mark the ones you like."

Her eye's all over the place, maybe lacks confidence, but when she sticks to black and white portraits, and figures caught on the move – the shots are haunting and resonant. Besides which, Deborah's one of your favorite Gaministas. Born in Casablanca, young adulthood in Paris, then launched herself at New York. High-strung, earthy, moody, part Jewish, part Berber. Some mornings, her default expression borders on aggrieved, but when she smiles, her face warms, flushes even, with expectancy.

A man enters, closes the door behind him, glances around, unsure the place is open. Deborah stands, gestures to the mostly empty room. "Sit anywhere." Polite, but fundamentally indifferent – French beyond French. The customer, looks relieved, heads

toward Table 10. Deborah half shrugs, arches her eyebrows as if to say, "you see – you see what I do for a living?" She stifles a yawn, stretches expansively. Before your eyes, the twin towers on her teeshirt bow apart like parentheses, the moon waxes over "Harlem" on the rise. Goddam – what to do with your eyes? Quick, look out the window!

"I'll come back when I take his order."

The contact sheets still lie on your table.

"I'll be here."

D'accord.

• • •

Something of Shaharazade in the taking of these notes, though no one would mistake you for her. Not nowadays. Perhaps in your teens and twenties, when your female aspect lay closer to the skin. To the point where some folks getting into your taxi by night saw only your long hair from behind and addressed you, sincerely, as "miss." And indeed, the picture on your hack license made you look like a butch, slightly pissed-off Latina. On these pages too it's mostly days that accumulate, not nights. That is where middle age lands you.

Nor are you confabulating entertainments with the aim of staying the sword. Yet you have a sense – unsupported by any sort of reasoning – that by recording these moments you may somehow spin things out a bit longer. Or if not, simply mark the moments in play and passing. *Nothing to say, only to show*.

Meyer had a wonderful comeback when someone trumpeted an opinion as indisputable fact. *Vas you dere, Charlie*? – eyebrows raised, laying on the Yiddishkeit. In this case you could answer, yes, you were. Been here all the time.

The apartment's deserted when you return from the café. Long gray view through the living room windows to the fog-swept mountains downtown. But pinned to the wall above the buffet hangs the banner Katie and Gwen made while you were away at Goddard. Gnarled boughs shaped into letterforms, sprouting green leaves, and an occasional red one: *WELCOME HOME!*

February 7

The *Post*'s newest column: "Dead Dot Com of the Day." Rupert's amanuenses, never at a loss for the acid trope. Like Wilde, but heartless. Also reported, without irony, the evacuation of the Federal Treasury Building in DC due to a noxious odor.

Deeper into the paper you bore in order to learn, in a context already forgotten, that in southern Idaho, there's a town called Malad City – a county seat no less.

Return home to an email from Bill G. He wants you to check out a website that uses the 360° imaging technology he labors long and hard to market. Click the link and you land in DizzyCity.com where, with another click, up rises up a list of panoramas – three hundred and sixty degree views of dozens of urban crossroads. Ah, 23rd Street and Eighth is on the list. Click-click, *viola!* The Gap, Carver Federal Savings & Loan, Bassry's stand, Häagen-Dazs, the ancient donut shop out of Hopper with the reader-advisor upstairs. It's all on display, completely familiar, utterly other. The city on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Or is it you? Or the botha youze?

February 12 – Le G. – Midmorning

Cellphone warble, and the ensuing monologue at Table 12 cuts above the ambient din: "Ritchie, hey Ritchie, come in. Ritchie did you get the dumpster permit? No? Should have come in. Give me Pat. Hey, Pat! Did a dumpster permit come in Friday? It should have come in Friday. GPS, yeah, GPS. When did it come in? Could Angelo fax John from Steve's office? – is Angelo there by any chance? Hi – yeah, Pat has the dumpster permit – fax it over to him… These vertical joints… Ah, I believe it's bonded… Those clowns over there, they make me nervous…."

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All the dailies cover Bill Clinton shopping for office space on one-two-five. *Daily News* wins out the headline competition: "HOMEBOY."

February 19 – Le G. – Early Morning

Times front page shows a mockup of the proposed new downtown Guggenheim Museum. Odd juxtaposition of symbols, given that the Gehry design looks distinctly

vaginal. The site's just across town from the WTC. So the question is, if one of the towers were to precipitate itself over in that direction, might we expect offspring? What would it, or they, look like? And how long a gestation period? If both towers try to go for it at once, could be some serious competition between twins. Unless they agree to take turns. Ah, commerce – always looking to get a piece of the arts.

February 20 – Le G. – Early Morning

Great moments in marketing right in your very corner. Can't see the graphics, but the smoothly-modulated voice from the speaker of the G3 iBook on the table just to your left comes across loud and clear: *Expressing the brand where it was not spoken before… Connecting to product in meaningful ways… Music and sound bring life to experience…*

Life to experience – God you wish you'd written that. Whatever does it mean? Scott's a nice man, your age more or less, a regular here and business guru to a tribe of bright-eyed young acolytes.

Tune out the market-spiel and take another run at the *Times*. Welfare "reform," it seems, has had a beneficent effect upon 129th Street, formerly "Harlem's Ravaged Heart." Seems the editors have rolled off the panic for now, and amped-up the Pangloss:

"Those laws which require work in exchange for benefits before they are cut off entirely, pushed many residents into the work force. Their landing has been cushioned by an economy as supportive as a trampoline."

Thus "revived" by the wondrous elixir of the work ethic, the heart in question has now become just another "American Block" – or read another way, a safe investment for white folk.

But there are juicy bits embedded within the language itself. Here, Ibo Balton, director of planning for Manhattan's housing department calls Harlem *the spiritual capital of the African Diaspora.* Is he right? And if so, what does that mean to and for the city, and beyond? What is the material basis of a spiritual capital? Are matter and spirit extricable from one another in the life of a community?

And Big Stan, who grew up on 129th before its domestication, still raps out uncompromising rhymes:

Accept the fact that now I'm a grown man standing on my own two
Used to hate guns but now I own two
Twin Glocks for cops
Use? I promise to
I ain't going out like Amadou.

Probably won't top the playlist over the PA at Harlem's flagship Starbucks.

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And thick and fast they came at last, and more and more and more. The latest bid for the WTC: $3.25 billion. Vornado! There's a player for you – a real estate empire founded on blowing hot air from one end of a room to another.

February 27

Strike's over at Domino sugar. A long one, over a year and a half. Big loss for the workers. Sad and sorry too, because not one other union or local came out to back them up. Most likely Tate & Lyle will pull the plug on the plant anyway within a year or two, and the last big Brooklyn manufacturer will be gone. So out of balance with itself and the world, this city is getting too painful for you to write in, or about. Basta.

March 9 – Metropolitan Museum – Evening

Strange, exquisite little painting of smoldering ruins in twilit snow: Egbert van der Poel's "A View of Delft After the Explosion of 1654." The card on the wall explains that the city powder magazine blew up accidentally, killed dozens and knocked scores of buildings flat. Tourists came from far and wide to witness the destruction. To meet the demand for souvenirs, local artists churned out views by the hundreds.

March 23

Not every day that the *Post* and *News* offer up the same headline, but given yesterday's staggering market, this one's a no-brainer: MAD DOW DISEASE.

April 7 – Midday

Marjorie, your neighbor from the 19th floor, is walking down the path from the front door to the sidewalk just as you're coming in. Usually when you see her, she's leading her nearly blind husband, a former French teacher at NYU, but this time she's *en seulle* and stops to chat. "Ruth told me you wrote a book about the World Trade Center."

Bless Ruth. You've known her since you were twelve and she was what, forty-nine? Still lives in the apartment right below you, moved in at the same time you and Bea did. Forty years gone, but nothing's dulled her engagement with the world. Which makes her an unimpeachably sincere booster of all she finds of value. And she values art, ideas and experiment bigtime, reveres culture in a way that's hard to imagine now with the optimism of a generation that believed their work might make a better world. She once introduced you to friend, claimed you as the pride of Penn South, "our own Upton Sinclair." If you had the money and she were even a few years younger, you'd hire Ruth to do PR.

"You know," Marjorie confides, "Minoru Yamasaki was a close friend of my family. I remember, when he came to New York, he would look at the World Trade Center and say: 'these are not my buildings' – because they made him do so many changes. The downstairs part perhaps he thought was his – but not the rest."

April 9

Plunked down the money and bought ze tickets *pour visiter La Belle France cet été*. Ulp. Big gamble. The whole family boodle's on the line – Goddard escrow account and more. But if not now, when? And how, apart from setting foot in it, will Gwen come to come to connect with a world out there, even wider and more varied than the city she's grown up in?

Afternoon surprise – who should visit you at the café but the villain of *Free City* – his spirit anyway. He insists on telling his side of the story. Wants to take a star turn in his own novel. Right away – immediately. That's the kind of guy he is.

Coffee gets cold. No matter. You've got plenty of ink. For however many pages you're permitted to live in the ductile and life-giving republic of fiction, you'll have a

happy exile. And maybe not mind so much what happens in New York, that other place where, more and more, only your body resides.

July 5

Ten days of Goddard residency to get through, then two days back in the city, and you're off to Paris. As the time approaches, the mechanisms of everyday life reduce to a series of dead-hearted exercises that become increasingly less tolerable. Each action you're called upon to perform, even those that normally give you pleasure, like going to the café, makes its way grudgingly against a tide of fractious and petty moods you're hard put to suppress. What's the game here? Guilt at abandoning New York, however briefly?

Looked at straight on, you're pretty sure this weirdness is all bound up with your father, and specifically his credible promise, the summer you turned fifteen, that he'd cut you off if you accompanied your mother and aunt to England and France – your first potential taste of travel abroad and hence beyond his control. Back then you'd felt a resolute calm in the face of his fury. You even recall a sense of exhilaration at his having made the choice so clear for you – decided in a heartbeat that you'd rather never see Jack again than be subject to his dictation.

But this is now, and some diffuse and angry power threatens to punish you beyond measure if you skip town. The only thing to do is tell the monster to fuck off. And take your freedom as you find it. You always have.

July 19 – New York to Paris

Three eggs in one basket, seats A, B & C, row 22, the 757 taxiing into position, poised for takeoff. Unbelievable. This is really going to happen.

You lean in toward Gwen, half shouting over the noise of the turbines. This is the image grandma Bea saw in her head just before takeoff: great teams of horses tethered to the plane straining to bound forward and sweep it, like a chariot, into the sky. Look out the window at the vibrating wing and you can sense them, invisible and protean. This is it. They've been given their heads. Galloping now. Place your hand over hers, the purple cast on the armrest. Don't squeeze her fingers. The tarmac

rumble quickens, travels up your whole spine, then it quiets and you're up and gone – steeply angling – into your element.

3 À NOUS LA LIBERTÉ

July 20 – Paris – Late Evening

Such density of image and sensation greets you here, it's impossible to sleep yet. Jet-lagged, the three of you stroll through the amusement park set up on the Tuilleries, toward a huge Ferris wheel set up just west of the Louvre. Katie doesn't do heights, so you and Gwen take the ride together. No enclosed compartments here. You sit in something that resembles a large dangling saucer – the sides don't come up nearly high enough – particularly given that that some of the more adventurous passengers seem to be purposely swinging in them and spinning them round.

Fortunately, you and Gwen get a dish to yourselves, and position yourselves on opposite sides to counterbalance it. The wheel begins to turn. Two takeoffs in as many days. Upward you soar. Glimpse yourselves in miniature framed by the lights of the wheel reflecting off the windows of the Louvre – and now you clear the roofline. Near the apex, the wheel stops and you hang there, swaying gently to the creak of metal joints. An unaccustomed voice, not one you recognize, speaks plainly inside your head: *You will not die in Paris*. Gwen's face has gone white, so you reach over to clasp her hand. A lurch, and onward you roll.

Katie spots you and waves from her bench as you descend, sweep past six o'clock and then ascend again. A weight seems to have lifted off Katie here too, at least for the moment. Even from a distance, and in the dim lantern light, she looks radiant. From the top of the arc, you can read the time on the backlit glass clockfaces of the Musée d'Orsay across the Seine. Further to the southwest, the searchlight atop the Tour Eiffel whips across the sky.

You shift your weight to point between L'Opéra and L'Arc de Triomphe and the saucer rocks from side to side. *Out there*, you say, *that's Argenteuil, where grandma Bea were born. You remember the photo on the dresser – the one taken right before they came to New York – when Bea was three and aunt Gladys five?*

She recalls the picture, even that the tall, elegant woman with the beaky nose standing behind them was their mother Helen, from whom she gets her middle name. Gwen's never seen the photo of her great grandfather Meyer standing outside the door of his embroidery workshop circa 1910, when he'd have been around thirty-four, arms folded across his chest, sleeves rolled to the elbows, the distillation of self-assurance and still-youthful virility. You'll have to dig that one up for her when you get home.

July 21 – Evening

Early this morning, Sunday, to the bird market on Ile de la Cité near Notre Dame where Gwen fell under the thrall of a tiny bright orange canary. You convinced her of the logic of not buying it, but nonetheless she named it: Mango.

Only now, as your body adjusts to the actuality of breathing in the Paris air, do you begin to take in that you almost didn't make it here.

Just over a week ago, up at Goddard, the day before her ninth birthday, Gwen broke her wrist. But it could have been exponentially worse. In the midst of an afternoon tutorial, a graduate assistant knocked on your office door, and informed you, with the kind of goofy, wide-eyed Vermont Maid affect, that your daughter had been in an accident. *Where?* At your dorm. *How badly is she hurt?* A half-embarrassed shrug. *When?* Another shrug. Twenty minutes maybe.

You didn't ask why nobody had called all that time, just bolted out the door and set off across the campus at a dead run and arrived, panting like a dog, to find two paramedics loading Gwen into an ambulance, strapped to a back board, her face tear-stained above a neck brace. Katie, stricken-looking climbed in after her, called out that Gwen had fallen down the stairwell from the second floor. You made straight for your car. No time to find out anything more, nor let Gwen see that you were there before the doors closed and the ambulance took off at a clip. Interminable the twelve miles or so that you trailed the flashing lights along the road to Barre – all manner of terrors playing in your head.

When they examined Gwen in the ER, it quickly became clear how lucky she had been. She'd tried to slide down the banister and, in her enthusiasm, overshot it, fallen twelve feet onto the steps below. No head, spine, or internal injuries. Just the simple fractured wrist. Officially, you're an atheist. But if you were the sort of fellow who

deals in astral terms, you'd imagine that some winged celestial guardian saw a demon nudging Gwen over the banister's edge, and swooped down to break her fall. No denying that you've often had the sense of spirits running loose up at Goddard – not all of them beneficent.

For now though, you give thanks to whatever powers conspired to place Gwen on the balcony of this too-pricey hotel room, gazing out over the chimney stacks of the 7th arrondissement. "Pretty amazing," she says, and points down rue de Verneuil toward the wild effusion of devotional graffiti that covers the walls of what used to be Serge Gainsbourg's house. You've read somewhere that he's buried in the Montparnasse cemetery. Baudelaire too. Et Robert Desnos.

Still light out and nearly ten p.m.

July 22

Rain at dawn, which clears by mid-morning. A late breakfast, over which you read, in the *Herald Tribune*, of a riot at the G-8 meeting in Genoa and the police killing of a demonstrator. What a sorry, criminal spectacle: the world's most presumptively powerful – but truly the weakest of men – relying on legions of armed goons to protect them, unable to claim authority over any urban center, much less whole of the globe they are attempting to subjugate.

Amble down Boulevard St-Germain to the Cluny Museum. Perhaps it's the death of the protestor, but you find one life-sized wooden head of Christ – mask-like, long detached from rest of the crucifix, if ever it belonged to one – particularly disturbing. An unmediated truth cuts through the stylized form. At the corner of the Son of Man's eyes, deep wrinkles etched by anguish, and across his brow, punctures from a crown of thorns, now missing, interspersed the filigree of tiny holes where real termites have made a feast of his forehead. Christ's lips are parted, his eyes heavy-lidded. Whatever master carved this head, some six hundred years ago, caught nothing of the god, only the essence of a living human being at the brink of transitioning into a corpse.

• • •

Afternoon. On the Rue de Sèvres a man with dark brown skin, wearing the bright green uniform of the Propreté de Paris, plies the sidewalk with steaming spray from a high-powered water gun. The hose is attached to a small vehicle parked by the curb, and its length adjusts automatically.

So as to watch the spectacle undisturbed, you draw Katie and Gwen into a doorway, where you confide to Gwen your belief that Parisians would stage another revolution if told they had to pick up after their dogs, and for this reason, among others, the city has deployed an army of workers equipped with the most advanced sanitation technology.

By now the man has noticed the three of you staring raptly at his labors and he responds by creating a spontaneous street cleaning drama in which you are very much implicated. Step by step, he advances methodically toward you, blasting his targets on the sidewalk with pinpoint accuracy and precipitating a tide of cigarette butts, dogshit and random detritus into the gutter, helpless before his onslaught. Nearer and nearer he draws, then parallel with you, then beyond, leaving a swath of wet pavement in his wake. Yet your feet are still dry. The spray has passed just centimeters from the toes of your shoes.

• • •

Evening. You convince Katie to overcome her embarrassment at doing something so touristic and take a Bateau Mouche ride along the Seine. Up late and tired from so much walking, Gwen can barely keep her eyes open, so after the boat passes the Eiffel Tower and turns back east, you give up trying to point out the sights and just let her nod off on you shoulder.

Catch the train from St-Lazare to your new, quite modest hotel in Asnières, a suburb just to the northeast of Paris. There's a hole-in-the wall épicerie just next door – of the kind vernacularly known as *petites arabes* – and it stays open late. Buy three white peaches and cut them up on the desk in your room. Juice like liquor – the best of all possible fruits.

July 26 – Asnières-Sur-Seine – Early Morning

Still, even here, when you wake up, depression grips you by the throat, having made inroads, throughout the night, into any residual well-being accumulated during the previous day, or even a sense of triumph as you drifted off to sleep. This morning, as you lay in bed, light still pale through the curtains, your situation resolved itself into an image all the worse for its lucidity. Sometime, in the earliest hours, despair had breached your room and broken your back. How can you swing your legs out, plant them on the floor and walk upright? Still you do, and heading for the bathroom, up comes a bitter, angry belch – a mocking kind of cock's crow – your stomach's acid call of defeat. *Lighten up, bro. Enjoy your vacation – vacate! – you've bloody earned it*. Bravo, you take a piss. Shower. Girls are still sleep. What to do but head out, walk to the corner, to the Café Le Rallye. Find a table in the open air. Write what comes.

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Un café allongé et un petit verre d'eau? The waitress asks, but it's just a formality. After just a few days, she already know what you'll order.

Just as on the other workday mornings you've sat here, the vast majority of people passing by are headed directly across the square to the SNCF station and trains to La Defense or St-Lazare. Office workers mostly, walking erect and with determination, the majority of them white, occasionally someone Afro-français, sartorially assimilated. At least half the commuters are female. In general, they're a well-dressed, *propre*-looking lot. The men nearly all carry leather satchels, many wear beige slacks and polo shirts, deliberately casual for the summer – few actual suits. A good many of the women wear pants, stylishly cut, and the skirts, whether ankle-length or shorter, are tailored to flatter the wearer's form. If the look is conformist, at least it pays tribute to line. Apart from an occasional bright necktie, cardigan or skirt, personal style here shows up in far subtler variations than it does at home. The same is true of facial expressions. Externally, almost no one is obviously attempting to stand out. Their "thing," if they have one, remains self-contained.

Remarkable – in the fifteen minutes you've been sitting here observing the flow, you haven't seen more than a few overweight bodies and no one really obese. A handful of people move with striking grace, but nearly everyone walks with a self-

possessed ease, as though quite confident of the relationship between themselves and the rest of actuality. No oceanic slackness or jerky flailing – the sort of "hey world, check out my dysfunctionality" body language you see everywhere stateside. Aha – there's someone fat at last – a white woman – heading against the trend, not toward, but away from the train station.

Still, no sense, from all appearances that she's on a slippery slope of any kind. Overall, these folks exude a sense of internalized correctness, of doing precisely what they intend to do, in the way they intend to do it, no more nor less. *We are just as we should be,* their attitudes imply. Is this possible? Yet if there is a gun to these people's heads, it's an invisible one.

One figure and face separates out from the crowd and like a heliotrope, your head involuntarily turns to track with her. Fine, nearly porcelain features, loose, swinging hair the color of Stephanie Audran's. A truly exquisite dress, deep red and fitted, cut high in front and low in back, tiny bone buttons running down to her sacrum. As the train for St-Lazare pulls into the station, she raises her head slightly but does not quicken her pace, although several people around her break into a trot. Another train will come, she telegraphs, but who else could possibly be me?

She's the one you've been waiting to see: her half-smile and unhurried gait trumping any dictate of the clock. Living proof that trains may run on a schedule, but time means nothing when set against beauty.

• • •

Eh alors, la mosaïque splendide de Paris. It's in the city of arrondissements, not in Asnières, that the big demographic changes since the last time you were here become apparent. Riding the Metro or just walking about you see far more African, Arab and Asian faces than you did fifteen years ago. And it's a more overtly gay town as well, particularly in the Marais. Which makes the vibe, despite the absence of a strong Latino presence, feel oddly less exotic – almost familiar. But then, you'll see, crossing the street, an African woman, gorgeously dressed, an infant slung across her back. Tall, lean African men too, wearing skull caps and long robes, some almost as flamboyantly colored as the women's dresses. And style, as ever, taken into the stratosphere. In

Montparnasse, a young African woman with runway model proportions stands – poses rather – on the sidewalk, cellphone pressed to her ear. She's got to be 5' 11" even sans high heels and brilliantly-hued head wrap – the same pattern as her miniskirt. More material on her head than round her hips. Lord – who's her couturier? Probably herself.

Frank told you a story once, about a trip he took to Paris with Gloria in 1957. One of the first 707 flights. Landed at Le Bourget. A whole 'nother geologic epoch from now. Gloria got it into her head to make herself a black dress, so she went to Bon Marché, bought the material and some lace and started in on it using Frank's late father's moustache scissors and the thread and needle from her sewing kit. Every day, at the restaurant they frequented, Gloria would show Mme her progress, and one evening, in she walked on Frank's arm wearing her *robe noir*. Embraces, kisses. "You are a true Frenchwoman," quoth Mme. "On a desert island, we can make a dress – with our teeth."

Every so often, in different parts of the city – and it kind of jolts your eye – you'll see a knot of women, some of them quite young, wearing *khimars*. Not what you're used to down on the farm.

July 27

To the Louvre, where you're in for a shock. Last time you were here, in '86, work on IM Pei's scheme for unifying the entrances and integrating the galleries had transformed the courtyard between the palace's wings into a huge excavation site hidden behind plywood fencing. Now a new global icon, Pei's glass pyramid, stands at the center of the Cour Napoleon. It's the new starting point for the sightline that extends several miles northeast, through the arch at Carousel, along the Tuilleries, past the obelisk at Place de la Concorde, down the Champs Elysée, through the Arc de Triomphe, all the way out to the vast hollowed-out cube of La Défense.

The changes go far deeper than the pyramid's symbolic value. Pei's design has rationalized the acts of entering, circulating within, and leaving the museum – particularly given the ever-increasing crowds – more radically than you could have imagined. But the appearance of order has come at a certain cost. Before, the place felt like a score of collections cobbled together – a mess really, but an interesting one. Now,

it's a smoothly-running museum-machine, its main entrance approached by descending from the pyramid, or underground from the Metro stop on rue de Rivoli.

The former, with its sense of abandoning the land of the living for that of the underworld is disconcerting enough. But the latter approach is truly bizarre. Once out of the Metro station, one is borne along on a tide of humanity, through a glittering, crypt-like mall. Your mind leaps to those surviving ground-level passageways not far from here as the crow flies, but a million miles away in psychic space: those streets covered over a couple of hundred years ago, enclosed in skylit arcades. These were the hothouses of consumerism's first flowering. Then came the Belle Époque and the birth of the *grands magasins*, their goods enshrined beneath soaring domes that offered, at their summits, panoramic views of the city around them.

Now, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the commercial action's gone troglodyte – sunk below ground to the same level as that of the medieval Louvre, the fortress buried beneath the renaissance palace. Off to the side, down a perpendicular passage, one can see the ancient turrets and walls unearthed by the excavation and now preserved. Keep walking, moved with and by the crowd. To your left and right, the great displays of luxury goods piled up in the shops seem more like ritual objects for the dead than objects for use by living women and men.

Ahead, dimly, a well of light. You shuffle along feeling like a steer in a slaughterhouse designed so as not to panic the animals. The passageway opens out into the huge light-filled space covered by the pyramid. For all the brightness that spills through the panes above, the effect is disheartening. Why, the body asks itself, did you trap me down here?

Even and maybe especially experienced from below, there's something about the rigid geometry of the glass canopy that's fundamentally hostile to the eccentric lines of the palace wings with their effusions of ornament. It's as though the pyramid is trying to coerce the palace into submitting to the worship of a static and rectilinear god – as to roll back culture from the time of the Sun King to that of the Pharaohs.

As you wait on line to feed your credit card into the ticket machine, it comes to you in an instant: this place feels like the elevator lobby of the World Trade Center all over again – Pei used the same strategy in post-modern Paris as Yamasaki did in late modern New York. Both spaces induce a disconcerting sense of nowhereness. Both do

away with the ritual of crossing of a meaningful threshold, then position the visitor half in the grave, half out of it, bathed in weirdly brilliant light. Both architects created illuminated nether-wells – waiting rooms for a people unsure whether they're alive or dead. Hallmarks of a culture that, as the saying goes, doesn't know whether to shit or go blind. You suppress a momentary impulse to flee up the spiral staircase to ground level, hovering tantalizingly above.

But the machine's spit out your card and tickets, so you press forward with the entrance seekers and finally into Sully, homing in on like a heat-seeking missile on your icon of icons: the Victory of Samothrace at the summit of her staircase. Off to one side in a vitrine, incredibly delicate for being half again life-sized, a fragment of her right hand, the one that held the vanished trumpet to her lips.

You circle round the knot of women vamping for their boyfriends' cameras in front the Venus de Milo and take the stairs up into Italian painting. The better part of an hour spent before the *Wedding Feast at Cana* – Christ at the center, the only one in the throng not celebrating, not even alive to the moment, his eyes fixed straight out past the viewer, a deer caught in the headlights.

When you turn round, you realize you've had your back to the Mona Lisa all the while. She's too mobbed to contemplate penetrating that crowd, amidst the popping flashbulbs, for a glimpse of that face imprisoned behind an inch of glass. On then, to pay homage to Leonardo's *Virgin and Child with St. Anne*. And hanging next to them, pointing heavenward, his smile as redolent of secret pleasure as La Gioconda's, the ultimate androgynous, St. John.

• • •

One greater Paris site that will remain unseen: Disneyland. On the walls of nearly every Metro station, stretching up to the vaultings, an immense poster of the castle aglow by night and crowned with fireworks:

> *Paris, ses grandes hommes, ses 7 nains.*
> *Venez vivre la magie.*
> Paris, its great men, its 7 dwarves.
> Come live the magic.

Pretty funny, you have to admit. Though she stares in fascination at all the Metro posters, Gwen has, thankfully, somehow remained immune to the Great Mouse's blandishments. Whew.

July 28

For the first time this morning, the knot in your viscera begins to slip a little. Who knows – perhaps the beast that spends its time trying to chase you down has gone on a little holiday himself?

Yesterday, Versailles – a suburb that's really small city unto itself, with a comfortable feel. Which is surprising, given the straight boulevards and gridded streets. Many of the houses along the avenues are fronted by lushly planted, tranquil yards. Proust and Wilde, apparently, found the atmosphere congenial enough.

For most of the day, you wandered in the gardens and found them so engaging you never made it to the palace. Gwen will have to wait until next time you come to Paris for her Hall of Mirrors experience.

But you did walk around the "hamlet" to which Marie Antoinette, when feeling overwhelmed by court life, used to escape, assuming the role of an Arcadian shepherdess. Utterly bizarre this potemkin village, surrounded by a moat and built just a stone's throw from the Grand Trianon, where the game of politics was played out in earnest. It's a design worthy of a modern-day Disney "imagineer" – the structures, thatched cottages and farm buildings, scaled just a little smaller than life-sized, endowed with the proportions of contrived innocence. Not actually inhabitable – all for show – yet living within the *hameau*'s precincts, real cows, sheep, asses, ducks and chickens.

Wandering on her own, clearly mindblown by the dreamscape, Gwen snapped a photo of the mill with its little waterwheel, then strolled across a patch of lawn and took a deadfall straight into an overgrown, half-hidden stream. From a few yards away, you watched as she disappeared completely, save for her arm in its purple cast, somehow holding the camera aloft and clear of the drink. You ran toward her, but she'd already emerged, completely soaked and weeping in shock. Sun hot enough that she soon

dried off and, even more quickly, spun the mishap into a tale for her friends back home, pictured them rolling on the floor with laughter.

July 29

Afternoon ramble up and down the slopes of Montmartre. Along the way, Gwen announces her intention to become a psychotherapist. And why not? since she'll have had years of practice riding out the emotional whitewater you and Katie manage to churn up.

Getting on to dinner time, you wend downhill toward the Gare du Nord. On a narrow street off the rue de la Goutte d'Or, you spot a promising Moroccan restaurant – inexpensive menu, a couple of families with young kids among the patrons. You sit down, order food and what comes is well-prepared and richly flavored. But subtly, as the meal progresses, a growing sense that your presence is more tolerated than welcome. Years ago, in East Jerusalem, you'd experienced something similar, though more acutely and under riskier circumstances. During a late evening walk from the old city toward your hotel, a little high on wine, you came to feel first one set of eyes boring into you, then another and still more until you'd reaped the full, almost palpable sensation of the quarter's collective will that you disappear, preferably in a flash, as if astride Mohammed's horse. Vanish, or else. But you were earthbound and your feet of clay had landed you in the wrong place at the wrong time. Nothing for it but to put left in front of right – deliberately – not too eager, not too slow. Send out a vibe that says *I am leaving at the fastest pace my dignity will allow – in the same manner as you might wish to leave if you were in my shoes.*

What had you been thinking, or not thinking – taking a stroll down an avenue named for Saladin as though it were Positively 4th Street in a sixties midsummer's night dream? Why now, in your presumably wiser middle age, had you gone and forgotten that in some places you're seriously Other.

Katie, who, from the get go had been skeptical about walking through, much less having dinner in a North African neighborhood, picks up on the room tension, and begins to chew more rapidly. Across the table, you telegraph *slow down*. Gwen unfazed, finishes her lamb stew, pats her lips with her napkin and announces herself

ready for dessert. *Not here, sweetheart. Someplace else.* Which turns out to be a hole-in-the-wall pastry shop just down the block.

The shift in energy between one space and the next on the same street is like night and day: the fellow from whom you order three beignets and an espresso *à emporter* treats you with the open affect New York deli counterman. All to the good. Onward then, toward the nearest Metro station where, in the quickening darkness, you find yourself trying to plow through the single most dense and chaotic tide of urban humanity you've experienced in lo these fifty years. Times Square in the bad old days doesn't hold a candle to the intersection of boulevards Barbès and Rochechouart. Everything swirls through this crossroads – true obverse of the Louvre pyramid – the only fixed points being three African women, zaftig and gorgeously attired, who stand motionless at what seem to be strategic points only they can sense, hawking bottles of mineral water immersed in ice-filled buckets at their feet. What are *they* thinking? At five francs a hit – same price as at the tourist hotspots – they're not pulling any customers out of this crowd.

Around and about the water sellers, motile waves of people surge, some folks, like you, aiming themselves at the staircase to the Metro, which is elevated here. You go with, yet try to bend the flow, and without too much eddying round, wash up on that shore. The steps lies half-obscured beneath a carpet of refuse so dense as to appear nearly rococo in its effusion. Beneath this layering you can glimpse the extreme corrosion of the staircase itself, such that it has become, literally, a lattice-work of metal. Up you leap, Katie and Gwen close behind, finding your footing where you may, weaving and dodging to avoid being knocked backward by those bounding downstairs. You gain the landing, where the scene is no less frenzied. To either side, as you feed your tickets into the turnstile, multitudes of people shoot past, many vaulting over the barrier with easy grace, as though theirs is the standard mode of entry.

Once on the platform, you survey the streets below. When was the last time a green-suited sanitation crew came through, scrubbing the sidewalk within an inch of its life? From this vantage, it's clear that the maintenance of a nearly Swiss standard of cleanliness and order, so rigorously applied in central Paris, has here been utterly abandoned. Yet this *is* central Paris. Nonetheless, the air feels differently charged

around Barbès-Rochechouart, as though an electrical storm is about to break. This quarter possesses a micro-climate entirely unto itself.

By some miracle, the three of you find a tranquil spot on the platform, unwrap and eat your still-hot beignets. Just as you're licking the powdered sugar off your fingers, by good fortune comes the train. Change at Pigalle for the number 12 to St-Lazare.

After midnight now and you're back in Asnières, buzzing with espresso and adrenalin, scrawling away at the desk of the hotel room in your sleepy banlieue. Girls out like lights.

July 30 – Rue des Rosiers – Evening

What a difference an arrondissement makes. Tonight a dinner just as Semitic as your last, but of another order entirely. Walking through the Marais, you spot evermore frequent signs in shopwindows announcing the arrival of the putative Mosiach – in the person of the late Menachem Schneerson, Grand Rebbe of the Lubavitchers based in Crown Heights, Brooklyn.

From one of the restaurants, the smell of falafel entices your nostrils and you enter through a restaurant doorway into a transplanted microcosm of Tel Aviv. Katie and Gwen sit facing the street. Sitting across from them, your view is of a huge, brightly colored mosaic that takes up the entire rear wall. It shows a bustling street scene in what looks to be an East European ghetto, probably Lodz or Warsaw, sometime around the turn of the last century.

The food arrives. Reasonably good, standard Mediterranean fare – no better nor worse than what you could get for two thirds the price in New York. But the whole meal, dessert included, takes less time than the entrée course at a typical Parisian brasserie. Katie and Gwen head outside into the still-light evening while you double back to get a closer look at the mosaic. It's an ambitious piece of work, intricately crafted, and it takes a moment for you to notice, hanging framed on the perpendicular wall, a black and white photo that the mosaic artist used as a reference. It's a view east, of rue de Rosiers in 1890.

When you walk out and turn left, you recognize the street as if by déjà vu. But you're entirely disconcerted, momentarily unmoored in time. Midway between the

scene depicted and the immediate now, where Katie and Gwen wait for you, browsing the window of a kosher patisserie, there came an occupation, wherein most of the people who were young in that photo disappeared for good.

Not improbable either that Meyer would have recognized some of them.

August 1

Time whips by. Bois de Boulogne. Tour Eiffel. Notre Dame. Ste-Chapelle. Yesterday, to Père Lachaise to visit Wilde, Colette, Wright and Michelet. This afternoon, to complete your necropolitan tour, Les Catacombes. You venture down solo. Katie professes disinterest, and in any case, someone has to stay with Gwen, who won't go anywhere near a cemetery – averts her eyes if she even passes one. Lately, when you enter a church, she'll ask, with considerable urgency, if anyone's buried beneath the flagstones. Notwithstanding, she's put in a request for a souvenir – a coin medallion to add to her collection of historic sites. "But," you ask, "What's the point of having a memento of a place you haven't been?" She shoots you back a look you've seen before, the one that communicates, distilled to a quintessence, the pathos of your attempts at logic. OK, *d'accord* – if they have 'em for sale, you'll buy her one.

Entry to the Catacombs lies beneath one of the few preserved outposts of the Farmer General's Wall, one of Ledoux's follies, and descent is via a narrow spiral staircase cut directly into the stone. It's a long way down, a journey made all the more unsettling by the absence of any sign indicating how much further you have to go. But then, abruptly you're there – the stairway gates onto a network of corridors, underground streets marked Rue this and Boulevard that. Apart from you, no one seems to have ventured down *en seulle*, and as you encounter groups of visitors, you begin to imagine yourself a shade overhearing the strange chatter of the still-embodied.

You overtake a trio of middle-aged Brits, two men and a woman. They proceed at a leisurely pace, their mood jocular, catacombing for a lark, and it soon becomes clear they are completely innocent of this place's history. Nor can they read French. One fellow speculates that the bones belong to victims of successive plagues and tries to reckon the dates by deciphering the Roman numerals on the wall-mounted plaques that record each deposition.

"Here now," the woman says, "what do you suppose the job description was to work down here?"

"'Must be able to build a wall with human bones,' I suppose," replies the third.

Brit number one stops to calculate the age of a particularly artful interment. "Ah!" he says triumphantly. "This one's ninth century." The shade passes by, says nothing.

Up ahead, four young American women trade remarks calculated to spook one another, as if there's an invisible camera rolling and this will all turn up in grainy, hand-held glory on MTV. Three of them strike a mock-vampiristic pose before a chamber full of bones that seems to extend into infinity, while the fourth steps back to take the picture. As the flash pops, you try to glimpse the cavern's far wall, but the black continues on beyond the reach of light.

You press on along the path, wet with drippings from the tunnel ceiling, find a spot where you can imagine for a moment that you're the only one here. To say you're filled with wonderment at the scale of the project and its manifest weirdness is no exaggeration. By turns utilitarian, æstheticized, sacred and promiscuous, the mix of paradoxes renders you lightheaded, almost giddy. It is only when you turn a corner and come upon group of fellow troglodytes speaking German that the chill produces an involuntary shudder. Six million skeletons lie interred around you, and though you know they were dug up from scores of church graveyards and moved to these ancient, disused quarries two centuries ago, you can't help but mentally blend this army of the dead into your image of *the* six million. It was down here too, during the occupation, that the Maquis established its headquarters in a warren of passageways the Gestapo never managed to fully penetrate.

In some chambers, the bones piled helter-skelter extend at eye level even further back than the dim light will allow you to peer, but facing onto the thoroughfare, the depositions are always finished off with a patterned, often symmetrical masonry of skulls juxtaposed with arm or leg bones, deliberately arranged, calculatedly decorative, never capricious. Occasionally, a surface composed of the knob end of long bones will seem to resemble a paving of rounded stones. It is in these surfaces that the workmen who created these walls inlaid a row of skulls, or a pair of crossed humerus bones, to make clear the singular nature of these materials so that one cannot reduce them – even

in their unimaginable quantities – to purely abstract forms. But there is a kind of tantalus to the visual play. Just when you focus on an individual detail, you see it within the mass. If you let your focus blur, a particularity forces the whole into coherence.

At times, as you walk, a calciferous rain falls from the mini-stalactites above and your shoe tips become caked with a chalk-white slurry. You linger before a particularly striking deposition and decide to take a photograph. But your light meter reads it as way underexposed even when you set the *f*-stop all the way open for a fifteenth of a second. No evidence of drippings on your camera, yet moisture must have worked its way inside. The shutter works fine, you can see that by looking into the lens as you rotate the ring, so you bracket as you shoot, hoping one of the exposures works. Even so, the part of you that believes all matter is imbued with spirit taunts you with the suspicion that perhaps this isn't an electronic failure at all, rather the camera's way of saying "I'd prefer not to." Or it could be that the machine is acting out your own internal resistance to taking such a picture.

There's more to this necropolis, a great deal more, but – to use Milos Foreman's phrase – you've enjoyed enough of this. Unlike the great spiral down, your ascent seems to take hardly any time at all – suddenly you're at street level, and on the line to have your bag checked at the exit. A minor hubbub just ahead: a young fellow has been discovered trying to carry off a fragment of some long-dead Parisian in his backpack. The guard dismisses him with the gesture of someone shooing away harmless but troublesome insect and places the relic on a counter where it joins a small but significant pile of the day's looted anatomy, similarly retrieved. Presumably to be reinterred. But who knows which pile it came from? If no one were minding the store, how long, at this rate, would it take for the ossuary to be cleaned out altogether? So distracting has this micro-drama been that you nearly left without buying Gwen her souvenir. There's the kiosk. Into the slot goes a 10F piece and out comes the golden coin. *Monnaie de Paris* stamped on one side. On the reverse *Les Catacombes* curves over a symmetrical quartet of skulls, two up, two down, set in a field of elbow knobs that look for all the world like little blossoms.

August 2

"Paris weeps at your departure," you joke with Gwen as you drive south through an electrical storm that buffets your silly little green rented car. And in truth, until now, it hasn't rained once during daylight hours in the two weeks since you arrived. But atmospherics aside, this morning the city seemed intent on holding you to her bosom forever. First M. Claude, your venerable and genial, but technologically-impaired hotelier, found it impossible to properly operate the machine that reads credit cards, so you were forced to sprint among several ATMs in order to hustle together the cash to pay for your room. Next, at the not-so-conveniently-located car rental office you'd reserved from, you found they'd somehow managed to lock themselves out of the safe where the keys are kept, hence a cab ride back to the hotel for your luggage, thence a tour of Paris's peripheral highways, all the way out to Orly to land up this liliputian Citröen Saxo that drives as they say, *comme le shit*.

But, all's well that ends well, and here you are, pedal to metal, south on the *payage* in the general direction of Provence. Driving by Eric, navigation by Katie, napping on and off by Gwen. You're doing great, the three of you, under the circonflexes. Vroooom! *Au sud!*

August 10 – St-Saturnin-lès-Apt, Provence

8 a.m. Thick gray skies. Your breath exhales in mist, yet you don't feel a chill. At the table to your right, outside the café-tabac across the intersection from La Poste, two guys in casual clothes drink espresso, smoke and talk in Arabic. A young woman walks toward you along the sidewalk, twin baguettes under her arm. From the opposite direction, the buzz of an approaching car, a tiny Renault. The driver brakes sharply, stops, rolls down her window and hails the young woman who strolls over for an unhurried chat in the middle of the crossroads.

What time does the mist begin to lift? Should you order another espresso? The young woman and her friend exchange pecks on both cheeks, the window rolls up. The driver flashes her right turn signal and the car heads toward Roussillon. As the young woman with the baguettes walks past you read the back of her teeshirt: *I did it with the Colonel, shouldn't you?*

Before stopping here for coffee, you rambled around town, discovered the stairway that leads to the old mill. Bear left at the fountain with the goldfish, then

through a narrow passageway and up the steps to the bluff high above the town. Four mills stood here once, the place being well exposed to the play of wind. One's been converted into living quarters for a family and you see evidence that the occupants are at home. The ruined barrel of another mill stands nearby. If you searched for them, you could probably find the foundations of the other two.

When you first gained the summit, the family Doberman bounded to within a few yards of you, barking up a storm. But as you neither ran away, nor made an attempt to cross the invisible perimeter around the house of its owners, it trotted off aways, all the while keeping a watchful eye on your progress. Every so often, if you seemed to be heading toward the house, it would approach, then halt, formally reiterating its notion of the line of demarcation. Eventually, this turned into something of a game, until you flummoxed the other player by walking away and not looping back. Out on the promontory, you looked out over the valley shrouded in mist. Assuming the sun fights its way through, you'll bring Katie and Gwen up later – it ought to be an incredible view.

The two men finish their coffees. One gets up and ambles across the intersection with a rolling, shoulder-heavy gait that reminds you of Bassry. The other, smaller man pays the tab and jogs after him. They climb into the cab of a white van and drive away down the road to Apt. As soon as the van is out of sight, as if the cosmos were exchanging the presence of one vehicle for another, the rumble of a big engine heralds what turns out to be a huge garbage truck, entering from the perpendicular road. The proportional disparity between truck and intersection obliges the driver to execute a series of reverses and turns before he can head up toward the bluff along a street so narrow it seems incapable of accommodating the truck's width. It's a path more than a road, laid down in an age of mills, when Occitan was spoken here, long before anyone but Roger Bacon could have dreamed of a metal machine that moved by combusting a black and viscous fuel.

The chair you're sitting in communicates to your ass that it's time to get moving and pick up bread. There's a popular boulangerie on Place de la Fraternity, but the one around the corner is better by far – in fact, they sell the best bread you've ever eaten. A little bell over the doorway tinkles as you enter. The young woman behind the counter, twenty-something, has eyes like a Byzantine icon's, made larger still by rimless, ovoid

spectacles perched on her aquiline nose. The customer ahead of you pays and you step aside for him, then up to the counter. This morning, beneath her apron, she wears a low-cut V-necked teeshirt. Along her pale forearms, a growth of fine black hair.

"Bonjour."

"Bonjour, monsieur." Third morning in a row, so you're good for a half-smile.

"Une fougasse, s'il vous plait." She selects one from the bin, lays it on paper, twists the ends tight, hands it to you across the marble counter. Still warm. You hand her the coins.

"Merci."

She puts the change in a small brass dish atop the register.

"Merci à vous, monsieur. Au revoir – bonne journée."

When you step outside, the clouds have transformed from gray to white and are moving northward fast, opening up to reveal, every second, wider patches of blue. An hour from now, it'll be gorgeous weather, and by afternoon, hot enough to take Gwen to the local piscine where she'll ply the waterslide as long as she desires.

August 11

With the heat this afternoon verging on caniculaire, a longtime friend of the German couple whose house you're renting, calls to invite the three of you over for a swim. Charlotte is German, by birth at any rate. For twenty years she's lived, sculpted and made music in the upstairs suite of a vast and ancient manor house a few miles west of St-Saturnin.

Qualitatively this pool is a bringdown for Gwen over the local piscine – no waterslide – but she reposes on her blanket like a proper sunworshipper and when bored with that, starts to read. The water's relatively unchlorinated, silky-textured, almost limpid, so papa and his host immerse themselves and swim many a languid lap, conversing. The whole area, Charlotte says, is fast becoming a foreign colony. Peter Mayles's book primed the pump, then vacationers, especially Germans and Brits, descended in droves. Finding it agreeable and cheap, they not-so-gradually bought the place up. But it's clear she loves the Luberon still – holiday crowds, Mistral and all – having known it before it became a destination.

Charlotte climbs out of the pool, dries off and sits down on the chaise next to Katie. You float, gaze up into the sky and around at the countryside. Cezanne's nailed it in his landscapes. Only now, being here, can you see that his paintings weren't amplifications, rather distillations of what he sensed. And then you laugh out loud. "What?" asks Gwen. Nothing really, just the image of yourself driving that ridiculous little car through all those winding, sometimes downright scary roads to get here. Katie clutching the doorhandle as you took the turns in the Ardèches gorges with some BMW or Mercedes suddenly out of nowhere right on your tail, urging your tiny Saxo off the cliff edge – not necessarily with malevolence, but as an impersonal function of its greater mass and power. In any case, you've learned your lesson. Next time you drive in France, it's going to be in a real car.

August 12

Katie's birthday – the big four five. Celebratory dinner in Villars. One thing you love about France is their utterly literal brand of *wysiwyg*. If a place is called Le Vieux Moulin, you can be sure there's an ancient mill within spitting distance. Brasserie Le Terminus, bet your bottom dollar on it, can be found next to the train station. This restaurant, La Fontaine, sits on a tiny square whose center is, in fact, *la fontaine*. Your table's outside, only a few yards away – close enough to hear, in quiet moments, the water rilling. That and a summer precursor of the season to come, stirring up the trees.

Last night in the south. Tomorrow, you begin the drive back toward Paree. Stay one night, then home. How they gonna keep you back in New York now that you've seen Provence? That first night on the way south, you stayed over at a château-hotel Katie booked on the internet. Strange and silly how you anticipated dinner with dread. In so posh a place, deep in the middle of nowhere, it'd have be a clip, right? And of dubious quality too. But France plays by its own rules, not yours. Mind-blowing: a gorgeous meal, well served, and finished with three cheeses, one of which – though you can't recall its name – you didn't merely taste, you felt tingling in your fingertips and toes. Washed down with the wine of the Loire *in* the Loire. After which you took the spiral staircase to your room, lay on the bed and looked up, through a circular window cut in the ceiling at the converging rafters of the turret above.

Next morning, instead of the roar and honk of traffic on Eighth Avenue, or the harsh cacophony of bottles being dumped from recycling bin into the garbage truck outside your hotel in Asnières, you awoke to crows in the garden and a view out the window of a dawnlit stand of pines.

Whenever you and Katie travel, the question comes up: *Could we live here?* The spare fundamentals of Provence aren't right for Katie. Her interior resonates to a lusher palette of green. And apart from the question of how you'd make a living, there's winter to consider. Between the lack of urban life and the infamous wind that unhinges the mind, you'd probably go barmy in a year or less.

Or would you? In a host of ways this surround, the pines and cypresses, the ochre of the stone walls, the details of the buildings; the cheeses, breads, melons, even the candied fruits and rosé wines that until now you'd no particular taste for – in truth the flavor of the air itself – feeds your senses more abundantly than any place you've set foot before. Surely the Mediterranean light counts for a lot given the SADD condition of your gene pool, but that doesn't explain the multi-tiered affinities you've developed for this region – the few square kilometers of topography that lie between the Vaucluse hills and the Luberon. It's only been a week. Who knew one's molecules could attune so strongly and so rapidly? You're going to have a hell of a time explaining to your body why it left here.

Here your fountain pen came to life too, leapt up and plunged into your notebook like Gwen into her swimming pool. Five fables written in as many days. Your stories must have taken heart from her.

August 14 – Nolay, Burgundy

Breakfast in the open air near the hotel you stayed in last night. Behind you, thataway, a hundred someodd kilometers south, lies the Vaucluse. But then, you are where you are.

This square, with its church and Halle was once the heart of the town. Open on the sides, the Halle's thick timber pillars branch out into trusses, supporting a slate-topped roof that runs parallel to the church's nave and nearly touches its walls. With only a narrow alleyway separating the two buildings, the pairing represents the purest

medieval form. The market hall, though freestanding, literally nestles in the shadow of the church.

Occupying a niche in the church's tower, two little painted wooden figures, a man and woman in medieval costumes, strike the bell with hammers every quarter hour. Somehow they manage to get the same bell to sound two different tones. The woman, in her blue dress and white bonnet, pivots first, pealing a high note. The man, dressed in brown breeches and a belted jerkin swivels an instant later, his hammer producing a note about a third lower. Rung one right after the other, the carillon sounds like the word "bonjour" as spoken by a bell. This morning, hanging in the sky just to the right of the steeple's peak, an early moon, waning to a thin slice of blanched lemon.

Your eye tracks lower, along the roofline of the buildings demarcating the square and the chimney stacks made of ornamented terracotta and surmounted by finials that look like overturned flower pots. A few pigeons roost atop them, but the main avian action is generated by multitudes of starlings that periodically sweep overhead, then disperse.

Gwen's playing in the fountain at the far end of the square. It's a modern addition to the medieval surround: a long marble slab laid flush with the pavement and perforated so that ten jets of water, arranged in a row, can shoot straight up. The jets are set just wide enough apart for a kid to slip sideways between them and not get wet. The four centermost streams leap to a height of around five feet and the three on each side to roughly half that. What makes the game a tricky one is that the timing of the spouts keeps changing, controlled by a hidden mechanism that turns them off and on in a seemingly random sequence. Here come a couple of local kids. Gwen stands back, watches them play a kind of twister game. The idea is place your feet astride two adjacent holes, then bend down and reach over to plug a third with your palm. Then, when you're about to fall over, scramble out of the way. Swoosh! Up comes the water – but if you're fast enough, you don't get soaked.

On your table appears a basket of bread and croissants, accompanied by two jars of confiture, strawberry and orange. You wave to get Gwen's attention, point to the tabletop: breakfast's here. She waves back, then placing one elbow just above the reach

of one of the gushers, leans over and mimes resting her weight on it. Whereupon, in true slapstick form, the jet recedes and she is left leaning on air.

August 15 – Troyes, Champagne

On the drive into town this afternoon – along a wide strip mall of the sort you're not used to seeing in France – you begin to get distinctly weirded-out. By the time you find a parking space near the strangely grim Hôtel Arlequin and lug the suitcases upstairs, your sense of disconcertion had intensified to the point where you feel like you're under the influence of a not very benign hallucinogen. Katie and Gwen, tired from the drive want to take it easy, maybe have a nap, venture out in the evening. Need to walk, want to map this place out. So you set off by yourself.

What a reversal of sensations from those of the past ten days! All the guidebooks extol Troyes as a model of urban preservation. In the late-'50s it was among the first cities to be designated *un secteur sauvegardé* by then-Culture Minister André Malraux. But right away it's clear: Troyes belongs to the pigeons now, legions of 'em – and to an astonishing number of day-trippers who promenade the thoroughfares and amble slowly and in close formation along its medieval streets and alleys.

Generally you love this kind of cityscape, even tricked up in postmodern trappings, but Troyes has a nightmarish quality to it, a dimness in broad daylight which feels all-encompassing – more Lovecraft than Kafka – as though some unknown agent has compromised the very gene pool of the place. Venerable half-timbered buildings line the streets of the old quarters, a good number of them painstakingly preserved, either recently restored or currently undergoing renovation. But for each viable, occupied building, there seems to be a derelict one, maybe two, and the contrast is disturbing to say the least. Here and there, a wooden skeleton survives, shored up with diagonal buttresses. Occasionally an old house has fallen in on itself, leaving a heap of timbers, or else the woodwork's been carted away leaving behind an empty, rubble-strewn lot.

Nor have you ever seen commercial signage so relentlessly ugly and battered-looking. Even the usually slick corporate logos and plastic chain store signs appear subtly out of whack. And you have to take particular care to watch where you put your feet. A haphazard assortment of materials has been used for curbstones, sidewalk and

street paving. Each manifests its particular style of disrepair, so that simple strolling becomes a tactical awareness game.

It doesn't take you long to realize that Troyes is an amazing place – different from, say, Youngstown, OH, or a thousand other once-industrial towns now contracting into shadows of their former selves. This place presents itself as a tourist destination, a kind of medieval theme park. Yet the whole urban organism appears to be falling into ruin just slightly faster than it's getting fixed. And there's an oddly energic quality to this decay, like yeast germinating. It gives off a nearly palpable sense of heat. You're half-convinced that if you were to focus on a particular detail, shift your eyes away for an instant, then look back again, you would catch it in the act of deteriorating.

Pull your focus back and it's astonishing how much of the architectural patrimony is simply trashed. You enter a chapel with gaping holes punched in the stained-glass windows, blackened gargoyles and pigeon feathers littering the flagstones to find yourself engulfed by an atmosphere straight out of Huysmans. Another church, where Henry V married Catherine of France, looks very much as though Gargantua passed through town and thrashed it with a ball and chain.

For the first time you begin to understand how, not so long ago, Gothic buildings were widely regarded as eyesores – relics of an ignorant, primitive and thankfully bygone age. Imagine Ste-Chapelle in such condition and one would be hard pressed to see past the surface noise to appreciate its elegant lines. The first time you saw Notre Dame, thirty-five years ago, its exterior was cloaked in the soot-streaked patina of centuries. How different the building's presence felt then. And then it hits you that some of what you're picking up on is the failure of globalization to impose its visual language on this place. Despite obvious efforts, it just doesn't seem to take.

Given the overall state of things, you'd think there'd be lots of graffiti – but block for block there's less than in Paris. Plentiful instances of vandalism though. Down one respectable-looking street someone apparently used a blowtorch on the plastic entrance buttons of an apartment house doorway, searing them into a weird, half melted, amber-like mass. Against these sorts of depredations and all others, Troyes has fought back with flowers. Windowboxes overflow with geraniums. Planters line the main thoroughfares and well-tended floral displays frame every square. The foliage is real enough, but these bursts of civic optimism come off as attempts to mask rather than

enhance, a bit like the daisy decals the city used to put up in boarded-up South Bronx windows.

Surely, you think, it's only a matter of time until Troyes delivers up some unsullied image that will permit you, at least momentarily, to free yourself from this undertow of decay and float off on a cloud of esthetic rapture. Isn't that what France is all about? Ah, here's a park – spacious and clearly modeled on the garden of the Palais Royale. At the center stands an imposing fountain, its central figures sculpted in luminescent white marble. The theme is familiar though you don't recall the particular myth: a burly mer-man has seized a young woman who struggles voluptuously in his grasp. Ringing the contending pair, four bronze frogs, mouths agape, shoot arcs of water at their legs. But here once again, any attempt at idealization folds back on itself as grotesquerie. So many pigeons perch on the couples' heads and shoulders that these are nearly obscured, and a streaked coating of guano accumulates on every surface that the sluicing of the frogs fails to reach.

Caught somewhere between bemusement and horror, you loop back across town toward the cathedral, with its one standing tower. The other either never got built, or else it must have collapsed. In your distraction, you scarcely noticed evening coming on, and you find the door's locked – too late to go inside. But the exterior is gorgeously sculpted, worth a full, slow circumnavigation. Finally, as you drink in the sinuous lines of the flamboyant Gothic ornament, your sense of Troyes as a bad acid trip begins to turn ecstatic. By the time you've made your way around to the apse, the window tracery has started to shape-shift before your eyes as if the stone itself were a plastic, self-animating thing. Radiating out from on high, where the walls meet the roof, a tribe of gargoyles whose expressions you can't help but read as a living index of the town's inner torment.

What ravaged Troyes? At the peak of its fortunes, when the great fairs of Champagne emerged as major centers of medieval trade, the town boasted a flourishing cloth industry, situated at the intersection of routes from the Mediterranean to Germany and Flanders to central and eastern Europe. Once too, this was the power base of a bizarrely modern, proto-anarchistic heresy known as the Free Spirit. So much material feels palpably concealed here that half perversely, you'd love to dig deeper. No time though. Tomorrow morning, move on. Let it go.

But some of the more recent insults to the urban fabric stare you right in the face. Not least that the Seine, which makes its iconic champagne-cork loop around the old town center, was diverted into a canal in the nineteenth Century, then partly covered over. Atop the canal, the city fathers – no doubt imagining their own version of the Champs Elysée – laid down Quai Dampierre, the boulevard you're walking along now. In the process, they split the townscape into an uncenterable thing.

You scan the desolate stores lining both sides of the street. What you could use is another suitcase for all the stuff you've accumulated these past weeks. Some clothes for Gwen. But mostly books. And when you get to Paris you'll probably buy the big two-volume Robert for Katie. Ah, here's a luggage shop with good prices. In you go, then out again, wheeling a huge red valise. Trundle it back toward your hotel.

Somewhere your read that several big fires badly damaged Troyes, one not too long past. Which may explain the concentration of modern housing estates built near the ancient core. They're awful buildings, even of their type – prison-like enclaves that face inward, isolated from the surrounding city, and blockading integrative flow among the adjacent neighborhoods. And then there's Paris. What has it meant, in modern times, for Troyes to be located only a couple of hours distant from such a powerful cultural and economic center of gravity?

How would one approach the task of fixing so large and multiply wounded a place? Or should it simply be abandoned? Jesus, could New York end up like this? Even at your most pessimistic it's hard to imagine, so long as the city keeps itself dialed into the world's flow of trade. Towns which, at their bedrock level, function as entrepôts – that constantly draw fresh inhabitants and generate new energies – can take a lot of hits and keep on ticking. Particularly if they're seaports.

August 17 – Café Bonaparte

Last morning in Paris this go-round. *À l'anée prochaine, enchallah*.

Sky overcast. On your way out to the door, you whispered once again to a torpid Gwen that Paris weeps when she leaves. Last night, as you were eating dinner came really torrential rains, and thunder that shook the windows of the bistro. No sign of it letting up, so there came a point when the three of you ran for it, splashing through puddles, several blocks back to the hotel. You arrived soaked – might as well have

strolled. Gwen shivering so loudly that the concierge at once found a large white towel for her to wrap up in.

A light rain now, but you're dry under the café's green awning. In one of the upstairs apartments Sartre and de Beauvoir once lived. So Levent told you when you were having coffee with him here a couple of weeks ago. Levent's a poet, and hearing this, Gwen interjected that she was too. OK, said Levent, make up a poem. Immediately she wrote some lines out on a napkin that utterly blew his mind. Yours and Katie's too. Wow, to be so tuned in and ready to engage. Were you like that? Probably not at nine. If memory serves, seven was around when you began to lock up.

Today, you've gravitated to more or less the same table and sit facing a narrow street on the other side of which, at the center of a tiny square, stands a trademark Parisian green-painted cast-iron public fountain, its cupola supported by a quartet of karyatids. Someone's left a mineral water bottle upright beneath the spout and the stream pours in from above overflowing it, a fountain within a fountain.

Mounted on a tall pole at the near edge of the square is a placard advertising an exhibition at the Musée Nationale des Artes et Traditions Populaires. You'd hoped to get there and see it, but time's up. Che Guevara's portrait dominates the poster – his visage in its way as inscrutable as the Mona Lisa's. Surrounding him, a constellation of other timeless "Héros Populaires": Napoleon, Harlequin, a cartoon farm girl in peasant dress (Jean d'Arc?), Tupac Amaru and a lute-playing troubadour replete with ballooning pantaloons, cape and hose, his feathered hat cocked rakishly to one side.

It begins to rain in earnest again. Your umbrella's back at the hotel. Can't go upstairs and borrow one from Simone and Jean-Paul. An African woman passes, wearing a gorgeously printed robe and shawl. A few steps behind her, a young white woman in bell-bottoms ducks her head beneath a splashy floral umbrella. Most passersby make a good faith effort to ignore the rain. Drops fall into the open bags of bread being delivered to the brasseries.

To your left, diagonally across rue de Rennes stands St-Germain des Prés. In front of the abbey, beneath a bus shelter, several people are gathered waiting for the number 39 to Gare de l'Est: a resolute-looking black woman, hands thrust in her pockets, three middle-aged white guys, and a white woman in a black mini-skirt, hair the color of Stephanie Audran's.

Some time last night, person or persons unknown rifled the glove compartment of your rental car and made an attempt to get the radio too. But they must've left in a hurry. Lucky break. It's possible that in your ecstasy at finding a parking spot so close to the hotel, you forgot to lock the doors.

Check the clock in the abbey tower. A century or so ago, around the same time as new buildings were sprouting on the just-Hausmannized Boulevard St- Germain, some improving spirit punched a hole in the second register between the portico and the louvers of the belfry and stuck the clock in. Despite its roman numerals, it still looks johnny-come-lately.

By your calculation, the clock is running three minutes fast. A young white woman sits reading on the bench in the shelter now. The 39 must've come and gone without your noticing since she's the only one there. Occasionally she looks up from her book and chews a thumbnail. When she drops her head, her hair falls like curtains around her cheeks. Now a young man and woman sit down to her right. He rests a very thick book on his lap. Standing nearby, a woman in a blue and white striped shirt. Every few moments she shifts her weight from one hip to the other.

Glance at the clock again. It is accurate. You see that now – the minute and hour hands are so similar in length, you'd transposed them. It's just past quarter to nine. A stunning young woman in a chartreuse cardigan, blue jeans and a fire-engine red backpack crosses rue G. Apollonaire heading north on rue Bonaparte. Not far behind her, an ample African woman in a blue denim dress, golden sandals and wrist bracelets.

The 95 bound for Porte de Montmartre stops, whisks the people away. Before long they're replaced by a bearded man with white hair and thick glasses, who holds the book he's reading virtually in front of his face. He does not get on the 39 when it arrives. Must be waiting for the next 95. Thirteen minutes to nine now. The abbey bell, apparently, does not strike the quarter hour. A cry of gulls. Half a dozen or so wheel about the tower, then glide out of sight behind the north side of the church. You keep looking for them, but they don't reappear. In New York, the gulls fly further inland on overcast days than on clear ones. Sometimes they venture in as far east as Seventh Avenue. A bit disconcerting to see them swoop by outside the living room window. What can they be scouting for, a good half mile from the river?

Three men occupy the bench in the bus shelter now: the myopic geezer, a guy with his legs crossed, and a young fellow with a briefcase hugged between his calves. You're going to have to leave before the bus comes. Before you find out if the bell will ring the hour. Or whether the chime is broken. Ah, the bus beat you to it. Writing, however fast you manage it, is no match for real time. Two African men, one in a dazzling print shirt, cross rue Bonaparte together, walk past the abbey, and make a left on the boulevard. The white-haired man's still sitting beneath the bus shelter. What is he waiting for? Only two bus lines stop here and both have come and gone. He's not reading any more, rather examining something small he holds in his hands. Four minutes to nine. A rag-tag procession of pigeons bustles by on the sidewalk, and one breaks off from the line to peck so close to your toe it could easily miss the crumb and hit shoeleather.

The rain's abated but the wind still gusts, sets the awning flapping overhead. You bid farewell to the Pantheon yesterday. Saw a special exhibition there, a tribute to Robert Desnos. Attempted to translate a few lines from one of his poems. Should've jotted it down – the sense of it remains, but the words themselves vanished into the realm of the tantalizingly forgotten.

A milkman delivers bottles to the Bonaparte out of the back of his little van. A handsome, tall young man in a black suit has joined the old fellow on the bus shelter bench. The newcomer reads, but every few minutes looks up expectantly for the bus. In the square, the karyatids still hold up their end of the bargain, water pours over the lip of the empty Vittel bottle propped inside the fountain. Rain mists under the awning onto your pages and the ink begins to spider. Coffee's drunk. There's a regular crowd forming in the bus shelter. One minute to nine. You're outa here.

4 WONDER OF THE WORLD

August 29, 2001

Back in the States and seething with misanthropy. The age scuffs by in its cheap shoes, nattering on a cell phone. Often the conversations you involuntarily overhear begin with "I'm at" such-and-such a place. Fully half the time they get it wrong, as in "I'm on Fifth Avenue and 22nd Street." But they're not, they're on Broadway and 21st. Either these folks comprise a vast race of liars, or they genuinely have no idea where they are.

Attempt to make your way through an immense pile of *New York Times* back issues that have accumulated in your absence. Separate out the Metro sections for tidbits you might have missed. Item: Canal Surplus goes out of business, holds an auction of the store's goods. One of the owners, Millie Skoler boasts "we did Tina Turner's curtains in chain mail, for her house in France." That bit's worth jotting down. But it would take the afternoon and into the evening to pore through every issue. Defeated by its sheer mass, you dump the rest into the laundry cart and thence the recycling bin unbrowsed.

Come to think of it, it's high time to take your WTC files downstairs to the storage locker. Maybe even out to Sea Cliff. Clear space for a new story. Been there, done that.

Turn on the TV. Scan through the channels. Settle, ephemerally, on CNN-FN: "Still to come on *The Money Gang* – talking to your children about layoffs – how to tell them you're not going to work in the morning." Click to black.

August 30 – Le G. – Early Morning

Conversation with Melinda wherein you show her a story just published in an Italian anthology of North American writers. Whenever your words leap over the

barrier into another language, a visceral thrill. More exciting by half than seeing them printed in English.

Melinda gets it right away, says "It's like having another soul, isn't it?"

A young woman sits on the banquette side of Table 10. She wears a black tee shirt with a glittery red white and silver American flag bonded across the chest. Superimposed upon the stars and stripes, in pink Olde English lettering, the word JUICY.

Everything is stretched too tight. Must soon snap back.

August 31 – Le G. – Early Morning

New atmosphere blowing in, you can feel it. If you had a corn on your big toe, it would be pulsing now.

What was fetid and misty turns dry and bracing, the fall colors more crisply defined in the angled light. This is a moment where a palpable recollection of summer is still possible. But the first whiff of burning leaves sets that swampy Eden at a great remove.

With three full cycles to go, this is no time to think of summer, which in any case didn't understand that it had overstayed its welcome – like the abject lover some of us have been and known.

Your hand still moves across the page, but the drag is lessened. The ink flows downhill now. These words are no respecters of person. Or position. They arrange themselves accordingly. Possessed by will or whim, they jostle one another, full of youthful self-possession, seeking their own level.

You remember, as a kid, the big slide in the Washington Square playground, climbing what seemed like forever, and then pausing on the brink of the silvery slope, polished by myriad denim'd behinds including yours. Do children still drum their feet at the apex, to proclaim their supremacy, warn all below *I'm coming!*? They must.

September 3 – Chelsea Streets – Midafternoon

Labor Day – afternoon light – previews of the abandoned city. You walk the too-long blocks between Ninth and 11th Avenues. The unremitting vistas give way onto open spaces of the waterfront. Stroll by the new water park and dog run near the

Chelsea Piers. Loop back eastward in search of a spot to sit down and write whatever comes. The Seminary grounds are closed today. Would've been soothing to stretch out on the grass and look straight up, the only evidence of earth an angled roof's corner, a spray of still-leafy branches at the periphery of the blue.

Peer through the windows of Le G. It's packed and far too clamorous for your mood even if you could squeeze in. Outside, the bench has been monopolized by a huge man wearing a red polo shirt and shorts. He sips an iced coffee, his joint-of-mutton-sized arm draped languidly across the back of the empty seat. You reverse direction again, spot a friendly-looking stoop to perch on just west of Ninth on 21st Street. Few cars going crosstown, so when the lights turn red on the avenue, near silence washes the block, only the click of dogs' toenails on the sidewalk, the voice of a passerby on a cell phone – "I think you'll survive…" – then the rush of traffic emulating the roar and ebb of waves against a strand.

Gwen and Katie are down in the Village having a swim at the Carmine Street pool. Seemed a golden opportunity for you to work uninterrupted. And you gave it a game try. But the moment they got on the elevator, you realized you should've joined them, savored together the last indescribably gorgeous day of official summer. Once upon a time in the West Village, the pool was a lot rougher and tumbler than it is now. You were about Gwen's age that day when, wrapped up in your own dream world, not paying attention, you walked into the path of a bigger kid chasing someone and he knocked you flat on the concrete surface, with its rough, sandpaper grain – didn't even look back. When you jumped in the water, the sting of chlorine on your scraped knee. That sensation's in the memory bank for keeps, stored right next to your nearly simultaneous first glimpse of an ankle bracelet's chain against bare, wet skin. Huh, how come none of the girls in your school wore them?

It's Gwen's pool now. She's growing up a second-generation Manhattanite, even as, incrementally, you've begun to detach. And just a few minutes ago, the realization went critical: you could leave at any time. The city doesn't claim you like it once did. But aren't you supposed to love the place you grew up? Honor it like thy father and mother?

When you wrote *Divided*, you wove materials from the city that lived entirely inside you together with the city that could be objectively known and shared with

others. In a sense, the book made it possible for you to begin living in the place where you'd always been. But there was another consequence. So long as your internal city existed unvoiced, it remained protected, like the contents of a valise held tight beneath the arm of an anxious traveler. When you opened the lid, everything leaped out, became autonomous, took on a life of its own. Even if you wanted to, you could never fit it all back in.

Walk across its crosswise shadow then pass beneath the High Line, the disused elevated railway that runs parallel with and just west of 11th Avenue. Rusting steelwork of a freight corridor that linked the industrial buildings of Manhattan's west side from Canal Street all the way to the train yards in the thirties. Overgrown now with all sorts of flora. You'd give a lot to get up there with Gwen, hike that urban Long Trail. Check the views from a vantage utterly unto itself. There's got to be someone you know, or will meet, who's got a window out onto that world.

With the transformation of the far west side into the new gold coast, the High Line's become a cause celèbre. The hardcore speculators want it gone. An eyesore – waste of valuable real estate. Preservationists and "green" developers are pressing to rehabilitate it, create a park-promenade – add value to the luxury conversions they'll string along its route like pearls. With luck though, neither outcome will occur, and the High Line will survive another boom-bust cycle or two, oxidizing with dignity, an undomesticated territory in a city trying too hard to be safe. Maybe it's your mood, but the fate of the High Line doesn't register much on your personal Richter scale. Not when set against questions like how is Gwen's generation going get a living here?

Which doesn't mean you feel blasé about it. As much as the High Line was, like the Carmine Street Pool, just part of the landscape to someone growing up in the Village, it seemed, even then, to belong to a bygone, and more heroic order of city. The sight of the elevated tracks tunneling through massive buildings that seemed to wrap themselves almost joyfully around its right-of-way struck you as so weird and magnificent that it opened a permanent zone of astonishment in your mind – a zone where the possible city meets and dances with the one objectively known.

Once, when you were about ten, walking with your father over near the Hudson, you watched a man drive a large black and silver motorcycle repeatedly through a puddle in the cobblestones, the steep angle of his wheels sending up a curl of water

every time. Nearby, a movie camera mounted low on a tripod. You asked your father why the man kept doing the same thing over and over again and he explained that each pass through was a take and they needed to do it until the director was satisfied that they'd got it right. When the shoot was over, you walked over to see what was so special about the puddle. Not particularly deep, but filmed with oil – and reflecting the underside of the High Line, and above it, the sky with its rushing clouds. You've no idea what movie they were making, but it must have been a terrific shot.

The flap and scrape of three pairs of feet in flip-flops, above which ascend six hairy male legs. Wait till they're well past, then look up from your book in the opposite direction. A slender rollerblader spins on the corner of Ninth like a ballerina on a music box spindle, waiting for the light to change. A blonde woman turns the corner, passes by slowly, weighed down by a bulging Gristedes bag in each hand. She's enormously pregnant, black stretch pants pulled low over an evenly-bronzed belly. They're returning to the city: from the Hamptons and all points east, north, south and west. The city hasn't been abandoned after all. Only you have left it.

A parking space opens up right in front of where you're sitting. Good until 9 a.m. on Thursday. Back in the days when you had the VW van, you'd have jumped at the chance. You don't own a car any more, but if you did, you'd hop in it now and drive down to the Carmine Street Pool and wait for Katie and Gwen to come out, hair wet and eyes wide with surprise. *Daddy what are you doing here?* You'd all drive somewhere. Somewhere you don't live now.

September 4 – Le G. – Early Morning

The Times reports that the New York hotel and restaurant industries have hit a slump, but suggests that it is confined to the most upscale sectors and does not represent a general trend.

Next Monday, in less than a week, the first barrage of fall semester packets is due from your Goddard students. Your intellects tells you it's a great gig – who else would pay you for being eclectic? Your gut says the walls are closing in.

September 5 – Le G. – Early Morning

You wuz waiting for Lefty, when Godot showed up.

September 6 – Le G. – Early Morning

First day back at P.S. 11. Her turf since pre-K, Gwen knows the drill. Up the stairs at a bound.

Always a bad idea to read the paper. The walls of social life, held up from collapsing by tie-rods of fear.

In walks Juan, one of your favorite Gaministas, if an occasional one. He's Argentine, small and lean, good-looking in an owlish way behind his spectacles, restores antique French furniture for a living. He asks if you're done with the paper and, with a certain relief, you hand it over. Juan scans the front page and shakes his head. Glad, he says that he and Maria are leaving for Germany soon after the baby comes. Baby? His whole affect changes, grows softer. Yes, it's going to be a girl. Due in March. They'll move first to the town where Maria grew up, between Cologne and Aachen. Then eventually, to Barcelona. The U.S., he says, is just getting too weird.

September 7 – Le G. – Early Morning

The Book of Margins. You've cracked it a couple of times since Frazier gave it to you over a year ago, but only now are you getting deep in.

"Reading a text involves several degrees of violence; this is sufficient warning that there is danger in the house." So says Jabès on page forty-two.

September 8 – Chelsea Streets – Early Morning

Any armored surface, no mater how seemingly impregnable, has its chinks, and something soft lies beneath.

September 9 – Le G. – Midmorning

Sulieman brings your coffee this morning. He's Senegalese, immensely tall, wants to model and is beautiful enough to, apart from a scar on his cheek which could be easily retouched. Sweet disposition too. You pay at the register and he hands you a dollar and some coins in change. On the graying border of the banknote someone has written, very neatly and in caps: THIS IS A LUCKY DOLLAR BILL.

September 11

Nightfall and Gwen climbs up on the stepladder, leans her elbows on the kitchen windowsill, peers out, says "I'm beginning to see the new view."

September 12 – #1 Train Approaching Times Square – Noontime

The faulty public address system makes it sound like the conductor is saying: *Transfer here for the N, Q, R and ancestral trains.*

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What can be done normally is done normally. Early afternoon, Katie goes to her Wednesday shrink appointment as usual. You want to stay close, so you and Gwen accompany her uptown, stroll through Central Park.

Walk past the Delacorte Theatre and find a spot to sit on the grass with a view across the pond and up at the castle. You point out to Gwen, probably not for the first time, the rockface you and the other kids used to slide down, hoping you could stop short before plunging into the murky pond. It seemed a wilder age. In summer, kids used to jump off the cliffs of Inwood Park and into the Hudson for a swim. Nobody wore bicycle helmets. Fourth of July in Little Italy: by night, a racket of small ballistics that felt for all the world like the outbreak of an urban guerilla war.

The sky just as crystalline as yesterday. Around you, frisbee players, gamboling children and a couple exhibitionistically breaking up. Nowhere is there any sense of urgency, of trauma. The downtown vibe has not washed this far north. From this vantage, the city of suffering and death has been negated. Above the treeline, the facades of the buildings to the south miraculously screen off the city beyond. *Un cordon sanitaire*.

Time to pick up Katie. Shoes still off, you walk the breadth of the lawn, toward the path, passing on your way a couple lying on a blanket – literally the most beautiful man and woman you have ever seen. They sunbathe, pass a magazine back and forth, she runs the back of her foot up his calf. They intertwine limbs. Like first parents, before the Fall.

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Your two Germans call, Wolfgang and Tobias, to make sure you're still on the planet. Wolfgang offers up a grim joke – he wants to reassure himself that your sense of humor is intact. Things heat up on the media front. Suddenly all the questions never broached about the WTC when it was up are getting asked amidst the rubble. Answers, they must have answers, now that it's too late. You perform the ridiculous: get a cell phone.

Out onto the street, you and Katie, each with a new mobile in your hand. Lock and load. Primed for satellite bounce. Look down Fifth Avenue. So many places not to see the towers from.

• • •

You turn out the light in Gwen's room, pull down the shade – her window faces south toward the great cloud of dust – then sit down on her bed to say goodnight.

You are conscious of the moment. That you should say something reassuring. But you have never lied to her. When her mother was in the hospital with a skull fracture, Gwen asked if she would be OK and you said: *I think so.* Because in fact you did think so. But didn't know for sure.

Tonight you say that you've no idea what's going to happen, but that you'll do your best to take care of her. To make sure she's safe. But you don't know what's going to happen. You turn on the nightlight and get up to go. She calls you back, reaches out to give your hand a squeeze, says: "They can't bomb our love."

September 13

John D. calls: "We pushed a button," he says – sent thirty thousand *Divided*'s into production with lightning speed via books-on-demand. A second conventional printing run ordered too.

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At 33d and Park, the Pinocchio Café has scores of little flags and "God Bless America" signs pasted to the window.

September 14 – NBC News – Midmorning

You sit on a chair in the Green Room. Across from you, on a couch, taking a break, the women who do wardrobe and makeup for the *Today* show. They watch the huge TV, nosh from the coffee table piled with breakfast goodies and comment on the broadcast, repeatedly using the word "He" to describe "the Mastermind,"

"Who is 'He?'" you ask.

"You know," says the woman who, a few minutes ago, powdered your face, "Osama bin…"

"Yeah," says the woman who pressed you jacket, "you know, Saddam bin Laden."

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Antsy waiting, you wander about. The door to Matt Lauer's office stands ajar. Inside, surrounding his computer monitor, all sorts of memorabilia. Propped on the floor, a poster of the iconic photo of Muhammad Ali, lips stretched back in his earth-shaking mouth-guard grimace, gesturing *Get up so I can flatten you again* to the prostrate Sonny Liston.

Al Roker, beloved weatherman, walks past wearing a bright yellow sou'wester. He opens the stairwell door. You give him a wave, and he waves back, heads downstairs.

You find a small, tranquil office, low lights, nobody inside. Cool heels. Call home. Katie's fine. Everything's fine. Lots of media calls. More than you can shake a stick at. Check the monitor. Judith Miller, *New York Times* Middle-East correspondent and author of a bestseller on biological warfare waxes expert with an earnest Katie Couric. You flag down one of the associate producers. "Tell them I have to leave in fifteen minutes." Your cough's getting worse.

You've turned the volume off on the monitor, but when you look up at it again, Al Roker is reporting live from "Ground Zero," his dark, immeasurably kind features resplendent, framed by the sou'wester's hood.

Footsteps. The associate producer. "OK, Mr. Darton, you're up next." You pop another Fisherman's Friend, cough into your sleeve like Camille. She holds the door open and you trip downstairs, almost gaily, into the studio.

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On air in a minute. You've lost the wrapper, so you plop your coughdrop into the water in your *Today* show mug. Matt Lauer sits perpendicular to you, studying the notes in his lap with singleminded intensity. In a cocoon of light across the vast, darkened space, Katie Couric, behind a desk, reports breaking news. A technician runs a lavaliere wire up your jacket and clips the mic to your lapel.

Lauer's eyes snap up, but he doesn't look at you, rather peers out into studio. "When that architect's quote comes up at intro – about the world trade center being a symbol of world peace – I want the towers behind it." Damned if you can see who he's talking to.

"The towers – how?" asks a voice from the blackness.

"Give them to me in slow motion. Exploding, falling – whatever!"

• • •

Murat drives the limo that takes you home from Rockefeller Center. A former Turkish Airlines pilot, downsized two years ago. He wants you to know, so that you can tell the media – he assumes you have their ear – that these planes were flown by expert pilots, highly trained, brilliant. This was a professional job. "A plane that big, that speed – a tiny bit this way, you're half a mile off."

Murat is a self-assured, even-toned man. Speaks with quiet authority. Seems to have adapted successfully to piloting a Lincoln Town Car. His priority's the same as before: putting his kids through college.

Perhaps he's right, perhaps this was precision piloting. But you can't shake the robotic look to the second jet's trajectory as it hooked steeply round. You saw it hit, and in the instant thought: guided missile.

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Fools with flags. Everywhere.

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Noontime and aboard the Amtrak bound for Rhinecliff. Elizabeth and Jonathan have offered your family refuge for the weekend. Katie will cook brisket. There'll be convivial guests for dinner – someone will make a pie. You'll rest and recover.

September 15

Katie and Gwen join Elizabeth, Jonathan and their boys Isaac and Nathan on a strawberry picking expedition. You stay put. Cough getting worse.

The woman who looks after E. & J.'s Palladian retreat when they're in the city arrives, bearing a hardcover copy of *Divided*. "It was the last one at the Poughkeepsie Barnes & Nobles" she says, almost breathless with urgency. "Would you sign it?"

This is the moment when, for the first time since Tuesday, reality hits you in the back of the knees. In order to keep your mind clear, you've some part of you asserted that your relationship with the WTC was just like anyone else's, no more nor less. Now the evidence is thrust before you: the familiar, half-forgotten cover that bears your name – physical evidence of your deep implication, suddenly catastrophesized. Not a heavy book, not flimsy either. The thing in your hands all that is.

• • •

Jonathan goes online to check *Divided*'s progress on Amazon. He almost whoops with glee. It's up there among the top sellers – number four or eight, something like that. You're too exhausted to imagine caring. Elizabeth gives you eucalyptus to add to your bathwater. You lie recumbent in their huge limestone tub – whose shape suggests a Roman sarcophagus – and breathe the steam.

September 19

When you and Eric B. left the café Monday he literally dragged you into Rite Aid and bought you a bottle of Buckley's, the truly vile cough medicine he swears by. This is the sort of remedy that's so horrible, it shocks the body into righting itself so it won't be made to take a second dose. Fine in principle, but it's two days later and Buckley's still hasn't made a dent in whatever's turned to concrete in your lungs.

September 24 – Midafternoon

Falencki diagnoses walking pneumonia. Fire in the towers. Water in your lungs. Fighting for air.

Miguel R., a photographer who's been assigned to take your picture for an article in *El Pais* arrives at Falencki's office. He's elfin and charming, self-effacing, even wears a rumpled coat like Peter Falk's Colombo – intent on reassuring that this will take no time at all. You walk to Washington Square Park and he poses you in front of an impromptu shrine – the chain-link fence surrounding the arch bedecked with flags and flowers. Then he sits you on the stone ring that encircles the fountain. Now that's funny – talk about the eternal return. Nearly fifty years ago, in your second summer, Bea took a snapshot of you playing in the center of this very fountain. A toddler, dirty-kneed and delighted in the water spray, wearing only a diaper, and that off-kilter.

Miguel is right – in less than ten minutes you're done.

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Miguel emails you the two shots he likes best. Sick as a dog you may feel, but the man in the pictures looks strong as a horse. Furious and centered. Maybe there's energy left in the old body yet.

September 28 – Midafternoon

Between phone interviews with a Philadelphia radio station and a Brazilian business journal, you sit in the kitchen and eat the matzoh ball soup Katie brought back from Zabar's. For some reason she brings up the Gotham Restaurant, how it specializes in towers of food. Right. You went there once with Elizabeth for drinks. She'd thought it an inspiring place to plan the *Divided* party. Looked over from the bar toward a table where the diners were being served plateful of vertical cuisine – formidable structures that required demolition before they could be eaten.

October 3 – Le G. – Midmorning

Giuliani has come fully into his own – full of grief, full of sympathy, full of righteous rage. Chock-a-block. His waxy complexion glows with vigor. This is the man who built himself a command and control bunker on the 23rd floor of Larry Silverstein's WTC7 – presumably terrorist-proof, money no object. One report has him racing toward the bunker when the south tower fell, forcing him back to City Hall. In another, hizzoner's in the bunker from soon after the initial plane hit until the first collapse. The whole building, bunker and all, disintegrated that afternoon. But what matters that now? Now that he's got his dream city – seven point something million souls under full lockdown.

October 4

In the last three weeks you've talked your brains out. So much you didn't write down. Where to start? Begin where the interviewers do: *where you were when it happened*? You could be truthful and say "in a group therapy session." But that would deflect the conversation into Woody Allen territory. You could pretend to have been at home since the view is much the same, but you don't want to flat out lie. So without even thinking about it you say to the first one: *I was at the doctor's office in midtown on the thirtieth floor, facing south* and that response seems to work just fine. True in spirit. And no one's yet pressed further to find out what sort of doctor has offices that high up, when, at least in residential buildings, they're not permitted above the second floor.

This morning, a young journalism student at NYU called to talk about the future of downtown. Somehow Tom Brokaw's name came up and it turned out she can't stand him either – thinks he's tried to consign her generation to insignificance. If you could have, you'd have hugged her through the phone.

• • •

Morning of. Through the window of Paul's office on West 50th Street, you stare abstracted, as a strange, uncharacteristic vertical cloud forms against a preternaturally clear sky. Several lazy minutes before you shift your eye to focus on its source. Take in the diagonal, orange gash glowing in Tower One. *Un chien andalou.* These are the signifiers we retrieve when we can't process what we see. What the hell did that, an explosion? Check your watch. Mark the time. Jesus, that'll cost a bundle to fix. Temporizing: Not to worry, the Port Authority rebuilt it last time – they can just sell some more bonds. A year from now, no one would ever guess….

Finally you open your mouth. Paul, Safia, Jim and Marilyn turn to look. The second plane hooks round, soundlessly hits, and the billow of flame. Think for the first time: Damn, there are people inside that sculpture. Then the Hindenburg flashback – *Ah the humanity!* But the Hindenburg was in black and white. This is in color. And anyway, the Hindenburg already happened. So this must be happening now. Check watch again. Temporize: At least it's early yet, the towers can't be full.

Safia speed dials her husband who's flying home that morning. Supposed to have landed an hour before. Circuits busy. Paul's phone rings. Katie. She's looking out your living room window, ten stores lower and a mile or so downtown. "I'm coming home," you say. Session's over for the day.

Safia dials again and gets a genuine busy signal. She feels relived by that and so do you, but why? Paul disbands us, each to our separate ways. You walk down the corridor with Marilyn, and she wonders aloud if the elevators work. "Why shouldn't they?" you reply – though a part of you imagines all the elevators in the city shutting down. Feels like a blackout, but isn't.

E train comes right away. When you reach 34th Street, you find yourself amazed that the subways are still running that far south. Bing bong. "E Train to World Trade

Center" intones the conductor. You turn to the man sitting a couple of seats to your right, ask him "How far you going?"

"All the way down,"

"Well," you say, "this train better not be going to the World Trade Center – it's on fire."

"No –" he says.

"Yeah," says a man across the aisle. He's got headphones and a radio. "Plane hit it."

"No–" says the man to your right.

The doors open at 23rd Street and you get out. Over your shoulder: "You better get off at Canal Street. If this train's crazy enough to go below there, you better get off it."

Through the turnstile and up the stairs to the street. Don't look to your right down Eighth Avenue. Don't want to stop, or see anything more until you get upstairs with Katie. Take the elevator to your apartment on the 20th floor, facing south.

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You and Katie walk to 21st Street to pick Gwen up from school. "Stay calm!" shrieks the monitor at the door. "I am calm," you say, and it's the truth.

In the auditorium, the principal speaks to a knot of parents. "The kids know," he says. Know what? "They aren't panicking," he says. Why should they? He hasn't yet come up with a dismissal plan. Says he'll have them ready for pickup in forty-five minutes. You and Katie stroll to Le Gamin, order take-out iced cappuccinos, perch on a stoop across the street from school. At the appointed time, you walk upstairs to Gwen's floor, nod hello to some other parents who've converged in the hall. The kids are lined up in a double row outside the classroom. "So," you ask Gwen, "you want to hang out and have lunch with your class and we'll pick you up at three, or you want to come home with us now?"

"I'm a little scared," said Gwen. "I'd rather be with you."

The three of you walk east on 21st Street to Eighth Avenue, and there make a collective decision not to head home, but rather south to Frank's. You don't want to be

in a highrise just now, and Frank's townhouse is two blocks from Katie's old third floor apartment on 12th Street. Roll the clock back to a building with fire escapes. Chutes and ladders.

Tides of humanity surge both ways on the Eighth Avenue sidewalks, spill into the street, unsure where to go. As you near 14th Street, you consider veering off to St. Vincent's to give blood. But Katie wants you to stick together and besides, she's heard on the radio that the hospitals are swamped with would-be donors.

Frank opens the window and throws down the key. Brooke is upstairs too – Frank's secretary in the old days, and, since Gloria's death, his self-appointed protector. Ensconced on the couch, she glares at you for a few minutes then says, as if you should have known it all along, that Frank's got a friend, missing in the towers – worked on one of the floors the planes flew into. Suddenly it hits home that you're imposing.

Walk back up to Chelsea. Just as you close the apartment door, the phone rings. Tom Brokaw's producer. He's already left a message on the machine. "Is this the Eric Darton who wrote… could you be a guest immediately?" Lots of airliners still unaccounted for and you're supposed to go to Rockefeller Center? Leave Katie and Gwen? Just say no.

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Morning after and you claim your preferred spot at Gamin – beside the window in the light, next to the beat-up plant with the French flag stuck in the pot. It's getting stuffy with the door shut. Mario in his chef whites, stands on a ladder just inside the door adjusting the air conditioners so the patrons won't have to breathe in quite so much microparticulate. Outside, a pair of young women, thin and smartly dressed, check out the café, decide in the affirmative, reach for the handle. Can Mario see them from up there? Is it possible they don't see him? The door is wood-framed glass, and you'd think his legs would be readily visible through the pane – bang! The ladder shakes but holds. Good Lord, they're about to try again. Out of your mouth comes the classic New York *Yo!* at the same instant you jump up and rap on the window. Oopses and embarrassed looks. Mario climbs down and, gracious as ever, opens the door for

them. The trade center is gone, that's for sure. But our sightlines haven't improved any. Still out of whack. Can't see what's in front of us.

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A day or so later, either the 13th or 14th, you see Eric B. for the first time since the 11th. Fall right into it. Start to jam on what might be done besides rush to war. How the city, even now, could reach out to the world – use the horrors just experienced to make a bold step forward. What if New York became the starting point for a futuristic railway, a magnetic Groove, that would run through Canada, across the Bering Straits, span Asia – a new silk route – with trunk lines connecting to Europe and Africa? Your talk grows animated as you build, in your minds, a massive, international public works project, linking a host of autonomous, yet interdependent localities.

The energy stirred up by this terrible aggression has to go somewhere. Why not transform the retaliatory bombs into the Groove? Cecil Rhodes built a railway, equally ambitious in its day, to further his own fortunes and the might of the British Empire. Why not create an infrastructural world-link to benefit all six-point-something billion of us? Besides which, people seem to want to stay closer to the ground these days. In the near term, New York should relearn how to build good ships. After all, the harbor is still there. And the city's lifeblood was always the sea.

Before you part to go your separate ways, you stand for a moment in the sunlit street outside the café. He tells you that as he walked along 21st Street the day of, he saw a fire engine heading crosstown. But the truck wasn't red. Gray, completely gray. Smashed windshield – memos, letters, invoices stuck to the front and sides – paper plastered to the plaster. And the truck kept going, no siren, driving west, toward the Chelsea Piers, leaving in its wake that smell. First day's smell unlike anything before.

October 5 – Downtown E Train – Midafternoon

It's a brand new subway car you ride home in – a sanitized vessel hurtling underground – replete with graffiti-proof surfaces and programmable displays on which the first and final stops appear in jet black letters against a brilliant yellow. *JAMAICA* the sign flashes, then an instant later *CANAL STREET*. This morning on the

trip uptown, you'd ridden an older train, the kind with signs printed on rolls of fabric that have to be cranked by hand. You noticed one that still read *JAMAICA* on top, and beneath: *WORLD TRADE CENTER.*

The subway maps are not so easy to modify. It becomes a matter of redrawing and reprinting them. Of course it's possible they'll keep the name in the absence of the buildings. The world is full of cognitive incommensurables. The horizon changes, but our internal geography digs in its heels. The ears too, become organs of displacement between the is and was. How many times, this past thirty years, have you heard the PA crackle: "E Train to World Trade Center" – a cluster of sounds repeated so often you took them for granted? Today, consonant with the sign, the conductor announces the terminus as Canal. It's as though carrots and peas had suddenly changed to carrots and squash. Makes literal sense, but carries an incongruous ring. It may be that however long you hear the new message, the old one will echo, immediately after. And if, by some folly, we build new towers in exactly the same spot, they will have to share headspace with the ones that came before. Until the old memories slough off.

"23rd Street next stop. Watch the closing doors." When you get off, take the stairs at the north end, right up to your corner. Outside, the sky is whitish gray and misty. Even if the towers were still there, they would not be visible in this atmosphere, though on a clear day, the view of them down Eighth Avenue was spectacular. You're almost at the front door when you remember you forgot to buy milk. So you turn round and head for Kyung's deli across the street. As the light goes to green, the wind shifts and you get a noseful. Kyung's flowers never smelled like this. Somehow, across sixteen centuries, the air of Alaric's Rome has arrived in millennial New York City. And the wonder is, we're breathing it today. With added substances not available for the fall of Rome: fiberglass, asbestos, pulverized gypsum, benzene, dioxin, PCBs. Bone fragments they had aplenty in antiquity, but the power to grind them so fine and waft them so far, that's new.

October 10 – Midafternoon

Things run in sets, but certain coincidences are particularly striking. Three times so far today you've seen little Asian girls having melt-downs while their white, middle-aged moms stoically wait it out. A mother at PS11 talked to you a while back about the

trouble she was having with her adoptive daughter. Used a great phrase. The child, she said, wasn't "transitioning well"

These days the kids are hardly alone in that game.

October 12 – Le G. – Midafternoon

From across the room, Bryan, a cameraman from MetroChannel fixes you in his sights. Amanda, your interviewer, coiffed and pancaked within an inch of her life, directs his shots. Writer at work. Even at this distance, the light mounted on the camera, bright as a freight train's headlamp, heats your forehead, the tabletop, the plants to your right. You're seized with great desire to spill something daring and profound onto the page. This is your chance – say it! But nothing comes, so you write what's happening.

Now Amanda and Bryan move outside and shoot through the window. They frame your face between the flowerboxes and the sign painted in gold and black on the glass: "Le Gamin," in crude, but charming script curved gracefully over a bowl of café au lait. But the materials haven't stood the test of time. With every cleaning, the paint incrementally washes away. The letters fragment, the bowl's shape becomes less distinct, to the point it is only by bringing to the image what we already know that it remains legible.

Amanda points and Brian aims. You feel yourself becoming contextualized – can almost trace the framing of their shots in the air around you. Amanda is so stunning to look at, you'd imagine she'd be arrogant – or project that otherworldly remove you've seen in the professionally telegenic. Instead, she warmly thanks the waitstaff for letting her shoot there. The three of you stroll east, back toward your building. Bryan's air is one you've come to associate with TV cameraman: can-do, manly, but laid back. Everything's fine, relax, just leave it to me.

As with every other media moment these past weeks, you've gotten through this one on sheer adrenalin, with an assist from Vocalzine coughdrops. When the time comes to speak, or go on camera, you wrap the tarry little blob in its wrapper and pocket it. As long as the tape rolls, no problem. Once it stops, uncontrollable coughing, for which nothing avails until the spasms simply wind down. Yet how clear your voice sounds, how robust you look on the playback.

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The media people dote on statistics, so you weave them in as best you can. 40,000 doorknobs. 5,000 bathroom soap dispensers. Folks walked in and out of a couple of thousand elevator doors. You culled these palpable, quotidian figures from a forest of stats – superlative in their proportions – on the order of: if the wiring were laid end-to-end it would reach Jupiter. Now a whole new Guinness book of wreckage is born, and a recycler's utopia too. The *Times* reckons the aggregate debris at one and a half million tons including three hundred some-odd tons of steel, about two thirds of it structural. Eight and a half thousand tons of aluminum and glass hung from the columns of the exterior walls.

Since almost immediately after it was destroyed, even as the rescue workers sought for survivors, the physical stuff that made up the WTC began disappearing from the site. Much of it was – and continues to be – brought to Fresh Kills, the vast garbage mountain on Staten Island, officially decommissioned, but hastily pressed back into service to accommodate the immense quantities of debris. Barges – there are currently sixty four of them working round the clock – floated 40,000 tons of heavy steel down the river and across the bay in the first days after the 11th, as well as vast quantities of what is called "mixed debris," purportedly to be sifted for crime evidence, personal effects and bits of humanity.

Thus, from the outset, a great dispersal of forensic material took place. Huge quantities of metal that could have been analysed for evidence of what caused the collapse were shipped directly to salvage yards for recycling. Even after the official "rescue" phase ended, wreckage continued to be cleared at warp speed. The city keeps mum about the financials of its recycling contracts, but there's got to be some serious jackola in this for someone. Steel sells for around $90 per ton and the aluminum and copper go for up to $1,000 per ton. Who knows where it'll all end up? Some skyscraper in Shanghai?

Unseemly the haste. The kind of thing that, given time, comes back to haunt.

October 13

You talk into a can, its string strung round the world. And how many listening to their cans on the other end?

In the last four weeks, a hundred interviews or more: media from every continent bar Antarctica. By and large, the foreign reporters don't raise your hackles. But with the domestic media you have to work to keep your cool, your restrained mode of address – treat every questioner, however blind and vicious, as a fellow soul thirsty for a bit of truth. As often as possible, you pose questions in return. You've got your Warholian fifteen minutes – in the persona of a rabbi.

Tonight Eric B. and Erik L. call to lend their support. Both sense what it's costing you to keep rapping against the tide. They're also alive to the fact that this awful crime has opened up, however fleetingly, a chance for a radical voice to be heard amidst the yelps of war hysteria. Consciously, then, you try to formulate ideas the way they would, channel their intelligence through your own medium. Try to connect with the countless souls who know deep down that no amount of killing will make us safe.

October 14

If only King Kong had been standing astride the towers that day. He'd have shown those planes.

October 16

Old glory everywhere. To step out on the street these days is like being engulfed in that Childe Hassam painting of the Fourth of July. Little flags too, tied in knots from the straps of backpacks, fluttering from car aerials. And on a grander scale, as though Christo had been seized with a spasm of patriotism, the entirety of the four-storey Chase bank building at 43rd and Fifth stands draped in an immense, translucent stars and stripes. It must be mighty strange to work in that surround.

Since 9/11 too, an enormous proliferation of people, mostly men, wearing baseball caps appliquéd with NYPD and NYFD logos. Giuliani himself appears capped as a policeman or firefighter at every media op. So does the young fellow, Mexican probably, who last night delivered your takeout food for Royal Siam. Once the only people who wore these caps were actual members of the "Finest" or "Bravest." But now affiliation shades into affinity. One can easily "cop" a one-size-fits-all

identification with a caste of official heroes – much like walking around in a shirt with the name and number of a sports idol. Or flaunting the "Vuitton" bag purchased on Canal Street.

Possible too that for some, this ubiquity signifies even less – just an inexpensive way to cover your head. The symbols have all detached themselves from whatever they might once have stood for, like currencies floating in the realm of the spirits, unpegged from any set value in precious metal. In the vast expansion of the free trade zone in signifiers, is anything still counterfeit? Wonders abound, on every streetcorner, of the evermore astral world.

On the 11th, among other things, you confronted a real paradox for your carefully cultivated materialism. Katie felt it too, and probably many others as well: the sense – the vision almost – of spirits, great numbers of them, spiraling up and outward, separating their lighter selves from the heap of wreckage and dust of the earth.

October 19 – Airborne to Tampa

Now write it fast: how your plane banked steeply over Lower Manhattan before heading down the coast and you, at the window seat, found yourself saying *it can't be doing this, it is doing this, it can't be* and then peering directly down onto the great charnel mound. A horrible magnificence to it, smoldering like a volcanic aftermath. Admixed with nausea, a sense of privileged exultation to see this feat of destruction from such a vantage, as Dionysus might, without mediation. When you and Katie flew to California back in '91, the year before Gwen was born, the plane flew right over Grand Canyon. You'd only known it from pictures, so a part of you remained unconvinced that it really existed. No warning from the pilot, just the sudden presence of the mind-blowing thing itself.

October 20 – Pané Rustica, Tampa – Early Morning

You've fled New York seeking Health – the heavenly Jerusalem imagined by all sufferers. No miraculous healing here. Same body, sick as a dog, transplanted south. Is it possible that whatever still afflicts your lungs is Tampa-proof? What's scary is how truly ruined they feel. And the irony is that you've never smoked cigarettes, not much

dope, haven't worked in a cotton mill or mine – only breathed in the city air that purportedly makes one free. How to describe the sensation? Like you inhaled the raw materials that make cinderblocks and they used your lungs as a mold. With every cough, a little piece chips off, but the mass of it isn't going anywhere. Of course, if it *were* cinderblocks inhabiting your lungs, they'd feel heavier. So perhaps it's lighter stuff, more like pumice. In any case its gray, abrasive texture is palpable inside you. In truth it feels weightier than pumice.

At times you think this can't be an entirely physical condition. That you've taken the collapse of the WTC within yourself somehow, and therefore struggle for breath on behalf of those whose breathing ended that day, in those towers. Or perhaps you've found, however unwillingly, your suicide mode, become a perfect master of anti-breath control, your mind turned terrorist – warring against the body it inhabits, breaking it cough by cough with dumb concrete bombs.

Who knew these organs were so vulnerable to attack? Well, it wasn't like you didn't know they were your twin Achilles heels. Falencki showed you his chart: a bout of bronchitis nearly every fall – each time forgotten the instant you got back into the swing of things. You've always taken as a given your body's capacity to shake off sickness, recover its vital force. But this time it didn't cooperate, and here you sit, trying to write, to breath, willing your molecules to put up a good fight. The hope is that your lungs will have an even chance in Tampa – a warmer place, with gentler, if not purer air.

But respiratory distress is not the stuff of optimism. And every signal you're getting tells you: get ready. Good chance you've played your time out. And that will be the end of the story and the end of the grief.

Shift your eyes toward the sun, toward the bay. Past the café's name in reverse on the window. Across the street, a shop that boasts it will string tennis rackets in one hour. Joggers bound past a big wooden sign outside that reads "America And Americans Are Strong." Right now you must not be an American because the total energy in your body wouldn't fire a mood ring.

October 23

Whenever the sun's out with sufficient strength, you lie by the pool and soak up the rays, allow the heat to gradually expand your lung capacity. When it's overcast, work on Goddard packets. You're way behind schedule, but several other advisors are running even later than you. As for your students, they've been good as gold. No complaints. All you've heard are heartfelt wishes for the swift return of your health. One of your students, M., is in the midst of a tremendous breakthrough. After two semesters spent oscillating between poetry and screenwriting, she's hit on her thesis project: a play set in and around a WPA highway workers' camp in the Florida Keys just as it's about to be clobbered by the Hurricane of '33. For her, the subject's an old fascination. As a kid she traveled up and down the Keys with her father, a civil engineer, and he told her lots of lore.

The play hasn't distilled its form yet, but the act structure, and a number of potentially strong characters are there. For M. getting it right will be a matter of recognizing, and putting her hands firmly on what her characters show her of that moment. You write her:

Part of what goes on in our writing lives in the discovery that we are ineluctably drawn to certain material, even if at first blush it seems the work is about something else. Put psychoanalytically this means: follow the transference. Economically: follow the money. In any case, follow the energy – the desire. Another aspect of this lies in the autonomy of the text: certain stories choose us because they know we are the one who will be most able to give them concrete form. If they come knocking and we are lucky enough have the capacity to hear them, and we permit ourselves to open the door, well then, somewhere down the line, we might find we've connected with an aspect of ourselves we can only get to through the work. I was six years into the WTC project before it came to me that the towers had actively sought me out. Before this, all I knew was that, for some reason, I had gravitated toward them. But the current ran both ways….

You also tell her about the moment when, deep into a workout on the Nordic Track, you looked south from your living room and your mind abolished the distance between your apartment and the towers. You felt yourself expanded out and upward, until your scale was equal to theirs, and you stood, like a third giant close beside them. Close enough to put your arms around their shoulders. Always they'd seemed too

intimidating to touch. But now it was possible. If only for the moment you connected them, they ceased to be afraid.

October 24

Long live causality! This morning your inner Newton announces that if your body feels better, more invigorated – which it does – that this must have something to do with the curative powers of Tampa. Perhaps being too wired to sleep last night turned the trick, or was it the combined effects of a slice of key lime pie, green grapes and the dregs of a cup of ginger tea, accompanied by escapist reading about the Venetian republic's brilliant, facile double-dealings at the turn of the 15th century?

Perhaps your body decided *Basta!* Either get better or die – enough of this waffling. Or maybe it was the boat ride yesterday, out into Tampa Bay where you saw dolphins, fifty of them or more. And then, when the boat had nearly docked again, you saw one leap fully out of the water like a flying fish, so close in to civilization, not twenty feet from a rusting red barge.

Maybe the aquarium helped: the roughness of the baby sharks' skin against your fingertips as they swam by fast as anything, circling in their tank. There too you'd peered through glass into a darkened world to meet, eye to eye, the unblinking gaze of the Jewfish – who knew such a thing existed? – the face of a Nazi caricature grafted onto a salt-water creature weighing four hundred pounds. You watched Gwen squat down by the river otter's tank. It noticed her, pressed up against the pane, moved when she moved, seemed to want to *speak* with Gwen, as though it recognized itself in human form.

What pushed you a jog toward better? There had to be some impulse that tripped the switch, cast out at least some of the demons. Was it running back into the gift shop, just as the aquarium was closing, so Gwen could buy a souvenir – invaluable at $2.99 – a ring shaped like a dolphin, balancing a tiny blue glass ball on its nose.

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Now here's a cosmic joke on you: get out of Dodge for a bit of peace, fly a thousand miles, then discover that the vast tract behind the security gates not far south

of the apartment you're borrowing from your brother-in-law is McDill AFB – home of the planes that refuel the F-15s over the no-fly zone in southern Iraq, not to mention CENCOM, the joint military operations headquarters for the war on Afghanistan. You knew the base was around here someplace – it's where Peter works when he's not deployed abroad – but had no idea it was very nearly in his back yard. Drove south to find a place you heard served great Cuban sandwiches. There was the restaurant alright, replete with military vehicles in the parking lot and camo'd soldiers, automatics slung over their shoulders ordering at the counter. Yesterday, out on the bay, you saw huge oil tanks lining the shore. Now you're beginning to get the picture.

October 26 – Pané Rustica – Early Morning

Media gets even sillier in its zeal to whip up an anthrax panic. "ONLY CERTAIN MASKS WILL PROTECT." That's their idea of a headline at the *St. Petersburg Times*.

A young fellow walks into the café wearing a green sweatshirt. In big letters on the front: *When All Else Fails, Manipulate the Data*.

October 27

Dozing yesterday by the pool when the cell phone rings. It's Randy, the publicist from Basic Books. Tremendously excited. Larry King's people want to talk with you. Sure, why not? Just when you thought the media had dumped the WTC for a quick fling with bio-terror, he's hooked a big one.

A moment later, Larry's "book person" calls. "OK," she says briskly, "you have thirty seconds to tell me why your book is worth discussing on Larry King." Abstractly you are aware that you ought not take this personally. All the big shows do pre-interviews to make sure potential guests are sufficiently mediaphilic. You've done this before, albeit less abrasively. Doubtless the young person you're speaking to is sleep-deprived, having worked 24/7 for weeks on end and scared out of her wits about anthrax having to open Larry's mail. Perhaps she even lost a loved one at the WTC, the Pentagon or in that Pennsylvania field. Who knows her trials or sorrows?

Suddenly though, you find yourself incapable of being accommodating. You discover, yet again, that you are not a bodhisattva. Unable this time to slow your

breathing, feel the space expand around you and give them the assurance they crave. Instead you tell her that have no interest in reducing your book to a thirty-second pitch, and that from your perspective the conversation has begun very poorly indeed. Besides, there is another factor to consider: whether you want to be on Larry King. A beat of silence on the other end, then outrage. In her four years on the job, nobody has ever talked to her like this. *Well,* you say, *now someone has*. Sounds coming your way, but you hit flash.

A few minutes later comes the fight with Randy. He's no more accommodating than you were, particularly since he's worked tirelessly to cultivate the person you've just pissed off immeasurably, perhaps immemorially. Blown a great opportunity – not just for yourself but for other Basic authors too. That's it. Now every button's been pushed. Part of you disengages from your body, becomes a camera: arm up on a shot of a crazed-looking fellow parading around the pool's edge, gesticulating as he screams into his cell phone – a satire, if that's possible – on a tantrum by Hunter Thompson. Fortunately, you're the only one there.

Listen Randy, I'm not going to let some twenty-something little TV shitheel insult me. OK? Who was it spent eight years writing this book? Who got pneumonia from talking to every media asshole in the world, most of whom found me without your help anyway? I've done everything – everything to support this book! What have you put on the line while my labor's been buying you another fucking car?

You've kept your cool for over a month. Finally, it's all spilled out. All your helpless rage at being unable, even for an instant, to deflect the course of the media frenzy in its awful drive for war. You even manage to call Larry King a "court Jew." As you're shouting at Randy though, part of you know none of this is his fault. He's not the real enemy – he's no *eminence grise* – just an unthinking link in the great chain of complicity. And who needs the bad blood? What's scary is you'd no idea how close your fury was to boiling over – and here you thought that after working on your temper for so long, you'd gained some measure of maturity, learned the power of restraint, the capacity, in a tight spot, to tell yourself a bigger story. The fact is though, even a few days ago you'd have been too weak to get your blood up at all, much less take it over the top. Your old energy must be kicking back in – all out of whack, but at least it's there, on tap if need be.

The episode peters out in a sorry anti-climax. You apologize to Randy, and he to you. You agree to talk with King's producer if he can get through to her and ameliorate. Half an hour later, the producer calls. Her tone's much more civil than the book person's and so is yours, but you're hoarse, shaking. She asks you questions, then half-covers the receiver before you've fully answered, muffling the sound while she talks with someone else. Impossible to tell if she's consulting with this other person about you, or whether she's having two entirely parallel conversations at once. It soon becomes clear that L.K. has no interest in discussing the WTC's history, but rather in finding an "expert" who will uncritically endorse the idea of rebuilding it even taller. No doubt this person exists. If not, they will be manufactured by airtime tomorrow.

Lie back and breathe in the Florida sun. It's doing the trick. An aftershock of anger. Couldn't Randy have vetted these assholes out before exposing you to this charade? Has he even read *Divided*? Not bloody likely. Does he ever have any idea what the books he's hocking are about? You put too much trust in these weak-kneed functionaries when in reality, you're not even playing the same game. Time to pick up your marbles and go home.

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Jabès: *There would be the event. However, does the event exist? There is the white space* before *the event and the white space* after *the event. But who could tell them apart? So the event is perhaps the unexpected shattering of the white space within the infinite space of the book.*

October 28 – Pané Rustica – Early Morning

Are you some strange, atomized reincarnation of the British Empire – your strategic bases not far-flung coking stations but cafés in port cities? In your Tampa outpost, Marcella serves the coffee, a rhinestone stars and stripes appliqué safety-pinned to her black tee shirt. When she turns her back you see white flour prints where the baker's hands touched her shoulders. She tells you she was born in Colombia, but once lived in New York City, on 53rd Street and Eighth Avenue, which happens, by coincidence to have been the epicenter of last night's 2.6-scale tremor. No injuries, just a

lot of shook-up midtowners. New York, your city – as the body of Job reported from afar. Last Wednesday, the collapse of a huge scaffold and tumbling brickface. Six workers dead. Tremors from above and below. On 9/11, seismologists up the Hudson recorded higher shockwaves *as* the towers began to disintegrate than when the bulk of the rubble fell. How to explain that one?

For two afternoons on two successive days, you lay by the pool drinking air as though it were the healing waters of a therm. Actively worked at diffusing warmth to every cell of your lungs. Counted a hundred deep, unhurried breaths – slowed down the exchange to a snail's pace – then turned from prone to supine and began again. Deliberately teaching yourself to breathe again, to repattern the autonomic impulses that seized up after the towers, themselves so filled with air, turned to density and dust. Only five or so stories of rubble above ground level – all that compression of material. And the loosened spirits, springing into the atmosphere – the microparticulate riding their luminescence. Did you accidentally trap spirits in your lungs? Who clamored to be coughed out, even as they drowned inside you? How many met a second death in your lungs – how many did you liberate with every spasm of your back and chest? Did they drift out only when, on the exhale, you numbered your respirations, dozed, then half-woke each time Gwen called "un, deux, trois!" and then the silence of her run and leap – splash! into the pool.

Do the spirits care that the genie opened the bottle and liberated them in Central Florida, on the Gulf, far from where you unwittingly corked them? Are they disoriented to have traveled, engulfed in your vessels, so far from their original release? Or are they merely grateful not to be drowning any more, rather dry as the geckos Gwen befriends, builds houses for in the gravel with palm chips. Are they lighter and swifter now, no longer creatures of the earth and fire and sea – new citizens of the air?

Marcella refills your cup. Learn to drink coffee again. The tabletops here are made of a very rough mosaic. Broken-up tiles set in grout. Here and there a sharp edges. Got to be careful moving your arm across it as you write.

November 1

B-52 strikes on Afghanistan. We carpet bomb the weavers of rugs.

November 2

Amnesia the beautiful.

• • •

Back in the City of Heroes and walking along a band of Chelsea sidewalk, narrowed here and there by trees and townhouse stairs. From opposite directions, you and a mail carrier approach one another, she wheels her cart, you lug your backpack. *En passant*, you smile at her, and in response, she widens her slightly wall eyes. At that moment you think: *I love these streets*. And then a voice says: *But these are different streets.*

On the phone this afternoon with Wolfgang the formulation comes: there were two towers, the Soviet Union and the other the United States. First one freefalls, then soon after the other.

The headline reads: "Sight of a B-52 makes Northern Alliance troops shout with joy." The *Times* devotes these days, an entire section to whatever fits under the rubric of "A Nation Challenged." But each time you see it, by some virtue of some psychic dyslexia, you invert the second and third words. Lately too, you find yourself blasting words into constituent syllables: *Work. Man. Ship. Pen. Man. Ship. Hand. I. Craft.* Chipping off the mortar. Knocking apart the stuck-together bricks. Need to build something new.

November 4 – Early Morning

Sit in the café preparing to spill ink. But first, a Protestant moment: review your appointment book. Write in a note to call Dr. Johnson on Monday. Not happy about the cramped, awkward way you've made the letter "s" in his name. Erase it and try again, attempting fuller, more generous curves. But now the top overwhelms the bottom, so you rub out the offending character a second time, and make things worse. Now you've obliterated the second "o" and amputated the right leg of the "n" to the left of the "s." Collateral damage. Things are not going well. You're impatient. The eraser is too broad. And besides which, you've neglected to take off your glasses even though you've reached the age where it's hopeless doing close work with them on.

What next – erase what's left entirely and write it in again? Attempt to repair the hole in the word as seamlessly as possible? Or seize the opportunity to deproblematize the issue of your teeth by rubbing it out altogether and pretending everything's fine? Of all the strategies, this last seems the most heroic. But after due consideration, you convince yourself that if you write each missing or damaged letter deliberately and without haste, you can restore "Dr. Johnson" to coherence, and perhaps achieve aesthetic adequacy into the bargain. You have just rendered "n" bilateral once again and are about to take on the troublesome "s" when Anna leans across your table and asks: "Do you need anything?"

You find yourself struck dumb in the face of her beauty. Her pale eyes meet yours so directly you must shift your gaze. You focus on the white letters in the three blue circle on her tee shirt: "ulu" – a palindrome, like Anna. You read this backward and forward several times, stuck in a kind of loop, unable to engage your power of speech. Wrench you eyes back to Anna's face, notice that her cheeks are sunburned and recall that the last time you spoke she was planning to attend a bluegrass festival in northern Florida. How was it? Her eyes light up. Great, she says, really amazing music. Nothing like it back in Sweden.

The café's not busy so the conversation keeps going, moves with light feet from subject to subject. Eventually you tell her that her asking, "do you need anything," took you by surprise, that you were somewhere very far away, and temporarily incapable of replying because you didn't realize she was asking a simple question, not a complicated one. She laughs. More coffee arrives in your cup. You do not say to her that more than anything else, what you need is to stay connected to the principle of Eros, to repudiate, every instant, the pull of morbidity.

Later, at the cash register, after she gives you your change, you reach out to shake her hand. It is a silly gesture. But in the aftermath of your brief dialogue, you successfully completed the "s" and added the "o" thus creating a legible, altogether satisfactory reminder to call Dr. Johnson on Monday. You have even convinced yourself that in some small way, you're more solidly implanted within the circle of the living than when you walked through the door an hour ago. In a way that could never be communicated in so many words, you stand forever in her debt.

November 6

Phone rings. As ever, you hear a little throat-clearing cough before "Wolfgang here." He's just returned from Berlin for his customary fall-to-spring New York sojourn. His apartment scrubbed clean and HEPA filters installed in the air purifiers, he invites you over to resume your bi-weekly séances – sitting at his white, enamel-topped table in the dining alcove as dusk falls on the Lower Manhattan massif and the harbor.

Way back, when you'd just started your research, one of your advisors made the introduction to Wolfgang, whose work you already knew and admired greatly. The intervention proved crucial. Would there have been a book without these dialogues, who knows? In any case, Wolfgang's associative brilliance and rigor served as your model. And the conversations continue, ad infinitum, to hopefully mutual benefit.

In retrospect, the book's evolution owes something to the atmosphere of Wolfgang's high-rise cave: the bicycle with its wire basket leaning against the foyer wall, the bright kitchen near the table where you sit, parquet floors several shades darker than your own, the coffee table in the living room piled with research books. And pictures on the wall, deliberately chosen, enigmatic worlds unto themselves. During all those of late-afternoon meetings, the towers stood close by, implacably asserting their presence, and the ever-shifting patterns of light and darkened offices provided objects of contemplation during the gaps and silences in your talk. How different will this next coffee-conversation be without this presence.

As the doors close on the subway downtown you realize you've forgotten your camera and very nearly get off at the next stop to go back for it. But then you'd be late, and in any case, you're a bit relieved not to feel compelled to photograph the ruins.

When Wolfgang opens the door his greeting is cordial but brief, since he ushers you straight to the window. At once breaks out a skirmish in the everlasting war between memory and what is. And for the moment, memory retires in defeat. In the six months since you visited – accelerating in the past weeks – your mind moved the trade center much closer, compressed to insignificance the intervening streets and buildings to the point where, as you rode up in the elevator, you imagined that when you did look out, you'd be nearly hanging over the rubble. Thus the view isn't as impressive by half as the one you anticipated. Part of you feels cheated by the remoteness of the wreckage. From this angle, even twenty-five floors up, what's most

readily visible are the remains of WTC 4. Though destroyed internally, the walls mask much of the mound behind it. Over there, at the corner of the building was Borders, where you did you first public reading from *Divided*.

Beyond, endlessly rising smoke and intermittent glimpses of a bulldozer, moving like a remote-controlled toy, surmounting a peak in the rubble then disappearing out of view. *If fifty maids with fifty mops would sweep for half a year…*

Wolfgang, as it turns out, had been documenting the progress of the clearance from his aerie, as well as from the surrounding streets. A pair of binoculars stands on his window sill.

As night falls, the illumination of the site turns ghastly and aestheticized, evoking images of *Triumph of the Will* and Norman Bel Geddes's stage design for *The Inferno.* Weirder still that, when set against these images of artificial spectacles, the real thing appears tame by comparison.

Though he says he hasn't slept well, Wolfgang seems in fine form. There are those whose spirits and even physiologies are constituted to respond to the stimulus within a terrible event, who find their energies liberated by proximity to something cataclysmic. If you ever were one of these people, the mechanism has been suppressed. Or something prevents you from enabling it. The circuit breakers get thrown before you find out whether the fuses are up to surviving the surge. Thus the sight of the rubbled terrain fails to animate you, if anything it drains you of will.

Once, long ago, after your parents had separated and you were living with your mother – probably when you were about eleven – you went to visit your father at your old home on West Broadway. You knocked but he wasn't there. So you used your key to let yourself in and discovered, once inside, that he had chopped up most of the furniture in the apartment, probably the night before, including the rocking chair in which your mother had nursed you, and, inexplicably, a reel-to-reel tape recorder given to him by one of his drinking buddies. You didn't wait for Jack to appear. Turned around and left upon surveying the scene. You remember, after the initial shock, feeling only a strange, buffered calm. Deep down, you'd known for a while that something like this might happen. But never imagined that something's precise form.

Walk toward the subway home and veer south with the idea of placing yourself as close as possible to the site you have avoided these nearly eight weeks. Crossing

Chambers Street, you bite into a blast of ruined air – the odor hits – it smells like all the other fires you've smelled in the city, but admixed with something indefinably more caustic. You press on for a block, thinking to duck into the subway entrance ahead, but it's boarded shut and standing atop the scaffold, three men who, in the uncertain light, look like hulking Niebelungen with the features of Peruvian Indians, all wielding camcorders which they train upon the steaming heap. Just ahead, an impasse of plywood hoardings demarcates the site itself.

You turn on your heels and head back toward the last open entrance you passed, but another blast of incinerated air envelops you from behind. Gaining the subway platform, the tunnel wind smells strange too, but mediated, the harshness buried beneath a kind of tinny lavender.

November 9

Bea's birthday. How she adored her view of Lower Manhattan. How once when you spoke on the telephone, she told you the fog was so thick she couldn't see the trade center towers. She felt, she said, like Ondine – marooned in the clouds.

Another time, in the '80s, your mother called in the middle of the night – her near hysterics all the more alarming for this not being her usual MO. She'd awakened suddenly to see, out her bedroom window the upper stories of the Empire State building engulfed in a globe of flame. A bomber had plowed into it once at the end of the War – surely something like this was happening again. You told her to hang on, put the phone down, ran up to the roof and looked toward the Empire State. From your angle, a jot different from hers, it was clear that no catastrophe was unfolding. Back on the line you told her what was happening and then she began to see it herself: the brilliant spill of light resolved itself into the discus edge of the moon emerging from behind the tower's mass.

Back when you were working on the book, Susan O. told you a story about how she and Sam – who must have been about four at the time – were driving through Jersey within sight the Lower Manhattan skyline. Suddenly, Sam cried out in a panic. One of the WTC towers had completely disappeared! Knowing this couldn't be true, Susan said reassuring words until their coign of vantage changed, and the hidden tower came out from behind its twin.

November 11

Post 9/11, a weird, untoward embrace of New York by the United States. Our status as City of the Other, temporarily revoked. And now New York, for its part, imagines itself home, at last, in the heartland.

• • •

For the first time today it occurs to you that there must have been numerous copies of *Divided*, perhaps hundreds of them in the WTC when it was obliterated. Some of the books belonged, no doubt, to people working in the towers who had bought them just downstairs at Borders. They'd always kept a good stock on hand. Other copies inhabited the shelves of Port Authority officials, or were owned by organizations like the World Trade Centers Association. And then there were the *Divided*s that escaped, those purchased and taken home. Someone told you once that they'd seen it for sale in the shop way up on the observation deck, among the other souvenirs.

November 12

Keep working through the *Book of Margins*. Again Jabès offers up that which you could not name, but which you grasp at in the instant as though you could hold it fast, like a thing:

Day after day, my writing has consisted in savagely weeding intruding grass and roots; then in refusing to fertilize my land by slash and burn. …Write to shake off the dust; write at the peak.

…Never have you paid particular attention to dust, yet it is the limit of time abolished.

You write one last time in the dust because you cannot free yourself of words. You still move within your limits.

…You work in the vineyards of death, but you refuse to die this early.

…Dust! Air spreads its own suffocation. Every grain in the lot has chosen its victim.

• • •

It begins to come clear that the vast majority of those who died in the trade center were casualties of a decision made a generation before to create unbroken fields of rentable space at the price of tremendous structural vulnerability. These buildings were engineered to resist the pressure of wind and violent impacts, but not the heat of a fire within.

Yet something nags and it goes on the great list of unanswerables. Questions of a certain type one cannot even ask in such an atmosphere. No history of a steel frame building collapsing from a fire before, even blazes that burned hotter and longer. Unlike the towers, WTC7 was a "traditional" steel structure, no Achilles heel at the level of floor joists. So why did that one fail?

And how to account for such incredible pulverization? Like those old novelty games: what's wrong with this picture? You were always good at spotting the anomaly, but here you have no clue. It just doesn't add up. But one thing's sure. If someone wanted war, wanted, in fact, to open up the prospect of eternal war, and usher in an era of unending fear, then those towers coming down made a lever long enough to shift the world.

• • •

Social life continues at its feverish, caffeine-driven pitch, but with a new distinction: we can scarcely bear to look at one another. Smiles more forced than before 9/11, as though a baring of teeth in "friendly" mode might effect a deeper mood shift, turn a snarl into something else – outweigh the heaviness of shame. Nothing righteous about what we're doing. Yet friendly smiles in the street. Friendly fire over there.

Are our smiles of the same or a different sort than those the song evoked back in the war to end all wars?

Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag
and smile, smile, smile…
What's the use in worrying?
It never was worthwhile…

If we can just smile insistently, relentlessly even, we might yet abolish death, and history besides and have only victories, only punchings of the air and triumphant crows

of "Yes!" There – there's the snitch fluttering its golden wings, way up above the stadium, almost black against the sun. Now soar, Harry, soar! You can do it! Win the Quidditch cup for Gryffindor!

• • •

You can beat a dead horse. And if you hit it hard enough, you may get it to bounce upright on its stiffened legs in a semblance of life. Now, how do you get it to run the Kentucky Derby?

November 15

A host of opportunities, breathtakingly missed. Peace, like the lady, vanishes.

• • •

All these years of progress and what have we got: subways with lighting that makes people of every complexion look like ash.

Behind this mask is the voice we would have to imitate… And the face of another we would have to tame.

– Gérard Macé, (Leçon de Chinois) in Jabès's …*Margins.*

Keep to your book.

– Kafka

November 19

Somewhere between a fingernail and a quarter moon rises ten degrees to the west of the WTC's filmy plume.

We feign to be roused by injustice; in fact, we are roused only by what suddenly, for a moment, disturbs the comforts we enjoy.

– Jabès, …*Margins*

The organism moves along rapidly. From a sore throat, to a stretch, to a sigh. It peers from underneath its hood, takes the sweeping of its fingertips along surfaces for granted. Brushes with those fingertips a swollen gland on its throat, sits with the toe of one sneaker pressed up against the other. Takes its hat off, tosses it in the air. Bang! – shoots into the air in triumph. Bats at piñatas. Fabricates. Cuts and eats what is fabricated by others, by the earth. Gets used to its swollen tongue. Leans in to confabulate. Compensates. Shakes its head to clear the senses. Returns from Buenos Aires. Pays the cabbie through his open window. Mistakes Korean for Chinese.

The organism shifts its weight, becomes conscious for a moment that of its breathing. It sings along to a *corredo*, feels discomfort, compassion; it sighs, stretches, takes off from La Guardia. It experiences itself as oceanic, immeasurable. Folds itself in half. Runs a tongue over the metal-edged surface of its braces. Worries a loose flap of skin. Imagines that the burden it carries belongs by right to someone else. Leaps out of the water. Feels its lungs fill with something, but can't tell what it is. Shifts its weight. Waits. You smell macadam, stretch, and see that you're the road.

November 25

An innocent plane passes outside the expected flight pattern. The turbine whines its assertion overhead. Below, we dolls wait to be blown apart. The indirect object of the terror the state directs outward is the subjugation of its own subjects.

Rejoice at the suffering we are inflicting on those others, over there. And don't for a moment empathize with them. Do not under any circumstances imagine them to be your brothers or sisters. If you fall into this error, then we will be forced to treat you as if you were them. It's for your own good that we demand your wills – the better for you to cheer us on. Or you too could find yourself in shackles, blindfolded, a gunbarrel at your temple. And in your ear someone yelling: "Where's your God now?"

• • •

Most conveniently forgotten political lesson: you don't become more intact by dismembering others.

Will the unacceptable become part of the acceptable?
The void is irrigated with blood.
– Jabès, *…Margins*

November 27

"Everything changed after September 11." Did it? Or do a myriad of incremental shifts suddenly achieve recognition in light of a generally acknowledged before and after? Where would we be without the liminal catastrophe to locate us, to permit us, like a door opened onto technicolor to recognize that we're not in Kansas any more?

Aspects of this new reality – not least the ever-shrinking number of 9/11 fatalities – certainly lends itself to projections of the fantastical. What if it turns out the three thousand never died in the pulverization of the towers? That they simply failed to appear at work on the fateful morning, and have been now tracked down by a special police unit – found living in Belize or some similar paradise?

Thanksgiving

Out to Sea Cliff for dinner with Katie's mom. Every bloody place you look, United We Stand signs, flags up the wazoo.

Gobbles America.

Goebbels's America.

God Blast America.

Our eyes are watching something, but it surely isn't God.

December 2

Pull quote for an article by Jane Smiley in the *Times Magazine:* "The pictures of Afghan women that we have been seeing in the last few days have been beautiful, moving and an unequivocal good thing." Each day, official language presses further into the territory of unmeaning. Does someone write such a sentence – its grammatical torture so evident – in full possession of their will? Can this prose represent the

thought process of a free person, speaking her own mind? Or is it, like the veiling of the face, an act of ritualized submission?

December 19 – Early Evening

Katie picks out a cravat that works with your shirt. Attempt to transition into teaching mode. Over the years you've fallen into the habit of wearing a tie when you lead Writing X, or meet with individual students. A technique you picked up from Paul who explained it to you once in terms of transference. Whatever the mechanism, it seems that this small, formal gesture on your part permits those who study with you to exercise a greater associative freedom. And to imagine that what they write matters.

Just as you realize that the thin end of your tie is too long and you'll have to reknot it, a screech of brakes from downstairs and an enormous crash. You walk into the livingroom – the best sightlines in the apartment – and look out the window, but there's nothing to see. The intersection's clear. A few cars have pulled over and double parked along the avenue, but none of them seems damaged. Here's an EMS van too – they certainly came quickly enough – but no signs of any emergency treatment in progress. A moment of cognitive dissonance. How could so violent a sonic event have produced so little visible result? You're running late so you don't spend a lot of time trying to logic it out. Plus, when you live twenty floors up, there's a sense of disconnect from ground level. However loud the bang, since it didn't shatter your windows and no further alarms followed, it might as well have happened in Timbuktu. Fuggedaboudit.

When you reach the street though, a big *Aha!* Of course you couldn't see it from your living room, the corner's masked by overhanging trees. On the sidewalk, just a few yards from the pathway to your door stood a subway entranceway – standard issue cast iron lantern poles and railings – bolted into the concrete in the era of Edward Hopper, when this was still a neighborhood of tenements.

You moved here in the early sixties when this development was brand new, and in the intervening years must have run or walked up and down the subway steps literally thousands of times, in every conceivable state of mind – once after shaking off three fellow teenagers who'd surrounded you on the platform and credibly advanced the notion of throwing you in front of a train if you didn't fork over your wallet.

Whatever dramas swirled around that corner, whether yours or others, the subway entrance remained a fixture of the scene, hardly noticed its own right, a taken-for-granted constant. Over the years, small changes: its back rail became an armature for two public telephones and an advertising poster. Most recently, color-coded globelamps replaced the classic lanterns. Nothing significant enough to alter its basic nature.

Now a large black SUV squats cattycorner atop the wreckage of poles and globes and railings, covering with its bulk the stairs that, a moment ago in the elevator, you'd previsualized walking down. There's a comic touch to the angle of the big vehicle – as though it had wanted to drive down the stairs but discovered too late it wouldn't fit in. A few passersby mill about, intrigued by this spontaneous display of public sculpture. The driver of the SUV strolls calmly round his creation, detached even, mobile phone pressed to his ear. "Ah, yeah, well, I'd be there now, but, uh, something came up…". A cab's parked just across 25th Street. The driver stands leaning against it, looking on. Saw it all, he says: the EMS van was heading west and ran the light. The SUV, zooming northbound, swerved to avoid hitting it, jumped the curb.

• • •

You return, four hours later to find the wrecked SUV vanished and the subway entrance encased in a plywood sarcophagus festooned with strips of yellow "caution" tape. A surviving column, one of four, juts out, its globe shattered. Somehow what remains of the structure heroically supports the unmarred advertisement: *WKTU 103.5 FM: The Beat of New York.*

Upstairs in time for late dinner and the 11 o'clock news: on the ninety-ninth day, the fire in the ruin has finally been put out.

THE MAN AT TABLE 4

December 20, 2001 – December 20, 2003

Who can count the dust of Jacob?

– Numbers, 20:13

1 THE SORRYASS BUSINESS

December 20, 2001 – Le G. – Midafternoon

Conversation with Tobias at the café. He mentions that Sebald was killed last week in a car crash in England – a daughter, with whom he was driving, seriously hurt. You can't help but think: why this one? Why one whose work seemed so poised for further evolution? And then: well, he pushed matters as far as he could in the time he had. Was he aware of what he was doing, how he moved the whole framing device: the idea of what may be told to whom and by whom, and under what circumstances of telling – of story and remembrance-making – into new relationships, proportions, asymmetries, units of weight and measure? And in a mode that seemed the inversion of the post-modern: seamless prose to glide over, radical disjunction beneath, so you might not notice, until it sneaks up on you, that you're more than implicated – that the subject, the subject cyclically shattered and reconstituted, is, or might be, you.

Crossing 25th Street toward home, you notice the johnny pump that got knocked over the night an SUV jumped the curb and plowed into the subway entrance late last year still lies on the sidewalk nearby. It's ridiculous, of course, but your imagination projects the fireplug as a wounded creature, immobile, helplessly mourning the smashed railings and lantern posts of its dead companion. Then the civic order freak in you – the gremlin that lurks inside every New Yorker – kicks in: *just wait, someone will trip over it in the dark and break their neck and there's another lawsuit!* You even give a passing thought to dragging the hydrant over to the edge of the curb to minimize the obstruction, but again, like a New Yorker, leave the job to someone else. Apparently a knocked-over johnny pump constitutes debris of a different order than a wrecked subway entrance and therefore gets hauled away by another department, which hasn't gotten round to it yet.

• • •

"What is Sexy in the Wake of September 11?"
– headline in *The Onion*

• • •

You set up the electric trains of your youth in a circle around the fiberboard case for your steel drum which, covered in a white cloth, serves as a base for the Christmas tree. The whole process, even of steel-wooling the rust off the tracks and then connecting them is of much delight to G. She adjusts the position of the searchlight mounted on the flatcar so that it shines up on an angle and its rays glance off the ornaments as the train goes round – the effect particularly striking when you turn the room lights off. And with wooden blocks, you've build a series of arches over the tracks for the train to pass through.

December 21

Someone, perhaps the water department, perhaps an artifact-hunter with a strong back and a van, has taken away the johnny pump that lay at the boarded-up subway entrance.

December 24

Deck the halls. G'wan, deck 'em.

2002

January 9

Big surprise of the Goddard residency thusfar. There's always at least one. And not always pleasant. As you trudged wearily toward your dorm for a nap before dinner in a too-early dusk, you made out shape of one of your students approaching on the only-room-for-one path trodden through the calf-high snow. When you got close enough, you saw her face flushed with excitement beneath her wool hat. Normally undemonstrative, she enfolded you in a hug and delivered the news that her graduating class has voted you commencement speaker in July. So knackered from a daysworth of teaching, you acknowledged the honor in a perfunctory kind of way and the two of you maneuvered around one another to continue on your opposite trajectories. But as you reached the dorm's slippery porch, you caught an unbidden lump rising up in your throat. Your reserve shot. Eyes filled. Took some breaths since tears freeze on the cheeks in weather like this. Phoned Katie and Gwen. They're happy at the news, though they really can't imagine – how could they? – what this means to you.

January 12

Back from the Northeast Kingdom you begin reading William Carlos Williams's *In the American Grain*. The volume nearly leaped off the shelf into your hands at Rivendell Books, Montpelier's wonderful second hand bookstore where you invariably find what you've been searching for, whether you knew it or not. A semi-crumbling New Directions paperback from 1956 with an incredible b/w photo on the cover: what turns out to be WCW's open hand, palm up, as though about to receive some offering. First published in 1925 in what can only be called a hog time for the nation. Which makes his excoriating tone, his enraged poetics of history all the more immediate. You have to read each piece several times, first to adapt to the key and cadence. Adamant Puritan hearts of stone and literalist "reason." The wages of which we're paying even

now. No wonder this book was deep-sixed for all those years to breach again during McCarthy's reign. No wonder it's sunk so out of hearing again.

How does arrogance come into the world?

• • •

Osama bin Enron.

January 15 – Le G. – Early Morning

German-Jewish Steve has brought his Mercedes into Manhattan for a tune up. Sits next to you at Table 5. Always bemused, ever detached. Or so he seems. Today offers up the nugget that Bismarck had declared a special provenance for fools, drunks and the U.S. of A.

• • •

Four stages of Medieval drunkenness corresponding to the humors:

Lion drunk: choleric, hot and dry; fire. *Ape drunk*: sanguine, hot and moist; air. *Mutton-drunk*: phlegmatic, cold and moist; water. *Swine drunk*: melancholic, cold and dry; earth.

• • •

Word: overload of nothing. Jabès, *Book of Margins*, p. 166.

January 16 – Early Morning

A new postcard graces the bathroom racks at Le Gamin: "Even Heroes Need To Talk." White on a baby blue background. On the reverse, a toll-free number for "when you do" (1-800-LIFENET) coupled with the bracing motto: *New York Needs Us Strong.* Thus September 11 has delivered the talking cure its ultimate victory via the good offices of the New York City Health Department <nyc.gov/health> and a mystery

entity, Project Liberty, whose exhortation, in tiny type beneath its logo reads: "Feel Free to Feel Better." How many slogans can you fit on a four by six inch card?

Exit the WC and turn toward the magazine rack. On the cover of the *NY Post* a familiar face you can't immediately recognize, surmounted by the headline "Ring of Love." Read the finer print. The smiling, middle aged blonde woman with pink-cheeks turns out to be your old client Berry Berenson. She died when her plane hit one of the towers, and her ring, a strange trinket ornamented with a kind of cross, was apparently identified by a friend who'd spotted it in a photograph of excavated mementoes published in a previous edition of Hamilton's barrel organ. No report on the condition of the ring bearer, whether dust or something that a sieve would catch.

You knew nothing of Berry's life these past thirty years. Weren't even aware that she'd married Anthony Perkins, and was widowed by him. But back in the grim post-movement days, you, Danny of the Joe Stalin moustache and the occasional Vince had renovated her living loft cum photo studio, installed pulleys to hoist her rolls of seamless paper, and stenciled huge lipstick kisses on the white-painted bricks of her bathroom.

Berry had been a dream to work for. Cooperative, no attitude, paid on time, loved to collaborate on design ideas, then left you free to do your work. And she turned you on to her rolodex of fast and fashionable friends who discovered that having their painting and plastering done by an ex-heavy revolutionary without portfolio lent the enterprise a kind of unspoken panache, or as the phrase went: radical chic. You and Danny and Vince were one jump from being street people in those days, and the Superstars and rich hippies liked to have you around, gussying up their pads and making the rough plain, bringing light to the gathering darkness. There must have been something about you that felt *echt* – just as the culture was kicking its feet at the top of the great commodity slide. Though relentlessly apolitical, they could look at you and recognize a possible self, one that had ascended to unimaginable heights – had in fact been to the mountaintop – then plunged back into the valley, intact enough still to embody the tale.

And it came to you, looking at her life-sized ink-on-newsprint face, a generation aged, that if you had permitted yourself to back then, you might have been attracted to

Berry, might even have had a crush on her. Anthony Perkins? OK. You kind of get it. But not really.

January 17

Well into the month of Janus – god protector of doors and gateways. He begins as an emissary of light, opens the sky at daybreak and closes it at night, eventually evolves into a general-purpose deity of beginnings and endings, entrances and exits, depicted as looking both toward the past and future. It is this double faced image of him that appears on Roman coins. A temple to Janus was built near the forum in Rome. According to legend, the temple doors were kept open in wartime and locked only in times of peace – only four times from the earliest kings until the reign of Augustus.

Now he rules over the end of one year and the beginning of another. And then there are Janitors – persons who once presided over comings and goings.

You're so out of time, that despite the date, it takes you this long to realize it's January, and that whoever it was destroyed the towers blew our doors off.

• • •

Pane e cioccolato. Meet W. for afternoon coffee. It is only with him and a few others that you can share astonishment and nausea over the degradations of the moment, which pile up like the snow we so infrequently get here any more. You talk about Baudrillard's *L'espirit du terrorism* – his placid, measured, refusal to be pulled into an ideological game.

W. says that a *Der Spiegel* report on Mohammad Atta, a.k.a. "the Hamburg Terrorist," referred to him and the other September 11 hijackers as "murderers." W. wrote the editor requesting the name of the court they'd been convicted in. Of course he has received no reply.

• • •

Amazing that you didn't write this down before. Back in November last year, Katie opened the Visa bill and found this astronomical charge from your ISP for hosting

your trade center website. She panicked and called you at Le G. *Surely it's a mistake* you reassured her, *they probably added some zeroes by accident.* But no, the charges were real. Between September 11 and the month's end, over three hundred fifty thousand visitors had clicked seven million times through the pages of the *Living Archive of New York's WTC*, begun two years ago and forgotten, until….

Calm in the face of a $10,000 claim – supremely so since there was no way you could pay it, you began to negotiate a lesser fee with your webhost and found to your surprise that without much ado, they dropped the charges altogether. Your site wasn't, after all, a profit-making venture, and the inclination toward spontaneous generosity still hung in the air. You also learned how to log in and monitor the visits, saw for yourself, in bar graph form, the virtual seismology of the "event": flat, flat, flat, then an enormous tower of hits. A small step down for October and a gradual descent to a new, much higher plateau. Still running at a rate of several thousand visits per day, whereas before 9/11, you got maybe a thousand a month.

The numbers contain a kind of brute evidence. But of what? You'd love to know what passes through the minds of the clickers. No gauges for that.

January 18

Spent the morning trying to unlock a frozen heart. Looked at kilims yesterday and other gorgeously patterned carpets – contemporary ones that have the feel of wool mixed with silk. Now to work. Run your hand over the cover Katie made for your iBook. Rough fabric, like a tapestry. A frontier scene – a town with a saloon, a corral and cowboys riding broncos and unexpectedly lush deciduous trees. Find a way to weave yourself in.

• • •

The target is not Osama bin Laden. That is a projection. There is, inside us all, a little fellow with a musket, standing on a high peak, looking out trying to reconcile with the infinite. When that little fellow is bombed off his mountaintop, and comes down into the valley to sit on a couch and watch TV, the war will be won.

• • •

Infinite hate for the infinite.

• • •

Want to be the Bodhisattva of the Last Train Out.

• • •

How to see without going mad?

January 19

Twins, twins, twins. Iroquois beadwork at the Museum of the American Indian. Here Skywoman walks the Great Turtle's back, her movement expressed in paired, curved, scrolling lines. When these lines face in opposite directions, they suggest the duality of twins, and the struggle of life to achieve a balance – to negotiate a path between opposing forces. On one beaded bag (Seneca?) around 1830, two male figures joined at the hip: Skyholder and Flint, twins sons of Skywoman's daughter. In certain tellings, the brothers are of two, quite opposite minds. As Skyholder walks the earth he creates life-sustaining plants and animals. Flint sows poisonous versions of all good things.

Up at the Met, a Bifacial Head from Easter Island. Two human faces made of painted barkcloth over a wooden frame dating from the 1840s. Joined back-to-back, the faces are about half life-sized, and are said to depict Rau-hiva-aringa-erua ("Twin Two-Faces"), a legendary warrior and son of a chief. Oral tradition has it that during a battle, Rau-hiva-aringa-erua's rear face saw an enemy approaching and asked the front face to turn around and look. The front face refused and began arguing with the rear face. Both ignored the enemy, who seized the opportunity to go in for the kill.

January 20 – Central Park – Late Morning

Snowed last night, though less than predicted, as often seems the case of late. Generally the dire warnings of Huracán and flood manifest as garden-variety overcasts, sunshowers, or straight-up blue sky days. Nonetheless, enough white stuff came down to justify taking Gwen and her friend Daphne – who strangers usually imagine as twin sisters – up to Central Park to see what could be done with Katie's childhood Flexible Flyer brought in recently from the house in Sea Cliff, its rusty blades cursorily steel-wooled to a semblance of sheen.

So much for intentions. New York evermore resembles Maine in that you can't get there from here. Had to take the downtown train to change for the uptown, then got off at 59th Street because all the uptown trains were going express to 145th Street. It would have been nearly as easy to go to Van Cortland park where they have some real hills, or the ferry to Staten Island if they'd open up the Fresh Kills landfill to winter sports.

At Columbus Circle, snowcapped, its steelwork shrouded, New York's newest twin-towered folly riseth apace. The name Time Warner itself sounds like a B-movie victim's dying gasp: *No time – warn her!* And what to make of the acronym AOL? *Absence Of Liberty. Almost Outa Luck*. From which it's no great associative leap to AWOL: *America Without Legitimacy. A Wealth Of Lack. A Waste Of Lucre. A Wash Of Lacrimae*. Here comes the AOL Time Warner Center like a bat out of hell, someone gets in our way, someone don't feel so well – a creature that, like the WTC used to, projects plenty of aggression, but knows no hint of playfulness, nor irony.

Yet these towers appear less as direct descendants of the trade center than a bizarre mutation of the older race of residential twins that processes up along Central Park West: The San Remo, The Century, The Majestic, The El Dorado, The Beresford – standard-bearers from the glory days of the ultra-swank Manhattan apartment.

If you were to ride an elevator up to the topmost I-beam on a clear day, could you see, as Steinberg did for his famous *New Yorker* cover, over the foothill Rockies and all the way to Hollywood? Look south. How shrunk to dwarf scale the derelict slab of the Huntington Hartford gallery – evermore precariously holding down the circle's six o'clock. How like an ancient ancestor it seems, set next to these massive newcomers.

Perhaps it's the skeletal look of the Park in the midwinter light, but the city is beginning to feel more like an animal, or if not precisely an animal, than some sort of

animate organism, and we who burrow and navigate its hide, or climb it's promontories constitute its resident flea circus.

These days, one never knows which parts of the Park will be fenced off, allegedly for the protection of some fragile seedlings, or the delineation of a lawn to be admired from afar but not trodden on. Walking there feels more and more like negotiating a labyrinth than rambling across a variegated landscape. Everywhere one is guided, lest one stray. But amazingly enough, Cedar Hill remains open to sledding. And ringing the treetrunks, bales of hay, just in case. Not like in your day, when kids would regularly plow into the trees, then complete the adventure with a quick trip to Flower Fifth Avenue Hospital – now a palatial warren of condominiums. But the hay is a lovely, elegant solution – a safety measure that smacks of good fun, of the country come to town.

Almost everyone – and there's a horde of us – sails down the slope on a plastic vehicle, but there are a few vintage sleds in the crowd, and they perform wondrous well, for they can steer and go great distances if you're lying flat on your stomach. G. & Daphne are the ultimate size age for this. Nine – the charmed moment before the onset of the great disconcertion. Plus the sled fits them to a tee, and they insist on shooting down together, over and again, a dozen times or more – one in front steering, the other holding fast to the steerer. Then they get more aerodynamic, take turns lying down on top of one another, their little human sandwich flying fast and long, jouncing over the hump of the snowcovered path, sliding partway up the gentler slope on the far side. There's just enough ground coverage to make it work. This is the day for sledding. Good thing you didn't wait until tomorrow, Martin Luther King Day, though the kids are off from school. By then, given the traffic and the thaw, this slope will be mostly muddy grass. Sky as clear and blue as the day of the trade center planes. Vapor trails crossing one another to the north in an arching diaphanous X. Gwen & Daphne profess to be vastly thirsty, take a break to scrape snow of the fir branches and eat it out of their mittened hands. Then zoom down again.

At the summit of the hill, a gaggle of parents and extended family members give and receive snowballs, romp with dogs, build snowmen. But for the chirping of cell phones this could be a generation past. The moms behave like moms, circumspect and optimistic, light yet solid. The dads act bluff and physical, sliding with their sons,

competing with their adult buddies, pausing now and again to check their watches so as not to miss the game. Anyone here but white people? Ah, there's a black man, a white woman and their daughter, who's verging on teenage. "Give me a good push," she says like a proper princess, and dad complies. Down she goes, sitting erect, not holding on, hands elevated slightly. Dad tracks with his camcorder. Amazingly, she rides it out. How long will we be allowed to pretend that race is a dead letter?

Just enough snow to cover the ground. Hay bales, just in case. A hilltop full of upper east side weekend *far niente*. Almost as if never.

• • •

Has your writing changed much since you began these notes? It's likely that it has. At first you narrated from a place of isolation, of internal exile. Observed without much feeling. Which made sense because like most folks, you would rather feel less of everything than more pain. And then too, nothing big seemed at stake. So you laid down a series of dots without investing much in how they might connect. Beneath your city's clamor, its stasis was palpable, its pacification, its sickly complacency. Bluntly put, the city had become an indifferent lover, a partner always looking past you as you danced, fascinated by its own slick moves, too hip for history. Now it vibrates from within, begins to shudder. Reveals a pulse with a deeper energy. It is coming active with its fear. Does it start to learn that there's more to the meal than eating? There's the digesting too. Let them eat flags.

• • •

It's a paradox, and an unholy one at that. There isn't a lot you wouldn't give – up to and including your own existence – to have the people who died when the WTC was hit come back to life. As much as you love G. & K., as little as you want to stop this adventure of the senses midway through, you're pretty certain you would strike such a deal, if there were anyone or anything to bargain with. Yet for all that, you still believe the trade towers were an awful thing – like knives stuck in the side of the city – and you're glad they're gone.

January 21

This is the Y train to 403rd Street.

• • •

Do questions and answers not come out of a mad desire to know ourselves, a relentless determination to knock down the walls around us in the hope finally to win out over silence – as if we could, with our voices alone, fill the abyss? Jabès, *Book of Margins*, p. 187.

January 22

The exhibition "A New World Trade Center" at the Max Protetch Gallery. Approaching from the east, you cross Tenth Avenue and then under the rusting elevated High Line, passing a minimalist tea room. Opening the gallery door you emigrate from the embodied De Chirico of the street into the white order of Gallery World. Directly facing you as you enter is a series of large photographs of the WTC: scale models and actual buildings, interspersed so it's hard to tell which is which unless you look closely. Balthazaar Korab took them between 1966 and 1978. Taken in '66, the same year as demolitions on the site began, one image, an angle from above, shows Yamasaki full figure and wearing a suit. Framed by his towers, he looks down toward the plaza and smiles. The plywood on which Yamasaki stands would be the Hudson River. His feet straddle one of several piers, projecting out from the shoreline. Rendered with simple, cosmetic perfection, the docks the trade center landfill buried are miraculously preserved in wood and plaster. No ships.

The exhibit itself – what a horror show. The proposals as a whole present a mixed bag of aesthetic capitulations. Only one possesses real vitality: Eytan Kaufman's scheme for a pedestrian bridge from the World Financial Center to Jersey City – two strands of walkway bowing into one at the center – connected to a World Citizen's Center on the old WTC footprint. Referencing the Ponte Vecchio, the bridge serves as a platform for a mix of commercial and residential structures.

What most of the programs reveal, in their relentless insistence on new construction, is how badly the whole area needs building down. Is it possible to hold the images of people leaping to their deaths, and the collapse of the towers in a kind of sovereign, protected emotional space while considering the possibility that we ought to continue the unbuilding until we arrive at a Lower Manhattan we can reclaim as habitable ground – as a fit place for the living and the dead?

That said, if you can stomach the stentorian pretensions, the barely disguised grandiosity, the unseemly presumptions of projecting, before even a breath can be drawn *what should be done,* you'll return and study the proposals again.

Just before you leave, take a copy of the show's promotional postcard. Another image by Balthazaar Korab. Again Minoru Yamasaki framed by a large model of his towers. But this time we look up at him as he stands on a metal construction ladder, leans against its railing, fingers lightly clasped before him. Again he looks down at the plaza. His weight rests on his right leg, while his left foot is placed on the rung above – the summit of the ladder. He has been recorded in the act of climbing to the top, pausing to contemplate what lies below.

January 23

Around 9 o'clock the evening of the day the trade towers fell, G. got up on the stepladder that stands beneath your kitchen window. She rested her arms against the sill and looked out over the city to the south. You turned off the lights and she stared toward the plume of dust and smoke and said: "I'm beginning to see the new view."

Today, reaching and pulling and sliding on the Nordic Track, you look toward the V of buildings that gesture toward the spot where the towers stood. Now it is possible to see what was hiding behind them all these years: the trapezoidal forty-something-story black slab of the former Bankers Trust Plaza, now Deutche Bank and abandoned – damaged beyond reclamation. The upper part of the building's north face has become a backdrop for a huge American flag, perhaps a hundred and fifty wide by seventy five feet high, dead center above the nadir of the V. Slightly higher than the flag from this perspective, and to its right, another symbol vies for dominance on the skyline: the pinkish red neon umbrella that day or night announces the presence of the Traveler's Insurance building, as though its height and mass were somehow inadequate

to the task of communicating a presence. The Traveler's tower defines the westward margin of the Lower Manhattan V. Forming the eastern slope of the wedge is Liberty Plaza, a black slab Zeckendorf (père) monstrosity, designed for, but never occupied by US Steel.

Just north of Liberty Plaza, and ten or so stories shorter than its neighbor, a slender tower, the Millennium Hotel. Both these structures were, astonishingly, spared in the massive implosion just across Church Street at "Ground Zero." From your twentieth story aerie, three miles to the northwest, the formal relationship between Liberty Plaza and the hotel is such that under certain conditions, the light reflecting off the western face of the Millennium creates a weird optical illusion. The hotel tower ceases to read as a building at all, and appears rather as a void space cut through Liberty Plaza's tenebrous mass – the whole effect weirdly reminiscent of the hollowed-out Arc de la Défense in Paris.

Gwen, for her part, is less preoccupied with sightlines. At one point during post-9/11 media frenzy, you mentioned to a reporter her observation on "the new view." Published somewhere or other, a professor at a midwestern University was so struck by the remark, he emailed to ask if he could quote it. You consulted Gwen on the matter. Would this be OK with her? Sure, she said, but she wanted to elaborate – to make sure that it wasn't just the cityscape she was talking about. What she'd meant went deeper. "After the smoke cleared, that would be our future. And I couldn't have reached my hand out and said 'stop,' because the world went on."

• • •

What counts is being able to maintain or even widen the field of words in order to allow them to be forever reborn in their daring. Jabès, *Book of Margins*, p. 197.

• • •

Through terrorism the extreme duality transmogrifies into singularity. Enormous economy. Astronomical cost.

• • •

True ventriloquism is achieved at the point where the dummy believes it's doing the talking.

• • •

Proverbs written into the mind of Ponce de Léon:

Por donde va la mar
Where the ocean goes
Vayan las arenas
The sand should follow

A carne de lobo
For wolves' flesh
Diente de perro
Dog's teeth are needed
– WCW, *…American Grain*, p. 43.

January 24 – Le G. – Early Morning

The world is full of forced smiles, manufactured just in case. The world revels in false pleasures, manufactured just in time. The world is full of actualities so vivid that you've grown an entirely new part of your brain, a small bilateral peanut that triggers an avalanche of narcotic gloss which coats it all in simulation. The world is full of agonies, real and imagined, but it overflows in adaptations.

Mark and Bruce enter, assume their parallel stations at tables 10 and 11, open their (nearly) twin laptops. Passing by on your way to the loo, you fall into conversation and Mark lets go a quip so fluidly epigrammatic you write down at once: *'Tis no drama but in the doing*.

January 26

Osama Bin Aladdin: "Collapse sesame!"

January 27

When you stepped into the elevator this morning, your nostrils were assaulted by a truly vile scent. You could only think of a virulent fart. But the smell lingered, and though the noisesomeness of it carried a different quality, you couldn't help but remember an incident in the same elevator nearly forty years ago when these buildings were still raw and young. Then, you'd gotten on with Bea, she on her way to work and you to school, accompanied by a neighbor from your floor, a tiny woman named Mrs. Fishbien. The reek hit first and then your three pairs of astonished eyes, beheld the button panel caked in semi-solid shit. You immediately flew to the intellect, wondering who had plastered it there and why – and even tried to imagine what sort of container they had carried it in, and how it seemed far more crap than any one person could generate in one go, but Mrs. Fishbien, who had a good sixty years on your thirteen, had a quite different reaction. Nearly collapsing against the farthest wall, she clapped her hand over her mouth and nose, and half moaned, half screamed: "Oy! Human dirt!" Your mother's face grew pale, but she remained stoic.

None of you attempted to push the Ground button, but Ground is where the elevator defaults to if another floor's not pressed, so you rode down and on the path outside the building met Steve, the security guard and told him what had happened, and when you got home from school the mess was gone, and nothing like it ever occurred again, at least not in your building. But the event's singularity, and the anonymous virulence of the gesture impressed you powerfully. Someone *out there* had come inside, full of hate for your building – your brand new building – and by extension, for you. Someone was angry in a way you weren't familiar with at all, quite unlike your father's spontaneous rages, and this someone had chosen for private and undisclosed reasons to attack your elevator in this particular way in their own inscrutable moment. Put crudely, the shit was warm, but the blood was cold. Yet there was something very direct and economical about what had been done – an eloquent act, which no amount of speculation as to motive could ameliorate or contain. But there was no way to avoid connecting this act, however impersonal, with your own presence in that place and moment, and circumstances.

It took years before you found yourself studying slum clearance, by which time the name Robert Moses meant something entirely different to you than when you were a kid, dimly aware of him as a distant, mythic figure. You don't remember telling yourself any sort of story back then, in 1962 when you moved in, about how your building had gotten there – you were just so relieved to not be living in the East Village any more and in awe at the luxury of having your own, huge, sleek, smoothly plastered modern room in which to be an American Boy. You were, in fact, the first person to live the space bounded by those four walls. No history, apart from the fugitive ones of the builders. And you spent uncounted hours gazing out your wide window over the low-rise valley toward the mountains of Lower Manhattan.

So when as an adult, you came by the knowledge that a whole perfectly useful neighborhood had been bulldozed to make possible your eagle's lair, you gained a tantalizing thread of causality to cling to: a fine line drawn between displacement and the angry flinging of a bucket or a basinful of shit. But like a tug on a fishing line that lets you know they're biting, this tantalizing almost-knowledge gets reeled back in with the worm gone, as though there'd never been any bait on the hook at all.

January 31 – Le G. – Early Morning

There are days when, on your brisk walk to the café, your mind races ahead of you physically, arrives before you, wants to explode on the page. Deborah comes over to ask what you want. On the tip of your tongue, an order for a "verb omelets."

• • •

Look up from work. A group of five retarded young men from the Chelsea Residence walk past the café. The tallest wears a knit hat appliquéd with an FBI logo. You burst out laughing, nearly spew your café au lait. From her post near the register, Deborah looks over to see if you're alright, and you nod that you're fine, if a little abashed. Some jokes only live an instant – can never be told.

As Bea used to say, off the old radio show, "T'aint funny McGee."

• • •

9:30 p.m.: a Columbia architecture prof calls. She's organizing a conference there on the World Trade Center. Wants to know if you'd participate in a panel tomorrow afternoon. She is mortified that, despite having assigned *Divided…* for her course in the Politics of Space and knowing of its induction into the classics section of the Avery Library, you were "somehow" left off the roster of invited participants. Embarrassed too that what got her off the dime was a call from Marshall B. to the effect that you would almost certainly want to participate if asked and that your exclusion would be unconscionable. She offers you a ten minute slot in an already crowded panel that includes not one critical voice, but features a slide show of the WTC's construction and nostalgic reminiscences.

You respectfully decline. The timing of the panel conflicts with a writing tutorial for a student who travels two and a half hours every three weeks to meet with you. The professor sounds relieved, and you wonder why. It is only after you say goodnight and put the receiver back in its cradle that you realize what an embarrassment you must be to those who are now in charge of creating a post-mortem discourse around the WTC. If you were to appear physically among them, how much more difficult it would be to pretend that they had cared a whit about the WTC, or thought, even for a New York second about what those buildings meant, before they came crashing down.

• • •

Promise the weak strength and have the strength of a thousand weak at your bidding. WCW, "Red Eric," *In The American Grain*.

February 1

You try to imagine what it would be like to have written the cultural history of the buildings whose destruction served as the flashpoint for… you can't imagine.

Yet it is so immediately forgotten, and now too, just a few weeks ago – you don't even recall how many, perhaps three, perhaps six – the airplane bound from Kennedy and full of Dominicans fell out of the sky. First the engine landed on the apron of a gas station, then the rest crashed into some houses in Queens on a morning just as

crystalline as the day the towers fell. And before the fire was even put out, came the word that this calamity was accident pure and simple – not terrorism – and not a word since about the cause.

In The American Grain. Speaking through Cotton Mather's mouth, William Carlos Williams says: "We make no right use of our disasters."

It was in John Sanford's published correspondence with Williams that you first heard of *…Grain*. Sanford says he read it once and that was enough, the influence was so profound.

True enough, Sanford appropriated Williams's tonality and many of the particulars of Columbus's fictive voyage log – the foundation of all future American deception – straight out of *…Grain* and plunked it down in *People From Heaven*. Plagiarism? Close to, but the contexts are so different that they read as essentially distinct texts. And Sanford cranked up the Discoverer's mendacity and cynicism more than one notch.

February 4

Discovery in your book of a journal entry from a year past:

> Since *Divided We Stand* is unlikely to be given its due in my lifetime, I must content myself with recognizing the fruits of my labors as they manifest anonymously, or under others' bylines – as the narrative of the almost twin towers unfolds.
>
> Who knows? I tipped the reporter from Bloomberg to the issue of the WTC's unretired bonds and here it emerges, or rather pokes its nose above the surface for an instant in today's *NYT* at the top of page B4:
>
> "Because the building was financed with PA bonds, which place restrictions on any sale, Vornado could not buy the complex. But the deal would effectively give the publicly traded company full control of the 110-story twin towers…".
>
> The article goes on to synopsize my book as background without deigning to mention it by name, then cites the author of the "other" WTC book as an authority on the towers' history. But those sentences, however

glossable-over, about the bonds, and the restrictions on outright sale *are* there in ink on newsprint. Slowly, slowly the cat claws its way out of the bag.

February 5

Up betimes and took yourself by train downtown, lighting at Park Place where you went the rest of the way by shanksmare across City Hall Park to the R.DOT (Rebuild Downtown Our Town) meeting at Pace University. There discours'd (Bev Willis, Susan Szenazy and Liz Abzug having invited you) upon the origins of the World Trade Center before a gathering which treated yourself in the most respectful manner, of which you felt most glad. Coming up to greet you afterwards, a tall man, whom you no wise recognized, but he gave you wonder at the news that in Riyadh, in Felix Arabia where once he worked, there were built by Yamasaki some time in the '70s, twin towers on the general plan of the trade center, but smaller, to house the Saudi Monetary Fund, and this we both did marvel at withal.

Met also there an architect who has writ an article upon the connection between Yamasaki and the Bin Laden family, and Yama's use, so she says, of Islamic motifs which did inflame some already extreme believers to acts of violence – against the trade center especially. Yet she noted not why they would for this reason also despise the Pentagon.

This Laurie Kerr did also say that the towers collapsed at the speed of gravity, offering no resistance from within. Whether this is true or no, you cannot say, yet when she said it, you did see in your mind's eye, the great buildings as though being dropped from the hand of a mile-high Galileo – though it is recorded that he loosed instead a cannonball and a sack of feathers. And moreover came the image of a man leaping from the window of a tower at the moment they gave way, and him descending at the same speed as his fellow man who stayed within, and how traveling separately, yet at the same speed, they might meet the earth together – such are the rare physics of our age.

• • •

Get off the subway at your home stop and there in front of you, plastered over a smiling face on a poster, a white adhesive label, two inch by threeish, imprinted:

EVERYTHING IS FINE.
The Constitution is not under attack.
The President is not a thief.
Keep enjoying those delicious all beef McDonalds
hamburgers made of cow lips and anus.

February 8

At what point do we collectively acknowledge the culture-changing crash – the return from the stratosphere to the springy, but undeniable soil? Or have we achieved Neverland?

You begin to suspect that the unprecedented economic and military power which emanated from the US, and now proliferates far beyond its origins has rendered social life in the West incapable of recognizing the actuality of a crash, no matter how catastrophic. If overnight such a wind blew through that not a stone were left standing among us – as a result of a million suicide bombers, or some equally great destructive wave – you are convinced that dawn's light shining upon the ruins would be broadly interpreted as yet another great triumph of freedom, democracy, market forces working their through to the next best possible world.

Yesterday, a *NY Post* financial columnist estimated that the JP Morgan-Chase exposure in derivatives stands at $29 trillion. Is that possible? Did you mishear it? Aside from the raw inconceivability of this figure, there is the issue of it amounting to three times the domestic product. There is no perfect analogy here, but one senses we have entered an era in which a fleet of Titanics, sinking by the dozen, would only spur us to greater, more scale-free feats of ship building.

Another possibility is that when and if the actuality of a crash forces itself on our awarenesses, given the degree of our "exposure," we will prove inconsolable for generations – perhaps permanently incapable of imagining flight.

February 12

The very words you use suck you down to someplace deep. Emerging, you always sense the tug back into the depths. And the sick feeling of returning to the surface where you no longer belong. Remember when you were a creature of the air?

Not long ago there was a time when you'd get high by writing.

February 13

A milder winter that usual, or at any rate the remembered last. But it's still winter and some of us are not dressed for the winter. White fella in baggy shorts on a cell phone walking down Eighth. Why not?

Overnight Elena's poem, with which she won "The Arts Respond to 9-11" competition – has gone up postersized on all the neighborhood hoardings: black and white and red all over. Magnificent. Sticks to yet leaps off the tired walls – bare type offering itself ungussied. Machined-down language stands, for the time it takes to read, on two feet.

HOW THE LURKING

We are ill-
prepared for the unfamiliar. Not
ready for the family dog
to be poisoned. Hit
by a car. Gone missing
under mysterious circumstances.
Goldfish belly up. Painted
turtle too lost but radiant

A tear in the porch-screen door, well.

Catastrophe teaches early
how inelastic the membrane. Fraught
with. How one small rip
pulls the suck of all

from the royal and groaning earth.

• • •

Somewhere down in the pit, pockets of fire still burning. Crews close in on what the *Post* refers to as a "trove" of bodies.

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Met, last night, with the Pratt design intensive group, invited by Stephan to discuss the Ground Zero museum-memorial they've taken as a group thesis project. *Where to begin?* they asked, all fifteen-odd of them. Begin with a crystalline blue sky. Begin with a color and a quality. Then release the stone toward the pool.

What characterizes the "clean-up"? Immediate erasure. Move this scrap to this heap. This fragment to another. Scatter the evidence. Subvert the forensics. Don't above all calculate what went into the air – what substances still possess the air. Don't read the chemistry of the liquids that runs out the sewer lines and into the Hudson from the great hosing down. Pulverize the dismemberment. Dice fine the already chopped. Atomize, *semper* atomize. Silence the ruins before they can speak. The ruins we hardly learned to know.

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Hundreds of millions of monarch butterflies die in a freak frost in central Mexico. They rain out of the trees, their collective wingspreads deep and wide enough to carpet the Bathtub's bottom, whenever the diggers reach it. If only the mariposas were here, not there. Should we bring them north in a shrouded train for burial by the Hudson?

February 19 – Columbus Circle – Morning

Where Robert Moses's Coliseum once stood, The Time Warner Center, a.k.a. One Central Park rears up, its monstrous, tortured gridwork of beams absolutely dwarfing Columbus stuck up on his column marooned like a flagpole sitter left over from the

thirties. Behind Columbus's back and set in the awkward wedge of greenery at the south end of the Trump International Hotel and Tower, stands a chrome-plated globe, roughly thirty feet in diameter, planted on a pedestal. In this morning's late winter sun, the globe, with its jagged-edged continents overlaying a gridwork of longitudes, resembles nothing so much as a kindergarten project ("OK kids, we're going to make a model of the world out of tinfoil") gone absurdly out of hand. True, the flashy metal served to distract the eye, but for little more than an instant amidst this hodgepodge of urban mixed signals: the gilded, overwrought memorial remembering the Maine, the funky old Huntington Hartford building, traffic islands, radiating arteries and beckoning parkland. Now, Trump's globe has shrunk still further – it looks no bigger than a cat toy when set against the vast backdrop of the AOL Time Warner Center as the towers extrude from their massive, asymmetrical plinth. Thus dwarfed, the silvery earth seems less a planet than an unhappy moon, knocked out of orbit, isolated in an alien landscape that can never be home.

Across Broadway, the city's latest twins are not billed as anything so modest as a nexus of world trade. Bold type bannered across the scaffolding announces the coming "Center of Everything." Unlike the oddly passive quality of the WTC's aggression, the Everything towers present all acute angles and fractal edges undergirded by a heavy-duty steel cage – trusses and buttresses abound. No ticky-tacky bar joists hold up slab floorplates – this puppy is massively overbuilt. Though their designers could not have anticipated September 11, the violent *feng shui* of the AOL twins fairly taunts passing jetliners to make their day. These two-billion dollar babies won't just kill planes, they'll castrate 'em.

From within the matrix of steelwork draped with immense American flags, a repetitive infernal clanging. Soon – you don't know when but it's bound to happen – the anvil chorus will shift location across Eighth Avenue to the very base of the roundabout and modulate from sounds of construction to those of demolition. They'll be taking down the Huntington Hartford building, even now encased in a matrix of scaffolding. Built in the early sixties as a gallery to house Hartford's collection, then taken over by the city's Department of Cultural Affairs and now abandoned, Edward Durell Stone's strange caprice, the silliest, most endearing slab building ever designed,

still holds fast – for now. Bits of its masonry, unattended, freefall into the netting over the scaffolded walkway below.

How many more days? All at once you hear, close at hand, a sardonic laugh, No, it's a horse neighing – you see it pass, at full trot, lip curled, pulling its carriage, empty of the customers whose heads you imagine might press close together, framed in the canopy's heartshaped rear window – like the irising down of a silent film. The sound of another set of hoofs, and a second horse, a dappled gray, follows just behind, the driver, sitting stiff as the whip he holds vertically, muffled against the cold breeze. Then another horse cab appears and another, a half dozen or more – a cavalcade – rounding the corner of Eighth Avenue, clip-clopping east along 59th Street. For a moment your mind tricks you into believing the city's slipped back a century and change and these beasts have trotted north from Longacre Square. Where do they stable the carriage horses now? A few years ago you saw some stables way over in the far west lower fifties, not far from where the aircraft carrier lies berthed in concrete. But which street exactly? Somebody knows. Not you.

Glance at your watch. Almost ten. Within a few moments, these animals and their drivers will assume their stations at the hackney stand between the gilded Sherman memorial and the Plaza fountain, and stretches west across the bottom of the park toward Sixth Avenue. Now they are hurrying, as fast as circumstances will permit, to begin their workday, to the place where the horses, their muzzles deep in feedbags, and the men, talking in clusters will await the opportunity take whomever has the time, the inclination and the do-re-mi, on the most sedate ride in town.

February 23 – Midmorning

T. has forgotten the keys to his office, so you have your meeting an immense, echoing café on Greene Street. Ideal for a gallery space of the mid-seventies, but now a sort of holding chamber for a transient population of urban passers-through. How much the young peoples' possessions, scattered on chairs and tables – backpacks, cell phones, CD players, laptops, articles of dark overclothing – look like the debris blown out of an airplane.

Awful thoughts. All the time.

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You read an estimate that since 1950, the year that you were born, your country has spent $17 trillion dollars on its military.

The winter you were in gestation, George F. Kennan, a high foreign policy official circulated within the State Department a memorandum allowing that:

We have about 50% of the world's wealth, but only 6.3% of its population. …In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity without positive detriment to our national security. To do so we will have to dispense with all sentimentality and daydreaming…

February 24

These notes have become increasingly notes to yourself. You still relish conversations with others, but even with intimates feel it is best to be very circumspect.

You observe that it is as difficult now to see the World Trade Center, as it was before its destruction. But it is a subtly different form of "unseeing." Increasingly you are fascinated with *ways of unseeing*. You think back at your mother's terror when the ball of the moon was hidden behind the Empire State's superstructure and the only visibility that emerged around the edges was the bent light of fear.

The media is, of course, still covering the WTC story, and never more literally than in the sense of a burial. You think of your cats endlessly working over their litter box, attempting to mask, at an olfactory level, their presence as predators. The stakes of their hunt, so they are instinctually aware, depends on the suppression of evidence. And so they rake their cat sand over their telltale droppings repeatedly and from every direction, never satisfied with the result. With the WTC, we witness the burial of a possible political awareness unframable in the grammar of our cultural lockdown.

For every story printed, ten unasked questions. Impermissible questions. What *is* permissible takes new and strange forms, as though the visual world of mediated images has been genetically modified for maximum disconcertion value. Eventually, I suppose, the shock of biting into an apple that tastes like fish wears off. We adapt. We come up with a new idea of what an apple is. We are dealing with the explicit existence

of composite animals, and we build, when meaning fails, a vernacular mythology of chimerical forms.

Page fourteen of the *Times*: today's installment of Portraits of Grief, the brief, intimate obits of those – apart from the hijackers – who died on the planes and in the trade center on 9/11. WTC. Each "portrait" indeed include a photo, passport-sized, of a "Man With Many Sides," or a woman who had "A Thing About Cats" or another, gone before his time, who possessed "A New Passion." In total, fifteen miniature faces, nestled into print, surround the dominant image on the page: a spontaneous shrine assembled at a park in a New Jersey town, replete with flags, flowers, candles, snapshots of the dead and an assemblage of reverently-placed tchotchkes. This shrine shares a common vocabulary with a thousand, or ten thousand others – it is familiar and particular. Like the rest of the page, the picture of the shrine is printed in black and white and framed to such perfection that we might, if we could, reach in and touch the slate atop a brick wall to which a photo has been taped, or feel the warmth of a glass candle holder, or lift for a moment, the brass lantern that serves to weigh down one edge of a delicate flag.

But then there is the opposite page of the spread, the recto page, the visually privileged page, from which leaps – in brilliantly colored stars and stripes, augmented by blonde, and peachy fleshtone – an exhortation by Macy's to "Ride the Red White & Blue Wave" of spring swimsuits. One model, three poses, all frontal – the sea and sky at her back. How to choose among them? A "TOMMY Signature flag X-back softcup tank…" or the "NAUTICA striped softcup tubini…" or "VM SPORT Big Apple NY triangle softcup bikini." Or shall we splurge and go for all three?

Each style has its distinct charm, all are swimsuits, they do what swimsuits do. Yet so presented, they become, in their arrested moment, utterly particular, though not nearly so cluttered with detail as the adjacent shrine. But now the cat claws its way out of the bag, or rather stops for an instant in its eternal scratching at the sand, for if one looks as closely at the ad as at the opposite page, one sees that the "Big Apple bikini" features on its left cup, hovering northeast of the model's heartbeat, the red, stylized shape of an apple imprinted on the navy blue fabric, surmounted by white capital letters: "NY." The model would place her hand over this message if she were to pledge allegiance, but she stands not to attention, instead at rest, weight on left leg, hip jutted

contraposto, right arm raised, hand to forehead. Nor does she salute, just shields her eyes from the rays of the sun.

Thus, by increments, by leaps and bounds, by whatever means narcissary, a whole culture arrives at a ground zero that is no longer a place where something happened, but rather a burnt-over district of the mind.

• • •

A party in celebration Marshall's appointment as Distinguished Professor. Talk with Mel. He spent days, in the immediate aftermath, shooting the crews emerging from the WTC site, and due to an inadequate mask came down with inhalation pneumonia. High fever, hospitalization, near death. Saved by antibiotics and acupuncture. Well recovered though – he looks more robust than you ever seen him, better coloring. You'd never know he'd been sick. When you leave he wraps you in a strong, almost vice-like hug.

The doctors showed him his x-rays, pointed out the white stuff coating his lungs. *What was in there*? he asked, and they told him. A toxic mix, containing among other things pulverized asbestos, fiberglass, and human particulate.

Are some of us more vulnerable to breathing in the stuff of our fellows than others?

February 25

Suddenly it strikes you, after all these months of rumination: they died for our sins – the sins of greed and imperialism we cannot apprehend, much less own. This is the fire that, beneath the threshold of consciousness, fuels the drive, propounded in evermore militant language by organizations of the WTC widows and orphans, to preserve the entire sixteen square acres, as a permanent, undeveloped memorial – eternally sacred and hallowed ground: a graveyard without bodies. When the towers fell we lost our real estate Notre Dame. Now we dig our way toward Golgotha. Heretofore the office tower stood as the supreme symbol of urban wealth extraction. But might not the place where so many were martyred, in the long run, generate more

revenue as a pilgrimage site? It all comes down, as of old, to the Trinity: location, location, location.

March 1 – Early Morning

Tricks of the city. You drop Gwen off at school and walk down the street toward the café. Along the way you discover that a tree you've passed a hundred times, scarcely noticing it, now exhibits evidence of a visible spine. Up its trunk runs a pattern of perfectly spaced white dots. You look again, more closely now, because hey, even these days, pear trees don't have vertebrae. And then you look around and for an answer to this mystery. Which is not far, nor difficult to find. A few feet east of the tree stands a traffic sign: children crossing. The pole of the sign is made of metal, painted green and perforated along its length at about two inch intervals. And it is through those perforations that the morning light projects the pattern onto the tree. What a merry joke they've played on your eye and mind – these two verticals, planted in a kind of instrumental, perfunctory way have conspired to show you how, under the sun, everything works together. Aporias 'r' us.

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Every three Fridays, acupuncture. Cold hands and feet as you lie down. You do not precisely dream during these sessions, in the long, tranquil interval between the stickings in and the pluckings out. But you do fall into a state of very profound reverie and this time an unaccustomed voice speaks to, perhaps through you – clearly. "*I* froze," it says, "so that the winter did not."

March 2

No bottom hit for the body to come up from. No lion driven out by the lamb. The petering-out nonwinter of the graying flags.

March 7

Notes to yourself does not really describe what you're up to here. More like reports from the several fronts of yourself.

This past Sunday night tripped south to Bombora house, Melinda's subterranean gallery in the once-upon-a-Meat District. On the sidewalk, a boulder maybe four feet across and two feet high marks the entrance. Horizontal steel doors pulled up, it's a short, steep flight down slate steps. Cement bar and woodburning stove to take the edge off the cave damp. Melinda squats to feed in bits of busted up pallets, her slim hips made formidable in the armor of her silver Yemeni belt. Her inks on great sheets of paper nailed to the walls. Low benches and pillows for sitting, and floor coverings of teal-green cowhide. Watch out – an I-beam painted bright orange runs laterally across the low ceiling. Dangerous, because one doesn't cognate steel, unforgiving, beneath so joyous a hue. Like almost everyone does at least once, you learned to duck the hard way.

A trio, guitar, bass and sax lays down the invocation. When the set's over, Melinda asks you to read and you step to the center. No, the musicians in the crowd aren't falling asleep, they seem to be nodding in sympathy to your cadences. Then off to the perimeter, warmed by their appreciation. You sit and watch as Frank Lacey takes the circle – now talking through his trombone, now chanting wild-eyed words. Underpinned by trapdrums, he paces out rap hatched in the 70's, those forgotten daze when Dubya's père ran the CIA. Between stanzas, the drummer leaps up to push him, rough, but slapstick-style, halfway across the room as Lacy, vatic, shouts and whispers the refrain: "When Bush comes to shove… when Bush comes to shove."

Back he time trips to ages even more remote – the early '60s – recites Haile Selassie's storied admonition to the General Assembly …*Until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned; that until there are no longer first class and second class citizens of any nation; that until the colour of a man's skin is of no more significance than the colour of his eyes; that until the basic human rights are equally guaranteed to all, without regard to race; that until that day, the dream of lasting peace and world citizenship and the rule of international morality will remain but fleeting illusions, to be pursued but never attained.…* then, without dropping a beat, he launches into an apoplectic panic, fresh penned that very day: "Getoutadodge, getoutadodge" – conjures a parable of the Armaghetto, exterminated by synchronous earthquakes and nuclear detonations. Back, forth and across the tiny chamber, he races – flees up the stairs and into the street. The drummer keeps drumming. He rushes,

nearly tumbling, back downstairs. Declaims a geography of world conflagration. Flees again. Returns. Finishes. Stepping out of the sacred circle he tangles feet in the power cord of Elyssa's camcorder, so seeing something else is he, not what's in front of him, dreadlocks flinging like a wood bead curtain in a violent storm, sweat streaming – a parcel of prophets rolled into one fevered man.

Upstairs for some cooler air, just behind Marina. In your buzzy state you wonder how the boulder got here. Did she boost it from Central Park and carry it down here in a van? It strikes you, illogically, that she must have transported it from Australia. But in a way it makes sense – everybody brings something. The boulder lies bathed in the aura of a pin spot she's mounted way up on her roof. But if you don't look at the logic, but stay with the lightplay, the rock seems a projection, yet when you place your hand on it, the thing is solid enough. Up from below come Melinda and Frank. They perch atop the rock, cheeks pressed together, posing. Marina's got her digital camera, which for some reason, she hands to you. The couple puckers silent movie kisses and you snap the last shot before the memory runs out.

You didn't wish anything at that moment. It waited days – until right now – to coalesce into the urge to tell your father: *see, the Village is still there, fifty years and counting since you and Bea conceived a New York son. Thirty-four years since you left – headed for the hills. When you were young, you gravitated here, scented the energy in the atmosphere, knew this was the place to be. The Village is where you emigrated to, took point for all your siblings. See Jack, the Village continues here, Bohemian rhapsodies play out, pushed to the very margin. Yet the city keeps on and your bloodline lives it through. Or rather lives it for you.*

We might have shared this spotlight – this space even – so like the ones you took me to in years when I'd look up into the face of the conversations you were having with "some artist," or "some writer" or "some drunk." We might have walked down the steps together, first one, then the other, if only you could have gotten to the bottom – and found a way to stand your ground.

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Monday night we'll get huge shafts of light, straight up from the Battery Park City landfill. Hallelujah, Nuremberg come.

March 8

Evening, and Katie sits in the Morris chair watching Lexx, a quasi-farcical Canadian science-fiction show. Just for the sake of her company, you occupy the same space, though it would be easier to write in relative silence, at your desk in the bedroom. Turned toward the computer and away from the TV, bits of plot filter through the cracks in your concentration: aboard the ship in outer space, a venal, capricious American President is about to fire a ray that will obliterate the earth. Stan, captain of the Lexx tries to dissuade him. A snatch of dialogue sneaks past your baffles:

Mr. President: We are a good people driven to do horrible things.

Stan: No you're not. You are a horrible people driven to do horrible things.

March 11 – Early Morning

Unaccountably you are filled with optimism. Pass the newsstands barely glancing at the headline massacres, the front-page images of your fellowmen dressed in fatigues, the iconic jutting of the ruined tower columns.

Brilliant blue, nearly frigid, plenty of wind gusts, a March lion. Halfway down 22nd Street, the cold prevails and you pull up your hood, put on your gloves. As per usual the hyperattuned electric door of the Rite Aid slides open as you pass.

Deborah looks better than you've seen her in months. There's some color in her cheeks at last. Still, something's not right with her. You hope it's just New York stressing her out, not something organic eating someone so young. What is it like to leave your family in Morocco and come here alone to pursue an indefinite something that might be possible here? She asks how you're doing and you improvise a tapdance. She laughs – you've adduced, if only for an instant, her eyes' glimmer.

Sit down at Table 4 and wait. Outside, passersby snort vapor. March acting like March. What a conservative you are! Saturday, while Katie and Simon watched, you clambered all over the Central Park rocks with Gwen – told her that, if she liked, you'd both learn climbing in New Paltz or the Gunks. Today you feel like a hundred. With her atop the outcropping, not a day over fifty-one.

Last Saturday, you brought a bottle of champagne to Jennifer's big five-0 party. An ambivalent affair at best, oddly self-abnegating, yet absent the bracing rigor of Zen. The birthday girl came way late, seemed to vanish for whole stretches of time, nothing

cohered. Strange place to pick for a celebration – her friend's loft a stone's throw from the mound of rubble. When the wind blows right, the fucking thing still smells like something Attila dragged in.

Larsen's half-century bash was another story altogether. He catered it, danced to the Doors with his teenage daughters – in a psychedelic surround improvised out of his Nyack living room. And what had you done to mark your own threshold into official middle age? You'd resisted treating it as anything more significant than any other birthday. Which was delightful: a wonderful roast beef, gorgeous chocolate cake in the presence of little trio. How right it seemed at the time. Yet you question it now. Are you waiting until sixty to permit yourself some kind of blossoming? Or just deferring what you can't handle? Still looking for some kind of critical mass to arise from within?

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Crossing 25th on the way home you run into Maria, Juan's wife, very pregnant. She's hurrying west on some pre-partum errand, fuelled by adrenalin, high color in her clean, firm cheeks. Any time now.

• • •

Night must fall. Break out of a script meeting with Tobias to watch the advent of the "towers of light," the great plugging-in of the amaterial memorial. From his office, the two of you walk south to 22nd where the highway shifts direction and the sightlines open onto an unobstructed view of the Lower Manhattan massif. It was from this vantage six months ago that much of the neighborhood witnessed the collapse.

It's a relatively clear evening and the dual bluish beams carry quite a distance upward before fading out. But there's a good deal of ambient light, so the effect is static, indefinite. Difficult to see the shafts as fully distinct from one another. Choppers circle about their overspill. Tobias thinks they look like anti-aircraft spotlights. Perhaps. On the way back to his office, you pass two fellows, workers from a warehouse, who've paused to stare up at the display. As they turn away, one says, "probably looks better from Jersey."

March 12

On the front page of every newspaper, the towers of light shoot into the heavens. Each daily captures them from a different angle, but any hint of vagueness has been fixed in the mix, enhanced to brilliant ultramarine, their twin-ness rendered undeniable. Diffuse edges sharpened to accord with the simulations that preceded the actuality – no fuzzy bleedings together here. Light as policy. Amped beyond all possible ages of reason. Or remorse. Wonders of the insubstantial world.

March 19

Last evening the towers of light hit the low cloud cover and the beams spread out into a horizontal streak at the height of about eighty stories.

Tonight, from the living room window you notice another optical peculiarity. You doubt yourself so you call in your wife and daughter and ask them "what's wrong with this picture?" Without prompting they see it too. Looking south, the "towers of light" are leaning. Just slightly to the left, about two degrees.

March 20 – 8:43 to 9:20 pm

After a day of heavy downpours, the weather begins to clear, but the cloudcover remains low. In these atmospherics, the beams lose their bluish tinge, fatten and solidify, and rise to about the same height the towers stood, before the light diffuses as it hits the cloud bottoms. For a moment, a credible apparition of the missing buildings, augmented by lighthouse beacons shooting out horizontally from their topmost floors.

Then the cloud ceiling turns ragged and the lighthouse effect transmutes to something like billowing vapor – or smoke. A cloud passes lower still and the upper stories are engulfed in roiling white mist. Every scudding cloud mass transmutes a new and spectral effect. Sometimes the beams seem nearly extinguished in a swath of density, but then the west wind blows the obstruction clear and furnishes a new phantasm. A deep, tall cloud moves across the field, diffusing light at its center and the towers appear to shrink floor by floor, even as their upper stories expand into a brilliant nimbus.

You could watch this spectacle for hours, so mutable and ghastly are images that unfold. It is hard to imagine this as a simple interaction of nature and design. Instead you conjure the image of a protean hand stepping through a series of rapid-fire cues, playing with what Brobdignagian lighting board can do: *Here is what they would have looked like if they'd been hit at the 50th floor. Crossfade. This if had the planes struck lower, around the 30th. Transition – the scene with one tower remaining, chopped down to 40-odd floors.*

A dense cloud passes between you and the lights, and the beams vanish altogether. What you see appears as rolling black hills, and behind them, defining their contours, a milky mist that fades upward to black.

A low, translucent cloud moves in and restores the towers to thirty stories with only blackness above. But then, separated by a great distance, as though belonging to an entirely distinct cosmos, a burst of white appears where the beams emerge from behind their vapor shield to flash against a still higher stratum of clouds. Suddenly the drama has resituated itself, to a nearly empyreal realm. Here the dream towers burst into flame at an altitude where – at least in the mythic imagination – only the gods may reach them.

March 24

Spring gusts. Tender air. Eager young dachshund leashed in front of Bruno's café. Double broadsheet of the *New York Times* swoops down low across the pavement, settles on top of him, like a tent.

March 26

Year of the Horse (of a different color). Crocus like, the slogans of Merry Old New York poke through your surface:

Dig We Must for a Growing New York
New York is a Summer Festival
Fun City

March 27

At the café, Bruce asks how you're doing. "Ça marche," you say, more diffidently than you'd intended. "Some ouch?" he asks. Either he doesn't know the phrase, or mishears it in the ambient din. Or is tremendously intuitive.

"Oui," you reply, "some ouch."

Dig we must, for a grieving New York.

April 1

Ground Zero as anti-Delphi. An omphalos, a rupture into the underworld from which much hallucinogenic gas, but little wisdom, escapes.

April 2 – Late Afternoon

You train Wolfgang's binoculars out his window toward Ground Zero, the hole they are digging to China. If you shift right and northward a bit, you can see the batteries of lights set up just across West Street on the landfill. They are arranged in the shape of two offset squares, approximating the configuration of the towers' footprint. If you didn't know these were lights, you could imagine they were pilings. That's the freaky thing, how much they resemble the plan of exterior columns, the load bearing structure of something you've seen before.

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We really don't mind if the descriptions don't fit. As long as they don't fit usefully.

• • •

You always saw the WTC as an unwitting monument of the Vietnam era. The great splitting of the culture and the gulf between. Retrofitted now in its destruction to a symbol of permanent war. Murky origins in the late 1950s; "escalation" through the sixties; the official ribbon-cutting in April 1973 – the day the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam readmitted American journalists. This is something to look into more, if you looked into it more. Better someone else.

• • •

Marilyn, just back from a trip to Europe, tells you she spotted *Divided…* prominently displayed in the bookstores at Kennedy Airport. Visceral thrill to hear that. Apart from all else, all ironies, how this modernist child still adores his airports. To think a part of you lives on those shelves, at the nexus of so much turbined horsepower, yearning to take to the air, awaiting the traveler's outstretched hand.

April 3 – 79th Street Crosstown Bus – Midafternoon

You sit across from a prep school boy masticating a huge wad of gum, blowing ever huger bubbles. One obscures most of his face, expands far beyond the point you imagine materially sustainable. At last it pops, enveloping his nose. He tries to corral it all back in with his tongue, but it's spread too far, so he peels off the extruded portion and feeds it manually into his mouth. A small bit of gum remains on his nose, caught in the hazy sunlight. It must cause him a slight itch, because after a few moments he reaches up and, with the back of his hand, abstractedly brushes it away. He continues chewing avidly, occasionally darting out his pink-sheathed tongue. Eventually, he blows another, more modest bubble.

• • •

We are called upon now to become inhumane, to renounce any empathic resonances that may move the air within our cavities. We are called upon louder, we are beeped at, shrieked at, to stir ourselves to the point where the vibration of our own mechanism drowns out the noises of others who move their mouths silently like fish. The death urge we have incarnated in our government knows it need not fear our hindsight – which has never amounted to much – but they do not wait for the cataracts to build on their own accord – each generation seeing less. They want us blind right now.

• • •

Mark and Bruce over to dinner. They are vastly taken with your view downtown. Sometimes, even when they're in the same room, they speak for one another. "Ah, the towers of light," Bruce, says. "Mark thinks they look like something out of Batman."

• • •

Mark and Bruce have gone home. Gwen, up way past her bedtime, passes out while you're reading her *Harry Potter* – an episode about an ugly, racist wizard riot against Muggles using the pretext of a Quittich Cup match.

You check *The New York Times* online. Double click on "Bombers Gloat in Gaza…"

"It is the most effective strategy," says Abdel Aziz Rantisi of Hamas, "For us it is the same as their F-16."

"The gates of resistance are totally open," he says.

April 6

Two evenings ago went to Shahid's memorial down at NYU. A tape of him reading "Farewell:"

My memory keeps getting in the way of your history.

You looked up the poem afterward, marveled at the variations and how they resonate, because to some extent one has no idea what they mean:

My memory is again getting in the way of your history.

Your history gets in the way of my memory.

Your memory gets in the way of my memory.

And then:

I am everything you lost. You can't forgive me.

I am everything you lost. Your perfect enemy.

Earlier that day you discussed the once, future and present World Trade Center with a class of undergraduates at Galatin. Amazing. They'd all read your book, or had

made a game run at it. "A Sense of Place" is what the class is called and Steve, who teaches it, asked you – in his own way – the question you most often hear, in variously shaded forms: *what should be done down there? What should be built? What should "they" build?* Again you said *I don't know* –the three magic words – went on to talk about the process of mourning without flying into action. Of waiting to find out what is needed. Of dreaming into the space for a year minimum before trying to think or plan. If action could be held off that long, what else might not be done? Or not done. Shahid again:

You can't ask them: Are you done with the world?

This morning, Saturday, at the café, Bronwyn handed you a book she's reading for her dissertation, David Abram's, *The Spell of the Sensuous*. Not the usual jargon, she said. You thumbed through pages, came to a chapter epigraph:

I wonder if the Ground has anything to say. I wonder if the ground is listening to what is said. These words from Young Chief of the Cayuses, spoken in 1853 upon signing over the tribe's lands to the US government.

Then walking afterward, it came to you: the site might be asking for three presences, three entities. Nothing more.

April 11 – Le G. – Early Morning

That day, when you were talking with the students, you found yourself asking the difference, in psychological value, between the image of towers toppling over and disintegrating where they stand.

WTC: all columns, no vaulting. Details lie. Massive lateral supports below ground. Superstructure curtain wall. *Ogive*: a diagonal rib of a Gothic arch; a pointed arch. Keep to your book, read what Michelet has to say:

> Consider the deep, narrow orbit of the Gothic arch, of that *ogival eye*, when it strives to open in the twelfth century. This eye of the Gothic arch is the sign by which the new architecture achieves its identity. The old art, worshipper of substance, was identified by the temple's material support, by the column, whether Tuscan, Doric or Ionic. Modern art, child of the soul and the mind, had for its principle not form but physiognomy – the eye; not the column, but the vault; not the full but the empty. In the twelfth

> and thirteenth centuries, the vault thrust into the very thickness of the walls, like the solitary of the Thebaid in a granite cave, is entirely withdrawn into itself; it meditates and dreams. Gradually it advances toward the outside, it reaches the external surface of the wall. It radiates at last into lovely mystic roses, triumphant with celestial glory. But the fourteenth century had no sooner passed than these roses change; they are transformed into flamboyant figures; are they flames, hearts or tears?
>
> – *Histoire de France,* II, *Éclaircissements*, 1861.

How to sacrilize, after the collapse, a fragile twin of fortress towers, one pretending to a transmission spire without a prayer of fooling anyone.

The day is as the weatherman predicted, "partly cloudy." Rapid, unpredictable shifts of sun and shadow through the Gamin window make it nearly impossible to see the book, much less type this.

April 12

Some of the inhabitants of the Harry Potter books are fascinating, ambiguous little characters called House Elves who exist in a state of exquisite discomfort. These creatures possess great lemur-like eyes and are bonded servants of well-to-do wizard families, for whom they perform all manner of domestic tasks with equal measures of diligence and transparency. Yet beyond their drive to serve loyally, the elves are goaded by an urge that they sometimes cannot suppress to speak out on matters of conscience. When dark forces threaten Harry, a House Elf who knows of the plot, risks terrible punishment to warn him. But because speaking independently is tantamount to a betrayal of the wizard family to which they are bound, the Elves also undertake to punish themselves, even as they struggle to articulate a truth. They box their own ears, slam their fingers in drawers, beat their heads against walls, in the course of spilling the beans. This tortured form of expression reminds you of nothing so much as the language of the *New York Times.* Entailed to the bourgeoisie, the paper nonetheless blurts out, in a high squeaky voice, the very things it knows it ought not say.

April 14 – Midmorning

Spring's sprung and all across town, hosts of beautiful young women sashay down the street, showing off the lack of explosives strapped round their waists.

April 15

Choppers again. Part of the terror complex now is hearing turbines, or just looking up and seeing a plane taking some weird flight path over the city. And the choppers hovering, sitting in the air, sometimes in two and threesomes – a presumably strategic deployment – often for hours. Before they vanish. Then, with the same cryptic intentionality, they reappear, hovering in a new configuration, over another parcel of terrain.

• • •

Everywhere in the news, the terrifying face of Condoleezza Rice. What makes her mask so frightening are the features, so delicate and finely formed, yet distorted by a powerful rage. The National Security Advisor is bursting with fury because Hugo Chavez has been restored to power in Venezuela and she thought she'd got rid of him.

At the café, Eric B. observes that ideas can make a person ugly.

• • •

Powell journeys to Ramallah to tell Arafat: "It's showtime" – this quoted in the morning *Times*. In the accompanying photo, the two men confront eachother in a crowded, fluorescent-lit hallway – Arafat's compound? – barely a foot's distance separating their noses. The General looks down at the President from the better part of a head's advantage, but Arafat smiles, holds up one hand in an odd gesture, thumb and index finger pressed together as though feeling a very particular substance, perhaps granular. Each wears a small enameled flag pinned to his left lapel. Red, green, white and black. Red white and blue. A host of unidentified men press in toward them, and toward the photographer. All of them look at Powell, but each wears a distinct expression, some mix of questioning and suspicion, as though he were the Delphic oracle, but one who'd better come up with the right answer. The same sort of almost

skeptical look with which people regard their cell phones. Is the incoming call a portent of something banal, catastrophic or wondrous? Was the missed communication potentially life-changing or a just a misdialed number? Beneath the picture of Arafat and Powell, above the caption in tiny letters, the photo credit: Palestinian Authority via Associated Press. Here, write minutely, the politics of territorialization appear on Page One: in full color and read all over. Fit to print, even if in order to read it you have to take your glasses off and bring the broadsheet nearly to your nose.

April 18 – Le G. – Early Morning

Lacking a true spring, we body-slam into summer. Three days of temperatures in the '90s. A disassociation walking the streets between the sight and odor of the erupting blossoms and the sweltering heat. Which is the real signifier of what? Kelly, your Chinese doctor tells you that the body knows it is spring. Just outside your building, as you walked out, a gardener dousing the sunbaked tulips.

Gwen has no problem with any of this. Delighted she can wear her capris and shorts, as she is by the blooming of *her* cherry tree – the one that JFK planted at your co-op's dedication ceremony on the lawn between 24th and 25th Streets off Eighth Avenue. Gwen says that when she wakes up on these overripe mornings, it "feels like France."

You take a bite of croissant. Look across at the clock. 8:35 a.m. and you feel a sudden impulse to see her, to watch her run up the steps and into school. You cover your coffee with your saucer, tell Cathy you'll be right back and trot a half-block to where the parents and kids are converging on PS11.

Stand at the steps and look east toward Eighth Avenue. Wave to a dozen people. There's Alan, dressed in his suit for work. *Nice tie* you call. He holds a daughter's hand in each of his: Julia, Gwen's classmate in his right, and no-longer-so-little Sarah in his left. On some days you and Alan intersect on the street, and talk for a few minutes before he heads downtown to his job as an attorney for DC-37 which is headquartered in a building right by Ground Zero. Invariably he wants to talk about the WTC, keeps nudging you to write op-eds advocating human-scale development of the site. One morning last week he leaned confidingly in to tell you that on September 10, he'd seen "security, FBI guys, you name it – all over the place."

No palaver with Alan today. Instead, you fall into a conversation with one of the two Trinidadian Kelvins, both from Port of Spain, both fathers of PS11 kids, this Kelvin the shorter, and a Calypsonian. He's wearing a gorgeous deep blue shirt covered in sailing ships. You scan down the block, for a sight of Gwen and Katie, looking to spot the bright red shirt Gwen put on before you left, or perhaps Katie's cap, appliquéd with sequined elephants – from Nepal? – bobbing among the approaching heads. Kelvin tells you about raising his son and daughter on his own, about his childhood: bicycling to get food, feeding the hogs before school, feeling so tired by the time he got there that he just wanted to lay his head down and sleep, and thinking all the time: *I want to sing Calypso*. Then he tears off an *a capella* version of his latest, an eco-parable enjoining listeners to "do the right thing," have respect for the earth, don't destroy the soil, or else "Nicodemus will get you."

By now the sun has shifted from behind the water tower of the so-called luxury apartment building on Eighth just north of 21st Street and you find yourself standing in a flood of light and heat. You realize that G. & K. must have come early, before you arrived – odd because usually you have to hustle to make it to school on time and more often than not, get there just under the wire. Well, it's not the margin that counts. 'long as you make the last train out.

Normally you'd walk Kelvin down the block to Ninth, but you're still lingering, and bid him a good day just as the taller Kelvin, writer, scientist and old friend, comes tripping, almost prancing down the steps, stylish in shorts, and wrapped in an easy conversation with J., mother of his child. You wave to one another. His dreads bounce euphorically: *get behind me gravity*. Kelvin and J. head east, and you turn west, back to Le G.

Drop a quarter in the café's pay phone. Katie picks up on the second ring. Yeah, they got to school way early. Everything's fine, just fine. Yet your heart's still in your mouth. Well not precisely. Somewhere around your trachea. Katie's just downloaded a list of French acronyms off the web. Now you'll have plenty of vernacular phrases to study for your vacation in July. You tell her the only French acronym you know is CRS. Not sure exactly what it stands for: *Compagnie Républicaine de Sécurité* or something like that, but in any case it means the nasty riot cops. Melinda glides across the front window, steps through the door. You wave to her, but she doesn't see you back here in

the deep shadows of the café. Cave? Platonic? Or Nietzschian? Passing your table, she glances, half puzzled, half expectant at your notebook and coffee cup, then sits down at Table 10.

Ring off with Katie and head over for greetings and small talk. You confirm that it's still cool for Gwen to spend Saturday eve. at her house, so you and Katie can have dinner with friends. Sure, it's fine. But now she asks if Gwen can come with her to DC that day. DC? Sure, why not? "Would you be afraid?" she asks. *Afraid of what*? you think, *Gwen going on a jaunt with M. to DC – why no, it sounds like fun*. Then it hits you: Melinda is talking about taking Gwen down with her on a bus to the peace demonstration. The demo – shit – you'd blanked out it was *this* Saturday. You hear yourself blurt a bunch of words about Gwen having the rest of her life to be teargassed, you don't want her starting at age nine, and how Ashcroft makes John Mitchell look like Ghandi. Melinda's not quite processing your emphatic protestations. Says she doesn't think it'll turn ugly. Is she also thinking that it's best to get kids into protest and conflict early on – inoculate 'em? Her face is a mask, so you can't tell. You just can't imagine letting Gwen go to a potentially violent demo without you. Not sure you'd want her to go period. You realize that for months now, years possibly, you've lived in a state of red alert punctuated by unrestoring sleep.

You return to Table 4 and Cathy comes over as you're wolfing down your croissant. Can she refill your cup? She thanks you again for helping her take the chairs off the tabletops when you arrived that morning – they'd just opened the place and were running late. It's always been hard for you to sit and watch other people work. You say no thanks on the second coffee, tell her it'd make you too buzzy. You have to choose your words carefully, slow down and enunciate with Cathy because judging from her affect you'd think she understands more English than she does. "Ah," she says, "you don't want to be like Speedy Gonzalez." Yes, that's it. She's Korean, grew up in France. Speedy Gonzalez. Yes, that's the common referent.

Tobias comes into the café bearing a large padded envelope containing notes on a script you're collaborating on, copies of the keys to his office and home, several recent *New Yorker*s, one with an article on Ashcroft. He's flying to Germany today to find millions – millions! – for his script development company. In a few moments you'll follow him into the gathering heat. Yanni, Cathy's wait-partner pops his soundtrack to

O Brother Where Art Thou? into the CD player. Over the general din of the café, you recognize the lyrics to "Big Rock Candy Mountain" – the hobo Land of Cockaigne where there's more of everything sweet and desirable than can be described in words, where work is forbidden and he who sleeps longest is paid the most. The song ends with a coda:

I'll see you all,
This coming fall
In the Big Rock Candy Mountain.

Picture on the front page of the *NYT*: bulldozers operating in a pit, clearing a site, people standing round amidst copious rubble. Another body recovered from Ground Zero? You take off your specs so you can actually see the photo, read the caption. Bifocals are just around the corner. Not New York – it's Jenin. Many-cratered city of the West Bank. What a lovely sound to the word Jenin. A name fit for a beautiful girl child.

April 21

Morning. Heat spell's broken. Some solid sleep for a change. You dream, or hear in your dream the sound of a freight train whistle and realize it's not coming from across the river but from the tracks that run up Eleventh Avenue. How silly, you dream-think, to imagine they ever built a High Line. You ought to know better, even in a dream. And to think, so many people used to be killed crossing the tracks so frequently, they nicknamed it Suicide Alley. But now, as you stand on the sidewalk, the trains rumble past sedately. It seems a much safer and more humane place than in legendary times.

You wake up. Of course there are no tracks there anymore. And it was never called Suicide Alley. Your dream remembered wrong. You rifle through your New York books looking for the reference, finally in desperation call Frank J. He tells you to check the *WPA Guide*. And there it is on page 175: Death Avenue, once so dangerous to traverse, the railroad sent "cowboys" ahead with signal flags to warn of the oncoming trains.

• • •

Afternoon. Walking home, you spot a half-scattered pile of *New Yorker* magazines discarded curbside. Relics of the bygone world. At the top of the heap, the September 17, 2001 issue, which despite its date, was circulated prior to 9/11. What a bizarre cover! In vibrant tones of green, purple and black, there's the Statue of Liberty done up as Victorian fetishist's dream doll. A corset nips her waist and pushes her bosom up so severely that her torso assumes the shape of a valentine heart. Her eyes at once pop out and cross above apoplectically rouged cheeks, her mouth reduces to a sharp intaking "O!" Liberty's jaw disappears behind erupting breasts. In her extremis, her fingers splay out in spikes like those on her crown – she's lost her grip on her torch. Our Lady's other hand is empty. If it ever carried the tablet of Independence, this has dropped from sight. Beads of sweat leap from her brow. What distresses her so? Modernity itself. Or at any rate its iconography. For the corset laces that bind and distort her so turn out to be the cables of a suspension bridge – its roadbed streaming with Lilliputian cars.

You pick up the magazine, flip the pages. They fall open on a double page spread of a model in a green bikini striking a pose in an otherwise vacant, gleaming, metal and glass laundromat. What is it they are advertising? Aha, here's a logo: Vogue's *Style.com*. And the headline striped across the pages reads: RUNWAYS ARE EVERYWHERE.

The *New Yorker*'s next issue, September 24, is not among those in the pile, but you already have that one at home. On the solid black cover, two oblong parallels, meant to suggest the destroyed towers, are rendered in a matte varnish so subtle, it takes a certain angle of light to recognize that they are there at all. But the date: September 11, 2001, running in white boldface vertically up the left hand margin eliminates all doubt about what we are supposed to see.

April 22

Perhaps one day the Jihad-War on Terror will find its Homer, as Eratosthenes calculated all events from the Fall of Troy. And our Helen is black and viscous: she is oil.

April 26

The Great Figure
Among the rain
and lights
I saw the figure 5
in gold
on a red
fire truck
moving
tense
unheeded
to gong clangs
siren howls
and wheels rumbling
through the dark city.

– William Carlos Williams

In these hours so full, so wonderfully concentrated, when minutes were worth centuries, death alone answers to the impatience of minds and to the haste of affairs.

– Jean Léon Jaurès, as quoted by Barthes, *Michelet,* p. 61.

April 29

To be a fifty-something man in these times is to be on your way to Beth Israel for your first colonoscopy, as you are today on the crosstown bus, passing on foot among the puddles in Stuyvesant Square, the Quaker Meeting house behind you, the hospital ahead on your left, the old Stuyvesant High School on your right. Did you envy the smart kids who went there? The smart kids, now more Asian than Jewish who you used to see talking about calculus on the E train from the WTC on their way home from school.

You don't feel the IV, only the Demerol and whatever else suffuses your chest cavity – no, the drugs more overlay your heart like a cool heating pad. You're out. You

come to feeling feisty. Words flood into your head as you sit up: *I want to make capitalism nauseous.*

• • •

Elizabeth tells you of the case of a young girl who witnessed, from her home nearby, the towers' collapse, perhaps even desperate people leaping from the high windows. She and her mother and father were evacuated unharmed. Yet her invisible companion lost both parents in the tragedy.

April 30

You nap, and half dream you are a dolphin cavorting, leaping out of the water. Somehow as you reenter you find your medium, while still liquid, has turned very hot and granular.

You wake briefly, then continue your nap. Into your ears comes a slogan: *Contempt – it's a killer*.

Mayday

There is the horror, the double trauma – that is as yet the only word for it. If only one had been left standing! And standing beside the horror, invisible, inexpressible, a wonder, too nauseous to manifest as exhilaration, that now power, whatever its claims to power, is absolute. There are no equivalents, but the pulverizing of the towers – one, then the other – takes on the consciousness-altering aspect of an event as pivotal as the French Revolution, or, for the ancients, the fall of Troy. On the surface as it must, social life proceeds as seems "usual." yet something has been born: we live in the presence of a new myth which we do not yet possess the language to describe.

• • •

Because the skyline is empty of those towers, must the jails be filled? And the cemeteries too?

Today comes the federal report to Congress on the towers' collapse. Jet fuel was the culprit, it declares. But the *Times* reports "the investigators have concluded that they are unable to provide a comprehensive analysis." Well then, case closed.

First royalty check arrives for *Divided*…. Mixed as your feelings, underpinned by a visceral gladness, a thankfulness also, that someone – anyone – wrote this particular book *before*.

In your grandest, wildest, most revisionist daydreams you imagine that when the book was first published, it sold well, so well that it provoked a fierce public debate which culminated in a collective decision to abandon the towers as a site of human habitation:

Shit, you're not getting me to go up in those things,

Me neither – maybe sneak a look from the observation deck – but work *there? Forget about it!*

Memo to employees: after much discussion we have decided to move our operations to a smaller, saner structure…

To the People of New York and New Jersey: while the permanent closure of the World Trade Center represents a huge write-off, in light of what we now know, it is clearly the better part of virtue to cut our losses…

• • •

Isn't this what writers are after at bottom? To change awareness, to change behavior? Control, control, everywhere and always desire for control.

• • •

You talk to Marshall on the phone. He points out the degree to which your fate has been bound up with the WTC. "In your picture on the book jacket," he says, "the towers are coming out of your head like horns."

May 2

We are rats. We gobbled down the 20th Century because it smelled good – like cheese – and now we have the most dreadful stomach ache, realizing it was mostly poison. We can't digest it. We can't throw it up. Spasms in emulation of a dance.

• • •

One cannot reject an image the way one can an idea. This morning at Bruno's with Alane and Stephen H., he spoke about watching the towers burn, how they looked to him less like buildings than fuses.

And then the image came of sand castles.

• • •

At D'agostinos supermarkets the checkout clerks still pack your groceries in yellow plastic bags imprinted with a blue silhouette of the Manhattan skyline dominated by the almost twin towers. They must have ordered millions of them way back, before. What to do now? Print a new bag with a revised skyline? Not bloody likely. Just keep bagging and give it time.

These, then, are the WTCs that remain – triggering with every usage less and less a psychic jolt while carrying on as a mundane, load-bearing devices imbued with a *soupçon* of wish-fulfillment. These WTC's may be disposed of without guilt, or hoarded as sacred artifacts – or anything in between. Whatever need be.

The E train signs still announce the World Trade Center as the line's downtown terminus. And the conductors say "E train to World Trade Center" before they announce the next southbound station, as the chimes chime, and the doors slide shut. We are and are not letting go.

• • •

From Wolfgang's window this afternoon, you ply the ruins through his binoculars. Amazingly tidy – transitioning, at the level of image, from a field of

devastation into a construction site. Batteries of floodlights, stadium-like, illuminate the field. What next? Bleachers? A scoreboard?

May 3 – Le G. – Early Morning

Janus faces abounding. A perfect vertical split down the *NYT* front page. On the left, WTC cleanup: "Mournful Task Ending, Forever Unfinished." At the right: "U.S., in Surprise, Announces Global Talks for Mideast; Israel Backed by Congress."

Back to back races this weekend Saturday: *ici*, the Kentucky Derby. On Sunday: Chirac vs. LePen for the soul of France.

And in New York on the 5th of May, twin parades: "The Pride of Cuba" and "Salute to Israel."

• • •

Early evening. Walk home across 25th Street with a slight buzz on. Champagne on an empty stomach. At the Basic Books party, light poured through the twin skylights, one with a water tower looming above – part threat, part exhilaration – into their new HQ. Basic's parent company moved from the Harper Collins slab up on 53rd off Madison, down to a once-funky building at 28th and Park Avenue South into offices that once housed Marvel Comix.

Timed to coincide with a sales event known as Book Expo America, the party swelled as the elevators emptied a constant supply of business-clad, men and women sporting silly plastic badges of affiliation. Not beautiful, these folk, nor sharky smellers of trace blood in a vast sea. Neither timid mammals, nor scavengers. But they're alert, intent on something. They'll know what they're looking for when they find it – they're just not sure what it is yet. Near the buffet, a workmanlike jazz quintet emitted a precisely calibrated field of energy.

You wandered about from room to room but continually returned to the view upward through the skylights. Was the quintet to be the whole show? No special effects? No Spiderman to alight on the panes, or else crash through?

Not in the hour and a half you hung out. Chatted with many people. Tried to be animated, yet circumspect. Your circumspection is hard won and not entirely reliable.

Even intermittent as it is now, it's taken years – decades – to cultivate. The Basic marketing honcho, a nice fellow, introduces you some folks as "the author who wrote the World Trade Center book for us a couple of years ago." You shake hands, nod, smile and sip your champagne. Of course, that's what he'd think: you wrote it for them. That's probably what you'd say in his shoes. Or something like it.

A single set of pigeon tracks impressed into the sidewalk on the north side of 25th Street, between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. The pigeon who landed in the wet cement, appears to have been as tipsy as you are now. Its tracks meander westward over a distance of three seams, then end abruptly at what must have been already dried pavement. You'd eaten nothing at the party, anticipating Katie's chicken in orange sauce and broccoli. If you weren't so hungry, you'd detour a block south to 24th Street, where, just west of Eighth Avenue there are leaf imprints by the hundred etched in the concrete. When you first pointed them out to Gwen years ago, she deduced that the cement must have been poured on a blustery fall day. Lord, she's a bright one. Ah, you said, but which year?

You're halfway to Eighth Avenue before you register that back near the corner of Sixth, you walked past, without really noticing it, the storefront of the sewing machine supply company Bea once worked for. Was that the secretarial job where depression caught her up so completely in its grip that she had to go on disability, or was it United Family Services Association down on 23rd Street. When you were a teenager, she'd worked for the United Way – "I gave at the office" – up in the east 40s near the UN and Pfizer, with its amazing mural.

Your champagne head prompts you to converse with her, however unilaterally. You tell her you wish she were alive to see your writing validated as she'd always believed it would be. You say you're not so sure you'd want her to be alive to see what's happening in Palestine. How fervently she believed in the dream of a Jewish state. How it pained her to witness that dream turning, ever more inescapably, to nightmare. You'd want to spare her seeing what's going on now in the world as a whole. But still, on balance, you wish she were here, Not least to hear Gwen's touch when she plays Mozart's minuets.

• • •

Check email and find that Topiary has sent you a jpg of an image you'd asked her to shoot with her video camera last week when she interviewed you: her copy of *Divided…* lying on the table between you. Clearly she'd subjected the book to a pretty thorough going-over, evidenced by the thicket of annotated post-its sprouting from its pages. Looking closer you saw the post-its bore a brand logo in blue, purple-tinged letters: Zoloft. Laugh out loud. This is your book. This is your book on meds. These days so much is silly. Wonder where she got the pad. Is some friend or relative a shrink? It's possible too that she herself is a devotee of the pharmaceutical cult. She doesn't seem the type, for mood adjusters, whatever that means. But yes, anything is possible. Anything goes. No – everything.

Cinco de mayo

"War Emblem Takes Lead Early and Never Looks Back." That's the *Times* headline on the horse that won the Kentucky Derby, the horse owned by a Saudi prince, the horse so fast it "drained any drama from the race."

Only the other day a friend emailed you that he might fly down to catch the Derby with his father and brother. Your friend is a poet. His father ex of some intelligence service we don't speak about. Your friend's older brother carries on the family trade. After his retirement, *père* went to work for a man named Cummings, a private arms dealer. So personable a fellow was Cummings that he was given a nickname, not to say nom de guerre: "the smiling merchant of death." Not too long past, Cummings's daughter shot her lover cum polo coach – an Argentine as you recall – with a pistol, several times at point blank range over breakfast on the family estate in the rolling hills of a place that is, or might as well be Langley. The post mortem showed the fellow had been in the act of swallowing a mouthful of cereal. Ms. Cummings received the best defense money can buy. Sentenced to six months. Wheels within wheels.

God lead us past the setting of the sun
To wizard islands, of august surprise;
God make our blunders wise.

– Vachel Lindsay, "Litany of the Heroes," stanza 16

May 6 – Le G.

This morning comes and sits at the table next to you at Gamin a man named K. you've never seen before. But he avers he's observed you at your spot these many years. He's watched you write in longhand, then decant into your laptop. Turns out that as a young attorney in the '60s, he handled the closing on the Radio Row properties for the Port Authority. If you laid all these coincidences end to end, they'd form a chain longer than the ships at the bottom of the Bermuda Triangle.

May 7

You continue reading Barthe's *Michelet*, who described the execution of Robespierre and the beginnings of the White Terror, the *bals de victimes,* "orchestrated orgies of false grief" where "horror and absurdity fought it out on equal footing," or as Plutarch had it, "played Cretan against Cretan."

Is it just my nose or does the whole city smell of horseshit and piss wafted in varying degrees of pungency on the spring breeze? Not as bad this afternoon, almost not noticeable, but walking down 22nd Street, another sudden gust.

May 9

Another séance on the WTC site being held at Columbia University. Uptown then to attend the session wherein Stephan's design students will, among other proposals, present their collaborative thesis project for a trade center museum-memorial. The event is nested within a two-day academic confab held in Alfred Lerner Hall, a name that doesn't ring any bells. Not that you've ever been precisely a Columbia denizen. Brand new this hall is – its architecture at least one part knockoff Beaubourg (Fauxbourg?) – replete ubiquitous diagonal ramps and steelwork on full display. Alfred Lerner's hall stands where Ferris Booth's used to. The latter, as you recall, served as a locus of the student strike in '68. According to a plaque embedded in the sidewalk near the entrance, Ferris Booth Hall was dedicated in 1960. Replaced in forty years and renamed? Wow, that's fast.

Once inside, several of the students – you've only met them once – recognize you and wax effusive in their thanks for your help. You warm to their praise, but like so much else, it washes off you in the instant. The proceedings begin. A couple of designs make explicit use of shadows: in particular, those cast by the WTC towers at the moment they were struck by their respective planes. Which, of course, would be two events separated in time, so only apparent parallels here. Your crew's turn comes. Several students in turn articulate an aspect of the total design, and though some are stronger, more legible speakers than others, as a whole they carry off their moment in the sun with focus, confidence and a sense of genuine collegial engagement. Had the WTC been thought *and* felt through half as well as these guys' thesis, it'd be standing there still.

But talk of shadows flips you back to when you first saw Etyan Kaufman's bridge proposal at Protetch, at the beginning of the year. What struck you then, even in your daze, was how the twin spans emulated the shadows of the towers, entwined and stretched across the river.

Your duty of attendance fulfilled, you offer the requisite congratulations and vanish as soon as politesse will allow. When you get home, make a bee-line for Gwen's room and pull *A Child's Garden of Verses* – your old copy with the scotch-taped spine – from beneath *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* on the night table. Sit on her bed and read, once again, "My Shadow":

I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me,
And what can be the use of him is more than I can see.
He is very, very like me from the heels up to the head;
And I see him jump before me, when I jump into my bed.

The funniest thing about him is the way he likes to grow –
Not at all like proper children, which is always very slow;
For he sometimes shoots up taller like an India-rubber ball,
And he sometimes gets so little that there's none of him at all.

He hasn't got a notion of how children ought to play,

And can only make a fool of me in every sort of way.
He stays so close beside me, he's a coward you can see;
I'd think shame to stick to nursie as that shadow sticks to me!

One morning, very early, before the sun was up,
I rose and found the shining dew on every buttercup;
But my lazy little shadow, like an errant sleepyhead,
Had stayed at home behind me and was fast asleep in bed.

You show the poem to Katie and she says something quite profound about Stevenson and the Other. And reminds you that he came from a family of engineers, lighthouse builders.

• • •

Afternoon to the café to write, but can't and instead get seduced by the *Times*, whence you learn that under the radar, the government has bought us a new Navy. Billions and billions served. Up. Now, at last, everything will be alright.

A story on the latest mad pipe bomber. The day before he was arrested, the FBI issued this description: Fiftyish, disaffected hippie-type, a certified Unibomber II. Turns out the confessed bomber's age is 21. Almost generically clean cut, Luke Helder is a member of a rock band named Apathy. His pattern of bombs, distributed across five states is mapped out as an enormous smiley face. These last few days, when you overload on the deadly manifest silliness of it all, your mind tosses up the refrain from a pop song of the late '60s:

It's all too beautiful, it's all too beautiful…

That's all you remember. No, the trick is to hypnotize yourself – it's all still in there:

Over bridge of sighs to rest my eyes
In shades of green
Under dreaming spires, to Itchycoo Park
That's where I've been

What did you do there? I got high
What did you feel there? Well I cried
But why the tears then? Tell you why
It's all too beautiful, it's all too beautiful…

Right – and the group was called Small Faces.

• • •

Ah, some real news. Someone or other has polled the authors of the world and we have spoken. The greatest, best, most absolutely perfect novel of all time is *Don Quixote.* Now if only Cervantes could be reconstituted from a sneeze, sat down in a multiplex – he'd have to leave his rapier in the lobby – and asked afterward what he thought of *Spiderman*. $125 million in its first weekend. More better superlatives. You do the math and something like one out of twenty Americans saw it within 48 hours of its release. Numbers like this Goebbles would have never dared to dream. Carpet bombing. What sort of city arises from the ashes of so many devastated minds?

• • •

In the café's bathroom rack there is still a plentiful stock of light blue postcards put out by the NYC Department of Public Health and Project Liberty urging the traumatized to call 1 800 LIFENET because "Even heroes need to talk." Another card in the series avers that "New York needs us strong," and insists, in the same bold white letters: "We're all in this together."

• • •

9:15 pm. Peasoup fog. From the bedroom window, the Empire State, a third of a mile northeast as the crow flies, completely invisible, illuminated top and all.

May 10 – Le G. – Early Morning

Steve, master of irony, presents you with an article he's clipped out of yesterday's *New York Sun*. Thus you discover that in the 1890s Kaiser Wilhelm, in a fit of jealous pique at America's colonial expansion, planned an invasion of the U.S. by a hundred thousand German troops. Initially, the first targets struck were to be the major east coast naval installations, but in 1906 the scheme was modified so the assault began with bombardment of New York City. Ah, the plans, the plans!

May 12, Sunday

Fresh-laid white cement near Gamin, a three-panel strip across the breadth of the sidewalk. New macadam on the street too. You recall that a few days ago they were sawing up the roadway, excavating and laying new pipe there. Then, some time when you weren't around to watch, a single pigeon tracked diagonally across the wet cement, heading more or less northwest, toward your house and the Empire State Building beyond.

Years ago when Gwen was very small, they laid some fresh cement for a temporary sidewalk up by the luxury corporate chicken-coop on the next corner, the one you call the Mexico City, because of the skinny cinderblock columns, and the enormously thick floor slabs. You'd found a stick and held Gwen's hand as she incised her name G-W-E-N. She was delighted, but she kept looking round, hugely afraid you'd be caught. Nearly every day then, for a year, she passed her name until the temporary sidewalk got jackhammered up for a more permanent one. On the ground floor now, for months on end, a glass-fronted concrete chasm. Despite the allure of "Prime Retail Space," an occupant has failed to materialize.

Thus the great toad of Manhattan real estate inflates itself more slowly these past months – many projects near completion, with notably fewer groundbreakings – in Chelsea at any rate. One spanking new pile of bricks at 23rd and Sixth, named The Caroline, anchors the string of new apartment towers entraining up the avenue through the whittled-down flower district. Plastered ubiquitously around the neighborhood – on scaffolding signs, banners and even ads on nearby phone booths – the emblem for this high-rent MacPalazzo is striking indeed. It's a portrait-shaped depiction of the comely head and upper torso of a bare-breasted woman caught in the act of raising her

arms to adjust her coiffure, draw on her cloak, or perhaps support the imagined portico of her eponymous building. She's rendered as an "antique" engraving – part karyatid, water nymph, ship's figurehead – run together with a hundred other strains of mythic womanhood. It's soft core porn, for sure, and hokey past-o-rama too – a literally naked ploy to confer upon "Manhattan's Finest and Fastest Renting Building" the mantle of "A Timeless Classic." True, all true. Yet in this place and moment her presence stirs up something more. Here, at this non-descript and treeless intersection, flanked at every hand by vast, bleak chain stores or grungy little shops all draped in tattered banners, red and gray and blue, a goddess of the hearth has risen, bearing promises of limitless abundance, shelter and fecundity. "Ah," you nearly shouted when you first saw her image, "Ashcroft will never visit here – he couldn't stand the energy!"

Now if that isn't ridiculous, you don't know what is. Desperate associations of a flailing mind. But suddenly, for a half a block, your heart felt lighter. Eros, however compromised, lives on – a hop, skip and a jump from where the tricky gusts occasioned by the windplay among the Flatiron building, Met Life tower and Madison Square Park could blow a woman's skirt up high as her head, sudden as an inverting umbrella in a nor'easter. Back when the twentieth century was a teenager, long before Marilyn seized the opportunity of a subway sirocco, cops patrolled this crossroads twirling their batons, shooing away clusters of loitering men. It was here that the officer's timeless order to "Move it along now," transmuted into modern slang with longer legs: "Twenty-three skiddoo!"

• • •

Vic P., one of your Goddard students has written a brief, intense memoir of an acid trip he took in 1983. Lovely piece. Meticulous evocation of a *cultural* moment articulated in the relationship between the narrator and a fellow tripper, a lover of no-wave music who turns out to be quite compellingly mad. In his accompanying letter Vic recalls these experiences as feeling, even at the time like a narration. And now, nineteen years on, that narration takes material form. And something in Vic's way of telling alerts you to the degree to which your writing of this moment of your city and yourself has taken on ever more the qualities of concrete hallucination.

• • •

Burst, Phoenix-like out of the swamp of your Goddard packets. Out onto the street. Hail, and across three lanes he sweeps and screeches. Hop inside. Through the slid-open partition window, the driver looks to be, aside from a couple of day's growth of beard, a clean-cut young fellow. You lean over to read the name on his "picture." The allegedly bullet-proof plexiglas has a nearly sandblasted quality, but through its distress, the letters appear to spell Kevoucle, Hamid. As he trips the meter and accelerates, a grotesquely distorted recording blasting from the speakers just behind you nearly precipitates you out of your seat. "Hi!" – a chorus of shrieks – "We're the Radio City Music Hall Rockettes!" – this amidst an amped-up clatter of tap shoes – "We get a kick out of New York City and you should too, but remember to buckle your seat belt…" Typical Giuliani: the terrorism of everyday life.

Hamid Kevoucle seems not entirely sure of the distinct functions of accelerator and brake, yet somehow you navigate the raucous global wholesale streets east by northeast toward Gloria's oasis of tranquility in Murray Hill. Pull over at the corner of Park and 35th. The instant he hits the button to stop the meter, the Rockettes renew their assault. They insist vehemently, the cadence of their phrases enforced by infernal stomping, that you take your receipt. They demand you clear out your belongings, and most terrifying of all, threaten to "See you at the show!" You step out onto the street, your nerves shot. You've given Hamid Kevoucle a substantial tip, not for being a good driver which he isn't, but because it is the only way you can acknowledge his having to endure that harsh, unvarying sonic assault sixty times a day, six days a week.

• • •

In the space of your writing, you establish your own sovereign republic. The moment you stop moving the pen, the reaction sets in: the white terror of the counter-revolution. You've never moved a pen around for therapy's sake. But now it's a matter of keeping your marbles from skittering off the table.

• • •

It is not remembered what Nero fiddled. It is remembered *that* he fiddled.

• • •

Soul Makossa.

May 13 – Early Morning

Rain again. Never know a lusher, more verdant urban spring. On 22nd Street, the boughs of the pear trees hang so low over the sidewalk you have to duck.

Impressed in a single square of pavement near Leo House, what appear to be the pawprints of a kitten.

Ma ma ma, Ma ma sa, Ma ma Makossa…

• • •

Haven't been following the story systematically, but lord, the extraordinary, *ad hominem* attacks on Pavarotti, for presumably dissing NYC. Claiming congestion, he cancelled a performance of *Tosca*, and did not appear in person to apologize. In the *Post,* above a picture of the tenor bundled up in coats and mufflers the headline: *The Fat Man Won't Sing.* Inside on the editorial page, a grotesquely obese caricature: he's being transported by crane over the heads of the other cows in the stockyard. Ever alert to the main chance, the *Times* leveraged, and at the same time endorsed the Post's hostility, repeating the "Fat Man" headline uncritically at the top of its own story.

Such terrifying effusions of hatred. Such a tidal wave of free floating rage. One searches for a rational underpinning, however distorted. Is the abundantly corporeal Pavarotti a stand-in for the wispy, and now dematerialized Bin Laden? Bearded, yet otherwise the physical obverse of the Great Enemy of Civilization? Or is he taking the heat for repressed murderous impulses toward the gargantuan Sharon? A tinge of anti-Catholic backlash in the air? First they came for the priests, then the tenors. In any case, the hate seems nearly anti-Semitic in its virulence. Clearly the media finds his

silence enraging: nobody and nothing can make the fat man sing if he doesn't want to. The swan has the power to withhold his blessing.

But as in so many other things, a dissonance between this whipped-up scandal and life on the ground. Nobody you've spoken to raises the subject, and folks you bring it up with don't seem to care much about Pavarotti one way or t'other, assuming they've registered the flap at all. Odds are, as is nearly always the case in this attention-deficit culture, a week from now, some new object of hatred will be fixed upon with vituperative abandon, shaken and shrieked at, and then abruptly let fall.

Baudrillard got it wrong. Objects in rearview mirror get small real fast, and then they disappear.

• • •

A '50s novelty song swims into your head: *Purple People Eaters.* "One eyed, one horned, flying purple people eaters…"

• • •

Afternoon at Gamin. Look up from your book. Across the room, a customer pumping himself a take-out coffee. At his feet, a miniature, black and white bull dog. Cutest thing. With three legs.

May 14

In the latest issue of *Downtown Express*, an ad for a "World Trade Center Pregnancy Study" conducted by Mount Sinai Hospital. Another ad asks "9/11 Health Problems?" This one from the Chemical Sensitivity Foundation of Brunswick, ME.

The Tribeca Film Festival draws "tens of thousands" for "films, fun and music." AmEx celebrates its return to Battery Park City with a full page ad in the *Times* and sponsors a concert series to the tune of a million dollars. At the opening ceremony Mayor Bloomberg draws out his AmEx card and vows to use it exclusively.

Hundreds of children brandish "shaft of light" swords in emulation of the battles in *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones*, an event the *Times* describes as symptomatic of the "healing."

The last bargeful of debris is removed from Pier 25.

Witness the birth of the WTC industry. No, it was born with the first helicopter livecam on the scene. Why then did it take you so long to come up with this formulation? You were there, heard the words yourself, echoing in the dark cave of the studio way back when on September 14 – Matt Lauer's imperative to his technician: "Give me the towers in slow motion – exploding, falling – whatever!"

Turn to the *Times*. The moon's dust, it seems, "Hides a Throbbing Heart." This bombshell headlines the science section. Soon to be revealed, *la lune's* greatest secret: "far beneath its cold craters and rocky landscape lies a heart that is warm and yielding." This new narrative of molten innards, of lovely ductile stuff could "boost a theory that the Moon was born in the aftermath of a violent collision between early Earth and a speeding cosmic wanderer."

In the compromised poetics of journalistic wish-fulfillment, the Moon transforms into a love child, ripe for love in turn. Wears its love like heaven. *Agua de luna.* Or, as they say Down Under: "she'll be right." In these abrasive, lapidary days – days never oily enough, never ensanguinated enough, even the Gray Lady yearns to discover a heart beating within its barren soul.

• • •

It's an awful feeling: more shoes to drop off this centipede. It's not over. Whoever brought the towers down isn't finished.

Comes, through channels, a weird tale from the land of *eminences grise*, of "Buzzy" Krongard, CIA director and bigtime investor. Until quite lately "Buzzy" served as a prime shareholder in Deutche Bank AB Brown. On September 6-7, 2001, the bank placed 4,700 put options on United Airlines and took a similar position against American. The smart money? The crazy money? She'll be right. No worries. Just futures.

• • •

The state is capable of organizing a massacre and at the same time organizing the mourning, the public outrage, the medals for the widows and orphans and the official funerals with caribinieri presenting arms and standing to attention.

– Dario Fo, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (postscript)

• • •

Massacres of the impotent.

• • •

Let it go, Eric. Just let it go.

May 16

Woke up this morning so sick with the oppression and death around and within that you could scarcely move. Held the image of Gwen's face before you, not how she will look singing "Eleanor Rigby" in the chorus tonight, but just as it is when she is awake and observant, like an icon. Oval.

On the way to school she sang, or rather worked over, "On Broadway," her latest vocal conquest. *They say the neon lights are bright on Broadway; They say there's always magic in the air; But when you're walking down the street; And you ain't had enough to eat; The glitter rubs right off and you're nowhere (on Broadway).*

Her speaking voice is high and light, like that of a much younger child, so it's a surprise to hear her hitting the low notes so effortlessly. Wonder what Ben E. King would think.

In her backpack, along with her lunch and schoolbooks, she carries a letter Katie wrote, signed by both of you informing her teacher that she'll write a report on the article on the pulsating moon, rather than the horrible, war-mongering spew the kids are supposed to parrot in *TIME for Kids*. Basta. A tiny basta in the grand capitulation.

"I won't quit till I'm a star on Broadway" she sings. Looks up and over at you, expectant. Lag time. You remember your line: "All up and down Broadway…" Try for that drawl, that baritone.

• • •

Time to write. Nose to the wheel, shoulder to the grindstone. But your café compulsion leads you astray. Head back to the newspaper rack. Nothing there yet of today's droppings. Take a seat at Table 4. Down the street comes Mario, the *Post* and *Times* in his hand. Asks with his eyes if you want them and you affirm. Face up, in front of you now, the tabloid headline, white against black, a good two and a half inches high: BUSH KNEW.

Inside, "9/11: The Recovery – By the numbers:

Total victims: 2,823

Remains recovered: 19,497

Bodies recovered: 289

Debris removed: 1,610.852"

Pounds, tons – whatever.

• • •

Vanished with the wreckage, human and otherwise, the material evidence of ten hijackers. Were they considered part of the debris (only those who performed the task know how tenderly weighed)? On what balance sheet do they tally?

Is it possible, is it necessary, to invent a new mathematics for this terrordome? Some better description, some bridge between the quantity and quality of things?

• • •

p.m. back home and walking through your lobby toward the elevator. Joe, the mailman beckons, "Over here Mr. D." He calls you this habitually and though you've told him your given name a dozen times, he seems to enjoy the formality. "Here's

something to interest you." You've exchanged casual greeting for years, but the new wrinkle is that Joe now associates you with the trade center having recognized you on the Today Show. He's one of a small, but discernable group who now perceive you as plastered over with a banner reading: *As seen on TV*.

This time it isn't a special piece of mail Joe wants to hand you, rather he pauses in his work and pulls out his wallet from which he draws a twenty. Painstakingly he folds the bill this way and that, then hands it to you for examination: *voila!* the image of the White House on the greenback side, transformed into twin towers. He refolds it another way and there's a pentagon. "Spooky," he says.

• • •

In your nap comes a dream rhyme:

nine-eleven, twentyfour-seven
children can't wait to get to heaven.

May 17 – Gioia and Ken's House, Bearsville, NY – Evening

Gwen sits by the hearth, stares into the blaze. Do you remember, she asks, the poem about fire she wrote in second grade. Indeed you do not. So she recites it:

Where does this dancer go
On after the stage of light?…

Then lines about the smell of smoke that "still roams about," though the fire has died by morning. She speaks of the "hard work of trees," who repair to a kind of forest nightclub where flames, cast as women, leap and twirl.

…Don't try and stop them
It's their destiny
Those yellow endless dancers
Will just dance through the night.

"Gwen, you remember all that – from two years ago?" She nods.

May 20 – Le G. – Early Morning.

New York Post front page: "Cheney's Terror Warning: IT'S NOT IF – BUT WHEN." Beneath his visage, steely blue eyes. His mouth caught speaking, slightly more out of one side than the other, which lends him the aspect of a deadly serious Bob Hope.

"In a dire warning yesterday, VP Dick Cheney told Americans that Osama bin Laden's terror network is 'almost a certainty' to launch another deadly assault against the U.S. In his chilling assessment, Cheney said: 'It's not a matter of if, but when.' Meanwhile it emerged that possible targets may include apartment buildings, malls, restaurants and banks; see pages 4 & 5."

What appears to be the muddled language of a hysterical tabloid actually contains a very clear message: Cheney et al are threatening more terror. It matters little whether the assault comes in the form of "blowback" or direct action by the state. The source of the violence to come is less important than the certainty of its coming, and the authority of the *vates.* The language is played so close to the edge; so near to unmasking itself, to becoming not a confession of guilt, but an exhibition of triumphant psychosis. Our job is not to question what the President did or did not know. It is only to tremble in anticipation of the blow. This is no a Zen use of the stick. Nor even Teddy Roosevelt's. It constitutes a monopoly on the infliction of fear.

Mike B. walks into the café. You exchange salutations. He holds a small book in his hands, one he is enjoying: *Achilles*, a novel by Elizabeth Cook. Mike pats himself down, cannot seem to find his reading glasses. He heads back home leaving you holding the volume. You open it: Achilles, newly arrived in, or at the mouth of hell, is anxious for news of his son Neoptolemus, last seen at the siege of Troy. Odysseus assures Achilles: "All harm came from him. No harm came to him." You read the sentences over and over. Mike returns with his glasses. You hand him back his book, express interest in reading it when he's done.

Turn to the *Times*, which reports the veep's prophesy on page 17 under the headline: "Cheney Expects More Terror for U.S." Here, the picture shows him with his mouth closed, head tilted, as though listening to an interlocutor soft-focus in the foreground right. Beneath this photo, and separated by another headline is one of Condoleezza Rice looking deeply weary, pressing her fingers to her furrowed brow.

You show this picture to Steven next to you at Table 5 joking that it looks like the old ads for Anacin offering fast fast fast relief. Steve's wife is a physician specializing in headaches, and thus, if only via osmosis, he has some understanding of these matters. He scrutinizes the picture, nods sagely, and says Rice's pose is typical of a migraine sufferer.

Return to the *Post*. Page 5. To drive home the message the editor has clustered photos illustrating an example of each of the "soft targets" Cheney has listed as most vulnerable. Anti-clockwise from left: a shot from above of a mall's "main street" in full consumer cry; a bank vault, the door ajar, permitting a peek within; a young couple in a restaurant, unaware of the camera, swept up in the narcosis of one another's gaze and caress; a trim woman in a suit selects what appears to be a can of Spam from a supermarket shelf, and last, representing "Apartment buildings," a doorman wearing an interpretation of Olde English livery modified toward the military, has pulled a heavy grated door open and bids us enter. The silliness of the pastiche, culminating with an invitation to tour a metaphorical Tower of London, makes you nearly giddy. Out onto the street you go, into the bone chilling gusts of a spring that feel straight out of October.

• • •

Afternoon nap. A dream in which you work for Con Ed and are rebuilding the power station at #7 WTC. Wearing one of those miner's hats, you walk down a ramp into the cavernous foundation. Light from an opening to your left, a breach in the concrete wall. You pass through the portal and find yourself standing in the WTC's "bathtub." As you enter, the vast space is completely roofed over with translucent tarp, which in the manner of dreams, evaporates, and you find yourself standing in an open air immensity – the great foundation before the towers came.

• • •

'*If seven maids with seven mops*
Swept it for half a year

Do you suppose,' the Walrus said,
'That they could get it clear?'

May 21

Days wasted in thrall to fear.

The culture was, like a vessel, already filled with fear. Saturated, sponge-like. Who killed Kennedy? and on and on from there. Now we brim over.

You notice you've arrested your breathing. You stretch. Which hurts, so you stand. Attempt to do some Qi Gong moves, facing south. Your eyes focus on nothing in particular, but you cannot help notice, through the window, the Fuji blimp as it passes over, or appears to pass over the former site of the World Trade Center. In its silence, its slowness, its smooth trajectory, the airship is a dread image.

Of course there are sirens, choppers, planes – some military – overflying the city seemingly at random, but certainly outside their pre-9/11 flightpaths. Caught on the 20th floor, somewhere between the flying machines and the ground, you see in your mind, half hallucinated, Broadway as the Mohican trail – the high ridge of Manhattan Island – heading north to another Algonquin settlement that would become Montreal.

Finished with your Qi Gongs. Your extremities are still chilled, but your internal organs feel palpably warmer.

• • •

Not fear of God, just fear.

• • •

Newton York City: the bruised apple which so fell off the tree.

May 22

Morning visit with Elizabeth at her new office on the twenty-second floor of a hulking garment district fortress of a building on Seventh Avenue between 27th and 28th. The columns and floors that once bore the weight of sewing machines and

printing presses, now support the gentler arts of psychotherapy and, in an office down the hall "consulting."

Outside the window a jet, literally, screams overhead, twin engines, passenger. It gains altitude, banks over lower Manhattan and Brooklyn then makes what looks like a routine approach to LaGuardia. The morning sun flashes off its skin and for an instant, you're sure it is igniting.

Waiting for the other shoe to drop. But what does this mean when you're dealing with a creature of innumerable legs?

You venture downstairs and breakfast at the Utopia Diner. Cell phones detonating everywhere, including in her bag. You have arrived not at Utopia, but rather Rabelais's Ringing Island, *L'Isle Sonante*, where the migratory birds flock to live sumptuously while warbling to the carillon surround.

She orders breakfast, you a decaf. As always, your conversation ranges over a wide, unpredictable terrain. Elizabeth tells you of the horrific deaths that befell her childhood invisible companions. And how in her doctoral thesis, she turned their "tomb" into a "tome." The letters click in your head like tumblers falling to a true-cut key and pulling out your red razor point pen you draw for her, on a napkin, what happens if one removes the closed, rounded of part of the B, leaving in its place an E – thus TOMB, quite graphically becomes TOME. And, moreover, in a language that reads left to right, the energies liberated from the once-entombed B advance boldly across the page. When you get up to leave, she doesn't claim the napkin, so you tuck the napkin in your journal book – somehow it feels like an artifact.

Return home to discover your journal book is not in your backpack. Good lord, so much this past year you never had time to transcribe. Could you have somehow left it at Utopia? Pound the elevator button. The wait is maddening. Once downstairs, you sprint out the back door, diagonally across Eighth Avenue toward the coffee shop.

Purposely, you slow your pace as you enter. There is something about being past fifty that imposes its own sense of dignity, however fraught or ridiculous the circumstances. You spot the waitress and her eyes light up when she sees you. "I was going to call if you didn't come back in ten minuets," she says, reaches beneath the counter and delivers the book into your hands. Whereupon it hits you that, more important than anything written inside, the book contains the plastic sleeve you use as a

bookmark, filled with Katie's and Gwen's artworks, snapshots from photo kiosks, and a note from your mother – the epitaph on Wilde's tomb at Père Lachaise: "For his mourners will be outcast men, and outcasts always mourn." What was it in that turn of phrase that moved her so?

In your manifest relief, you offer up a quip of thanks and the waitress's eyes light up another magnitude which lends her face the look of one of those encaustic portraits placed over mummy cases in Ptolemaic Egypt – more alive almost than the living. You leave, grateful to Jack for teaching you to tip well.

Down the street home. Imagine – the Utopia being a "Greek" coffee shop – that the waitress is Greek too, and despite her youth, in some way ancient, fundamental.

May 23 – Le G. – Early Morning

NY Post: IT'S HER. Though the story concerns the discovery of the bones of Chandra Levy, the vanished Congressional intern, it echoes last week's gasp on forewarnings to the President: HE KNEW.

You recall Marshall's blurb of *Divided…* in particular his statement that you "knew where the bodies are buried…". Not this time, you don't. Now, as the sweepers sweep up the last remnants of the WTC, the forensics crews comb the Fresh Kills landfill for evidence, however minute, of the nearly two thousand people who, for all intents and purposes, completely evaporated on September 11 – who were, as the Bloods and Crips once said, and maybe still do, "smoked."

But didn't you have a preview of this too, when Nancy's plane went down off Newfoundland, what was it, three plus years ago? How little was left of so many. Such a mass of missing material. No – not missing so much as finely dispersed. It is not as though the mass was converted to energy, that it entered amaterially "into the world of light." Rather the conditions of the crash made it impossible to identify even coherent body "parts." In short, one buried less than what one could hold in one's hand. Hard in the absence of form, to tell a story.

• • •

Out came a book last week, *After the World Trade Center: Rethinking New York City* and in it, your essay on the parallels between the Yamasaki, the towers' architect and Atta, the urban planner gone bad, who purportedly engineered their destruction.

Called upon to participate in a booklaunch cum panel at Barnes & Noble, you found yourself inspired to dismissive utterances about the prospects for any sort of democratic planning process. You said, ex cathedra, something along the lines of: "It's a done deal." No audible gasps, but during the Q&A, you were peppered with questions by people who assumed you had some sort of inside track or back channel. In truth you've no evidence beside a bit of common sense which tells you that the process, if one can use such a term for the already programmed, is far too important to permit of genuine public engagement. If the state can't control the symbolic discourse, well then, what the hell's it good for?

Then came today's *Times* announcing that Beyer, Blinder + Bell have got the redesign contract from the PA and the Lower Manhattan Development Corp. Wham bam. What to say? But truly, cannot anyone endowed with smell catch wind of the Delphic vapors wafting from the blown-out Omphalos? A (Mohammed) Atta of roses? You reel through these sorry days almost giddy with contempt for your fellow New Yorkers. Pops into your head from time to time, this saving mantra – a Chumbawamba lyric, spit out in fury, the Yorkshire syntax punching out the final T's:

Your olfactory nerve's gone up the spout;
You can't smell a rat when your nose is out.

May 24 – Le G. – Early Morning

In walks Mike B. and takes his seat at Table 3 – his spot – just to the right of the door, if you're facing out. Interesting pin he's got on his bag, first time you've noticed it. People he knows make them – highly crafted, custom work. Real cloisonné. He hands it to you for a closer look: a skull in profile, wearing a red bandana. Against the black surround, the motto: RIDE HARD, DIE FREE.

The *Times* begins its coverage of Bush in Europe by stating, absent of irony that the President "stood today in the well of Germany's reconstructed Reichstag and told Parliament that the terrorist groups the United States and its allies are hunting down constitute a 'new totalitarian threat,' and in a clear reference to Hitler, compared the

current struggle to a past generation's battle against those who 'killed in the name of racial purity.'" How extraordinary that this speech transpires where it does. For what was the destruction of the World Trade Center if not the flashpoint, the liminal moment, the symbolic assault that serves to pre-justify a host of horrors unleashed by a nation that sees itself as victim? At least until the Reich itself comes crashing down.

Steve sits down at the table to your left. You talk about summer travel plans, his family's and yours. His crew is headed for Ireland, but before that, Germany starting off in Ulm. "Oh," you say, "the city famous for its young men hanging around brooding?" He looks at you quizzically and you make the quip you've been waiting years to utter: "The Ulm-louts."

Unflappable, Steve smiles to show he registers the joke, then responds with a German tongue-twister that does you one better:

In Ulm,
Um Ulm,
und Um Ulm Herum

In Ulm, around Ulm, and around about Ulm. It's a spiral. It spins out, then winds back.

Enter George S., marketeer extraordinaire. Must be taking the morning off from his company's campaign to sell rice to Latinas. Wow, what a tee shirt: brand new, khaki colored, with a brilliantly colored image of Ho Chi Minh's visage, superimposed on a red and gold Vietnamese flag, silkscreened onto the left breast, presumably over the heart of the wearer. George can truly be called a world traveler. Before Vietnam came Peru, or was it vice versa. Wants to visit Bhutan and no doubt he will. He's tall and slim and the teeshirt suits him well. As he walks toward Table 9, you call out: *Dare to struggle, dare to win.* George is a young fella, too young to remember the day, but he must know the slogan from somewhere, for he turns round and smiles.

• • •

Before the World Trade Center, the parallel supports of the Brooklyn Bridge.

• • •

Evening, Metropolitan Museum. Walk down the corridor where they hang the temporary photos and prints. An image of New York in the '30s reminds you of one of Erich Mendelson's pictures – jogs your memory. Didn't his book *America* contain a section called "World Center – Money Center"? Have to look that up.

May 25 – Midday

Fleet's in and the city teems with sailors, their whites blinding and infant-like. Last night you saw a whole passel of them meandering around the meat district. Abstractedly passing the old Hellfire Club and the Anvil, where one night, as though in a dream, you saw the knuckles of one man imprint their shape on the belly of another – from within – as if some miraculous pregnancy of the fist were occurring. KY, Surgilube – whatever gets you through the night.

But the sailors, eight of them, straggle diagonally across Hudson Street's blend of cobblestone and macadam patching, no doubt unaware of the dramas that have unfolded on the streets and bars and subterranean dens over which they walk. You notice that one sailor is a woman, and that she is holding hands with one of the men, a connection between them at once casual and tender. You overtake the group, walking New York speed – how many knots? – and flash on the signature line Tillie Olsen gives Whitey in *Tell Me a Riddle*: "Hey sailor, what ship?" You almost call it aloud, but then see the appliqués on their uniforms. Fresh off the Iwo Jima, they're half your age. Children. Innocents abroad.

May 26

Again, the media unconsciously utters politics' secret name. Bush flies eastward. In Moscow, he meets with Putin. There seems a striking parallelism between them. *Newsday*'s headline proclaims the two heads of state to be "on the same terror page."

May 27

Our obese, slack-jawed, medicated, incarcerated society, bursting at the seams with things, is on its way, despite audible tick-tocks, to surviving another Memorial Day, without blowing up. Onward! Onward to the summer palace!

May 29

Good writers are those that keep the language efficient. That is to say, keep it accurate, keep it clear….

The fogged language of swindling classes serves only a temporary purpose….

A people that grows accustomed to sloppy writing is a people in process of losing grip on its empire and on itself. And this looseness and blowsiness is not anything as simple and scandalous as abrupt and disordered syntax.

It concerns the relation of expression to meaning.

So says Ezra Pound in the *ABC of Reading*.

• • •

Who's afraid of Ezra Pound?

• • •

Or for that matter, Banquo's ghost. *Remember me!* No, that was Hamlet's old man.

• • •

New York needs a reincarnation of Joseph Mitchell like a hole in the head. What would be useful would be our own Pepys, or Baudelaire or Benjamin, or some admixture of the lot. We need to get small again, to fade into the twilight's gray dawn, to pick up again each morning the tools of an old laborer: *le crépuscule du matin.*

• • •

Out of the blue Gioia, fellow seeker born under the sign of the twins, calls to inform you that Mercury's in retrograde – something you could just as easily have told her had you thought about it since you feel in your bones. Sound comes as though

you're hearing down a very long coil, your voice feels tinny and deprived of overtones, and you get the sense that no one can understand what you're saying at all.

2 LA LA LAND

May 30 – Le G. – Early Morning

Your birthday, 52.

Official WTC "Closure Ceremony," 9 months – "Moving On" quoth the *Post*.

Keep to your book. Wherein you read that in 1498 Columbus declared the earth to have "the shape of a pear, which is very round except at the stem end where it is very prominent like… a woman's nipple."

9:05 a.m. Outside the café, a large vehicle, like a mobile home, docks at the curb. Across its broad flank the logotype proclaims "Fifth & Sunset." A side door opens, beneath which a kind of folding stepladder descends and eight people pour out videlicet: one blonde model in a black dress; one photographer; one photographer's assistant; one make-up person cum stylist, prettier than the model, with enormous hazel eyes, but too short and cursed with a slight overbite; one stylist's assistant. The other two, a man and a woman, though not wearing suits, appear to represent "the client." Across the breadth of sidewalk they sweep and into the café.

Closer up, you can see the stylist wears a lacy white peasant blouse. Her assistant, a gangly young man – his scraggly beard and pony tail give him the look of a grown-up child raised on a commune – is charged with spraying and combing the model's sumptuous tresses. Thus in a virtual eyeblink, the room fills the attar of hairspray – particles hazing the air as the photo crew bounces megawatt illumination off every available surface.

Mario ventures outside and cranks up the awning for maximum sun exposure. Your eyes meet and he shrugs his shoulders, smiles. This too shall pass. You pick up your coffee and book and move deeper into the room to escape the flood of light. Too nuclear even for a depressive carrying genes from the Levant. The model perches on a chair at Table 2, just left of the door. She pretends to drink a café au lait and nibble on a croissant while the photographer, a sharp-featured, swarthy bloke in an orange tee

shirt, hovers in the entranceway, occasionally thrusting his camera over the threshold to clack the shutter. Between shots, his assistant rushes in to hold a light meter next to the model's cheek.

For a quarter hour or so, the photographer shoots polaroids. Then a final combing. But wait – the polaroids reveal the dress to be too voluminous at the waist. Into the frame swoops the stylist and cinches with a spring clamp the excess fabric at the small of the model's back, then pulls an "evercare" lint-removing wand out of her jeans pocket and gives the fabric a fairy-light once-over. The serious clacking begins.

You return to *Michelet* wherein Barthes proposes that:

Based on the alliance of the two sexes, the People gradually becomes…a superior means of knowledge. Quite like Woman, and in virtually the same direction, the People is above History, it opens Nature and grants access to the supernatural goal of a paradisal, reconciled humanity. The conjunction of adverse sexes into a third and complete ultra-sex represents the abolition of all contraries, the magical restoration of a seamless world which is no longer torn between contradictory postulations….

The People set no frontier between yes and no. Michelet, moreover, has given the same image of this higher ambiguity: that of the little girl cradling her doll, smiling at her doll, yet knowing all the while that her doll is a wooden figure.

Within ten minutes it is all over. The shoot has moved on to the next location. With the awning still rolled up, morning light streams in on the empty table where the model sat, and on her still-full bowl of café au lait, the foam appreciably deflated, and the fingerprinted, unbitten croissant.

It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood. But the weather report promises afternoon thunderstorm and an evening laced with hail.

• • •

Wolfgang departs tomorrow, migrating back to Germany for the summer and early fall, not to return until nearly Thanksgiving. The only time you've ever spoken to him across the ocean was when he called on September 12. As a semi-New Yorker, he knew that the city had not been reduced to ruins, and assumed you'd survived. But he

wanted to make sure your critical nature and sense of humor was still intact. Somehow, you assured him it had.

This morning at 11 you ring him up. He is having trouble with the reception on his portable phone, so he moves toward the transmitter in the kitchen, and in so doing, looks out his window. With the air of someone not yet entirely awakened from a deeper-than-planned siesta, he describes the scene along the West Side highway: a cortège – a truck bearing the final beam, masses of people, bagpipers, and the site itself, empty.

• • •

Gioia calls to wish you happy birthday in Sicilian. You discuss the temptation of Adam with a fig – this is the truth of the matter and she reads you a Sephardic saying just she's discovered:

El amor es un guzanico que entra por el ojico… Love is a tiny worm that enters through the little eye… when it reaches the heart, hold on tight!

Enticed by the smell of baking, you put aside your Goddard work, walk down the hall and into kitchen. On the counter, K. is turning out the second layer of your cake. There they lie side by side: two dark and perfect discus moons.

• • •

After dinner, the traditional "blackout" and presentation of the cake. You blow out the five candles, wishing mightily for what you cannot reveal, lest it not come true. Katie, who also by tradition cuts the cake, asks how big a slice you want. "Large," you say and she takes you at your word. Large and wonderful is what it is.

• • •

11:57 p.m. No storm, no hail. The night is misty, but calm.

May 31

The entry above might be the end of it. *That's it* you thought last night. But the morning tells you to go on.

In the café you nod to a woman you have seen many times but never conversed with. You're no expert in these things but she possesses an incredibly "Mayan" face. Yet her affect looks thoroughly modern North American. You're not even sure what that means. Something in her manner tells you she's a complicated person. When she smiles to say goodbye to the waiter, she looks about twenty. Other times, she could be any age at all but young.

You can't resist. Put the saucer on your coffee, and walk fast to school in time to see Gwen running down the sidewalk toward you. She nearly collapses into your arms: "Must beat Mikey" she gasps. No sweat, her classmate's just rounding the corner. It's nearly quarter to nine. You point up the school steps. "Go!"

Calypsonian Kelvin buttonholes you. Sotto voce he confides that he'll start recording tonight. Ten tracks one right after the other – songs about The World Trade Center, Bin Laden, youth in prison. For a moment you breath a bit, oxygenated by the idea that right here in front of you is a man, a father, a moralist, a popular song writer all in one.

He confides that he hasn't told anyone else he's about to record. Wants to keep the energy concentrated. But it begins tonight.

You tell him your ears are ready.

• • •

In this world there are a great many white people producing fuckall and consuming a great deal. Whether consciously or not, I suppose a great many people of all sorts wonder, in one way or another, when this will end.

A contractor's pickup truck stops for a traffic light. The truck's cargo consists of a large cardboard carton printed "Assembled Vanity." The light changes and the truck speeds away.

The question arises in your mind whether in your now fifty-two year lifetime, you have drunk enough coffee to float a battleship. One suspects that the totality of your coffee consumption could only support the displacement of a destroyer, or even a frigate. But there's hope. You're only middle-aged.

• • •

What a chilling, galling parallel arises between what Michelet says of the Jacobin terror and the oligarchy of our moment, which has "made this people wretched, giving its name to what is done by a tiny minority, when [they] have destroyed in that people, by shameful habits of fear, all moral energy."

June 1

Yesterday's *Post* and *Times* headlines on the end to the "cleanup" both perform a variation on *…and the rest is silence*. Not so much silence, perhaps, as the real estate machine cranking up into a higher whine, a less audible gear, easily masked by the shouts and cries of the city. Thus, at any rate, are the trade towers transformed into Hamlet. And the ceremony itself – a play within a play – enacted according to the rules of the most formal and deadly theatre for the masses.

Today, the *Times* Metro section leads with "Many Relatives, Wary and Anguished, Shun Sept. 11 Fund" – in short, they're rejecting the government's buyout offer. Something about the Gray Lady's timing here, saving this bit of hardly breaking news for the day *after* the Ground Zero "closure" grabbed the whole front page banner. They're good scouts these *Times*men.

• • •

You arrive late au Gamin, to find, sitting across from one another at your accustomed table, a middle aged white man and a very thin black boy perhaps seven years old. Take Table 6 instead. What precisely is the relationship between them? The little boy is restive. He drinks iced orange juice in a stemmed wine glass. Says he feels cold. The man suggests he rub his arms. He gives his arms a desultory rub. The man

touches the juice glass, says "oh, it's so cold," and suggests he stop drinking it for a while. The boy presents his arms and the man says, "you're just one big goosebump aren't you." The pulls a sprig of rosemary from the planter by the window next to him and hands it to the man. "It smells good," the man says. Their food arrives: fresh fruit, croissants and pains au chocolate. The child eats hungrily and in between bites, recites a counting game. For the moment he is content. But so clearly can you feel the echoes of his earlier restiveness and it dawns on you how at odds the fundamental tone of this place is with the energies of a child. How at that stage, the very act of being sat down constitutes a capitulation, a cause, however indirect, for rebellion and resentment – a full body-mind chafing. You apprehend it now as clearly as you must have at that boy's age – an age you can no longer connect to, except via the rarest bolts of sense memory.

• • •

On a single square section of cement on the 21st Street sidewalk, just across from Gwen's schoolyard, several impressions nearly a quarter inch deep of ginkgo leaves. The wind must have been blowing from the east the day the cement was laid, because the nearest ginkgo stands some ten meters west of where your shadow passes over the fan-shaped declivities. Toward the curb, just adjacent to the leaf-imprinted square, a honey locust in full bloom.

June 2

John Sanford sends a note saying he "caught that good hour on the History Channel, and your comments were a delight." From this one can *shep nachas.*

A slight pang of guilt because you forgot to call him on his birthday, the day after yours. Nor can you imagine that somehow you neglected to send him a copy of *Divided*…. Out it goes today. When someone hits 98, what can one say but: *bis a hindred und svansich* – you should live to a hundred and twenty.

June 3

Field trip to the Tenement Museum on Orchard Street with Gwen's 4th grade class. After the kids have paid their collective debt to pedagogy – prompted to a semblance of engagement by an earnest young docent – you repair en masse to lunch at Katz's deli. High up on the wall, above the pictures of the owner cheek by jowl with a Gadarine tribe of celebrities, a blowup of a crumbling letter handwritten by a sergeant in a helicopter unit and emblazoned across the top: U.S. Armed Forces Republic of Vietnam. The sergeant extols Katz's salami, first shared with him by a buddy, recounting both its physical properties and other manifest virtues, not least how well it tolerates the heat of the jungle and absence of refrigeration. The soldier – who knows his fate? – encloses a check, to cover a shipment of salami, plus postage.

As you semi-shepherd the straggling ranks of Gwen's classmates toward the F train at Second Avenue and Houston, a man walking down the subway stairs recognizes you from the Today Show. He's read *Divided…* and is himself writing a book on "oddball New York." When you get on the train, Tatania's dad, Joseph, an ex-ray technician at St. Luke's-Roosevelt, starts talking about how he saw you on TV too. Then, for the two stops until West 4th Street he narrates his personal 9/11: how after the news broke he was told, for over an hour, that patients were on their way, yet they never came in. Meanwhile, he grew so agitated, his supervisor gave him leave to take off and go down to school to be with his kids. On the way to the subway, a subconscious message told him to stay and he turned around and went back to the hospital. The beginning of two long days. The helicopters landed in Morningside Park and brought the firemen and cops, "the ones who made it," to 114th and Amsterdam via ambulance. Joseph doesn't know why but he put the concrete fragments he took out of a policeman's hair into a jar and saved them on a shelf. "The techs who volunteered, who could handle it, worked with the parts, put them in parts bags in the morgue, there wasn't enough room downtown." Then, almost as an afterthought, "It was very sad."

West 4th Street arrives suddenly, almost without your noticing, but you manage to emerge from your trance and take up parental duty – planting the side of your foot against the car's open door long enough to make sure all the kids make it off the F. Herd 'em upstairs and thence onto the uptown E. Out into the air of 23rd Street. Walk toward school. Watch them climb the steps. Head back to the corner with Joseph. Just

before you go your separate ways, he says his daughter paid you the ultimate compliment. When your face popped up on the TV screen, he called out "Look Taty, he's an expert." Tatiana said, "He's not an expert, he's Gwen's dad."

June 4

Great moments in marketing, however unintended. On the subway platform, leaning against the column, looking absently down the track, a young woman – late teens, early twenties, skinny as a rail. *Baby Phat* glittering script on red fabric across her chest.

June 5

You dream the Broadway meridian has been turned into a canal, complete with flat boats. The water is choppy, azure and very beautiful.

The world is so full of a number of things,
I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings.
– R.L. Stevenson, epigraph *A Child's Garden of Verses*

June 6

In the café the TV that's been jerryrigged over the kitchen washbasin is tuned to Univision, Channel 41. In the epic struggle unfolding on the playing field, Uruguay and France stand tied at zero each. Losing the battle for aural space to the sportscaster's rapidfire Spanish and the roars of the crowd, the lyrics of the Tom Waits CD on the overhead speaker turn to gibberish. All you can make out is something about the damage done by a slug from a "two dollar gun." Don't know this song, but Waits has that other beautiful line, "it takes a sweet little bullet from a pretty blue gun to put those scarlet ribbons in your hair."

K. sits himself in the chair opposite. A fast talker, he's eager to tell you about his memoir. Also wants to answer your questions about anything you want to know. Anything. OK, you say: Who killed Kennedy? A Dallas cop, firing from the Grassy Knoll. Big John took Oswald's bullet fired from the book depository. Right, you say, but who was the client? Trafficante from Miami. Ah, you say, Trafficante was the

proximate client, OK, but who was the ultimate client? He shakes his head. Maybe Castro.

K. might be a very good actor, trained even in deception, a real neighborhood Defoe, but you suspect you've scraped against the bottom of his knowledge. So many people hated Kennedy, he says, it was a miracle he lasted as long as he did.

K. senses he's disappointed you, that something has gone wrong in the conversation because you are not dazzled by his litany of forensics. You've no interest in who pulled the trigger, or hired the killer. You want to know the names of the people who wished Kennedy dead and possessed the power to will this vision into concrete form. You want to know the ultimate client. The confluence of interests acting in concert. K. takes another run at impressing you, tries to bolster his shaken sense of mega-knowledge. He volunteers that Alexander Haig was "deep throat." That in the missing eighteen minutes Nixon debates with himself, and concludes that no, he won't shut Haig up, but will choose instead to go down in history as the ultimate schmuck.

K. delivers this nugget with the triumphant air of a child who has just deliberately crashed his remote control car. What he doesn't know – how can he? – is that for you, Watergate is a profoundly boring story – archetypally boring – told and retold since time began. It is all about the asshole and what can be jammed up it – hidden, retained. There is no Eros here, no vulva, no cock, no balls, no clitoris, no vagina, no foreskin slide, no fecundation. History without a uterus. Sans ovaries. Non-history. From which nothing spirit-blooded grows. You try somehow to alchemically transform the contempt that has settled on you like a coat, just as deadly dry, into something with momentum, something sanguine, oxygenating.

K. goes outside to smoke and finish his chamomile tea. He comes back in to put his bowl on the counter, then fires up his pickup truck and departs for his house in the Hamptons, which one of them you're not precisely sure. He waves through the cab window. You return the gesture, feel the burden lift as you raise your arm.

Ray, who's had his nose in the paper at the table to your left gets up to leave. You shake hands. He's off to Ireland. He lays his *Post* face up on the table: "Tanks Smash Arafat." You turn the paper over: "SHAQULED: O'Neal proves too much for the Nets."

Mario turns off the TV. The match was a draw. France and Uruguay nought-nought.

Paltry, paltry, paltry all your narrations in the face of the actual. And animated by the unlikely conceit that someone will have ears to hear after the roar of the great fires have shrunk to a whisper. Katherine sits down at the table Ray just vacated and you ask her to watch your computer while you go to the loo. "I'll guard your cyber life with mine," she says. "Only worth a scream," you reply. "No one's real life. Just zeroes and ones in there. Mostly zeroes."

• • •

The day dawned
full and long
and I a
blank
strong
hater of windows

June 7 – Le G. – Early Morning

You walk into the café to find the entire staff: Mario, Roberto and Tomás (representing Mexico), Kimsey (Germany) and Julie (the Philippines), standing ranged along the bar peering raptly at the tiny TV screen. Twenty minutes into the match the score is England 1, Argentina 0. You pump coffee into a takeout cup and squeeze into a spot between Mario and Kimsey on the metaphorical bench. The camera pans over the bleachers as the England supporters sing "Rule Britannia." Their boys are playing well. Not so the Argentines, who miss a penalty kick. Mario literally whoops.

You fall into the rhythm of the play, buoyed by a sense of surprise at how much of the Spanish commentary you understand. Suddenly it hits you in what Gwen would call a "duuuh!" moment. Out there in the city and the world beyond: Sulieman from the Ivory Coast, who found a better job at a Bistro up near Harlem; Gabriel from Colombia, fired because he kissed another waiter (his Israeli girlfriend) on the job; Karim, canned for – allegedly – pilfering the till; Adan, repatriated to Madrid; Anna of

Sweden, who dug bluegrass music, and customers like Juan and Maria – a host of vanished Gaministas dispersed to the four winds – all of them are doubtless glued to their TVs at this very moment. Some of them bleary with fatigue, having watched the 2:30 a.m. match too – like Eric B., who doubtless won't be rolling in this morning. The cup is the world, and we are bearing witness as it overflows.

You glance around the café. A handful of customers sit at their tables looking abandoned. Several others crane to get a view of the telly. Mario, usually two jumps ahead of everything, lets a tartine burn in the grill. You couldn't precisely say what's going on here this morning constitutes a form of resistance to hegemony. Rather it feels more like diversion of energy into something else, if only a something else of the mind, as if our shared focus on the World Cup opens up a space amidst the jagged topography of economics, political violence, bigotry and greed. A field which, if not level, contains no land mines. Only play.

Time runs out. Britannia rules, for now. Mario hits the button and the screen goes dark. The café breaks out of its trance. You ask Julie what's next for Argentina. She says they'll have to beat Sweden in order to advance. How's Sweden doing then? She doesn't know. But a fellow at Table 11 overhears you. Very buttoned-down he looks, crisp-collared shirt and jeans, like a career soldier on leave making a game run at civilian drag. He puts aside his *Times* long enough to tell you that Sweden lost to England last week, but beat Nigeria this morning. Aha. So many pieces of distributed information.

No one's claimed Table 4 yet, so you do. A copy of the Gray Lady lies on the windowsill within easy reach. Bush's latest "security" moves take up four columns of the front page, Bloomberg's power play on the city school system fills the other two. But everyone reading the *Times* here this morning has their nose buried in the D-section and the Copa coverage on page eight. Surveying the room you notice for the first time that the huge American flag put up beneath the counter in the days just after the towers fell has disappeared. When did that happen?

Long ago your belief in the powers of reason were definitively beaten into submission. But you still trust your nose. Over the odor of burnt tartine, it picks up another, deeper scent which, in the instant, you label hope.

• • •

You have a nodding and sometimes waving acquaintance with the fellow who runs the Laboom Te-Amo magazine-cum-smokeshop between 22nd and 23rd Streets on the West side of Eighth Avenue. This man is, by look Middle-Eastern, whatever that means. When you hear him speak, he speaks Arabic, and that's pretty much all you know about him.

And even that you only know because of an occasional gig you did a few years back, subbing for a friend whose job it was, every morning, to compile an index of articles in the *Times* for a database in California. So when she went on vacation, it fell to you to be abroad pre-crack of dawn in search of the latest edition – this signified by a series of dots in the upper left hand corner of the front page. Laboom, of all the newsstands in the neighborhood, almost always had what you were looking for: the three or sometimes four-dot final. Since then, you've generally avoided going inside. The place smells redolent of tobacco smoke, and, in truth, it's got a bad vibe. Often, though, when you pass, you see the owner apparent – you've named him M. Laboom – leaning against the piles of newspapers stacked on counter, staring out the window at the passersby along Eighth Avenue.

This morning you nod-wave, and he nods and waves back. But his rejoinder somehow takes on the gesture of a sweeping away, as if he were banishing some annoying cobweb, or a swarm of gnats. You almost feel he senses, after the fact, that his wave contained something other than a wave, but it's done, so there is no taking it back. You wonder if, next time you encounter one another through the glass, he will try to make some gesture of compensatory friendliness. Or will he, and you, silently agree to declare his last wave an anomaly and, as though it never happened, pick up the cue from the time before.

• • •

Dwelling loftily in remote halls, facing a mountain stream,
I set forth wine and summon my wife.
Spreading high and wide, bamboos and trees are silhouetted against the blue sky,

Fields and garden plots wind around and wander off into the rain and mist.
In calculating a festival, I mistakenly use a calendar of the previous dynasty.
While cooking, I hear the distant call of other people's chickens
Zither and books I have arranged at my leisure to the left and right,
Only now do I realize that one's Wuling does not have to be in Qi.

So wrote Gong Xian, recluse of the Warring States Period, who lived in Wuling, in the state of Qi.

June 8

An actor friend of Bronwyn's, a fellow named Court, in town for a performance, joins the Saturday morning salon at Gamin. He's been reading your first novel *Free City* at Bronwyn's behest and has all sorts of kind things to say about it. Lovely to hear. Jesus – 1996 – it's been a geologic age since you wrote it.

A real gathering this time. Steve and Ellen are there, as is Geoffrey G. And Katie too, Gwen being off at her Quaker retreat this weekend. Even Tobias drops by, though after salutations, he sits at Table 11 and buries himself in the soccer news. David's missing. Usually here by now, but he's been feeling weak and, for him, it's a long walk up from 16th Street and Sixth. You can't help worrying how he's getting on, given how chalky he looked last week. But since David has surpassed all expectations on how long he could survive on so compromised a heart, you choose – on this abundantly vital morning – to imagine that next Saturday, he'll be back and sitting across from you.

It's a free-form and multifarious confab that you're physically in the center of, so periodically you shift your attention to the separate conversations going on to your right and left. And occasionally focus deeper into the room in order to wave at folks you recognize but barely know: Michele who always ties her little spaniel up outside while she's getting take-out coffee, and scolds him for barking with a wagging index finger, to which he pays no attention at all; to Ann and Allen, and a half dozen other people whose names you can't recall.

Eventually Ellen and Steve drive off in their Mercedes – it's got a butter-colored leather interior – to pick up their girls at German school. Then Geoffrey heads out to spend the day with his girlfriend, and it's down to you, Katie, Bronwyn and Court.

Eventually, Bronwyn, warming to a favorite theme, begins to wax alarmed, if not alarmist, about the coming domestic state terror, the one not limited to suspect immigrants. You don't recall exactly what Court says, but he's looking at you even as he directs his voice to her. "You could feel the hand on your shoulder any time. If it happens, the only thing you can do is deal with it with as much equanimity as you can. Otherwise, you just live in a constant state of fear."

It's really tossed off the way he says it, and in the moment you think: *But what about Gwen?* His words keep reverberating, along with the paintings you and Katie saw at the Met last night – brushwork by Buddhist monks, former Ming princes and court officials, now on the lam from the Manchus – accompanied by poems. One, by Shitao (Zhu Ruoji), you went so far as to write down.

Orchids
Words from a sympathetic heart are as fragrant as orchids;
Like orchids in feeling, they are agreeable and always joyous;
You should wear these orchids to protect yourself from the spring chill;
When the spring winds blow cold, who can say you are safe?

Came 9 p.m. and the great herding out of the museum-goers by phalanxes of museum guards eager to get home. Waiting for the bus in your linen jacket, you felt seriously underdressed. In fact, you imagined the exact moment the microbes go the upper hand and you caught a cold. But this morning you woke up strong and with a clear head. So much for your intuition.

June 9

Just after the starting gun for the Belmont stakes, War Emblem brushes against another horse, stumbles and throws his jockey. Somewhere, a Saudi prince watches as the Triple Crown runs through his fingers like sand. A horse named Sarava, a 70-1 shot takes the cup.

The streets of Chelsea – who knows about the rest Manhattan, or the city as a whole? – give off that abandoned feel. Just listless, not *Sunday Morning* Velvets lazy. Sure, it's been thirty-five years since that groove was cut. Thirty-five years too, give or

take six days, since Ari Sharon taught the band to play. How many million *New York Times*'s under the bridge? Many thousands gone.

Is it too early to say that Manhattan no longer believes in itself as the source of all impossible energies against all impossible odds? Even Yossi, the wiry, Yemeni-looking Israeli dancer of the ready smile and brilliant teeth, can't pretend his heart's not elsewhere, even as he brings your coffee. Perhaps it's just that in this overcast light, this tentative spring, we are permitting the disappointment to read on our faces. Lately the New York smile has had so forced a look, as though an autonomic reaction to a needle prick, independent of what is felt deeper down. Numerous women appear all the more beautiful for the diminished rigor of the tensed facial muscles. But Kimsey, whose teeshirt reads: *the rapture, the rapture, the rapture*, tries to hard to maintain her perkiness and consequently doesn't wear the mood as well.

You think about *Two Roads*, Meg's play about the great South Florida hurricane of 1935 and how the barometer, interpreted this way and that, becomes a mute, yet eloquent character in the drama. Are you turning into a barometer? Sloughing off your coat of individualism to become a response mechanism for the collective atmospheric pressure? This morning feels so similar to the vibe last September 3, Labor Day. Except that then, you took the feeling personally, and now it's not about you any more. It's about what happens.

A woman whose name you don't remember – an ex-parent at PS11 who pulled her son Luke out a couple of years ago – stops outside of Gamin when she spots you through the window. She's pushing a huge empty black shopping cart and heading south on Ninth. You rush out. Bear hugs. It's been months, maybe a year. She's your height, but twice your breadth. For whatever reason there's always been some sort of simpatico between you. You fall into talking schools. She's hoping Bloomberg will wrest some power from the principals. Luke, a year older than Gwen, is heading for the Museum School having not made the cut at School of the Future. Disappointed, since she'd thought all his years in the accelerated program would have counted for something. Hopes for the best though, believing as she does that God arranges things in ways we can't anticipate – imagines Luke saying, years from now: "That teacher at the Museum School changed my life."

He's off to camp after graduating from fifth grade. Loaded with books. She's investing in a computer for him, and when he comes back, Luke will find his room set up with a new desk and "ready for business."

Like you, she has all her eggs in one basket – Luke's an only child too. You know a little about what it is to be the steward, in partnership with Katie, of a fast-growing girl, moving inexorably toward adolescence and beyond. How would you cope as the single mother of a lad already taller than you, and approaching a cusp of his own?

"This is when it get serious," she says.

• • •

Long years since finishing *Divided…*, Scott sends you a tidbit you somehow missed in your research: xeroxed pages from *The Best, Worst and Most Unusual: Noteworthy Achievements, Events, Feats and Blunders of Every Conceivable Kind*. Published in 1976, the book cites the World Trade Center as the "World's Worst Office Building." How strangely now, these words from the Bicentennial year play in the mind.

"Besides blighting the skyline and affronting the eye, the World Trade Center is also a wretched place to work. 'When I approach the building, I just don't want to go in there,' says one employee. Says another, 'Sometimes I just walk out, intending to get out for an hour for lunch, and can't make myself come back.'

The Center's horrors are many – inexplicably sealed mail chutes, hopelessly snarled telephone lines, centrally controlled office lighting that can be controlled after hours only by means of a written request submitted at least a day in advance – but the building's denizens reserve a special place in their spleens for the elevators. Plummeting downward so fast that their walls shake audibly, they break down frequently, spilling over with humanity during rush hours. 'Sometimes I feel like a lemming – or a salmon swimming upstream,' says one New York State employee… 'If I can't leave at 4:45 I wait until a quarter past five or I walk downstairs rather than be squeezed into the elevator.' A woman whose office is on the eighty-second floor describes the noontime trip to the cafeteria: 'I have to take a local elevator to the seventy-eighth floor, then and express to the first floor, then an express to the forty-fourth, then an escalator to the forty third, where I get a lousy meal.'

Many workers have complained of psychosomatic ailments that are directly traceable to the Center – one Manhattan physician has treated five such patients. Leonard Levin, a staff member of the New York Racing Board, whose office is in the Center, says, 'There *is* one wonderful thing about the World Trade Center, It feels sooooooooo good when you get home at night!'"

• • •

Comes the news yesterday of the remains of twelve people discovered in the ruined Deutche Bank building just south of where Tower 2 stood. Sealed since September 11, the huge vertical warren of toxicity is only now being explored, and cleaned out. You try to imagine the cost. The conditions.

• • •

For the past few days you've been possessed of a great desire to walk atop the High Line with Gwen. It would be an adventure and a half seeing the city from up there, the old track bed sprouting with spring greenery.

T.'s got his office in a converted industrial building, which abuts the line just to the west. You've seen, from the window near the stairway on the sixth floor, how easy it would be, from the equivalent window on the third floor, to drop a few feet down, or perhaps clamber up from the second. You begin to cook up a vision how you'll put elastic bands around Gwen's and your pants legs to keep the ticks off and how careful you'll have to be of the broken glass and other hazards as you walk up north toward where the tracks bend toward the Hudson.

Which prompted you, when you went for a meeting this morning at T.'s, to do a recon of possible safe egresses, only to find that the second floor window has a grate over it and the third floor is entirely tenanted by one company which keeps the stairwell door locked. No doubt you could contact the Save the High Line people and arrange to go up yourself, but they'd never allow Gwen to accompany you, and in any case the enterprise would lose its transgressive edge. But you're not going to give up just yet.

• • •

Katie laughs aloud reading from her Terry Pratchett book. What cracked her up? His definition of the civilized world as one "that can support historians."

June 12 – Le G.

You'd arranged to meet Rob M. here at 9:30 before taking off to tour the ex-WTC site. Rob reviewed *Divided…* twice for his Boston paper, once when it first came out – citing the section on the trade center as a prefabricated ruin – and then again after the towers fell. You've emailed back and forth occasionally since then, and agreed to get together for a walkabout whenever he found time to take a day off and fly down. And now, here he is – early even, it's only 9:15 – eager to talk, gather information toward his article for a "major magazine," and the problem is you find, in the instant, that you can't do it. Can't possibly face going downtown this morning. But he is cool with that.

So you schmooze a while in your protected zone, then walk him over to the Strand. Once inside, Rob heads off to graze one section of the pasture, you another. Into the stacks you press – and get lucky. There on the shelf, side by side, as though they've been waiting for you to arrive and claim them, stand twin copies of Barthes's *Michelet* – one each for PK and Elena, your heroic Goddard near-graduates. Hardcovers yet, unlike your own well-marked paperback. Then downstairs to look for a review copy of *After the World Trade Center*. If it's there, it'll be half price, which beats the one third discount you get from the publisher. Look first under S for Sorkin, then Z for Zukin and finally, just in case, under A for *After*, but no dice. Instead, Shahid Ali's book, *Rooms are Never Finished*, posthumous and just published, practically leaps off the shelf and into your hands. The only copy. You let the covers fall open, then focus your eyes where they've landed – recto page 59, "Barcelona Airport":

Are you carrying anything that could
Be dangerous for the other passengers?
O just my heart first terrorist
(a flame dies by dawn in every shade)

Crescent-lit it fits the profile
on your screen…

Where to find *After*? The fellow at the information desk looks it up on his computer, then disappears into the STAFF ONLY section, and returns holding the sole available copy. You walk upstairs, reconnoiter with Rob, who, when he visits the Strand, usually buys so many books he has to ship them up to Boston. Amidst the tables full of variously eager and indifferent volumes, you resume your conversation, in order to wind it down for now, pledging to continue it in the future. You part company, one home to write this, and the other to the place where today, particularly today, you just can't make yourself be present.

June 13

You used to imagine Le Gamin as your outpost. More and more you see it as a trading post. Here you sit, in the manner of a pasha, and every day, the stories of the world, like so many spices and fine-wrought goods come, by straight or circuitous rout, to you.

People too. Deborah Harry at Table 18. Chelsea Clinton over at 13 . Not to mention Ethan Hawke who's said to have been a regular for years, though you wouldn't know him from Adam. Nor any of the others either. Someone always has to point celebrities out to you. Michael Stipe you recognized, more as an exercise in phrenology than anything else. Who next? Idi Amin? Bin Laden? T'aint funny, McGee.

The story today is that Mexico eliminated Italy from the World Cup, a triumph for Mario, Roberto and Tomás, and any of the fellows who work with them behind the counter at the grill, the chopping board and sink. Lots of other stories, but that one entered through the airwaves from thousands of miles away. Another story is that you are learning, flooded as you are by stories, to let a few roll off you, duck-like, even as you float amidst them, even as they form the medium that carries your nurturance.

• • •

On the corner of 25th and Eighth, workmen begin reconstructing the subway entrance on your corner trashed one night last December by the sudden and unexpected arrival of four thousand pounds of SUV. Whenever you use that acronym, Gwen comes to mind and how she loves to sing the lyrics Ken A. appropriated from an old Quaker song for his comicstrip "Road Kill Bill." Bill is a furry-tailed mammal, a squirrel probably, who contrary to his name, never dies, no matter how often he's run over. Every time Bill scrapes himself off the tarmac, a bandolier of tiremarks printed across his body, he attempts to Socratically engage his assailant, a monstrous white fella named Anger Man. But to no effect. Anger Man just rolls up the windows, cranks the AC, and flattens Bill again, chanting his war cry all the while:

Tis a gift to be simple
Tis a gift to be free
Tis a gift to drive a
Chevy SUV
With a four-wheel drive
and a stereo DVD…

While you're musing one of the workmen jacks into a lightpole's electrical supply and, wielding a drill whose bit is of nearly satyric proportions, proceeds to bore holes in what remains of the concrete form to which the entrance frame and railings will ultimately be affixed. Into the holes he bores, another workman inserts lengths of rebar, spiral-turned steel rods.

Downtown a couple of miles yawns the great Bathtub you couldn't bring yourself to see up close, and here, not twenty feet from the winding path that leads to your building's door, a sensibly-scaled, graspable and comforting restoration takes shape. Will the new subway entrance resemble the old one? Will they fake it in grand New Urbanist tradition, like the bishop's crook lamp posts on the new-minted streets of Battery Park City? Or will they perform an act that screams: *Today!*

Once, you pointed out to Gwen variations in the cast iron ornaments – some sort of Titan's heads – that adorn the railing round The Dakota. Some of them are original, and others, too badly corroded to support the property values, have been replaced with

facsimiles made from a very skillfully made cast. Superficially the two iterations look the same – both new and ancient Titans painted shiny black. But the old ornaments wear a biography of weathering and chipped undercoats that telegraphs their particularity. And their visages look fiercer, truly chthonic. For now, until they've been through what the others have, the fresh-faced ornaments come off like poseurs. And now that she can see it, Gwen points out the difference each time you walk by. And she, who can never fathom which direction she is walking in – though she's traversed the city's paths for nearly ten years – nonetheless unfailingly recalls what you only mentioned once, and in passing: this is the spot where John Lennon was shot.

• • •

This p.m. comes an email from Rob:

Hello!

Thanks so much for taking the time to meet with me. I like your office a great deal. It reminds me of Paris. I could imagine sitting around there a lot.

I had a very interesting walk. First and foremost, it's a hole in the ground, of course. I had a good time talking to tourists who had never been to New York before. I can't imagine what they were getting from the experience, since I can't imagine that the visit would be meaningful unless you knew what you were seeing. Personally, I found it very startling, since my brain had difficulty encompassing the void and kept trying to infill the space with what I remember from my last visit there. I think it is time to remove the viewing platform and the screens that block the view of the scene. There is no conceivable argument now that gawkers would be unseemly.

I had an interesting conversation with a guy from Nebraska who had problems with building anything there because the land was "sacred." I pointed out that it was pretty sacred to the native people who probably wouldn't have appreciated the towers on their site, and he asked if I was some kind of commie.

It is pretty clear from looking at the site that rebuilding the towers would be absurd. It occurs to me that the area is much improved by the absence of the towers. I also think it would be absurd to make it a park, which would make World Financial Center look like some kind of Corbusian nightmare. I also hope that the eventual plan

allows for some kind of organic urban growth; building another series of buildings like the WTC or the WFC would be a mistake.

I did have an interesting experience on the subway that illustrated a point you made. Two Arabs got on the subway car carrying briefcases. This elderly woman sitting near where they sat down scurried to the other end of the car and sat down next to me. I pointed out to her that if these guys were carrying bombs, it didn't matter where she was in the train. She then denied that she had moved at all.

As feared, I had some trouble getting through security at the airport going back to Boston. Paying cash, no luggage, and carrying a briefcase full of info about the WTC set off all the profiling bells, and I had to explain myself to the pleasant machine gun wielding national guardsmen. Thank god I had the book you signed, since it confirmed that I was weird as opposed to dangerous.

Thanks again. I'm sure I'll be in touch.

June 14

If the great breadth of the U.S. is the heartland, how does that square with New York City as the heart of this land. Or is it one part heart, one part brain, not to say mind? For David Rockefeller, the financial district was the "heart pump of the capital blood of the free world," but does it function like that organ-muscle in other, even deeper ways as well? And did Lower Manhattan ever serve the role that David claimed?

Rob M. says that in his travels he's observed that anguish over, even interest in, or connection to the "events" of 9/11 are pretty much limited to the northeast. You haven't ventured outside the city physically or psychically enough to read the mood, but you can feel for sure that this city is heart-sick. How or will this sorrow make its way out and across the latitudes and oceans too?

Rob asked you, not rhetorically, what could really shock America as a whole. Without even thinking you replied: Take away their SUVs. As soon as it was out in the air, it sounded glib and facile. But the more you think about it, the more you realize it's probably true.

Up out of the café betimes and across through the flower district to visit Kelly McD in the rain. She sits opposite you, remarks on the warmth of your hands,

examines your tongue and checks the quality of your various pulses. It was Elizabeth who recommended Kelly, and Kelly helped free your lungs from the grip of the trade towers. Somehow too, she finds ways, not just to bring the energies of your mind and body into the same room together, but also to demonstrate that what seems wide-split lies closer together than you imagine.

She walks slowly round you, supine on the table, palpates each spot before placing the needle, tells you she expects this will be a difficult fall. Here, in her small office on East 28th Street, she will map the topography, chart the ripples through her clients' bodies, of last fall's great battery.

The state you go into lying there, quilled like a porcupine, a lamp heating your abdomen, is deeper than sleep, and when she opens the door and you awake, your head reasserts its attempt at domination. In the few moments before you entirely untransify, Kelly plies you with sage counsel. You strain to hear what she is saying. She's talking normally. It's just that her words have a lot of layers to penetrate. You'll keep coming back, hoping to get your arms around the underlying problem. But you suspect that ultimately, this cure would work better in a different geography. For you, there are triggers all around. This burg is a psychic minefield. Living in New York City is like an alcoholic working in a bar.

Out onto the street. This sure is one reluctant spring. It pours. It shivers. Hey now, hey now, hey now. New Yorkers walking fast as chickens, playing chicken with our umbrellas. A ragtag team of men fling the dusty, jagged contents of gray Rubbermaid garbage cans into the hopper of a compacting truck. None of them wears a mask. The flanks of the truck are airbrushed *Avanti Demolition Company*. Fast forward. No rewind.

Walking toward home, you flash on how a young retarded man from a group home in Chelsea makes it a practice to step into the café on his way to wherever he goes weekday mornings and shout "hi" at the waitstaff. Sometimes when he's in a hurry, he'll crack the door, stick his head in and voice his greeting in the upper range of a tenor – bright-eyed and all smiles.

This morning, he came all the way inside, then noticed through the window the WALK light on Ninth flashing its imminent change to red. So Kimsey's reply was lost as he bolted out and across the street. You've noted this more than once, how the

peculiarly anxious haste of the retarded calls into high relief the similarly absurd behavior of those who imagine ourselves normal. Has it not been said, in Arabic: *Ajila min Shetan* – hurrying is for Satan?

Inscrutable dance of the other.

June 16

First Day – a.m.

Hallowed ground, how so? There are no oil reserves beneath Lower Manhattan. No known oil reserves there at all.

Early p.m. Pick up Katie and Gwen at Quaker meeting. Some Friend, clever with design, has created a lapel button whose graphic brings the twin towers close enough together to function as the upright stroke of a peace symbol. Buy two.

The three of you walk west to Au Bon Pain on Fifth and 15th for lunch before Gwen's piano lesson. You're about to sit down to soup when it strikes you to double back to the Amalgamated a block east on Union Square West to get more cash. The soup's too hot anyway.

Half of New York's crammed into the airless chamber where you wait on line for the sole working machine, shuffling forward amidst an effusion of discarded receipts. Perform the beeping ritual, pocket the bread. Scope a fast panorama outside to make sure no one marked you, head back toward the restaurant. Not far along 15th, a black backpack lies on the sidewalk. Refuse strewn around. Keep walking. Single minded. Algorithmic. Soup, then piano lesson, then…. Midway down the block, reverse again to confirm what you saw but didn't see. Backpack's ripped open. Ripped off? This time take your time. Survey and record:

4 athletic shoes, all well-worn, one pair Fila, the other Riddel

2 folding umbrellas

1 toothbrush

1 almost full bottle of Slice

Several dozen dark brown, lozenge-shaped tablets, everywhere, underfoot

1 pair of gray, patterned Perry Ellis underpants

1 light gray plastic ID card issued by the New York State Department of Correctional Services to Melvin Lewis, a "black male," born 8/13/80, height: 6'2", release date 3/25/02, after which this card was "valid for 60 days."

Also scattered across the sidewalk, some facing up, eight photographs, black and white five by sevens, well shot and professionally printed. Several show a man who's likely Melvin together with various other people posed on the street in front of the enamel sign for a subway entrance you've seen a thousand times – on the northwest corner of Waverly and Sixth nearly flush up against the side wall of the Twin Brothers restaurant. In one shot, Melvin and a companion sit on milk crates. Melvin's arm drapes around the shoulder of older white, alkie-looking fellow. Melvin wears a knit skull cap and toasts the camera with a 20 oz. can of Budweiser. A cigarette hangs from his buddy's hand. The photos, the ID card and the toothbrush are all smeared with a brown substance.

You walk back toward the restaurant. There's Katie, down the street. You've been gone so long she's come out to look for you. You wave and she turns, goes back inside. Over your now-tepid soup, you explain why, aside from the wait at the bank, it took you so long to return. You and Katie debate what to do. Should you leave the stuff where it is in case Melvin comes looking for it? Problem is, Waverly and Sixth seems his usual spot – or it was – and Union Square is a good half mile from there. So the likelihood of him homing in on it here seems remote at best.

What would you want a stranger to do if you were Melvin? Impossible to say. The card's expired. The umbrellas aren't worth a search and everything else is pretty much spoiled. Yet even in their distressed condition, the pictures seem worth saving. Best go back and gather them up and on Monday, call the Department of Corrections. Tell them, if they have any further contact with Melvin Lewis or he with them, that you're holding his pictures for him. You'll also look him up in the phone book, but that seems a pro forma exercise. Polish off you corn chowder, now officially gelatinous, Katie and Gwen having long finished theirs. Send Gwen to get some napkins and ask the cashier for a plastic bag. Gwen is vastly intrigued by your discovery, wants to go back with you. At the site, she follows you about holding the plastic bag open as you use the napkins to gather up the photos and the ID card. Not so easy to pick up the photos with a napkin. So you use your foot to push them across a seam in the sidewalk,

then bend down, slide your index finger along the gully and lever up the picture from underneath. Gwen speculates on the nature of the occurrence: perhaps this stuff belonged to two people, since there are two umbrellas. You tie the plastic bag and put it in her backpack.

Katie waits on the corner. Westward ho. You stop into Kid's Gap and buy Gwen a navy blue hooded sweatshirt. Despite the detours, you arrive at her lesson right on time.

You and K. sit in the Seminary garden until the rain forces you indoors. Wait on the bench outside Andrejika's studio and listen to the sounds from within. They are working on a calypso. Gwen's tone is lovely, at first you think it's Andrejika playing. But then you catch a slight waver in the beat, a recovery, and Andrejika nearly shout "Yes! Yes, that's it, da-*dah*-dah!"

Next to last lesson before you break for summer. "Syncopation," says Andrejika, "it's tough, but she's getting it."

Bloom's day.

June 17

The foam overlaying your café français today slowly forms itself into a shape reminiscent of a sixteenth century map of Europe and Africa.

Down the street a woman approaches, led by a beautiful golden retriever. In the late afternoon light, the shade of its tongue exactly matches her shirt.

A whiff of linden.

June 18

At the café you overhear a young woman with an unplaceable accent talking with her friend. "Did I ever tell you," she says, "about the time the Gypsies stole money from my store?" Apparently her interlocutor has not, for she continues. "They hypnotized my sister and opened the cash register."

You glance up and do a double take – particularly since she's otherwise stylish-looking. Could that really be an unheeded ball of snot hanging from her nose? Of course not. Tricky afternoon light. It's the bauble of her nose ring, which, until she

turned her head and you saw it flash, blended transparently into her shadowed silhouette.

June 19

p.m. Brief but violent shower. Ensconced at your corner table, you look out the window to your right: thunderheads. Turn round in your chair and look south. The sky's an easy, late spring blue. There's an atmospheric faultline straight across 21st Street. This won't last long, and when it's over, ideal conditions for a rainbow.

• • •

It's a phrase one says without thinking: putting your kid(s) through school. But like airplanes through steel grids, what comes out on the other side?

• • •

Up to the Met this a.m. on a date with Kate, to catch the Renaissance tapestry show before it closes. Scores of masterworks in knotted yarn overwhelming, astonishing beauty. One Italian marvel that must've packed the wallop of an action flick in its day, stylized to the point of mannerism, but woven of exquisite threads: Justice liberating Innocence.

All around the border of one tapestry, made for Charles II de Bourbon, a fifteenth century cardinal, also bishop of Lyon and courtier the king, a motto, repeated as often as space will allow: *Nespoir Ne Peur*. Your French isn't so hot, and your medieval French ain't worth a sou, but are you too far off in imagining that this means something on the order of "No hope, no fear"?

• • •

You swiped one of the copies of the *Post* lying around the café this morning, and now that Gwen's in bed, flip through it. On the editorial page, John Podhoretz chronicles some recent bits of nasty local business: rapes, murders, robberies, hostage

takings. He notes especially, their "racial" theme. "Horror's Return" reads the headline. "Spate of brutal crimes tests our new innocence." What a challenge it was, and remains, for a culture to remain so innocent. What a triumph over knowledge we have achieved. Innocent unto our graves. Like a virgin. Two hundred and sixty million of 'em. And who among us, in all the land, possesses the widest, most unseeing eye?

June 20

Ride the E train uptown. As you approach 42nd Street, the PA crackles and the conductor begins his rap about all the possible connections it is possible to make at West 4th Street. Huh!? He finishes by saying: "Next stop, West 4th Street" then, as the train pulls into to 42nd Street, realizes which direction he's going in and corrects himself. But there's a logic to his disorientation if he was reckoning from 23rd Street, where you got on. Heading uptown, in two stops you're at 42nd Street. Southbound, it's West 4th that comes two stops later. Makes perfect sense if you turn the world upside down. As in the poster across from you: *call 1800 … if you're green and don't have a pregnant card.*

• • •

Do you love your country? Hard to say. Because in all your fifty-two years, the notion of "country" has never stirred you. No that's not true. You did get all het up about it at around eight. But your true color, as far back as you can remember, has always been purple. And purple is no more nor less than the mongrel form of red, with howevermuch white to lighten it, and blue.

• • •

p.m. On Eighth Avenue between 23rd and 24th Streets, separated by only a few squares of sidewalk, two young Latino women in tight shirts hand out fliers in front of the cell phone store. Above the traffic noise they cry out the absolute on-saleness of everything Sprint. Just down the block, several white teenagers, hippyish, wearing

Greenpeace teeshirts and armed with clipboards make diffident attempts to engage passersby. Weave through it all. Just before you get to Bassry's stand, it hits you in the center of your forehead. If somehow the electorate of this country had voted Ralph Nader into office in 2000, it's possible the events of September 11th would not have happened. Other things, no doubt, would have transpired – a whole alternate universe of other things. But even if 9/11 did go down, how different might the aftermath have been?

June 21

Happy solstice, yo. And the horse you rode in on. The Bushies, it seems, are up against a wall of their own device. They better get some presumptive A-rabs to do some serious violence here real soon, or else bomb some real A-rabs real soon, or folks are going to start thinking they're being scammed by some jive motherfuckers. Where's the fear? Got to keep it cranked. Like oil, eventually fear runs out and then you've got to deal with people who have nothing to lose. Like Baldwin said, the most dangerous. And they will be us. Of course it's all unthinkable. The more so because it is simply happening. The sixties, back with a vengeance – Janus faced, and with an ugly genetic twist.

Or not. Perhaps we 'mericans have developed the capacity for infinitely sustainable, low-intensity fear. But whether the threat's objective, or the substance of our own tricky shadows, the condition warrants an angry father, and an unsparing God, to will over our clenching paralysis.

On your way home, the cadence, then the lyrics of a song from elementary school days well up, then flood back at a walking beat:

Who can retell the things that befell us?
Who can count them?
In every age, a hero or sage
Came to our aid.

Straightaway, once inside, you pull the *Fireside Book of Folk Songs* off the shelf – the same edition you remember from school, when you sat in a circle in the music room,

two kids to a book, the covers lying open on your and your neighbor's adjacent knees. There's the music for "Who Can Retell," surmounted by the illustration engraved in your mind forty-some years back: two bearded patriarchs wearing striped green caftans stand flanking a third man, who cradles a Torah. You scan through the lyrics, then your eye jumps to the attribution. *Ba-bump* in your chest. "Who Can Retell" is listed as a "Palestinian folk song." Turn to the copyright page and there it is: 1947. Of course. The book was published a year before. What a difference a year makes. Now, as then.

• • •

Hold that signifier. But not too tight.

• • •

In the streetside window of Master Cutting Tables Co., 50 West 27th Street, among the display of dies and wire stitching machines, a head of Charlie McCarthy, missing his lower jaw, impaled on a metal pole. Good god, is this what it comes to – caricatures of Robespierre on display in the garment center?

• • •

p.m. You ask Katie if, on your behalf, she'll call the Department of Corrections in her aspect as a counselor at law. She speaks to one Lt. Mahoney. He sounds to her like a straight up guy – promises to get the pictures to Melvin's parole officer and thence to Melvin. So you sandwich the pile of warped five by sevens in cardboard, stuff them into a padded envelope, print *PHOTOS – PLEASE DO NOT BEND* across the front of it in fat red magic marker, and off they go via U.S. Mail.

On your way upstairs it occurs to you that you ran into Tom this morning at the café and though you told him about the pictures, forgot to ask him for Maureen's advice on how to clean the crap off them. And now they're gone.

Tom had listened to your tale with eyebrows raised and afterward said wouldn't it be interesting to follow the story through? Which got you to imagine inserting a fiber optic camera into the envelope and tracking the whole deal. Particularly vivid in your projection is the way Melvin's face lights up when he sees, however damaged, the photos he thought were gone for good. But truth to tell, you can't know what it is that'll go on inside his head, assuming he gets them. Your grandfather Meyer had a phrase he used when someone tried to palm off a rumor or hearsay as though it was Truth itself. He didn't call them on their bullshit in so many words, but rather offered them a sidelong look and in a kind of stage Yiddish accent asked: "Vas you dere, Charlie?"

Yes, it would be one thing to track the photos you had such a fleeting relationship with, that sat for a day in a plastic bag on your filing cabinet. It's another thing to let them go.

Breezy afternoon, strong sun through the living room window, but not too hot. Over all the other city noise you hear the sound of a clip clop trot. Look out. Down there in the city, heading north up Eighth Avenue rides a cop, mounted on a beautiful Morgan. There's close, there's far, and there's near. And all the distances in between.

June 22

Cousin Robert, the high school history teacher with a voice like Robert Blake, comes in from Joisey on a visit. He and Katie, both into paper folding, want to check out the Origami Society of America convention, and along you go for the ride. Works from all over the country, and beyond. Astonishing. So many stunning designs, such skillfully planned and executed craft, it literally takes your breath away. After half an hour of marveling at the virtuosity of each display, you find yourself yawning. Yet you are not particularly tired. If Nancy T. were still alive and here in this room, she would congratulate you on having found your "yawn center." She'd urge you to give yourself up to a full-bodied awareness of taking in air.

You unlink from the systematic approach and gravitate toward a table presided over by a genial-looking black man. Which is how you come to be face to face with the geometric creations of Brooklyn's own Vernon Isaac. Among his specialties are tetrahedrons, constructed with open centers. This permits them to be folded one after

the other into indefinite chains, and Vernon has created virtual garlands of them using discarded Metrocards, as well as other found materials. But Vernon's dominant theme this year is the World Trade Center – postcards of the towers folded into tetrahedrons and interpenetrating. Indivisible. On top of one display, he has placed a small round lucite container, a transparent reliquary for several whitish, moonlike pebbles, purportedly bits of the actual WTC.

A short, plump woman pauses at Vernon's table and takes one of his Vernogami Originals business cards. Her nametag identifies her as a "first timer" at the convention, but her tee shirt reads: *I fold under pressure*.

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As gravity catches up with you, so, apparently does gravitas. It is not so much that you are less easily moved, but that you find your transformations occurring to a slower rhythm. If you were a pendulum, your swings would be getting longer. More so than you could ever have imagined.

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Summer's here and there's no AC in this subway car. Besides a tendency toward hypertension, among your genetic legacies from Bea are abundant sweat pores on your face and forehead. In this weather, you schvitz like a fountain. David Dinkins did too. In fact, the primary image you retain of this otherwise phlegmatic man is of him mopping his brow with the white handkerchief always kept close to hand in his breast pocket.

City of alphabites – read, unread and indecipherable: too many by half. Would anyone notice if one morning the signs for Brooklyn Battery Tunnel read Roland Barthery Tunnel? What if one entered the Holland Tunnel on Canal Street and came out in Leiden? The most popular organ of print information among legions of young, can one say professional? Gothamites is *Time Out* – a name that gestures, like a breeze in static air, to the acute absence at the core of things.

Nearly every descriptive trope of New York, from Phelps Stokes to Frank O'Hara to John Lindsay and back again considers the city as crazed, confused and chaotic, as though this were its nature and destiny combined. It is not that you feel its atmospherics as less "New York" now, only that in your time of witness, you have never felt the city yearning so much to live another way. Is this pure projection? Or a wish fulfillment wider than your own, a sigh for what we feel we cannot claim: *And there's another side to this life I've been living. And there's another side to this life…*

June 24

The publicist at Routledge calls, mentions a recent review of *After the WTC…* – positive toward your contribution, but mixed on the book as a whole. And, she says, Philip Lopate will be doing a review in *Metropolis.* Oy vay. Shades of two summers ago, when Lopate slammed *Divided…* in the self-same publication. Back then he labeled the parallel you drew between the abstract, distanced-from-huma-scale worlds of the terrorist and master builder as "bullshit."

You responded, of course. Had to. It was an *ad hominem* attack, with no pretense of professionalism. Plus, this is New York, and when someone gets in your face – well, you gotta represent. *Metropolis,* to its credit, and your surprise, printed your rebuttal in its entirety. What survives today is a dim resonance of your disappointment in Lopate's failure to connect. Naïvely, you'd assumed, given your mutual enmeshment with the stuff of the city and its narratives, that his words about your book would carry, however critically packaged, something of the spirit of a fraternal handclasp. Go figure. You owe him though for pushing you, however unwittingly, to elaborate, rather than retract your initial argument. But what got you to write the essay was forensics, pure if not simple. Not long after 9/11, the story came out in the press that Mohammad Atta, putative lead hijacker and WTC unbuilder, had been trained as an urban planner.

And you remember, when you were working on the text of *Divided…* how the idea of architectural terrorism as a Janus faced creature came straight at you out of the blue, leapt from the materials themselves, in whatever draft it was – three, four, or five – as you sat one afternoon at Table 4. The frisson that accompanied this realization came closely attended by the question: *Can one say such a thing?* You'd looked round the room trying to make eye contact with someone, just to discharge the energy in a

glance, but there were no ready sockets for your plug. Then, in an eyeblink, the après-frisson, more powerful still, that indeed you had hit upon a morsel of truth and the mute gods of language had picked you to put it into words, so it wasn't so much a question of whether you could say it, so much as how to articulate the message in the clearest, most economical, least compromised way.

Then only a short year after Lopate's dis, theory turned to fire: Yama and Atta, born as twins of the same egg, consumed by their relationship to those towers, one metaphorically, the other in flesh itself.

All this comes to you before you doze in the mid-afternoon torpor wherein the image comes of the dim interiors of enormous, unfinished, concrete chicken coop-like structures, which your dream knowledge somehow equates with Donald Trump. You are aware too, that these vast telescoping caverns are to be dynamited by the authorities almost immediately – this is the last sight you'll have of them – barely illuminated and concatenating on and on in rectilinear repetition as far as the eye can see. Unlike Yamasaki's Priutt-Igoe housing project – which the poor of St. Louis had to endure living in for twenty years – they are being blown up before they are inhabited. Not because they have failed to function, but because it is inescapably evident that there is something about them which is plain wrong. And these impressions come very swiftly, and without benefit of empirical thought – so fast that you only realize you have shut your eyes, when suddenly, you awaken.

June 26

From down the street you can see them for blocks: fluttering over the awning of the Chelsea Square coffee shop on 23rd Street and Ninth, the stars and stripes, and the rainbow flag.

Twilight: over the sloping grass down toward the circle playground and all along the south side of 25th Street, hundreds of fireflies.

June 27

Location, location, location: the fragrance.

Into your head pops the title for a book. Will you ever write it? *The '90s: The Death of Hope, and the Street*.

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p.m. He sits foursquare on the downtown #6, head and upper body responding to the call of the rap hissing through his headphones. Wristwise, a Rolex. On his feet, Air Nikes, but not pristine, these are work shoes. Around his neck, on a silver chain, a miniature hand grenade. Its facets diamond pavéed, the little pineapple sways against his sternum. He stands to get off, turns toward the door, hikes his baggy, knee length shorts. On his tee shirt, the emblem of a laborer's local. He's a broad man, not tall either, and bow legged, but he moves too fast for you to read his back – it's a blur, the graphic, the surrounding type: something about the wreckage at Ground Zero, something about the flag.

• • •

Hearts hardened. Boots blackened. Inevitabilities prolonged.

• • •

You stand in the doorway of the Pink Pony on Ludlow Street, just south of Houston. You've come to hear the music, but it's early yet and though it's raining, the fresh air to be had on the sidewalk pulls you outside. But the atmosphere smells of money too. This not the Lower East Side of your yout'. Across the street in a nearly empty restaurant, a waitress in black standing near the bar raises her arms and stretches her body nearly into a bow. How long this gesture takes you are not sure, but in this moment, it seems possible that, though things still look the same, the entire universe has changed its nature. The rain falls harder now. Dave glances at his watch wondering, you suppose, whether his crowd will show up, and when or if, or Paul, the other tall, lean singer-songwriter in this double bill, will climb out of a cab, or emanate from the street. And so you stand in the doorway of the Pink Pony looking at one another's faces, and then survey up and down the block, shift your eyes here and there, take in details, but keep the gazes moving, in anticipation that perhaps now, right now,

the city is preparing deliver up whatever it was you came for. You watch expectantly, without alarm. Whatever it is, you'll know it when you meet it.

June 29

Saturday, 7:57 a.m. He, the apparition, walks south on the east side of Eighth Avenue, past the knot of people, mostly young, well-muscled gay men, waiting for the health club to open. You spotted him almost immediately when you came out of your building though he was a block south and across the avenue, and the sight had left you no choice but to detour from your accustomed route to the café in pursuit. You overtake him just as he turns east on 23rd Street. Probably Japanese, and approaching middle-age, he wears his hear shoulder-length and dyed a color that used to be called dirty blond. Affixed somehow to his upper back are large, white, feathery wings. With one hand he holds a length of graying linen robe draped diagonally across one shoulder that also serves to cover his nether parts.

There's a pattern to his progress. Every fifty paces or so, he breaks his measured stride and pauses, gazing into the middle distance. Not quite a thousand yard stare – he seems to be looking *at* something with an expression both quizzical and pained. Now he stands stock still, just east of the Krispee-Kreme donut shop awning.

Across 23rd Street, at Temple Emunath Israel, services will begin at nine. Despite the proximity, you get the distinct feeling this angel will not visit the Congregation in its prayers. But thinking about the temple reminds you that you haven't seen Mr. Litwin for a month or so, and when you did, he didn't look so hot – his skin white and papery. Make a note to ask Ruth how he is doing, hoping that indeed he *is* doing. Unzip your backpack and pull your book and pencil out right here, otherwise your impulse will get swept aside in the great rush of things, forgotten for days, until some association spins it back into awareness. When you finish jotting, you stand for a moment, watch the winged man walk on.

• • •

Ever since the dawn of crack, gunfire continues on routine in certain neighborhoods. In the Bronx and Brooklyn, two kids hit in as many days by bullets intended for others. Both sixteen. One holding her baby.

June 30

10 p.m. Gay Pride fireworks, probably shot off the 13th Street Pier – the highest bursts visible to the southwest over the top of Building 3. Is it just your mood, or is there something especially effusive about these lights – as though the rockets themselves know they're signifying the presence of an overarching generative spirit. And suspended, for those who can see it there, in the smoke above the Hudson, the sparkling charge of Brazil's *Copa* victory too.

July 1 – Le G. – Early Morning

Open the *New York Times* and an advertising insert falls in your lap. Yeeech, the colors – a violent confrontation between yellow and gray. Ah, the Olympic wanabees' first shot across the bow. Unfold to find: THE OLYMPIC X PLAN for 2012 done up in boldface stencil, like a message along the fuselage of a bomber, or inscribed on the payload itself. On the verso, a map of the region viewed from way above. Upon this terrain an X has been superimposed, with a host of athletic events strung along its axes, everything from slalom canoeing in Queens to mountain biking in Staten Island. At the very crux, an entity called Olympic Village has been plunked down in Long Island City, just north of where Newton Creek flows into the East River. A wide circle reaching nearly to the margins, denotes a ten-mile radius from the epicenter of the games. If you looked at just the imagery without resorting to the text, you'd swear for all the world this was one of those H-bomb blast and radiation charts from the '60s, a different culture of fear and a time when Ground Zero meant something other than mass martyrdom as preamble to sixteen-acres of real estate heaven on earth.

Lord, this is a singleminded map – strategic, not tactical – hence no arteries or streets, no cemeteries, nor any identifying urban features. Only an elementary distinction between land and water and the names of the boroughs. What's labeled are airports, Olympic transit routes, and proposed sports facilities. The whole of the region lies denatured, neutralized – fallow land for domination.

On the recto side, a wide column of PR boosterspeil ramps up in the syntax of assumed high Newyorkese. As you read, the words come across subvocalized in the tones of a central casting hardhat, or cabbie, or hotdog vendor delivering up the authentic and ineffable wisdom of the stoops. "Just think (tink): The Olympic games in New York (Yawk). Can you (youze) imagine that? The world's (woild's) greatest event…in our great city." A ways down, the language shades into a higher tax bracket, promising billions in revenue for upgrading parks and recreation facilities – all "for our children." And will this cost the taxpayer one dime? No siree, Bob.

Yo, yo – wait up now – this all sounds to good to be true. Ergo: "We know what you're thinking. Seventeen days of more traffic…more crowded subways…more of more. But detailed plans have been made to ensure that you still have enough time to get your iced latte before work."

And then the closer: "Come on, New York…this is the Olympics…. Without your support…fuggedaboudit… Become a cheerleader for the cause… Talk to friends around the country… let them know how New York will have something great to celebrate along with the rebuilding of our city…. After all, we've been training for this forever."

At the very bottom of the page, the logo repeats in miniature the graphic on the cover: a runner in blurred high contrast, female and seemingly black. Crouched to spring into action, she waits for a DONT WALK sign to flash GO.

The map is printed in tones of gray, but darker by far are the forces behind it. And nowhere do they identify themselves, this "we" who know us so well, who look out so beneficently for our needs. These Olympics, and their sequelia, were they happen here, would deliver a body blow to the city, far more damaging than the destruction of the towers. These *farpotshket* dreams of abstracting out, of wrenching the polis into Happy Host mode, would mark the dead end of the four century arc begun when the *Halve Maen* dropped anchor in the bay. "This is a very good land to fall with," Hudson's navigator observed, "and a pleasant land to see."

Somehow, New York – the organism – has always marshaled sufficient Eros to edge out a narrow victory over deathwish. But now? How long after the last electric bulb blows out on Broadway, and Nasdaq's ticker LCD flashes from zero to permanent blank – how long will it take for a council elm to grow again on the spot the Dutch

called Bowling Green? Who will keep the sacred fire burning there? Who? – now that the Canarsie Indians have gone.

• • •

By shanksmare toward Tobias's office to drop off some books and your apartment keys before flying outa Dodge for the summer. A Sanitation Department sweeper vehicle careens past you heading west on 25th Street. It raises in its wake an immense cloud of dust which, a few steps on, you find yourself engulfed. Swallowed up with you in the particle storm, a lone workman trying to muscle a heavy wooden construction barricade into position on tiny metal rollers. Get closer and you see his rollers are appropriated chain-link fence poles laid down in the street like something out of a speculative history of pyramid building. In the midst of the cloud you can also make out a man on crutches, his legs misshapen, struggling to negotiate the torn-up plaza in front of the Elliott Chelsea Houses – "A Proud Home in Our Community" – a public project built around the same time as Penn South and more or less the same towers in a park style. Visible in the plaza too, a blue portosan and a yellow bulldozer-backhoe hybrid, whence came the construction debris along the curb whence came the dust the sweeper whirled temporarily into momentum.

How much you can see despite it all. On the sidewalk you pass a middle aged woman in flip-flops and her tiny black poodle. You keep walking through, in the sweeper's wake, like an animal that, in hot weather, bathes in dust to keep the files off. You may not have begun as that sort of creature, but perhaps it's your destiny to evolve into one. A creature that one day adapts to writing in the dust.

July 3 – Montpelier, VT

Sneak away from the Goddard residency to watch the parade in town. Ranks of men dressed in Revolutionary War uniforms march solemnly by. Every fifty paces or so, they pause, set the butts of their muskets against their shoulders, and, as though aiming at a flock of invisible geese, fire. Great puffs of smoke emerge from their gunbarrels, and on the march, they rip open powder measures with their teeth and load the breeches again.

Just behind the Minutemen, slouch two boys of middling teenage years, clad in tee shirts and torn shorts, one stands out, with scraggly red hair and a braided goatee. Between them, they hold a homemade cardboard sign: *Let's Kill All The Arabs*.

Stunned silence from the onlookers as they pass. Nobody knows quite what to make of them, they look so weasily, so unmilitary in their bearing. Then, down toward the corner, a middle aged woman rushes out of the crowd and attempts to wrest the sign from their hands. One of the boys half pushes the woman back, but the gesture's more like a rough turning away to deflect her. They walk on undisturbed. Behind them stretches a long column of camouflaged trucks.

July 11

Coming into LaGuardia, you buzz midtown Manhattan in your tiny thirty-three-seater USAir prop plane – passing over the Empire State's spire – if you were Kong, you could grasp it just like that.

What a grid, what a layout, what upthrust. You've always know from the ground level that it was a real estate game, but you never saw the board laid out like this before and internally a voice sounds, *Yes! This is the playing field for which the skyline is the alibi! Come play the game and try to live here if you can.*

July 12

A dream in which one of your two cats reveals itself to be a human infant, while the other remains a cat. "Katie!" you call in your dream, "How can we be going off to Europe without our baby? And isn't this amazing – we have a second child!"

July 13 – Twenty Minutes to Paris

Fields of Normandy below. Dawn in another part of the world, over a different rim.

3 ABODE OF PEACE

July 14 – Jardin du Luxembourg

Once again, just like last summer, you and Katie circumnavigate the perimeter of the children's playground at a stroll, while inside, Gwen climbs the enormous pyramidal jungle gym. Then she queues up behind a horde of other kids waiting their turn to mount a low platform, cling to one of the knotted ropes that hang on rollers from a metal track and swoosh round the circuit back to the starting point. For a kid her age, it's endless fun. She cedes her place to a smaller, eager child, then grabs a rope and leaps into motion. In the time it takes to blink, the idea plays through your head that this particular moment constitutes a déjà-vu and the intervening year has been an illusion. It is still summer 2001. No three hundred sixty-odd rotations, nor a revolution round the sun. Kronos never ate his children.

You scuff through early fallen leaves, mostly silent. But when you and Katie last walked this path the talk between you had gone a mile a minute, congratulating yourselves almost ecstatically on getting back to Paris with Gwen. What a difference a year makes. Gwen waves, and you beckon that it's time to go. Bargaining to stay a little longer, she holds up five fingers. There's the proof you needed: a year ago she had a cast on that arm.

Ten years is too old for a pony ride, but apart from that, you complete, almost ritualistically, last year's tour of the Jardin: the carousel, then Théatre Guignol, where, as before, our wooden and enamel-rouged hero saves the damsel in distress – assisted this time by a dusky, mischievous little fellow named Zim-Boum.

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Comes the evening and the three of you hook up with Rosemary and amble down to the eastern end of the Tuilleries where the gravel covered ground slopes up to

a balustraded terrace overlooking the approach to Pont de la Concorde. From here you gaze across the Seine toward the fireworks bursting alongside the Tour Eiffel in honor of Gwen's birthday and, incidentally, the storming of the Bastille. But she can only see properly if you hoist her on your shoulders. Hop-la! She's growing by leaps and bounds even as your bones get older. Lock your knees and redouble your efforts to stand straight. This may be the last time you're called upon to do this particular duty. Will you be able to turn your head tomorrow? Probably not. But tonight you're thankful you can still hold her aloft, through the final volley, the playing of La Marseillaise, until the show is over.

July 17 – Chinon

South into La Loire. Pilgrimage to the birthplace of Rabelais. Not hard to see in this terrain, fizzing with the life of the soil, how such an imagination could gestate here.

Back in the day, the custom of Touraine was to build into the farmhouse wall one dovecote for every unit of land under the owner's cultivation.

Pitstop at a local café, where you spy a poster for an upcoming event at Discotheque Chinon: *Election – Miss Tee-Shirt Mouillé*. Now, how would Pantagruel react if he came upon a host of tiny people frolicking so?

• • •

Nine hundred-odd years after the Norman invasion, the Brits, hectare by hectare, proceed to conquer France. You're staying the week in Dampierre-Morains, at a medieval château owned by the parents of a London-born editor, now one of your New York compadres. Strange to encounter, above the door to the guest bedroom, a baby picture of your friend, hanging next to one of his brother. The two portraits, in black and white, are mounted side by side, and nearly identical but for their poses being reversed. Each infant faces feet inward, head out so that taken together their bodies form a of U-shape – all vignetted innocence. Both C. and his brother lie on their tummies, foremost legs slightly cocked as if preparing to crawl in opposite directions. Their arms, nearly extended, support heads which raise off pillows to stare at the

camera, turning, in all likelihood, toward the sound – perhaps the call of their names – that came from behind or beside it.

Against the bright white of the linens, the babies' skin appears light gray, while behind them, a cloudy backdrop, slightly darker, sets in relief the softness of their lineaments. In these postures, somewhere between recumbent and rampant, the infants appear almost heraldic – as though their combined image makes up the emblem of a coat of arms.

July 18 – Saumur, Piscine Publique – Afternoon

Strong sun. The breeze ruffles the body hair you wish existed in inverse proportion to that on your head. Into your mind floats the notion that you have come to this spot precisely in order realize you've been lying here for a million years. No, nothing that finite – rather a vast, unquantifiable stretch of time.

When you turn your head and open your eyes, you see to your left the children and the mothers on the grass beneath the trees, or partly in the sun. To your right, upon the bluff, a large château – a famed equestrian academy. If you blink, the scene might shift and the château give place to a mill. From the ramparts of the château, flags fly from the spires atop its towers. A weathervane shows, better than your body hears, the precise direction of the breeze.

Close eyes. If you open them and see a mill, it will pivot to catch the wind, and its blades will move counterclockwise. In this particular reverie, the same frame cannot accommodate both a château and a mill. It's one or the other, take your choice. But the women and their children remain the same. The former wear their hair cut short or long, depending on their age. Some dye their hair a version of Stephanie Audran red. Their bikinis come in black or white. Their daughters look just like them in coltish miniature and more colorful swimsuits, and their boys run bandy-legged through the grass in diapers or naked, it is all the same to them. Where do they feel the breeze, having no significant body hair? Over the tops of their intent little heads, maybe, above which the clouds roll and the mill turns, or else the château flags snap in the breeze.

July 19 – Dampierre-Morains

Every time you climb the spiral stairs to your bedroom, you look for the odd little head of a man carved into the stone of one of the risers, near the narrow end of the step. He's hundreds of years old, and almost cartoonishly stylized, but so seemingly animate that you keep expecting him to change expression or move a stair up or downward, just to play with your head. But perhaps his trick is that he's always there, until one day, he isn't.

Evening and you join your friend's father, the lord of the manor, in what was once the great hall. A soft, leather sofa. Above, the ancient jointed, pegged timbers of the ceiling illuminated by warm overspill from the table lamps. Desultory conversation, interspersed with bouts of reading the news – he the *Financial Times*, you *The Economist*, wherein the question is posed: "What next for Ground Zero?" How far away is New York City? Your window looks out onto the ancient road cutting through vineyards, the land this fortress was built to strategically control.

"This week, after months of discussion, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, which is responsible for the site, unveiled six designs. These have whipped up a tidal wave of comment, not all of it kind. More than forty million people tried to view the plans on the LMDC's website, overloading its server and slowing down internet traffic throughout the U.S."

If you knew R. better, you'd say something snide. Flip the pages instead to an article on telecom giants gone bust. "'Today, there is no economy but the global economy, no Internet but the global Internet, and no network but the global network,' wrote George Gilder, a technology guru, in February 2001. He predicted two telecom firms, Global Crossing and 360 Networks 'will battle for worldwide supremacy, but in a trillion-dollar market, there will be no loser.' Yet within a year, both had filed for bankruptcy."

Say goodnight to your host. And on the way upstairs, to the little fellow carved in stone.

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A dream in which the WTC towers appear as two extruded cubes, like a doubled Ka'aba.

July 19

Tapestries at Chenonceau show the Triumph of Force and Charity – the latter depicted as an army led by the Virgin.

In the great Apocalypse tapestry cycle in Angiers, the white horse symbolizes domination.

John, author of Revelation, eats what he has eaten – reports that it "tastes sweet as honey, but fills my bowels with bitterness."

One knows from experience that frogs' legs can taste delicious. But, as the tapestry makes clear, it is not a good thing to have whole frogs coming *out* of the mouth.

July 21

Incredible straightness of the Roman road from Loudon to Mirebeau.

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Katie wanted the Dordogne experience, and this is it in spades. Intense cultivation as at Dampierre, but of a different sort. Here are sheep and cow pastures, corn, sunflowers, walnuts, and tobacco as one heads west toward Périgueux.

• • •

Janet and Patrick, refugees from the Lower East Side, have taken a tumbledown farm complex in the hamlet of Chaumont and turned it into a home for themselves and a guest house for the likes of us. The gîte is a former sheep barn, rubble stone and masonry walls, ashlar door and window frames, tiled roof with a scalloped terracotta edge below. Round about, in garden beds and climbing vertically on trellises, evidence of Janet's genius for placing her effusions of flowers. This is where you'll spend these next three weeks revising your imploded second novel, a gift of Katie's imaginative generosity. If not here, then where? Patrick helps you move a table into the bedroom so it faces out the French doors. Spread a tablecloth and set your laptop down, but

don't open it yet. Look through the darkened frame onto the garden beyond and the social life of bees and lizards navigating the stones and wall-chinks. Literally, doves coo in the eaves.

• • •

Grill duck breasts with rosemary cooked on a rack set over stones on the lawn outside. In the kitchen, Katie stirs potatoes in a pan, filled a quarter inch deep with duck fat. Parsley from Janet's garden. Late, late sunset.

Kick a soccer ball about with Gwen. A shot goes wild – oops, hit the plum tree. A rain of *reine-claudes*.

July 23

There was a tall stack of them on the book table at the Monoprix in Périgueux and now you possess your very own somber, gray-covered copy of *L'effroyable mensonge* – *The Frightful Lie* – a compendium of evidence by two French journalists that Bush whacked the WTC. Lord knows why you bought this thing – from the little you can decode it reads as strident and hysterical. Yet it called out as an artifact of the moment of a kind one you'll be unlikely to find so readily back home.

Evening and Janet comes over to report a TV newsflash of an explosion at the Con Ed power plant on East 14th Street. Right near where Mickey lives. No one hurt, apparently, that's all that's known. And the beat goes on.

July 24

Item in the *International Herald Tribune*: Prince Ahmed bin Salman, owner of War Emblem, the horse that won the last Kentucky Derby dead of a heart attack in Riyadh at the age of 44. And the horse goes on.

• • •

Night falling, the three of you pile into the back seat of Janet's little red Fiat and drive to a jazz concert in the Forêt Barade preserve. With the rest of the audience, you

sit on the slopes of the former moat of a ruined château. Legend has it that centuries ago, the château was besieged and burned, and its despotic seigneur put to the sword in a peasant uprising led by the heroic child-rebel Jacou. When the concert ends, the keeper of the château illuminates the structure from within, the door creaks open, and in flocks the crowd – led by a troupe of wildly excited kids. This sort of treat doesn't happen every day.

The ancient keep is gutted – the walls still stand though, and form a vast atrium partially roofed. Looking upward from the cellar affords an unimpeded view of a succession of three successively shallower fireplaces, sheared-off and mantelpieces jutting from the walls, each surmounted by the seigneur's coat of arms, carved into the stone. Stacked this way the whole of this monumental chimneywork appears as a single contiguous tapering sculpture, yet sockets in the masonry walls show where once, timber beams supported the floors. Winding upward, a steel scaffold's been affixed to the interior walls, and you ascend the steps to what was once the top of the citadel, and then cross the see-through walkway spanning the chasm below.

July 25 – Evening

For days you've seen posters along the local roads for a traveling circus – touring all the nearby towns. You catch up with Cirque Ullman in Thenon just after nightfall, wend your way through the crowd toward the chain of red wagons semi-circling the ring, Gwen in the lead. Find three seats together, reasonably close to the action. Barnum it ain't, nor Big Apple – silly even to make the comparison, this is *la France profonde*. You drift into a suspended state that matches the show's unhurried pace, when midway through, quite unexpectedly, comes its star turn: Katia et ses Fauves. Compactly-built, with an exquisite oval face, Katia – whom you suspect, though not by resemblance, is the ogre-like ringmaster's daughter – puts the lions through their paces with verve. But beauty's time-honored dominion over savagery only serves as an entrée. With the fauves returned to their cages and pacing in the background, Katia delivers up a series of ever more complex and risky acrobatic and balancing stunts, her movements so self-contained and precisely focused, she reminds you weirdly of Rostropovich, the night you saw him perform solo at Royal Festival Hall thirty five years past.

Audible gasps, some of them yours, at the completion of each feat, whereupon she strikes a "tada!" pose – with a twist. Gazing out somewhere beyond the audience, Katia offers a half smile, draws her hand across her face in a kind of arabesque, as though both masking and revealing a subtle transformation of her features. "Regard," her gesture telegraphs, "I possess a wonderful secret, but my lips are sealed."

July 31 – Sarlat

An ancient market town, known for its inbreeding, and the resulting mad folks and idiots. But you see no evidence of this until, urgently needing to pee, you stop into a hole-in-the-wall bar on a side street, order a café, and fall into a conversation in horrible franglais with three distinctly lupine fellows, one of them the patron, that eventually works its way round to the putative craziness of George Bush. Seeing that you are in accord with them, one of the men throws his arms around you, kisses you on both cheeks, and embraces you like a brother. A great deal of genial, raucous laughter, but it feels as though you've stumbled into a medieval farce, particularly as it begins to dawn on you that all these guys look very similar indeed.

That encounter was a lagniappe. What you came to Sarlat for is the marché and it's an amazing one – most of it spread across the square, but continuing indoors, enclosed by the nave of a half-destroyed gothic church, its vaulted arches soaring high above the stalls. The immense doors are of modern vintage and made of burnished industrial steel. Painted across them midway up, in bold fire-engine red letters, a quote from Baudrillard:

L'architecture est un mélange de nostalgie et d'anticipation extrème – architecture is a mixture of nostalgia and extreme anticipation.

Everywhere, each day, some sign calls you back to New York. Which is when you remember you need to buy a gift for Juan and Maria's newborn – not so newborn, actually – four months old by now. Where are they – have they left for Germany yet? Near the market, you find a shop that sells enameled cups and plates. Ah, here's a little white cup imprinted with ducks. A big handle, easy to grab. This'll do the trick. Anna Luna – that's her name. You'll see Juan at the café when you get back and give it to him then. If they've already transplanted, no problem – it's durable enough to send abroad without fear of damage.

August 6

Gwen's had a little gap between her front teeth since the permanent ones appeared. But she says it here, in the bathroom at : "Whenever I want to look at the World Trade Center, I look in the mirror and smile."

Work on the novel proceeds apace. What was called *Year's Utopia* has become *Orogene*. The good news is that most of the characters and plotlines will survive. But this is not a revision, it's got to be a full rewrite – language mowed down to the ground, ploughed under – not a sentence left standing.

August 7

You promised Gwen that she could have her ears pierced when she turned ten. She's been lobbying for years, and now three whole weeks have passed since the official date. *Patience, patience*. Only now, in Montignac, a little town where, under the right circumstances, you can imagine spending the rest of your life, do means, motive, and opportunity converge. Just past the bridge over the Vézère you spot a little jewelry shop and cross the street to look inside the window. A tasteful selection of earrings. Gwen fancies those studs there. It's midday, but the shop is open. Enter. The bell on the door tinkles, the jeweler comes forward to the counter.

Tu dis: *Bonjour*. Pantomime: do you pierce? *Mais oui*. Friendly, but serious. This is the man into whose hands you are delivering the fate of your child's ears. He meets your eyes and you decide you trust him. He steps out of the room and quickly returns wearing a white lab coat. Gently, but with precise formality, he sits Gwen in a straight-backed chair, wipes her earlobes with alcohol, marks tiny dots on them with a felt tipped pen, looks at her straight on to check their symmetry, raises the CO_2 gun – *pwok!* – one's done and she's scarcely had time to blink. *Pwok!* number two, and *c'est un fait accompli*. Fast and painless, not like in her mother's day. Another Rubicon crossed. How many more to go?

August 12 – 2 to 4 a.m.

Gwen asleep inside, you and Katie drag chaise-longues thirty meters or so out into the open meadow, cover up with blankets and gaze up at the sky. No lights

around but the planets, stars and shooting stars aplenty. Sometimes there's a pause in the meteor shower and a great visual stillness sets in. You wait what must be ten minutes and wonder *is that it – are they all done?* And then, just as you're glazing over, eight or nine flash by in succession, from an unexpected quadrant of the heavens. Katie's annual birthday gift of Leonids.

August 13 – Ajat – Midafternoon

Gwen frolics in the piscine – she's found a couple of girls to play aquatic volleyball with. Papa does his best to chill out, lies down on a towel at the edge of the concrete perimeter, opens Bloch's *Principle of Hope*. "Functionalist architecture reflects and doubles the ice-cold automatic world of commercial society –"

A swallowtailed butterfly lights on his right knee. Tickles. What to do? Book tented on his chest, he waits. It's gorgeous. His breathing slows.

A great splash from the pool, someone's cannonballed in at this end. No spray hits, just displaced air. The creature's flown.

August 16 – Chaumont

Tomorrow to Brive, then by train through Paris, to Leiden. Begin to feel your way toward a farewell.

These past weeks you've worked at the novel in a way you've rarely had the opportunity to write before, intensely, but without a clock of obligations ticking loudly in your ear, nor punctuation of alarms. So the metaphor's come, and it's fits Périgord, that you're cracking walnuts – each sentence is another hard little spheroid, and you've got to find the seam of it, and apply pressure just so if you're going to separate the shell halves without damaging the meat inside. Bagsful of walnuts to go, far too many nuts to count. But given what you've gotten done, so much more than you could've accomplished in New York, there's hope. And you're grateful for it.

• • •

Evening. You noticed it the first day, but only now do you tilt the lamp to read in full the handwriting penciled on the wall of the gîte, just to the right of the door.

Janet and Patrick have carefully painted round the whitewashed patch and framed it with a valentine heart made of red foil.

ICI REPOSAIT EN PAIX LES EVACUÉS DU
9E DE STRASBOURG DU 20 SEPT. 1939 AU 10 DEC.
VIVE L'ALSACE ET LA DORDOGNE
À BAS HITLER!

And their names:

BIEBER THOM
FRANTZ THEODORE
BRADY ANNE
STOELZEL MATHILDE
URBAN MARIBELLE

August 17 – Early Afternoon

No seats to be had three abreast on the Paris-Rotterdam train, so you take a place on the aisle in the row just behind Katie and Gwen. Next to you in the window seat, reading, a young woman, black, pretty in profile. She turns toward you once, smiles, and you catch a flash from the small gold cross on the chain around her neck before she returns to *France Dimanche*. You can't resist the New York subway sidelong glance. There are the towers afire, the iconic wreckage, the straight-on face of Mohammed Atta and the boldface headline: "C'est l'armée americaine qui a détruit les tours du World Trade Center!" Double take. Of all the gin joints in all the towns…

She's either so absorbed she doesn't notice, or doesn't mind your peering over her shoulder. Aha, the article is an interview with Thierry Meyssan, one of the authors of *The Frightful Lie*. No way you read the fine type so you work at translating the breakout box: *Plus que bizarre: le passeport du pilote d'un avions meurtriers a été retrouvé comme neuf dans les décombres* – Even more bizarre: the passport of a pilot of one of the murderous airplanes was retrieved spotless from the wreckage.

August 18 – Leiden, Netherlands

A new word learned in reading: *saccade* – rapid eye movements from one fixed point to another.

August 19

Certainly not silent, these walls of Leiden. Starting high up and running across and down a whole apartment building's side at the corner of Langebrug and Diefsteeg:

Riposte

Love is like water or the air
my townspeople:
it cleans, and dissipates evil gasses.
It is like poetry too
and for the same reasons

Love is so precious
my townspeople:
that if I were you I would
have it under lock and key –
like the air or the Atlantic or
like poetry!

– William Carlos Williams

August 20 – Haarlem

The Blue Stone, laid down on Breestraat in the 14th century – at the crossroads of the Hospital, Meethall, Woolhouse and Cloth Hall quarters – served as the town's gravitational center. From investitures to executions, every kind of public ceremony was held above and around it. Dug up in modern times, it's in the museum now.

August 20 – Early Afternoon

Paniers packed with lunch, you're setting off to cycle from Leiden along the bike path to the beach. Rich heads the procession, followed by Ellen, their two boys, Gwen, Katie and yo. Nearly out of town when Rich pulls over, leans his bike against the kickstand and trots into a shop. He's out again in no time and bearing a bag from which he presses into your hand, before you can you form a thought, a cold can of Heineken. He snaps one open himself, hops back on his bike and resumes the lead, looks back to make sure all the ducks are in line. Does he favor you with a wink?

Somehow you feel enormously uncoordinated, like Gerald Ford, trying to bicycle and drink beer at the same time. Hot sun and the beginnings of a buzz. Along the path, a sign points to Katwijk and it's no exaggeration that you almost careen off the blacktop and into the dunes. This is it, the same path you biked along with Justina, you nineteen and she twenty, just met that morning at the Amsterdam youth hostel. You talk, she laughs and decides to rent a bike. When the sun goes down, you'll build a fire on the beach, unzip your sleeping bags and spread them carefully one on top of the other. They won't stay that way long, twisted soon, and the sex, not her first, but yours, spiced with sand. You're way too fast, but thankfully Justina's a tolerant soul, and anyway, what's youth for but quick rebounds?

Stars when the fire goes out.

Comes a flash in the dead of night. Two cops. Blinking, you catch the jist of what they're saying: it is forbidden to sleep on the beach. Ah, yes, you didn't know. It's an awkward moment. But the year is nineteen sixty-eight. And in truth, there's nothing to get hung about. So they look at one another, shrug and then they're off down the strand, lightbeams sweeping to and fro before them. You remember thinking if you had some dope, you'd have hooked them up.

The morning dawns gray. You and Justina cycle, headed vaguely toward Paris, along a path flat as a pancake, past immense concrete bunkers, long abandoned – the Nazi line of defense – facing out to sea.

August 27 – Paris

At Hôtel Carnavalet, the city museum of Paris, a series of small engravings records the panoply of *les petits métiers*: street peddlers circa 1630, each captioned with his or her cry:

Des fin chappeau de papier à vandre! Fine paper hats for sale!

La mort aux raz et aux souris! Death to rats and mice!

Serize douce serize! Cherries, sweet cherries!

A pâtissier hawks *Ratons tout chau'st!* – cakes in the shape of rats.

And the fruitseller of four seasons calls out her vinegar, cabbage, radishes and onion:

Voÿla des bon vinaigre; chous blang, des radis nouvelle, mon bel oignon!

August 28 – Café Le Rallye, Asnières-sur-Seine – Early Morning

Heading home this afternoon. Coffee's drained. Deep funk. Same as last year, only worse. Did church bells ring unnoticed, or did the old tune just pop into your head?

"Go so far and no further," sing the sad bells of Asnières

"Pass through, pass through," call the clear bells of Paris

"No life here, no life here," toll the green bells of Ajat

"We never stop ringing!" boast the stout bells of Leiden

"No comfort, no comfort," booms the great bell of New York

"Take courage, take courage," sound the soft bells of Apt

"Approach and abide here," urge the sweet bells of –

Emigrating by inches. Not there yet.

September 3 – Midmorning

The view from the living room window doesn't lie. They're not there any more. Almost robotically, you begin writing an op-ed piece.

> It is nearly one year after the fall of the World Trade Center. Gone like the towers themselves is the once-smoldering mound they were reduced to. We have arrived back at the bare foundation that supported these structures, the enormous pit known as the Bathtub – sixteen acres square and five stories deep – now rendered pristine. Yet we are, for all

that clearing, no further along in our understanding of the WTC than were on 9/11. How can that be?

In the months since their destruction, the nearly identical towers of the WTC have been retroactively adopted as the preeminent symbol of American culture. But the fact is that the trade towers – immense as they were – existed for their entire thirty year lifespan without really making it onto our collective radar. It has only been belatedly, posthumously, that we've became aware of the enormous symbolic importance these particular buildings held for us.

Until the towers were lost, few of us had an inkling of how deeply identified we were with them. We'd made an enormous emotional investment unconsciously, and took the objects of that investment for granted, or simply ignored them. Today, one often hear a sentence begin with "After the World Trade Center…". This preamble serves as a kind of verbal shorthand to indicate the threshold between a past forever closed behind us, and a new era as yet undefined. But the phrase also contains within it the tacit admission that the towers only really sprang into our awareness at the moment of their obliteration.

Yet there they stood, for just over three decades, begging a host of questions that, even now, months beyond their singular destruction, remain largely unasked.

Where are you going with this? What are you trying to say? That you're angry at being marginalized by the aftermath industry? That it's galling – all the years you served as Boswell to these two very uncooperative Johnsons – to have your privileged relationship with them ripped away, your painstaking research supplanted by a host of Monday morning quarterbacks rehashing, without attribution, the narrative you assembled – the parts of it, that is, that they find useful – as though they'd thought it all up themselves? Worse yet, *Divided…* has vanished into obscurity for the second, and final time. Books don't come up for air thrice like drowning people do.

Jesus, all it would have taken was for Basic to send out a new press release and buy a couple of ads. Well, why the hell didn't you do it then? *I'm a writer, Jim, not a publicist!* See where that gets you.

First and foremost, how did World Trade Center come to be? What forces converged to extrude, out of the bedrock of New York's financial district, twin buildings that made all previous architectural power plays obsolete – structures so massive and blank-faced that even people well disposed toward their design found it difficult to imagine that, on any given workday, they were filled with humanity.

Conceived just after World War II, though in a very different form, and actively planned as part of a wider Lower Manhattan redevelopment scheme, the trade towers were constructed into the mid-nineteen sixties, at the height of the Vietnam war. As I have documented elsewhere, quite stunning abuses of power had been written into the life of these buildings at every stage. Initiated by banker David Rockefeller and owned by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, the WTC displaced an active and longstanding merchant community called Radio Row and ultimately expropriated sixteen acres of land from the jurisdiction of the City of New York – a seizure upheld by the Supreme Court.

Once built, no feat of the imagination could begin to domesticate the trade center. So there it stood, isolated and immune to mediation – telegraphing not just New York's greatness, but also America's claims to global supremacy – asserting in two emphatic strokes of skyscraper domination, both the threat and the promise that America intended to rule the world.

Did Americans see the World Trade Center this way? Probably most of us, even New Yorkers, did not. Even now, the idea of being the frontline city of an empire just doesn't square with our self-image. But the horror of the towers crumbling ought to have cracked open even the most resolutely clamped-shut eye.

In the World Trade Center's short and brutal history, before its catastrophic return to earth, we can observe the mechanics of unchecked power on the rise. Between the heroics of construction and the heroics of rescue, search as we may, we will be hardpressed to pull a thread of everyday humanity from the fabric of the tale. If we do find one, it immediately shrinks to insignificance beside the drama of the giants. The fact that at no point could the towers be brought into scale with their surroundings should tell us something about what our attitudes were when we thought it right and proper to build them.

Our awakening, like sleepwalkers, to the discovery that they had so powerful a hold on our imaginations, may offer clues as to the sort of people we have become in the intervening years. Prior to raising new buildings on the WTC's "hallowed ground," we would do well to listen to the echoes of what the towers, even in their absence can tell us.

In doing so, let us permit ourselves the possibility of acknowledging the horrific equation between the vast quantity of materiel that comprised these buildings: steel, glass, concrete – millions of tons of it – and the literal pulverization of thousands of people. Let us take into our deepest awareness how nearly instantaneously the seemingly impervious mass of these buildings turned to smoke and dust, and with such extra-human force that we were often denied even the grim affirmation of witnessing the bodies of the dead being brought out of the ruins. Of the majority of the victims, there is simply nothing left to bury, no physical evidence to ground our shock and grief. Our eyes saw such prolific images of destruction, yet there is so little human evidence to wrap our minds around.

If we can find some way to grasp, in its totality, the inhumane-ness of the World Trade Center both as it went up and came down, perhaps we can use this knowledge to feel our way toward a vision of what might be sensible to build where it stood. More broadly, we might begin to ask – and perhaps one day answer in a wiser way than the trade towers did – the question of how to design cities that are workshops for coexistence, not

trademarks of domination. What are the sorts of buildings that will help us see eye to eye? What would the architecture of peace look like?

Aw, fuggedaboudit! What were you thinking? Better keep to your books – however adverse the conditions, they've a better shot at seeing the light of print one day.

September 11

You insist on getting out of town, spending the day at Jones Beach. Katie accedes, Gwen's delighted. Much indolence until late afternoon when you commence, at Gwen's behest, to help her build a sandcastle. She digs like anything, steps back from time to time to keep get some perspective on the grand design. You don't think, just scoop with your hands, feel the friction, the grit of sand under wearing-down fingernails. Pat things into shape: towers, a moat and a tunnel for the water to flow through underneath a castle if an incoming wave breaches the trench you've dug parallel with the shore.

"When did you start?" You look up at a dayglo orange bikini suspended in midair. So close is her tanned skin tone to the darkening sky that you have to blink a few times to make out the woman's face.

"Around an hour ago," says Gwen.

You stand up, suddenly self-conscious, legs stiff. Brush off your knees and appraise your labors. Though there's no ziggurat, something about it reminds you of a Sumerian city. "Nice," says the woman. Bright flash of smile.

Gwen begins scooping a wide channel so the onrushing waves will fill the deep central well within the castle. You get back down to work, build a breaking wall to guide the water into the channel. It seems the tide is coming in because you have to buttress the walls evermore frequently. Still you continue raising the superstructure. It's an art finding the exactly right mix of sand and water that produces a solid tower, neither too granular, nor too soggy, when the bucket's overturned. By the time you leave, the castle is many-turreted.

Sometime in the dark tonight, the waves will sweep and take care of it all – with infinite patience, rearrange the sand to its cyclic purposes again.

September 13

Pictures are our own surfacing in another place. So said Franz Marc, via Bloch in *Principle of Hope*.

October 9 – Le G. – Early Morning

Some time during the night, amidst the potted lime trees in the Spanish Patio of the Metropolitan Museum, a larger than lifesize 15th century marble statue of Adam (grasping an apple) keeled over and shattered into bits large and small – in any case many. Apparently the plywood base, only two years old but poorly built, gave way beneath the sculpture, a putative masterwork of the transition between the middle ages and renaissance.

This time, no seductive rib-girl precipitated the Fall of Man, just bad carpentry. He crashed to the ground unheard, to be discovered later by a guard on his rounds. The Met puts a brave face on for the *Times* – promising to restore Adam to his former state so flawlessly that "only the cognoscenti will know."

You recall the sculpture well, passed it dozens of times, but are certain that the figure possessed a navel. So how could he have been Adam? Or was there an Adam before Adam? In which case this Adam may not be all he's cracked up to be. Perhaps they'll restore the statue *sans* navel – more authentic that way.

Same paper, different page. A fatal accident during a trial run of the Port Authority's new JFK airport monorail link. As the train negotiated a steep turn, the sixteen thousand pounds of concrete ballast – intended to simulate the mass of human passengers – shifted radically and crushed the motorman. Another marvel of engineering, brought to you by the folks who dug the hole and raised the WTC.

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Look out the window toward nightfall. The sykyline's gotten very active. Not so much with construction as communication among buildings. More birdlike, their calls to one another. Though we can't hear them, its clear they're sentient, that they understand, in their way, what's going on. You wonder what they think of the

dramatic, even ecstatic sunrises and sunsets we've been having lately, how the sky plays its resources for all it's worth. Do they read the signals in the atmosphere and talk about them? If only we could still hear the ground and read the sky. Look up. what drama transpires there in the play of light and shadow. And even at the horizon. Or what would be, if you could see it.

November 6 – Le G. – Early Morning

The *Post* narrates murder in the voice of a demon:

"Now he was about to become the first casualty in what experts are calling 'robotic warfare.' As he pulled out of his farm in northwest Yemen on Sunday with five of his cohorts, he was dead center in the crosshairs of American ingenuity."

Once he, Abu Ali, suspected senior Al-qaeda member, appeared in those crosshairs, a button thousands of miles away, probably in Tampa, FL, was pushed, most likely on orders from Langley, VA. Why at that particular moment, who knows? Only the gray men do. Perhaps in less time than it took you to write that sentence, an unmanned Predator drone, cruising high above the desert fired its Hellfire missile and Abu Ali, his companions and the SUV they were unfortunate enough to be riding in, became vapor. In any case the bits were rendered very small. Too small to know who was actually in the car. If it was a car.

The *Post* allows Clifford Beal of *Jane's Defense Weekly* to wax well beyond customary tabloid norms on the "human factor" in warfare. It's vanishing fast, says Clifford. "The next step is when you have the authority to kill given directly to the robotic vehicle. These drones could be programmed to have a particular target set in their computers.… To have a drone that engages and kills people – that is quite a threshold to cross…"

Which is something to think about when you step out the door of Le G. into the microparticulated air of Ninth Avenue, humming with traffic. Not too cold for the time of year. Stop to ruffle the neck hairs beneath the collars of Bauer and Brusché, a pair of pugs who've jumped up onto the seat of the bench they're leashed to while their owners breakfast inside. Sit next to them. Hunker down so that your heads are more or less the same level. Watch the street life from their POV. Up here, B. and B. are as tall as most of the passing dogs. And they're excited by the way the smells waft by differently up

here. Reach down for the pan of water on the ground and put it on the bench so they can lap at it. *Anyone who wants to can find us right here*, you say to them. *Isn't that right?*

November 24

There are times when you look downtown from the living room window and the sun, setting, inspires two otherwise nondescript modern towers – once puny neighbors of the WTC – to play divinely-inspired visual tricks. A coppery glow reflects off the western face of the Millennium Hotel. It exactly matches the color of the surrounding sky. The side that faces you is cast into shadow, its color blending seamlessly into the that of the broad flank of One Liberty Plaza just behind it. Taken together in this lighting, it appears as though it's all a single structure – a giant arch with a rectangular cutaway. There's something exhilarating about seeing the unremitting bulk of the great dark building made lighter, even for the length of a sunset, thanks to the sovereign sleight of rays.

A crooked dark outline to the left. A second one on the right. Two mantis-like cranes discovered on the southern skyline now.

November 29

News item on the radio that a cop with a Latino-sounding surname you didn't catch has been suspended without pay for refusing to bust a homeless man for "trespassing" in a parking lot. The mayor, backing up the PD brass, achieves a stunning rhetorical epiphany and announces that arrest is a method by which the city delivers services to the homeless.

Citizens! Find that cop and give him a medal – no, a medal *and* a stipend for life!

• • •

Now let fire and water fight it out wrote Kokan Shiren eight hundred years ago in his poem about sugar.

December 1

Dream in which you kill a lynx that is mauling your infant. The lynx turns out to be your lover and the infant, well, the infant is an illusion.

December 7

Jack's birthday, 83.

"Suppose," asks the *Lotus Sutra,* "you are on the peak of Mount Sumeru and someone pushes you off. Think on the power of that Bodhisattva perceiver of the World's Sounds and you will hang in midair like the sun…"

December 19

Ding! Out of the corner come the second round WTC designs, mouthguards in place, looking fierce. Jabbing. Keeping their guards up. All the front pages carry big images of the contenders. What an easy thing it is to build castles in Spain. And all's quiet on the grand illusion front.

December 20

Convictions and charges in the "Central Park Jogger" case are thrown out. Sent to jail as teenagers, those who served between seven and thirteen years are exonerated. Confessions coerced. You were working at Johnny Colon's East Harlem Music School at the time, and recall how strong the sentiment on the street was to crucify these youths. No one you spoke with in El Barrio, at least in the immediate aftermath, expressed any doubt that the suspects had done what they'd been accused of. Or even allowed for the offchance they might be getting railroaded.

Some of the tone of what you heard might be chalked up, in one way or another, to your being a English-speaking white guy. But the vituperation directed at these kids seemed so reflexively punitive, so unmediated – as though a wellspring, repeatedly tamped down, had finally erupted. The presumed anomie of these almost-men was scary enough, but the hatred shown them by their elders made you nauseous.

• • •

By faster and slower beats – the city of your heart, catastrophesized.

2003

January 10

Another Goddard residency over and done with. Goodbye winter wonderland. Snowshoeing with Bill George you learned to associate letters with types of tree: fir = friendly, flat; spruce = spiky, sharp; pine = prickly.

And you also saw, for the first time ever, someone blow soap bubbles that instantly freeze, turn a pale white, and when touched, shatter into puffs of dust. On the way down out of the hinterland to the airport in Burling – though it's more like sledding than driving on the icy roads – the driver tells you that the bubbles, a molecule thick, freeze at around seven degrees Fahrenheit. He's the sort of person you've come, over the years, to expect to meet out and about Vermont, a person whose knowledge and capabilities bear no relationship at all to what they do for a living. To pass the time the cab driver raps, not too speedy, but without any pause. You imagine that the sound of his own voice may establish a rhythm that keeps him from driving faster than he ought.

How you got on the subject of soap bubbles, you forget even now, an hour later, on the plane, but somehow that bit of scientific arcania slid with frictionless ease into his theory of the Bermuda Triangle. The water is silty there, he says, and as it composts it creates methane – gassifies the water so it loses density. "They pumped compressed air into one of those tanks – like a wind tunnel for planes, except for ships – and they found you can sink a two-by-four if the water is gaseous enough."

Methane rising into the atmosphere also goes to explain the disappearance of planes in the triangle. "Feed one of those engines a big blob of methane and it'll gag. It'll barf. You're not just giving it gas, you're giving it a whole different kind of fuel." At last a pause. One of your carmates – there are five of you, jammed in like pilchards, bags and all – a gal from the Psych program, gets a word in edgewise. "Wow. I'll bet you were the type of kid who drove your mom crazy."

"Yeah," he says, "I was. Most kids put holes in the screen door. I made the screen evaporate."

His barrage of engineering folklore diminished the terrors of the drive to the point where, getting out, a part of you wished you could hang out and listen to him all day. The last of the bags unloaded, he slammed the trunk and got back behind the wheel. You offered your collective thanks again through the steamed glass and he cracked the window for his parting benediction. "If you not having fun," he called out, the cab already moving, "try changing the batteries."

• • •

At the USAir gate, you confront a tribe of ancient Vermonters charged with performing security checks. A woman with silver-blue hair wands you while a fellow who could pass for Methuselah inspects the shoes you've removed as though they might contain the code to the elixir of life. Finally cleared, you find a seat in the lounge with a pack of homeward bound Goddardites. But you can't follow a word they're saying, you've tuned out of that language, already back in your cave with Katie and Gwen.

Still, there's a big picture window out onto the runway. One after another, in close order, eight fighter jets from the Air National Guard, fling themselves into the sky. They bank round in formation and scream over the airport at an altitude of maybe three hundred feet. Practice time for the *Green Mountain Boys*. How far we have come.

January 20

Coldest winter in recent memory. Absolutely cloudless sky, blue at dawn, by midday nearly white. Frigid air. Steam in waves off the top of the World Financial Center, like the sea claiming its shore.

Last week new cement poured for the subway entrance on the corner – the one trashed over a year ago by an out-of-control SUV. Yesterday the workmen built a set of wooden railings on top of the concrete forms and painted them standard-issue MTA olive green. Hard to imagine this is anyone's idea of a permanent entrance, but who knows?

January 24

Insane security at the midtown office building where you go to pay your health insurance. Your backpack, containing in it's little pocket, a razor sharp Nontron jackknife – pride of Périgord – passes through the X-ray without a hiccup. Deadly stupid.

January 28

The gift store at the corner of 55th and Seventh sells a slightly higher than average grade of tourist-aimed tchotchkes. Three large windows face onto the avenue. One display just below eye level is devoted to a collection of crystal World Trade Center towers. These come in a wide variety of sizes and more or less accurate proportions, details and configuration – some even include the low-rise adjacent buildings. All possess a certain loveliness – ethereal, like Bruno Taut's *Stadtkrone*. But the pièce de la résistance is a off to one side: a Limoges pillbox in red white and blue enamel, with the towers sprouting from the lid – the north one topped by a gilded aerial, as finely wrought as porcelain will allow. And painted across the "plaza" in gold: *We Will Never Forget*.

February 2

Lie down for a nap, wherein you dream a black and white political cartoon. Several Frenchmen in berets, piloting tugboats, sorrowfully haul the Statue of Liberty back home.

March 9

French coffee – *café allongé* – and clear thinking – that's the ticket!

Nothing needs to be built there. The Bathtub is beautiful as it is: clean, austere and monumental.

March 13 – Late Afternoon

Two young women in animated conversation at Table 3. Tales of Power Yoga and the single life over glasses of wine and no food. You can mostly tune it out, but the

decibels ramp up until a fragment cuts through: "I was like drama drama drama! *He* was like drama drama drama!"

March 19 – Le G. – 9:00 am

Sitting here an hour and haven't done fuckall besides look out the window. Here comes the sweeper churning up dust like a dirty white mechanical dragon. It hangs a Ralph onto 21st Street and you rotate your head leftward to watch it disappear beyond the window mullion. The stretch felt good. Go the other way now. Neck's stiff as a board.

Hussein. Hussein.

Who's sane?

We must disarm who's sane.

We must kill who's sane.

• • •

p.m. Head downtown to the Bathtub to give the rap to twenty-five geography students and their professor who've come all the way from Montreal to see a hole in the ground. Across from you on the E train, an ad poster for what they used to call a made-for-TV-movie: "Helen of Troy."

Interesting graphic. On the bottom third, a dark, blurred phalanx of hoplites with spears charges at you. Behind the footsoldiers and dwarfing them, rise the armored figures of Menelaus and Paris. Between them, a toga'd Helen, half again larger than the men who contend for her. Clean-shaven is bold Menelaus, dark-bearded his Trojan foe. Both stare out with grimly sealed mouths. Helen's lips are parted. But her eyes – in fact the whole top half of the face that launched a thousand ships – has been cropped off. Thus your eye is pushed back down to her bare shoulders, the charging hoplites below, then up and around again to her open mouth and half face, flanked by male leads. And so the cycle goes until you pull your focus toward the tag-line, nearly as large as the title: *Desire is War*. The "epic miniseries" was produced by USA Network. Begins Sunday, April 20th at 8 p.m. A month. A lot can happen in a month.

The students and their professor are waiting for you at the southeast corner of the Bathtub and since it's too cold to talk outside, you head into the World Financial Center. The group seats itself on the tiered, pink stone steps leading down to the Palm Court, which you often slip up and call the Winter Palace. Not today, but on many an afternoon the monumental roundness of this stairway, polished within an inch of its life, serves as a kind of giant wedding cake atop which Korean newlyweds dance before their retinue of camcorders. The whole structure of this place, with its geometric grove of heroically out-of-latitude palm trees overhung by a great glass canopy, has been flawlessly restored, so that lacking a sightline to the trade center site, one could easily imagine that nothing happened here in the nature of an unbuilding.

The Canadians are a happening bunch – bright-eyed young-uns, quick studies. So the dialogue among you flows, well, like the tide that's trying to push its way under this very building and into the big Bathtub just to the east.

Out again to walk the perimeter. Bid au revoir to the geographers. Like the WFC, the surrounding area is pretty much deserted, apart from occasional knots of tourist-cum-pilgrims documenting their every step. And you wonder if by now, more images have been made of the hole, than ever were of the towers when they stood. You'd love to have a platform, high enough so everyone around could hear you say: *We are a coastal folk, a riverine tribe, a people of the bay. Nothing changes that*.

Back home again by E. That poster again. And finally you retrieve the rest of the line that Marlowe gave Faustus: *…and burnt the topless towers of Ilium*.

March 20

To and from the café the morning after the "First Strike" on Baghdad, no one on the street looks directly at anyone else. You all plod obliviously on. Would that it were a symptom of shame. But it's worse. Nothing, not even September 11th could shake the spell. Communism arrives as universal stupefaction.

Cab ride to the oral surgeon who pulls your lower right wisdom tooth – *adieu sagesse*! He office is in Murray Hill, just down the street from Gloria's, where you do not pay a surprise call, since at the moment you sound like Thurston Howell III from *Gilligan's Island*. Briefly you entertain stopping at a payphone just so that when Katie answers you can say "Hello, Lovey." Homeward you walk in a mild, cool drizzle, jaw

clamped on cotton, wondering whether Iraq has been, as the anchorman put it last night, successfully "decapitated." Things move fast these days. Granted your mouth is not Ur of Chaldees, but it's for certain that Dr. Sherman was able to excavate your old friend #32 in less than the time it took to recite *Ah, Sunflower* in your head. Jeez, was there something in that shot beside novocain?

You reach Fashion Institute and pace a long, unhurried diagonal southwest across 27th Street. The block is closed to cars during school hours, and the bikes glide fluidly around you, so you are free to look at the students, furtively smoking in the chill beneath the steel arched entrance, or hoofing it, like gentle, timorous bipedal herbivores, shoulders drawn up against the rain, across the street between their dorms and classrooms. And you look at the ground. A car has leaked oil along the whole length of the block between Seventh and Eighth Avenues and you are walking on it. Not enough to be slippery, rather it has converted the wet macadam into an array of gorgeous, disturbing, spectral effects. You flash on HP Lovecraft and his "color out of space," and think: *this is the stuff of what we've become* without having any idea what you mean by that. And you are grateful for novocain. Plus whatever else was in the shot.

March 22

At the café just before heading uptown for the peace march it occurs to you that Le Gamin is actually a form of Paradise. One has to do no more than ask for a bowl of fruit and it appears. Or wine. You find yourself among friends, and the conversation is good. Those who bring you your food and beverages are not virginal, true, but they are beautiful. And though you have to pay for what you eat and drink, you did not have to blow yourself up, nor anyone else, to get here.

March 23 – Afternoon

This weekend, in a loft on West 25th Street, a dozen kids, aged roughly three to twelve – Gwen among them – learn how to fend off the unwonted advances of adults. The people from Prepare self-defense teach them a variety of techniques for how not to get in a jam, along with some impressive hold-breaking moves if they do. Comes time for the demonstration. You and Katie file into the room and sit on a bench against the wall. To your right and left, proud parents fire up their camcorders. The kids are cool –

they've really taken it in. Even the youngest act with focus and determination. Pity the grown-up who tries to mess with them. But surprise, a great lump rises in your throat when the instructor delivers her final instruction. "The most important thing," she says, "is to trust yourself when someone – anyone – gives you…" And the kids chorus back "An 'uh-oh' feeling."

March 26

Ironwork for railings of the subway entrance the SUV took out arrived last week. Today, they are assembled and painted rustoleum orange. One side is bolted together all catywumpus. Apart from this, when it's painted olive green and corner uprights crowned with globe lamps, it will look more or less like what was there before.

March 27 – West 4th Street Subway Station – Early Evening

Standing near the turnstiles, a knot of soldiers in full camo cradling machine guns. A woman, black, trim and well-dressed shakes her head as she walks by, turns and addresses them, loud enough to cut over the ambient din: "You know, you guys scare me to death." Swipes her card. Beep. Passes through.

March 28

Past two nights, a kind of roar underlying the tone of the city – as if of a carpet bombing some distance off – still virtual.

At the café, a young male customer wears blue denim jeans which have been bleached to a kind of beige linen color up to about eight inches from the hem. His shoes are a butter colored leather, similar in shade to his jeans and the soles are a pale margarine. It's a fashion statement, yet one that makes him appear to have been walking, perhaps unawares, through a toxic dump.

March 31

For years you've had a daydream of buying an old Vietnam-era Huey helicopter and painting it pink. In some variations, the chopper was purple, with or without green dots. You'd also own a house with big spread round it, in the stone wall-bounded green fields of Menemsha, and the Huey would have a regular run transporting your

friends and loved ones from the city to your pastoral domain. Now when this vision plays in your head, the scene has shifted to the lush countryside north of La Dordogne. But how would a Huey get there, all the way from New York?

April 2 – Midmorning

Crazy man talking on 22nd Street: "My television carries a *club*, and it beats me if I don't turn it on."

April 3 – Early Morning

The Utopia of the 50¢ cup of coffee. 100% Colombian, the sign says. Or the Utopia of the coffee and bagel combo – one buck. It's been a year since you stood in this spot – at least a year, maybe more. Only two ahead of you. The arrogant fool at the head of the line gestures to a jelly donut with his pinky – commences a very long order. You scan the shelves full of cut plain, margarined and creamcheesed bagels in every variety. Donuts 'r' us. Unfocus your gaze and stare at white reflections off the diamond quilted chrome in the creeping-up sun.

Abdul's cart is kind of a kiosk with wheels, room only for one person to stand inside, but proof against the elements. It appears, at the northwest corner of 24th and Eighth, towed behind a van, every workday, rain or shine. Abdul and the van driver unhook the cart and push it manually up the wheelchair cutaway and onto the sidewalk and position it near the curb's edge, over the subway grating.

How long has this ritual been going on? Maybe five years now. Every blue moon or so, you stop there, when you're headed someplace other than Le G., but not if there's a long line, which often materializes even as you're walking down the block. One minute nobody's waiting, but an instant later, *poof!* a twenty person queue – Fashion High students mostly, who stream up the subway steps and stop to pick up breakfast before bounding across Eighth Avenue against the flashing red and oncoming cars to make it through the doors before the late bell tolls.

When there's more than, say, four waiting at Abdul's, the time vs. price curves favor Kyung's deli across the street. The coffee costs a quarter more and tastes about the same, but Kyung's crew has the drill down to a science. No matter how many people are on line, you always make it out of there in under thirty seconds. And so

does everybody else. Who knew a bagel could toast so fast, or a scrambled egg congeal, get flipped onto a bun, wrap itself in tinfoil and fly into a brown bag?

Real estate factors in, but then the whole neighborhood's an exercise in the great wonderment of pricing. On 23rd Street, at the Korean bagel shop, coffee costs a dollar. Can the rent really be that much higher? Their coffee's blah. At Bruno's down the block, a first rate Colombian may be had for the Kabalistic mystery sum of $1.08. When Starbuck's comes – and it will as surely as pollens blow across from Jersey in fall – who knows, two bucks a hit?

The fellow just ahead or you, with gym cut shoulders and a short, sculpted haircut, wants his coffee light and sweet, five sugars. Then it's you.

"Hi," says Abdul, "Haven't seen you for a long time."

"How you been?"

"OK," he says, "Black, no sugar, right?" Broad, open face.

"You've got a remarkable memory."

He smiles. Flips the lever on the huge canister, almost a vat, that holds the day's supply of coffee. Far as you can recall, the cart's gone soon after lunchtime. Don't think you've ever seen it there after two. Abdul's about to bag your cup, using that twisting motion to make sure the lid doesn't catch on going in, but you wave your hand. "No, I'm good. I'll just walk with it this way."

Carefully and very quickly he wraps a paper napkin around the cup as he hands it over. Proof against excessive heat.

• • •

Finish coffee somewhere between the 66th Street and 72nd Street stops on the #1 train – rush hour. What to do but shove the lid into the cup, crush it and shove the ensemble into a pocket in your backpack. Make a mental note to throw it out next time you see a garbage can.

Opposite you a woman sits. Despite her well-sprayed coif, there's a stolid and Central American air about her, even as she applies her eye makeup. Then you see, on the back of her small round mirror, a self portrait of Frida Kahlo.

At 168th Street, the conductor announces over the PA that, due to a schedule adjustment, the train will go express to Dykman Street bypassing several local stops. A collective groan from those who now have to get off and wait on the platform for the train presumably just behind. The conductor, though unseen, is clearly a woman and her tone mixes New York street with public employee ennui. "Next stop Dykman," she repeats, and then, effortlessly, fluidly: "Dykman es la proxima parada."

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You deliver your spiel on Utopian New York to a classroom of frighteningly with-it Horace Mann students then head back toward the subway. Cross the grounds with their manicured playing fields. What a place. Hogwarts-on-Bronx!

April 4

The Utopia of everyday life, painstakingly made, bit by bit, out of a passing conversation, a snatch of song, instant to instant, so easily crushed.

A lot of people you know are very close to despair.

You've spoken recently with two friends who've lost children: one kid was nearly an adult. Motorcycle accident. The other a baby, perfect but for being stillborn. The horrors of our war – the knowing of the death of other's children – seem to resonate profoundly with their deep sense of helplessness.

And the moment, the moment is like the season – caught in the mud between winter and spring.

April 5

Some time during the night or early morning hours, person or persons unknown donated a heart-sized padlock to the *mise en scene* of Le Gamin. Which is to say that they fastened the lock to the metal scissor gate over the largest front window – high up enough to be hard to reach – and clicked it shut. Neglected to leave the key, rendering said gate unretractable. Disgruntled worker or ticked-off customer? Prankster making an ironic comment: "Ya like locks? – here, have another one!" Who can say? But the

state of things when you arrive is thus: Mario in his whites staring at the half-opened gate and scratching his chin.

Whereupon the following ensues: Mario trots up to the Russians at the hardware store on 23rd Street and borrows a hacksaw. He places a couple of wet bar towels under a milk crate on sidewalk, so it won't skid when he stands on it. He starts sawing. When his arm gives out, you take over. For half an hour or more the two of you work at cutting through the hasp, one holding the lock steady while the other saws. Every few minutes you trade places. At last, the smooth metal gives way before its toothed cousin, the gate rolls back and the window's liberated at last. Mario grabs the crate and towels, rushes inside to man the grill. It's Saturday, pushing nine-thirty, and there's a café full of crêpe-famished yuppies to feed.

• • •

Damascus has fallen! No, Moscow – no, Buenos Aires – no, New York! We won't stop till every city is leveled free. And the more ancient the better.

April 8 – Le G.

Furiouser and furiouser. News comes of a CIA operative halfway round the world who saw "Saddam" enter a café near the Tigris, and called in an airstrike. There goes the local version of Le G. Did they even know what hit them?

You flash on the title song for *Baghdad Café* – a kind of sleeper movie about a joint somewhere in the desert of the American West. Mid-'80s? It had this haunting theme: *I-I-I-I-I am c-a-a-a-ling you…*

April 9 – Le G. – Early Morning

Baghdad has fallen, so they say, as in the days when city walls were literally toppled. One thinks of a fallen woman or Edenic Man entire. Nor is the Fall without Eros – for some. Forest Sawyer of CNBC, scarcely able to contain himself, describes the "penetration" of the capital by the 3rd Division, and "just behind it, pushing up toward Baghdad… that great rolling 4th Division, which is just magnificent in its capabilities."

For such a formulation, he deserves nothing short of an officer's rank, and later, a seat in the dock at the war crimes trial.

Mark S. come in, stops by on his way to Table 9. He too has made the mistake of watching TV. *The media is caged in by bars it cannot see*, he says. So familiar the homophone. Notsee. Notsee. As if the words themselves are guiding our ears toward what the eye can Nazi.

Return to your book, Christopher Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down*. Ass on chair, mind deep in England, mid-17th Century. Time of their Revolution.

Miracles have not ceased, asserts John Everard in his day, "but our eyes are blinded and we cannot see them."

Look up and out the window.

April 12 – 22nd Street off Eighth Avenue – Early Morning

A green delivery van maneuvers into a tight parking space on 22nd Street. As the white reverse lights flash on, hidden speakers blast forth a parrot-like shriek: *Attention please, this car is backing up!* All down the deserted, rain-slicked block you hear the electronic voice repeat its warning to the multitude of invisible passersby.

When Faustus asked Mephistopheles, he answered:

Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscrib'd
In one self place: for where we are is hell.

And forms of heaven inhabit earth in real time, don't forget it, bro. Mario's is captain of the cornucopia this morning, dishing up the fresh fruit and toasting tartines, wearing his olive gimme cap embroidered *Variety* in red. Around him, extracting and serving the multiplex nectars derived from roasted coffee beans, Mario's Angels, three graces of terrestrial paradise found: Shana – dark, dark skin, compact as a prizefighter, exquisite toothgap, enormous wounded eyes. Eyoko – skin close in shade to Shana's, but tiny, wiry and lithe, Jamaican cheekbones to die for, and she hugs you like a bear. Kimsey – *Le Petit Prince* reborn in woman's form, elegant, Modiglianiized – five ten or so – tall enough peer into a higher-up heaven. And what do these goddesses have in common? Their utterly distinct and impeccably brilliant smiles. No false beacons here. Only radiations of the inner light.

• • •

p.m. With our bums on couches before our tellies, words come at us, sincere beyond all satire: "Looting in Baghdad continues after the market wrap-up." What will Gwen's generation say of us? That our eyes were watching something, but it surely wasn't God?

April 14

Again TV. A tense standoff. A knot of men – hard to tell how big the crowd is – chants "Go home America." They scarcely look like rebels, their tribe is of the urban middle-aged. But clearly they are furious and the Marines confronting them are scared. One young soldier loses his cool, fires a short burst into the air. As though sucked into the vacuum created by his fusillade, he approaches one Iraqi as close as he dares and shouts into his face, fairly screams: "We're here for your freedom, understand! We're here for your fucking freedom." CNN bleeps the expletive, but the lips of the Marine, a light-skinned African American, read clear as a bell – as if correcting an error of omission. Operation Iraqi Freedom doesn't quite say it all. Operation Iraqi Fucking Freedom – that's the ticket.

• • •

You're turning into a misanthrope – overwhelmed at times with contempt. It's a lousy feeling. Two young women – rich and slumming – sit nearby at the café this afternoon. They order quantities of food, but do not appear interested in eating any of it. Via some horrible trick of tonality their conversation cuts through the clamor, at least fragments of it do, and you're already jumpy enough to be distracted by the least thing, not to mention the cascade of tropes they exchange – the most terrifyingly unspontaneous conversation you have ever heard.

Low-rent Gatsbys that's what we've become. Gap Gatsbys. When they meet us, must not the rest of the world ask: from what factory do these awful people come?

Would that you had it in you to recognize these fellow creatures. But the truth is, you wouldn't care if they all blew away.

April 15

So rapid the change of temperatures, you feel your body grind its gears between the winter and the summery spring. Today you're fighting everything. Where-o-where-o-wheros, did I ever leave my Eros?

April 16

Photo in the *Times* – this little fellow whose family we killed, whose arms we blew off, whose body we burned. We left him his eyes, beautiful and limpid. Presented to our gaze so we can demand that he weep for us all.

• • •

Central Park, early afternoon. Out of nowhere, you sense a kind of freedom coming – an incipient movement unlike you've felt in years. More wide open even than the late sixties, if that's possible. There will be mobs. And these mobs will be filled with everything but fear.

Here comes a man down the path, sweating, dragging two enormous plastic bags. Talking to himself, or at any rate not to you. How is it he came all the way from Africa to collect bottles?

• • •

Wolfgang's, late afternoon. Directly after you greet one another, he hands you a copy, signed, of his latest: *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning and Recovery* – its publication at the present moment being either the best or worst timing imaginable.

Fascinating photo on the dust jacket: a hollow bronze Napoleon, in the aspect of Caesar replete with laurel wreath, lying supine on the ground – the Paris Communards having toppled him from the Vendome column. Behind the fallen statue, what appears

to be a hedge. But it makes no sense that there'd be shrubbery planted in the Place Vendome. So you look closer and discover that your 21st Century eye was fooled by the long exposure needed to capture the image in 1871. The hedge is actually a crowd of people gathered round the fallen statue, their forms blurred by their movements, yet ultimately distinguishable as human beings. Some may be the very ones who knocked the Emperor from his pedestal. Soon, in the reaction, many of the branches on this hedge will be whacked off, left lying on the ground as still as statues. What you see before you is the preview of that reckoning: the static life of symbols triumphing over the fugitive, unsustainable energy of the masses.

Any fallout from the book yet? Too early to tell. But the *Times* has asked for an op-ed piece. What'll he write about? A widely-circulated news photo of victorious American generals sitting at a long rococo table in Saddam's palace in Baghdad. Missing from the picture, a defeated foe across the table ceding power in a formal surrender. Where has the enemy gone? Underground, he implies. This war is not over, rather just beginning.

When you leave, Wolfgang walks you down the hallway. Shake hands as the elevator door opens. Descending, it hits you that you didn't once look out his window at the progress of the hole, and words, addressed to nobody, leap into your throat, caustic as espresso bile: *It all seems so oh-one now.*

Easy, boy. In a little over a week, Gwen's Easter vacation. Christ'll rise. And you'll fly south to a country with no standing army.

April 17

Sleet in the morning. Beating the petals off the tulips. The city's return to the perpetual October that won't let us go. Persephone doesn't stand a chance against the forces bent on sucking the budding life back into the earth.

Outside the café window, bright orange plastic tape tied to sawhorses demarcates a lingering, desolate Con Ed excavation. The tape ends dance in the gusts, like the ribbons of a thwarted maypole.

History's not over, it's just impoverished, dependent, no teeth in its head, can't stand on its own two feet. Hears the bell for the next round but can't get off the stool. It lives at the pleasure of the economy now. So feeble the straw, not even

Rumplestilzchen could weave anything out of it, In an eyeblink a dictatorship becomes a corporate fiefdom. No struggle equal to the name. No Moor's last sigh. No backward glance. On to the next effigy!

Can't gauge how the overthrow of Saddam is playing out in the great heartland, but here, conspicuous by their absence, public expressions of triumphalism. Some of this can be put down to the hits the city has taken – there's a undertow of grief below the roiling manic surface – but wherever people are seeking their diversions, it does not seem to be in the euphoria of the victory dance.

And then too, a strange parallel between the evaporation of the Iraqi regime and the collapse of the WTC. In the cradle of civilization, there is less, much less to be found – of mass-killings, biological weapons, resistance, or liberatory upsurge – than could have been imagined only a few weeks ago. Like the towers, Baathist rule produced another hollow core, supported by as little structure as mechanics would allow. One wonders, as with the Soviet Union, what held it up so long? Does the dominant prizefighter embrace his partner, support him, if only to have something to punch?

A beautiful black woman – overweight by white standards – passes by the café, walking down Ninth Avenue, Proof against the rain that drives against her from the south, she wears a brightly checked deerstalker hat.

In the *Times* metro section, beneath an article on hawks "employed" by the local BID to scare off the legions of pigeons in Bryant Park, you read that the final run of the Concorde from New York to Paris will occur in six weeks, on your birthday. Sure, *tu ne regrette beaucoup*, but now a sharp pang that you never got it together to take a supersonic flight. Too late now, no techno-Icaran moment for you. Era shock. The supremely avian defeated the relentlessly terrestrial. One species fails, another thrives. The profile of the Concorde vanishes brick by brick behind a wall of Hummers.

April 21 – JFK Airport

Is that who you think it is, boarding your plane in Posh Class? No one else looks like that, even from across a room, and the entourage cinches it. Janet Reno. Going to Costa Rica? Not likely, probably just as far as Miami. You're never scared flying, but having her on the plane gives you a chill. Not that you believe in ghosts, but what happened to the souls of all those Branch Davidians? And how quiet do they rest?

April 25 – Quepos, Costa Rica

Awakened before dawn by a bird calling *You're where?* To which a distant call responds *We're here!* Then, nearby: *You're there?* And the reply: *Here! Here!*

Katie dreamt that New York City had somehow shrunk down to a taxicab in which she was riding. The cab was too crowded and speeding in the wrong direction. She ordered the driver to stop, threatened to call the police. It halted for a moment and she and several other passengers bolted out before the cab roared on.

• • •

Early morning. Walk the trail through the forest as silently as you can and there you find it, where it lives, midway up a tree, its great forked tail feathers impossibly long. No dream. Beyond what you could dream. Quetzal is imperturbed. Bird of freedom doesn't care if you are here or not. Yet somehow, you feel a kind of blessing – the witness of the thing itself.

April 27 – Manuel Antonio National Park

Thousands of crabs along the path to this beach, maybe hundreds of thousands, red-legged and scurrying out of your way. Monkeys too, and lizards the size of the average Chelsea pooch.

Here the Pacific lives up to its name. Never have you been so close to the equator – so directly in the sun. Floating.

Gwen swears that when she's older, she'll come to live in Costa Rica. And the truth is, you'd bet more than even money she will.

April 29

Back and into the teeth of a New York state of siege. The cherry tree, however, the one in the center of the lawn between 25th and 24th Streets, in full blossom. Planted there at the dedication of Penn South, back in sixty-two. You don't remember much from that day, besides how different a vibe – though it would be years before you could use that word – JFK had from the other men in suits crowding around the dais.

So gradual this spring, and now it's sneaked up after all.

• • •

Only a week, but how many latitudes ago was it that you and Katie reposed on chairs outside your hotel room in the pitch dark listening to the volcano – Arenal – harrumph and bluster? And passed the binoculars back and forth to more clearly see the material signs of the earth's utterance? Every few minutes, a burst of enormous boulders, bright as embers danced down the mountainside like a cavalcade. Then half a beat later, came the rumble.

• • •

Scan the late morning crowd at Le G. What a difference in the quality of faces here and in CR. There, you often see a kind of stolid opacity to the countenance, which shifts and brightens immediately on pleasurable stimulus or engagement. Whereas we look either stultified or over-animated pretty much all the time, cycling through far too many expressions for them to add up to a fully-cohered emotion. We twitch intensely – the lights full on. But who, or what, is at home? Some kind of energy emanating, though it sure doesn't warm and comfort like inner light.

That said, you can't shake the graffiti you read in the baño of a modest, self-respecting seafood restaurant in San Jose. Two subjects of scrawl, the first, anti-war: "No sangre por petrolio." And "Ticos: Liberernos de Bush – un Gringo Avergonzado." The second railed against the Nicaraguans who, in desperation of poverty, have streamed across the border. "Ticos las mujeres de Nicas," "Nicas es las peors pestas del mundo," "…hijos de putas…" – on and on.

April 30 – Early Morning

Gwen goes to school by herself these mornings, at least from the corner of 23rd and Eighth. Also back and forth from French lessons on Seventh Avenue, ramping up for the next year's big 6th Grade trek to middle school all the way across town. But this time you continue on across 23rd Street hand in hand. At graduation her chorus will

perform a medley of songs, one of them from *Hair*. You walk in step, singing it together, with lyrics inverted on the fly: "This is the aging of the dawn of Aquarius." Near the steps of PS11, she asks what Aquarius is and you do your best to explain.

Mayday

What if Baghdad were your city? If you knew it as Abode of Peace, Mother of the World, Gift of the Gods, Abode of Beauty, Round City or *Um Al-Basatin*, Mother of Orchards? What if you grew up walking the Al-Jumhuriyya bridge over the Tigris, rather than the Brooklyn Bridge, or the George Washington, with its little lighthouse below. What would you be writing now?

May 3

News comes that the Great Stone Face, the old man of the mountains in Franconia, New Hampshire has crumbled into unrecognizability. The profile wrought by action of the elements has now been erased by them. Subject of a Hawthorne story, emblem on license plates and tourist souvenirs, and most recently minted on the back of a gazillion government-issue commemorative quarters. Associated with the motto *Live Free or Die*, what symbol takes its place?

May 7

Is it possible for a people to be broken not by defeat, but by prolonged and undeserved triumph?

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An *echt*-spring day apart from the haze. Walk toward the Amalgamated Bank on Union Square, then you'll head south to meet Elena for lunch. The city in a desultory mood, conserving its energy, waiting for the ax to drop. New Yorkers are endowed with many qualities, but grace has never been one we've cultivated. Why start now, except to begin to learn what we're in need of most?

A doubledecker tourist bus glides down Fifth Avenue, its ten passengers all sitting in the open top, nearly prostrate with lassitude. Downtown, they will see the big

hole, and barricades everywhere. Do they get to walk around or does the bus just continue on, passing along once-mighty Wall Street, so timid now?

Everywhere these days, peculiar asymmetries of density – where and how folks cluster. In one place, a restaurant or store say, an unaccountable crowd. Half a block on, in a similar location, an equally inexplicable few to none.

The green spaces in Union Square park are all fenced off, where previously, this time of year, people used to sunbathe. Once, an eon ago, bearing Gwen in the baby carrier backpack, you trod barefoot across the beat-up grass. The prickle on your soles must've tripped some neural circuit, for an image came fast and sharp into your mind, the image from which *Free City* would grow: A woman, abandoned in the extremis of her labor pangs, observes herself as though from above, while soldiers, sent to arrest her heretic lover, splinter the door with halberd shafts. You remember propping Gwen up in the backpack, feeding her salad bar tortellini with tuna, and asking her rhetorically, since she couldn't have been more than two, if so crazy and out-of-nowhere an image was worth writing down. Still you pulled out your book and made the note.

Pigeons peck on the lawn, but nobody, neither office worker nor slacker, stretches out on the grass this high noon. No one sits in whatever form of lotus, eating from the clear plastic salad bar box set before them. No complaints. No pulling the fence back to clamber over. You and the others confine your sitting to the benches and look over at the grass, lush from so much rain. Who would think anymore of transgressing even so feeble a boundary to claim the pleasure on the other side. Well, you might think it. Perhaps the fellow the next bench down does too. But doing a thing, so long as it's not hurting someone else – that ancient vernacular New York anarchism – seems a dead letter now. Don't want to freak anyone out. There's a kind of conspiracy of acquiescence taken hold since the towers fell, as though any breach of order might be construed as a sociopathic act. The T word. No degrees of shading any more. Only absolute states.

So, city of mother Bea and father Jack, of grandparents Meyer and Helena, of aunts Gladys and Nell, when will you finally be allowed to close the book? Katie seems more and more amenable to leaving, and if you gave Gwen the high sign, she'd have

her bags packed in an eyeblink. France or Costa Rica are the places she loves, apart from here, but any expedition is fine by her.

Or are there more pages to this book, or another one after that? The truth is you can't bear to imagine what will become your city, much less the country you never really owned. But can you bear to leave?

Union Square at noon. The benches not nearly full. There seem fewer of us. Where have we gone?

But the billion dollar question is: *What will we do when the Republicans come to town?*

The answer, probably, is *Nothing*. Nothing much. A generation from now doubt anyone would dream of holding a convention here, except perhaps a fraternal order of rat catchers. But in the near term, it is absolutely necessary to the Bushies that New York offer itself up as conquered territory, powerless to assert its autonomy, or even symbolically oppose those who hate it most.

The regime must show it has nothing to fear from this pacified, once-maverick dynamo of immigrant energies – the city that for centuries lived by, and generated a raw egalitarianism unmatched anywhere else. Clausewitz said something to the effect that imposition of will constitutes the appropriate measure of victory, not physical destruction per se. Thus New York stands to experience not just lockdown, as after 9/11, but a week's worth of political tourism by our imperial lords.

That said, if you can swing it, you'll be in France with Katie and Gwen. Who needs the heartache? Still, if out of harrowed ground resistance were to grow…

May 11 – Le G. – Early Morning

Over and above your depression, a burst of refreshing schadenfreude breaks: the spectacle of the *New York Times* attempting to appear large and in charge in the wake of the Jayson Blair scandal. The paper of record has become the subject of its own front-page news and its reportage is truly surreal – as if Mao were caught red-handed in some politically forbidden act and defended himself with self-criticism. What makes the tone of the piece weirder still is that – whether for reasons of journalistic protocol, corporate solidarity, an identification with Queen Victoria, or simple schizophrenia – the *Times* refers to itself in the third person. Then there's this gob-smacking assertion:

"Every newspaper, like every bank and police department, trusts its employees to uphold central principles." Well now, as if the *Times* could be "every" anything or the U.S. just another nation. And what a choice choice of analogies. There's a wonderful innocence in so freely uttered an affinity with institutionalized usury and the dogs of private property. Bravo – let loose the tide of secret names!

Fold up the silly sections and leave the paper on the rack by the WC. Wave to Mario, kiss Deborah and Clara on both cheeks and out the door. You think of Gwen's "logo," the graphic she signs all her artwork with nowadays. A peculiarly bereft-looking skull and crossbones, beneath which the motto: Confessing Skeleton Productions. Where did that come from? She was trying to draw a scary skeleton, she says, but it ended up looking like it needed to get something off its mind. Whatever's going on, she's nailed it.

May 15

Yesterday an airliner buzzed the Statue of Liberty and Lower Manhattan. A planeload of military personnel returning from Iraq. They'd gotten a special dispensation from the FAA to break their assigned flightpath in the interest of overflying, closeup, the terrain in whose name they had fought and killed. Freaked the shit out of people, one of whom observed the plane "going really low and zigzagging." Subsequent outcry sufficiently widespread and vociferous to warrant a promise from the FAA not to do it again.

May 16

Hundredth anniversary of Luna Park. Right on time, since we're all living in dreamland now. And electrocuted elephants danced in their heads.

May 17 – Le G.

Tom often shows up for his takeout iced café mocha – year-round he drinks it and a rare concoction it is – just as you're anteing up at the register. Whereupon you palaver, and walk north together. This morning the subject turns to Ellis Island, and he offers up the nugget that in the years between when it was abandoned in the early fifties and Iacoccaized thirty years later, the rat population grew to a quarter million.

What became of them? One assumes they were killed, at least most of them. But how, and were they buried, incinerated, dumped?

• • •

Atop every fourth or fifth cab, an illuminated advertisement for *The Matrix: Reloaded* proclaims "This Taxi Is Not Real."

May 19 – Downtown C Train

You've brought nothing you want to read, so your eyes roam around the car, searching for something to light upon. And they find it. On the inside door nearest you the decals that usually say: *Do not lean on the door* have been pasted over. The new messages reads: *Do not bomb Syria*; *Do not cut jobs*; *Do not trust TV*; *Do not hike fares*.

Take a walk through. Every door, every car, the whole train.

• • •

5 p.m. Your French teacher's roof. Balmy. Hot slant of sun. Between the buildings way downtown, a small oblong of bay, and through this narrow slit, the Statue of Liberty. You've been here many times before, when the visibility was good, but never seen her there. Did a building come down to unblock the view?

May 22

To Byrdcliffe to investigate Utopia. However incipient, however ephemeral, however distant the heyday. Gioia's asked you to give a talk next month for the hundredth anniversary of the artists colony she's lived and worked at periodically since her twenties. So you're tripping up to the heart of the Catskills, to plant your feet in the place, map its mind and story, and tap the ground for resonances of Ruskin.

But first to the deuce, to the Port Authority bus terminal where the stoner clerk at the Trailways counter doesn't meet your eyes, but asks for a picture ID. Huh? For a bus ticket? How long has this been going on? You can't help but ask, even though you know what he's about to say before he slurs it. "Since 9/11."

Twelve minutes to get to your gate in the bowels of the terminal. Stroll along the concourse level. Running the whole length of the room, two parallel rows of banners hang down, from the high ceiling to perhaps fifteen feet from the floor. Each banner bears the same image: a pair of American flags turned vertical and elongated to form an ideograph of the WTC towers.

Midway through the Lincoln tunnel, you watch the New York-New Jersey line flash by on the tiled walls. Same walls, same tiles as when you took the bus to day camp back in the days when cars had fins. Except that this trip you have the seat to yourself. Don't have to worry about that kid, the one you usually got stuck sitting next to, getting carsick all over you. One time, after unloading his breakfast, he fell asleep, baseball cards on his lap. There, on top of the stack lay Roger Maris, supreme technician of the supremely technical Yankees. You'd bought fifty packs of gum at least in search of Roger, and no dice. So today you make your own luck. From between his torpid fingers, you ease the card. Roger is yours. For about a half hour. As you near camp, it's not so much guilt as the idea of getting what you've wanted so much in this particular way that bothers you. The kid in the next seat is not, after all, a bad fellow even if he's never figured out how to aim in the other direction. As you pull in, he wakes up. Roger is back on his lap. He doesn't even look at his stack.

Now you're out of the tunnel and the bus is looping up the ramp on the Jersey side. Try to catch a glimpse of Penn South, but it's invisible, at least in this fog, behind the Starret-Lehigh building and the twin ocean liners of London Terrace. Then you look north toward the new midtown skyscrapers to update your personal skyline. Double take: the trade center never fell at all – it just moved uptown. Ah no, it's the AOL/Time-Warner twins. Tricksters – had you going for a minute. Massive they are, and in this eastward lighting, blank. What fooled you was the ratio of building-to-gap-in-between. It's more or less the same, from this angle anyway, as the vanished one, imprinted in your mind.

May 23 – Gioia & Ken's – Bearsville, NY

Breakfast conversation with Gioia. En passant she mentions that the corporation that makes Life Savers closed their U.S. operation and moved production to Canada. You flash on the full-sized pressed-tin Life Savers charm your uncle Mike showed you

once when you were maybe ten. Might have been a keychain. Given to him by his mother when he shipped off to Hawaii as a Navy flyer in WWII. Mike came back in one piece and since then rolls of Life Savers – the edible kind – have served as your family's travel talisman. On every take off and landing, mixed fruit for Gwen, white pep-o-mints for Katie and yourself, ostensibly to help ease the pressure in the ears. Funny how even atheists make obeisance at the altar of tradition.

Outsourced to Canada. What more to say? Pass round the Life Savers mates – the ship's a-going down.

• • •

On the desk in your room, a book. *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi.* Henry Corbin. Bollingen, 1958. Open it.

May 25

An early Sunday café invasion by two sets of couples, both with small children, one right after the other. Throw in some friends and a grandparent or two. The adults vie with one another for awfulness, barking orders at Eyoko and Yossi. One mother discusses a tank top she bought from a catalogue while her kids shriek and attempt to demolish themselves and their chairs. The men, when they stand up, walk like SUVs. They explode out the door in the order they came in, leaving behind a great mess and plates full of uneaten food. The average American has become a petty terrorist in the public sphere. God knows what they're like at home.

• • •

Sea Cliff, Long Island. Gingerbread houses. An objectively beautiful townscape, fantastical trees, and in certain spots an almost Menemsha-like air of chthonic energy radiating from the ground itself. It's where Katie grew up, but she doesn't want to be here now.

Eternal, eternal this process of cleaning out her mother's house in preparation for its selling. Forty years of a family's stuff, packed from basement to attic, plus ancestral

accumulations to be somehow rationalized, integrated into other homes, put in storage, dragged to Goodwill or otherwise disposed of. An impossible job.

Some aspect of Wilma still lingers in these rooms that, since her death early last fall, have grown to feel more and more uninhabitable. It takes effort, but you can imagine this place a couple of years on, transformed, vital again, infused with the presence of a new family.

Lots of things you won't remember, but the porch along the front of the house and wrapping round to one side, the breeze that took a liking your pages there, the sliver view of the Sound from the topmost window – those bits are hard-wired into your head by now, unlikely to ever leave.

• • •

Home again, late evening. Fog so thick that looking out your bedroom window to the northeast, no Empire State. Half a mile as the crow flies, but not even a hint the great building's there.

Jesus, when are you going to get out of this? Everything you write comes out a lament.

May 27

Walkabout. In and around Union Square. A more promising morning sky than most of late. The atmosphere struggles toward spring. Here's another, coming toward you, the third or fourth in as many days: a young woman, walking dreamily, hands clasped at about sternum level. It's a strangely devotional gesture, as though she holds a breviary before her, or some sacred object that might at any instant speak in the voice of God. But it is a cell phone. And with this timeless gesture of contemplation, she awaits the Call.

May 28 – Midmorning

Half a blocksworth of cars stuck behind a garbage truck loading trash on 22nd Street. As you walk closer to the bottleneck, the harmonics of the cars' horn blasts find a rhythm in the muffled booms of the rap drumtrack leaking from the seams of a stalled

Grand Cherokee. Then comes the call and response of the sanitation workers and angry drivers. Not quite an oratorio, but as close to it as the streets can offer.

Around the corner, on Eighth Avenue, an elderly, bearded fellow, tall and thin as a rail, with the eyes of a prophet, stands near the curb over the subway grate. With great concentration and precision of movement, he hoists a shopping cart up and down, sidewalk to overhead. How many repetitions has he done? How many more in his regime? Pilates for the mad.

• • •

Late afternoon at Wolfgang's. Last coffee of the season in his kitchen on the 25th floor. In two days he makes his semi-annual summer migration across the pond. Down the river, between the towers of the World Financial Center, a huge wedding cake of a cruise ship, moving fast, steams out to sea. Ah, but ships no longer steam.

As you talk, echoes of a rally down below. Out of eyeshot, from somewhere on the landfill to the west and north, a fragment of harangue booms upward to your ears: "That's the message we're going to take to those bastards in Albany" – pause for cheers – "and those bastards in City Hall!" Further cheering, but after that no more. You listen to silence for a moment.

Where were you? Wolfgang was saying that word "strafe" comes from the German verb "to punish." And that when the British declared war in 1914, the German sense of shock and betrayal by their putative cousins was so great that "God punish (*straffe*) England" became a commonplace phrase. Somehow the word mutated into English with the advent of aerial warfare. You agree that strafe is a very satisfying word to utter.

Glance through the window again when you stand up to go. Through another gap between the buildings, the cruise ship's stern is still visible out in the harbor. At this distance and from this angle, it looks like a white castle turret, standing still.

• • •

Katie, who persists in reading the *Times* when you can no longer bear to, reports that the Met will close its Islamic section for four years while the cafeteria, presently on the floor below, is undergoing conversion into expanded Greek and Roman gallery space. The official story is that the Islamic collection is being dispersed for the duration of construction to prevent any damage to the artworks. But gol-lee, the timing and duration of this move sure make something more than sense.

May 29 – Early Morning

You sit in your almost-favorite seat at the café, contemplate for a moment the galactic shapes in the crema of your on your café français, then open up your iBook. A small piece of plastic bounces off your table and onto the floor. Has someone thrown something? Well really there's no one nearby it could have come from. You get up and examine the object. It is the blue-gray Apple logo formerly glued into a little reciprocal hollow on the top of your machine. If you were another person, or lived in another age, you'd be inclined to endow this with symbolic value. What does it means when one's apple falls?

Two godly folk who hail in some manner from the Church of Holy Apostles – a woman in purple and a man, gay 'twould seem, wearing a black tee shirt – converse to your right at the Table 4. You catch fragments, despite your legendary concentration on the work at hand. They talk about finding the bases for radical arguments in Scripture. Then the woman, whose voice carries better, says: "I feel a kind of attunedness to the city that I never felt before, and a fierceness about hanging in." A pause. "I think September 11 was a kind of opening."

This woman avers she has a gift to give, aha: "I've had the opportunity to be a priest," she says. "But I don't know about being a prophet beyond that."

Gioia mentioned this in passing, as she often does: *The power of story*.

May 30 – Morning

You leave the café and pass by Gwennie's school. Through the mesh of playground fence spill the merry jibes of her classmates: "You suck!" "Loser!" "Take a walk!" Same and different as in your day.

Sun hits full from the east and the threshold between you and some sort of divine melts to a thinner veil than the twill of your jeans. On your way to a parents' orientation meeting at Gwen's middle school-to-be, Baruch. Meet Katie at the corner of 23rd Street, walk across town together.

Diagonal to the Flatiron building, just inside Madison Square Park, a modest bronze statue of William H. Seward, Secretary of State under Lincoln, purchaser of the Alaska "folly," and the man for whom your high school was named. Downtown it is, on the Lower East Side – the big blockhouse you spent your fourteenth to eighteenth years hellraising in still stands. But who knows for how long? The model for *Up the Down Staircase*, a great ejumication factory since 1923 will soon be decommissioned, broken up into several, smaller, "magnet" schools.

Seward High, older alumna have told you, once gave Stuyvesant a run for its academic money. In the mid-sixties when you got there, four thousand students jammed into a facility built for twenty-five hundred, some spilling into an annex on Eldridge Street. The language department still boasted Mandarin Chinese, Russian and Hebrew, and faculty overall stood a cut above the average Board of Ed hack. But ah, demographics – it was rough and tumble lot that jostled through the student hopper. No plan got you there, it came about by default. Seward is what happens when you refuse to put together a portfolio for Music and Art, and blow off applying for a scholarship to one of the posh private schools the rest of your classmates are headed for.

Not entirely clear though, even now, is the process by which you made the transition from being beaten down and robbed on a more or less daily basis to helping found the Seward Park High School Peace and Freedom Coalition, editing the "underground" paper, and otherwise tying the administration in knots. But it's for sure that by your last year there, '68, you and Larsen and a handful of others had the overseers on the defensive, a goodly minority of the faculty on your side and ready access to almost anyplace or anything you needed in order to further subvert the order of things.

Which culminated the day after King was killed. Minutes after the word came down, before you'd even registered the shock, you drew the flyer up. In the morning comrades with keys opened up the printing office door and slapped the stencil on the rexograph drum. By the time the first students started to arrive, leafleters abounded on

every corner round the school. The plan: Seward students would swell the ranks of the memorial rally set for Central Park that afternoon. Word had it in the hallways too. At noon, get up and march out.

You and Larsen made a nominal appeal to the acting principal along the lines of *let my people go*, but you knew the answer in advance. And in truth she couldn't legally dismiss the students early, so things just took their course.

Stroke of noon, in most classes the kids just stood up and filed out the door. The hip teachers knew in advance, and were cool with that. But once out on the street, the pace quickened with the liberated heartbeats. Down the steps of the F train at Delancy street you stormed by the hundreds. The train pulled in and folks started hopping turnstiles. You saw the cop stationed by the token booth move a tentative hand toward the piece on his hip but you read his thought like a teletype as it passed through his mind: *Too many Negroes*. And then he tried to fade his blueness into the white tiles in hopes that no one noticed him. Truth was, he didn't matter. You all had business uptown.

Funny how the image holds its charge these many years on – of so many standing up at once, not just for King, but out of the weight of their own autonomy, their sense of a collective will in which, suddenly, they played a part. Even the middle-class Jewish kids from Stuy town, at Seward because they couldn't make it higher up the food chain – the ones who dissed your politics or found your profanity embarrassing – most of them walked out too. The only people left inside the classrooms were an occasional bewildered-looking teacher and clusters of Chinese kids in buttoned-up white shirts, hunched over their desks – those most earnest students, recently off the boat, unlinked to the pull of the moment, still contained in some other, set-apart world.

All this folly in the time it takes a DONT WALK to flash green. A squeeze of Katie's hand and you head southward down Broadway's diagonal. Across the street, W. Gordon's Novelty Co. The windows of the wide storefront are entirely boarded up. Somehow it surprises you not that it's gone, but that this ancient center of the clownish and grotesque survived long enough to crawl over the finish line into the new millennium. Shouldn't it have vanished years ago, given logic of Manhattan's ever-suburbanizing real estate drive? Number 935 Broadway. Is it possible that behind the

plywood, nothing's changed – the dusty masks of presidents, criminals and movie stars, the caveman costumes replete with rubber clubs still stand arranged exactly as they were? Above the doorway three glass panels backpainted in flaking-off block letter read:

PREMIUM GOODS	BALLOONS	HALLOWEEN
BAZAAR ITEMS	DECORATIONS	COSTUMES
CHINESE LANTERNS	NOISEMAKERS	MAKEUP
RACK NOVELTIES	PARTY HATS	MASKS

• • •

Late morning. Up to the Met in honor of your birthday. As at the start of every visit, approach the mini-Parthenon. Peer through the doors to catch a glimpse of gilded Athena. It is necessary to bend slightly at the knee to see her shadowed face.

June 15th, they'll close the cafeteria. It's not Penn Station, no, but thus vanishes another great semi-public space with its high ceilings and vast breadth. Though the plebians were separated from the full-service diners, the plates and cutlery were the same, the distance didn't seem too far. In the air itself, besides the smells of food, a sense of the socially possible.

And the amazing mural from the Normandie behind the bar. Deco to the max. Back-painted on glass. It has to be twenty feet tall. What becomes of that? Not to mention the pianist in the black dress working the grand most Saturday evenings to produce medleys so florid the arpeggios sometimes made you choke. Or her occasional counterpart, a flamenco-jazz guitarist of immeasurable gravity.

The new cafeteria is housed in a gustatory crypt beneath the medieval galleries, thus eating at the museum will become, for most, a subterranean experience, unless one rolls the really high dollars to sit and be served in the courtyard of the American Wing.

June 1

EVIL ERIC (Randolph). There's a *Post* headline for you.

June 2 – Late Morning

All aboard the Lizzie J. Elizabeth's invited you along for the ride – from the Chelsea Piers Marina down "the creek" past the Colgate clock to the Statue of Liberty.

The skipper is Capt. Don, who'll teach Elizabeth the duties of crew – so she can assist Jonathan when they voyage up to their house in Rhinecliff or out for a jaunt around the island – or beyond. Capt. Don motored from Long Island, through Hell's Gate to give this lesson, and his boat is far more modest than the craft he's piloting now. Lizzie J. sleeps several. She's white and sleek, and as the engines rev, the hum from belowdecks travels fast up to your teeth. There's something of the happy carnivore to this yacht.

Capt. Don's turns out to be an affirmative sort of guy. "Kool and the Gang!" he enthuses, when Elizabeth successfully casts off. On having cleared the marina pilings, "Kool and the Gang!" Over the course of your run out into the bay and back, the insistent repetition of this mantra convinces you that a little of Capt. Don goes a long way. When you're moored at the dock, he starts to show Elizabeth, literally, the ropes. He demonstrates the various knots she'll use, has her mimic, step by step his turns and twists. And then you see how, like a magic trick, an impossible-looking knot can pull effortlessly apart. You think *here comes his trope*, but out of the blue his voice changes tone. "Knots are made to be untied," says Capt. Don.

• • •

Le G. p.m. You who are professionally shocked by nothing gasp internally, if not aloud, when you read that the Republican National Convention will be held to coincide with the third anniversary of September 11. One would give, or at least consider the gift of one's right arm for even a hint of the surreal in the face of absolute literalism – the sort of triumphant, peculiarly direct, unmediated and puritanical literalism of the same species that each year compels certain Protestants to march through Catholic neighborhoods in celebration of having killed a great many of them generations ago. A renewable insurance policy on a hate-filled future.

The present intention is to rub our faces in our abject powerlessness. And we will likely let them. "Welcome!" says Bloomberg. "We cannot thank you enough."

Such degradation of the human spirit on both sides of this immense power asymmetry. No good can come of it, but it cannot last forever. The Bushies no longer have enemies, only victims. So they must, and will, devour themselves. But in the meantime they are doing their job: sowing the seeds of despair among any who oppose them. Not Bin Laden, no. Just people with any sort of surviving decency.

June 3 – Late Evening

Speak briefly on the phone with Larsen. When you ask him if he's heard about the Republican Convention's being slated for September 11 there's a pause and you think perhaps he didn't hear you. Then he says "Right. Un-huh. Right." For him too, an instant's disbelief followed by something like a sigh.

June 4

This a.m. you have to shift operations to La Bergamotte, the patisserie one block south of Le G. The café has been taken over by a film crew. An indie starring Matthew Broderick, who, frankly, you wouldn't know if he bit you.

Bergamotte's got killer pastries and the coffee ain't bad, but the seating, most of it along a banquette opposite the counter is of the eat it and beat it kind. Squeeze in and look around. At the table next to you, a man is actually reading *How to Win Friends & Influence People*. His tiny silver cell phone lies idly by the napkins and sugar. When the inevitable happens, will it chirp, or just dance around on the tabletop like spit on a grill?

Spring of the endless rain. In a half-dream early this morning, you found your way back to Washington Irving, summer of '66, trying to catch up in algebra. Those weeks felt like a truce in a protracted civil war. Your teacher was a mensch, and a master at his craft, evidenced by the fact that you wound up with a 97 on your Regents – a performance hitherto unequaled, never to be repeated. And the girls were smart – what the hell were they doing in summer school? – and beautiful in a host of unto-themselves ways. About all you remember about the girl you hung out with most was that she was unprepossessingly lovely, hip and together. Yes, and she had different sized breasts, one A, the other C. Cool with it – as though this was the way to be. You'd sit on the grass for lunchbreaks in Union Square Park under no pressure to do

anything at all. The moment itself came vested with a light touch, like fabric for a transitional season.

Up to Simon Pearce on 59th Street to buy a wedding present for Alane and Clive. You settle on a large handblown glass pitcher. Liquid and the marrying of waters seems an auspicious way to go. Alane's a Cancer so it suits her element. Then too, there's the spring of Arethusa which it will always bring to mind.

To the west, the upper stories of the AOL/Time Warner "center of everything" swallowed in mist. Against such mass of building as you can see, the scaffolding of the construction elevator running up the side looks ethereal, like Jacob's ladder.

June 5 – Midmorning

Several tables away at Le G., a young woman talks with her mother about her school loans. "I may be eligible for being consolidated."

June 6

Le G. is late to open this morning. Only Mario and Tomás have arrived, no waitstaff, so you pull some chairs down from the table tops and claim your place in the southeast corner by the windows. Spot the house newspapers on the magazine rack and can't help but laugh when you take in the Post headline: *PAPER OF WRECKAGE: Scandal Claims Top Times Editors.* Inset, next to a picture of outgoing Howell Raines, a mock Help Wanted ad for a new executive editor, whose qualifications include being a "lefty francophile [sic] with diversity obsession…respect for facts optional."

True to form, of all the reporting on *L'affair Blair*, the Post's has been the most gleeful. Murdock's scribes never miss an opportunity to celebrate the embarrassments of the gray lady. But the way the *Post* goes about it reminds you of an elegantly-turned line you read in Christopher Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down*. Commenting on reports of the Ranters' practices in the 17th century, Hill said the contemporary press had managed, "like modern journalists, to titillate while reprehending."

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Along the West Side Highway and here and there on subway billboards, the most interesting, tongue-in-cheek ad campaign you've seen in years – for Manhattan Mini-Storage. A variety of images: a tornado tearing up a prairie, three fat bikini'd women clustered on a beach, extreme closeup on a godawful haircut, all headed: BAD THINGS HAPPEN WHEN YOU LEAVE THE CITY.

On your way to Kelly to get needled, walk past the building Tesla where kept his offices. Energy, energy! The body electric. Flash on 540 West Broadway, the ancient tenement you grew up in – so ancient it was wired for DC. You had to use a converter, a heavy industrial-looking box that sat next to your mother's upright piano, to run the appliances. And how many appliances were there? Two: the fridge and toaster. A mixer? Possibly. And every so often the Electrolux. Christmas lights once a year. And yes, a vaporizer when you were sick. Your trains too. You gave yourself a mighty shock hooking up the transformer once. Bakelite it was, with red switch. You knew the American Flyer logo, that was a brand name. But this other symbol stamped on the plastic left you puzzled. "What," you asked your father. "does *UL Approved* mean?"

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p.m. Apart from a billion other things, this talk you're supposed to give up in Byrdcliffe at the end of the month has you bent out of shape. Posing questions like: is it possible for you to call yourself a socialist? That's how you self-define. And have ever since you were in your teens. But do you look at the people of the world and recognize your brothers and sisters, or see just so many useless objects cluttering the sidewalk? There was a time when you could genuinely say this wasn't your operative mode. It sure is today. Wish you could just shake off the misanthropy, like a dog does water. Problem is, it's gotten deeper. Not superficial. How to keep it from your heart? Power of story.

Eric B. comes by the café walking Blanca. Sits down for a coffee and palaver. Midday he tuned into WNYC and heard Leonard Lopate interviewing Isabele Allende. Leonard closed a segment with a comment on how Americanized Chile is becoming. Seems they're even opening a Starbuck's in Santiago. Cut to station break: *NPR wishes*

to thank Starbucks for supporting this program. Good boy, Leonard, you earn your keep don't you?

You heard somewhere that Chile wants to give a gift to the U.S.A., though not quite the Statue of Liberty. Seems the Intrepid Sea Air Space museum – or whatever they call that cemented-in aircraft carrier at the Hudson River end of 46th Street – will soon be receiving a MIG fighter, no doubt from the stock supplied to Isabele's late father. The MIG could take the place of the French Mirage on their flight deck, the one the Intrepid management wants to get rid of it. Half-jocular talk of pushing it into the river. Perhaps they're afraid it will corrupt the other planes. You never know. Can't be too careful.

Sudden realization: You have no empathy for people who have no empathy.

June 9 – a.m.

Shanksmare west to Seventh Avenue to pick up the shoes you've extravagantly caused to be resoled. They're good shoes though, comfortable, and hopefully worth the investment. There it is, the trashed car with Pennsylvania plates. Mitsubishi Mirage, fire engine red. Been there for months. Long enough to turn into a neighborhood institution. On the days she walked toward home after French lessons Gwen used it as her next landmark after passing Eric B.'s house across from the Precinct. When she mentioned the car one time, you nodded, half-remembering having registered it vaguely. But this is the first time you really look. Pretty awful. Pretty bloody awful.

Word on 20th Street has it that one night in the late winter or early spring, its driver, intoxicated and pedal to the metal, wrapped it around a lightpole on Ninth Avenue. Whether he died before or after the EMS crews cut the roof off and extracted him isn't known, but that the accident was fatal is a matter of local lore. The cops towed the wreck close to the Tenth Precinct where it remains – as shattered a piece of once-sporty automobile as one can imagine, the curbside door flung wide, detached roof haphazardly angled over an interior progressively filling up with garbage. Prominently strewn across the topmost layer, a square-toed women's shoe with a gold buckle, a Corona bottle, an issue of Bazaar, and a paper coffee container from The Big Cup, the wildly popular gay hangout half a block up Eighth Avenue.

You wonder, surveying this container of a human tragedy – this site of the beginning of who knows whose grief – now a vernacular dumpster, what the kids lugging their huge backpacks to from the International Youth Hostel a few doors down think of when they it pass by. There's bits of refuse lying on the sidewalk and in the street around the Mirage too, stuff that didn't make it inside, or else blew out. Your foot crunches something plastic: a discarded orange pill bottle. You bend down to read the label. Zoloft, 50mg, prescribed by Dr. H. Fong for Donna Parkinson and filled on May 1st. Take one per day by mouth. A month's armamentarium against depression. Assuming Donna Parkinson followed the directions, she needed a refill last week. Her address is just a few doors down. Have you passed her in the street. Would you recognize her face, or she yours?

The sun's broken through. Though it's muggy, you can feel the moods lift, but warily. Will the skies stay clear long enough for us to internalize the sense of spring? The month of May vanished in chill mist and rain making less of an impression on the collective psyche than a daily round of Zoloft would. Across the brick front of Eric B.'s house, the ivy is growing like wildfire. You'd swear it's spread since last week. Does it imagine it's dignifying a wall at Oxford, say the Ruskin Institute or Oriel, Eric's alma maters? In the last few days, his ailanthus in the shallow front yard has sprouted over the iron fence and now overhangs the sidewalk.

A man with no front teeth, wearing a baggy basketball shirt and shorts, stands in front of you, immobile, shouting into his wire. Accusations of betrayal. Dirt done him by the party on the other end. If you keep your eye on the plants, you could mistake the street for Eden.

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p.m. Strange how the clear evening makes the city seem louder. Plenty of identifiable noises – carhorns below, passing tires rhythmically kathunking the metal plates over excavations, jet turbines overhead, peaking and fading, locating themselves between roar and whine depending on altitude and atmospherics.

How will you find the wherewithal to stay open these last days before you get on one of those planes and blow this joint for two months, your journey undergirded by the possibility of changing continents altogether?

Given that your experience of this city – which constitutes the *plupart* of your lifetime – has become inextricably bound up with your writing, is it any surprise that you feel this is as good a time as any to break off, quit funneling your direct experience down into pages any more?

But then another stimulus – unintended or happenstance – esoteric or a backfire on the avenue will entreat, or demand to make itself part of the mix, and the voice in your head tells you that you have no idea what this book is about, but that it will let you know when it's done writing more than vice versa. Control control control. Can't live with it, can't live without.

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The *Economist* offers $10,000 for the prizewinning essay on the subject "Do we need nature?" Just say no.

June 10 – Le G. – Early Morning

So deep in novel work you hardly notice a young man as he sits down next to you at Table 5. But when he apologizes for making a cell phone call, you think *here's a rare one* and thus starts a conversation.

Dylan Thomas Murphy he turns out to be: red haired, blue-eyed, strikingly handsome, firm handshake, ex-baseball player. He asks if you go online from the café and at once the generation gap yawns wide. No, you tell him, think of this old AirPort-less Mac as a silent typewriter with unlimited white-out. It rarely talks to satellites. He laughs and tells you about a techie buddy who took his computer and a homemade surveillance device – one part of it an empty Pringles can – to Madison Square Park on a sunny noontime and hacked into the laptops of the folks on the nearby benches tapping into the open signal there.

How exactly his friend performed this feat Dylan doesn't know. Nor do you much care about the means, or even if this actually happened. Makes a good story.

You share a moment of appreciation at the simple, liberatory, do-it-yourself-ness of the scheme. Dylan returns to his book, a thick tome about the great "they," the Committee of 300 elite arch-villains, who've chained up the planet and are draining the lifeblood out of the US of A, and you go back to writing this.

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p.m. – as gorgeous a day as one could imagine – the atmosphere as sweet as New York gets. All around one can sense the hearts lightening.

Heading home you notice the Laboom "Te Amo" shop stands vacant and unlit within. Et tu, Brute? One of those neighborhood fixtures that, though not entirely beneficent, seemed eternal. Cupping your hands to the glass you can make out the empty beverage coolers in the shadows toward the back. On a metal rack near the cash register that once offered snack foods, a cleaned-out box of Drakes Cakes. A sheet of paper taped to the inside of the window bears the NY State seal and attests that as of March 2, the establishment owned by Issa Gazem was "in substantial compliance" with all necessary regulations. So what happened? Rent jacked up? The place seemed well-trafficked enough to make a go of it. But if the increase was into the stratosphere, who knows? Chelsea is, of late, one of the more action-packed rings in the real estate circus.

The store always had a weird vibe, but after September 11 the clerks seemed furtive and resentful by turns, as though they begrudged your buying anything there, and you're pretty sure this was not entirely your projection. Issa Gazem – was that the name of the man you thought of as M. Laboom, the shortish, middle aged fellow you often saw gazing out the window when you walked Gwen to school? When you caught one another's eye you'd wave, though your gestures always came up shy of friendly.

An unsold copy of the *Post* lies on the shelf behind the window: *EVIL ERIC: Olympic Bomber Suspect Nabbed*. The accused terrorist stares out from beneath his headline, indifferent to the woman in the yellow bikini his notoriety has nearly squeezed off the front page. Next to the *Post*, incongruously, a yellowing copy of *Maariv*, international edition. Photos of Ariel Sharon and Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian prime minister, face off across a column of type. A box above the masthead advertises $899 fares to Israel. The writing's all in Hebrew, so you look for the date on

the *Post*. June 1. Every day since, you've passed the store, every day not noticed. What else are you not seeing?

June 11

Fog then sun then rain then shine. Mountain weather on an island.

June 12 – Late Afternoon

Feels like you just bench-pressed an elephant. What you did was bang out a rough draft of your Byrdcliffe piece. Your modes of living under this peculiar brand of fascism is either of being possessed by manic bursts of activity, or losing your energy altogether. And then there's always the question begged: how much of a person's state reflects their situation, and how much *the* situation?

June 13 – Early Afternoon

A stocky man in work clothes talking on a cell phone abruptly changes pedestrian lanes and weaves into yours, so you have to downshift your legs to a lower gear to avoid tripping over his heels. "Eight thousand BTUs of heat," he shouts. "It's fuckin' ridiculous!"

Attempt a bit of travel research at the mezzanine café of the Chelsea B&N. Among the placid readers and laptoppers, a couple speaking Spanish-inflected New Yorkese stages a loud conversation decrying the evils of bi-lingual education in the public schools. "When I was growing up, they used to…" "Yeah, and we never…" You move further down the line of tables, but their voices still carry. Better though – you can't hear distinct words, only the tonalities.

This morning on a bench in the Seal Park on Tenth Avenue, Jessamyn presented you with an extraordinary gift: a pair of heavy, incised Tibetan chimes, strung together on a leather thong. As you marveled over them, it started to rain harder, so you opened your umbrella up and with the other hand, suspended the chimes, then allowed them to strike together. Two hours on, and you can still hear the overtones. Of course you can't, but that's the story you tell yourself. And then you notice that the anti-bilingual couple has disappeared into the city.

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Late evening. The other boroughs got 'em first, now it's Manhattan's turn – the new WALK/DONT WALK signs. But no longer are these words, rather symbols composed of multiple tiny lights. The proscriptive side of the dialectic is represented by a bloodorange palm that flashes, then fixes in an unmistakable "Halt!" Signifying "go" the simplified contour of a male pedestrian flares out of its box in a blue-white of almost laser-like intensity. By night, The Walker seems trapped midway between street and sky – an isolate cartoon constellation of everyman, unable either to come down to earth or ascend any further. At whatever hour, if there is any humidity in the air at all – and these days the atmosphere feels saturated – the Walker's form appears painfully bright.

Whether these new signals are the result of some intended municipal petty-terrorism, or simply a lack of physiologic empathy for the already maxed-out urban visual receptor you don't know. And really, it matters little, the effect is the same. You have to avoid looking directly at the signs, and particularly not at their multiple iterations in perspective up or down an avenue. Trooping off toward a vanishing point, the brilliant figures lose nothing of their harshness over distance. You can't imagine you're the only one whose eyes feel assaulted. But no one's mentioned it, so perhaps you're becoming neurasthenic in your middle age? Back in the day, hipsters and junkies wore shades 24/7. Perhaps your time has come, daddy-o.

Mizzling rain opens up as you walk along 22nd Street. You catch a whiff of burning, then hear the sirens. An engine turns left off 19th street and heads south.

At home, you write for a while, then hear more sirens and wake up still sitting at your desk. In your dream you've been running, shouting with excitement: "We saved the show! We saved the show!"

June 14 – Chelsea Streets – Midday

Construction like crazy all over the place. Down every street one or more plywood-fronted lots: a sidewalk detour, cranes and dumpsters, broken-up pavement, flood plains of mud, diluted concrete, you name it. A woman walks past the riot of posters plastered over the post-no-bills signs. She's wearing that wide-eyed cellphone

stare, head tilted over, device buried in her hand: "I'm in Houston right now, going to…"

June 15

Dinner party last night at Teddy and Ladan's. Pasta al dente, bottomless bowl of green salad, wine in plenitude and spirited talk the table round. First thought on waking: *What a wonderful time!*

June 16 – a.m.

E train uptown, an odd trinity of signs. Sitting to your left, a skinny, stoned-looking young whitefella has devoted his entire inner left forearm to the display of a gothic-lettered tattoo: *Faith*. Across from you, a young woman whose clothing and affect advertise her deep commitment to becoming a Future Hottie of America. Over the metaphorical region of the heart, her red sweatshirt bears a pink, glittery appliqué of cupid surrounded by type: *Hollywood Angels*.

Your stop. Scan the ad to the left of the doors as you wait for them to part. A crudely drawn little pink frock floats suspended from a hanger. Above it the words: "I got all dressed up to look for him online." And below: "Yahoo personals. Believe."

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p.m. Early evening of the Monday after a final weekend of sorting, packing and dragging the thousand-and-oneth trash bag out of Wilma's house, across the patio and up the garden stairs to the vast pile accumulated beside the garage. Consequently, too knackered despite more cerebral labors today, to subway down to the Poetry Walk across the Brooklyn Bridge to Brooklyn. Would have been fun to share the view and hear some Whitman, Frank O'Hara and who knows whom else, read aloud in the company of friends and friendly strangers. Would've been lovely. But your legs only carried you as far as the café to write this, add some few words to *Orogene*, and celebrate your own small Bloom's day.

June 17 – Midtown – 7:45 a.m.

On your way to Paul's, you pick up a cup of coffee from a curbside stand. Burnt taste, phew. Look at the white cup. Citi, the mega-financial services corporation whose logo is a red arc, abstracted out and simplified, of the Traveler's insurance umbrella – has printed a message there. Before you pour out the bad joe, squeeze and release into the trashcan, you read the slogan for whatever edification may inhere. "Hugs are on a 52-week high." And then the tag-line: "Live Richly."

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Things you never knew. "USA Patriot" (as in USA Patriot Act) is an acronym for *Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism*. Amazing what language will admit to when tortured.

June 18 – Early Morning

Rain again. Vancouver-on-Hudson. *New York Post* columnist Cindy Adams blames our "weather of mass destruction" on Saddam.

On your way to the subway after dropping Gwen off at school, you pass the former Laboom Te Amo. No apparent change within. An illustrated greeting card of two bunnies still pasted to side of the cash register. Several crushed cigarette cartons, and a heap of spiral-bound New York street atlases on the lower shelves by the window. A few touristic souvenirs, one of which catches your eye – a life sized red delicious-type apple ringed at its base by a miniature, blue-tinged cityscape, complete with Statue of Liberty. Looks made out of wood. Carved by some industrial process, or even by hand? Strange chromas, seems airbrushed. It's lying on its side and partly covered up by some paper detritus, so from this angle you can't tell if it's a before or after apple. Such a bizarre little tchotchke you might've bought it if you'd noticed it was there.

Subway car. What is the distance between Whitman's *Me imperturbe, standing at ease in nature!* and the hundred someodd rancid little souls jammed in here chilled by the corporate exhale? Me, clueless, taking up as much space as I can.

These days, the only times you don't feel yourself screaming inside is when you hold Gwen's hand. Lucky today. Got to walk her all the way to school under the

umbrella instead of waving goodbye at 23rd street, where you pretend to head west, but actually just slacken your pace, drop back and watch her figure weave among the comers and goers, forging imperturbably ahead. There's something gallant in her bearing, of going out to meet the world with a light and dignified spirit, no matter what the circumstances. You recognize a quality her great grandfather Meyer had, and Bea too, even at the end.

June 19 – Morning

On the subway platform, two guys, more or less your age, both vaguely redolent of the counterculture, stand close enough for you to overhear a snatch of dialogue before the train rumbles in. "He's a really nice guy who really cares about his company." Have the surviving relics of your generation had a collective lobotomy?

p.m. You've quit your "day job" – indefinite, doubtless infinite, leave of absence from Goddard. Now starts the countdown: Europe for two months – the Grand Tour, Daddy-O. And one day, maybe, you'll get free of the jaws of the city and States. Thing is, are you chewing your foot off or picking the lock?

June 20

As of yesterday, Gwen's a graduate of PS11. This morning it occurs to you that her seven years there, pre-K through 5th grade, more or less coincide with the span of this book. No, the math's not that neat. You wrote your first entry nine months before Gwen started school, when she was still spending several days a week at Peggy Rey's. If they gave McArthur's for child-care, Peggy would deserve one.

Somehow Peggy managed to integrate the disparate energies of whichever kids were in the room on any given day into a mélange of creative play and respect. Five days a week, fifty-two weeks a year. Just drop your 'em off for all or part of the workday. Pay by the hour, one reasonable rate. A New York City phenomenon, a hothouse of humane interaction in a tiny rent-controlled studio: Peggy, her two muscular, face-slurping boxers, and anywhere from eight to thirteen kids, infants to three-year olds, all inhabiting that little room. Some mornings, you'd come in and her late-night fashion model son would be sleeping up in the loft bed while the young 'uns scrambled around below.

It was a crazy scene, but you credit Peggy with a large share of making Gwen the unaffected social animal she is. She started off among the youngest, and ended up as one of the group's big sisters. And it's where she met her still-close friend Daphne. How would you have ever gotten by, written what you wrote, without knowing Gwen was OK at Peggy Rey's?

Between rain showers, the graduate, nearly 11, takes off for the playground with some of her classmates, Laura, Charles, Nicky, all of them, by coincidence, headed next fall for the same middle school. Old enough to negotiate the neighborhood by themselves now, they take their freedom where they may. Crossing those streets, leaping those thresholds.

June 21 – Early Morning

Stuck for morning coffee cash you cadged two dollars from Gwen's allowance money and left a post-it IOU. When you were Gwen's age, now and again Jack would pilfer your stash and later claim he'd forgotten. Perhaps he had. Either way, the money was gone. So there is a sense of double payback when you return, often without her being aware of its having been missing, whatever amount it was you borrowed. Each of the two or three times you've taken and repaid one of these mini-loans, a knot of anger has slipped within, and you've felt in the same moment both more worthy of Gwen's trust and aware of the distinction between your father and yourself, as father. Funny buggers, human beings – the wider meanings we give, and take, from little things.

Two men enter the café intent on a business meeting, the first, a small fellow. But his partner's so huge he can shut the door behind him from damn near halfway across the room. Are you hallucinating or does the little wicker chair he has his eye on tremble slightly at his approach?

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p.m. Southwest out your bedroom window, there's a narrow space between two neighboring Penn South buildings. Twice a year, the sun sets dead center in the gap.

You've never marked down the dates, but if memory serves, one of these events takes place around the summer solstice. You've got a feeling it'll be this evening.

June 22 – Early Morning

You wait for the traffic on Ninth Avenue to pass so you can cross the street to the café. Has someone appropriated "your" table? No. Too early for anyone not headed straight to work to be abroad on such a rainy day. Roberto's behind the counter wearing a white hairnet, heating up the grill for the morning's first crêpe. No other customers, so Sulieman, Eyoko and Kimsey vie briefly for the opportunity to make your coffee.

You glance toward the blue awning of the Aphrodite Dry Cleaners – "where cleaning is an Art" – on the other side of the street. Too small to see from here, but in the window stands a plaster Venus de Milo about a foot and a half tall, and flanking her, on separate little stands, a miniature frock and suit jacket cunningly made of wire mesh. The garments seem just the right scale for her to put on. But why the jacket? Is Venus a cross dresser, or does it wait for an unseen David to appear?

Imperturbable in the downpour, the manager of the drycleaner walks diagonally across the street under her umbrella, opens the shop and disappears inside. Until this moment, you'd thought the idea of naming a drycleaner after Aphrodite pretty silly, but now it occurs to you that this might be in homage to the manager herself. No American woman walks like that. For the moment you cast her as Venetian, though odds are we're talking someplace Slavic, or middle-European.

Your coffee arrives. Suddenly you feel affluent and order a pain au chocolat. If you were to return to this table tomorrow, and the day after, you would probably find out what country Aphrodite comes from. Someone knows. All this and more. *Col tiempo*. With time. You might, some morning, even walk into the store.

Happy summer rain. Hot weather to come.

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p.m. You walk along the West 4th Street subway platform. As you near the exit onto Waverly Place, the largest, fattest rat you've seen since you were a kid hops calmly

down, step by step, dead center on the staircase. Rats this size used to live in the sub-basement of your house on West Broadway, now La Guardia Place, and sometimes when you looked out into the covered alley between your back building and the front one, you'd spot a really big one going about his business in the same unhurried way. But for some reason you never encountered such a fellow face to face the thousands of times you went in and out. What would you have done if you had?

Midway down the stairs, the rat pauses as if considering whether to wait by the express tracks, or on the local side. He seems absolutely sanguine about your approach. As the distance between you closes to a few yards, you bear slightly to your right. He maintains his course. Making no apparent effort to avoid you he gains the platform and strolls, if a rat can stroll, in a wide semi-circle. Then he noses about the base of a column, reverses direction, and eventually vanishes into the darkness of the tunnel's catwalk, heading north.

You walk upstairs into the late afternoon light, half creeped out, half feeling you have just encountered a being of considerable gravitas, a true patrician, a privileged citizen of a parallel, sovereign realm. The lighted areas of the subway, and above them, your collection of streets and personal outposts along the way are so familiar you could almost navigate them in your sleep. But this fellow lives in two worlds, and one of them you can only imagine.

4 GROOVE TON CHEMIN

July 2 – To Paris

Exactly at what moment did you notice the way you've come to live? – with a strange baffle, a kind of buffering between you and all else, as though you had grown a full-body cataract, an opacity over your whole sense of things? You recall once having felt vividly, but your inputs seem all referred now, as if in passing through a protective medium their essence has been deflected and glances off, diffuses impalpably. Once, at least in memory, what you experienced might strike some sounding board within you as deep as waves could go, resonate, and became part of your molecular self. Failing to reach your insides now, do the rebuffed sensations fly off in search of a more permeable soul?

When you were younger, when you were that more permeable soul, you'd have been grateful for a bit of layering between the you and the it, but now you'd welcome the opportunity to drop your guard, rework the barrier into an easy-woven cloak. It would sit lighter on your shoulders too.

The strangest part is that you had no real sense of the accretions layering up – the process was too incremental to be recognized until it had advanced past the point where you could contest it. You dimly realize too, abstractly, that your present state is bound up with grief over the fate of your city, its inextricable connection to your five minutes of literary fame and subsequent plunge back into obscurity, the truly frightful crimes your country keeps committing, the psychic and logistical after-effects of Wilma's death. But none of this matters. As Bloch says, the sick man only wants to be well.

July 3

This first morning you wake up in your little hotel room in Asnières just northwest of Paris and a part of you breathes easier, while the rest seizes up, becomes

more rigid. You bang into the furniture in passing, spray shower water on the bathroom floor, push a door you ought to pull, stub your toes on a low, unnoticed step between the bath and bedroom. And you feel stiff as a board when you rise out of a chair you've sat in for a few minutes. Katie still asleep. Gwen too, though she turns round in the single bed, still clutching her stuffed otter. If you time it right, you'll get back just as they've finished showering and brushing out.

Down the stairs then, as if you were loose-limbed. Soften your footfalls on the last flight and scoot past the breakfast room doorway before M. Claude or Emilia notice you. If they did, you'd have to crank up your still-asleep French and explain why you are going out for coffee.

Off down the street toward the Rallye café, past the little alimentation, not yet open, and the boulangerie already doing a brisk business. An old Eurythmics tune begins to play in your head and you croak out joke lyrics in an old man's voice: "I feel like I'm seventy again." Somewhere in your body though, the change of atmosphere takes hold. On the corner opposite, in the pharmacy window, a new skin-care poster has replaced the one you remember. Why not? It's a different summer. You can pre-feel it.

July 4

A slow start to the morning, but it's agreed: you all want to head for the Marais. Quick trainride into St-Lazare. Some wandering, still jet-lagged, meet up with Rosemary, and together into the Hôtel Carnavalet, the museum of the city of Paris. Rooms full of paintings, shop signs, scale models and vernacular treasures of the city's pasts. Then you cross a threshold and arrive quite unexpectedly in the jaw-dropping surround of an entirely other era: the reconstituted wall and ceiling murals of the *Salle de bal de l'hôtel Wendel*. Transported from the old hotel – demolished? – on Avenue de New York, the Queen of Sheba and her entourage prepare to depart for King Solomon's court. At the head of the procession rides Sheba herself – side-saddle upon the back of the most brobdingnagian of a score of elephants.

A throng has assembled to mark her leave-taking: clusters of acrobats, scribes and their monkeys, a gaggle of entrail-reading priests. From whichever angle, no matter where in the room you stand, you find yourself amidst her retinue. The smoke

of torches lit to shield the queen from the sun billows upward through a festooned bower and drifts into an illusory sky. Bold forms, deftly rendered in tri-tone: black and deep red varnish upon a field of white gold leaf. This is the work of José Maria Sert, a Catalan of hallucinatory imagination and loose, confident brushwork – a sort of Tiepolo for the Jazz Age.

How is it that such a masterpiece escaped your prior notice? Both you and this painting existed – the latter since the early '20s – yet until now, you never met! And on the heels of this crazy notion, a strange surge of optimism: your eyes are not entirely insensible to the new. You are still capable of enchantment.

July 5

Hard to imagine that Gwen is due for another birthday soon. For her tenth last year, she saw the Bastille Day fireworks from a terrace on the Tuilleries overlooking Place de la Concorde. Perched on your shoulders. She's too heavy to carry that way for long now, and soon she'll be too cool to allow you to lift her up. That's how it should be if you've done your job.

Her nearly-eleven-year-old eyes home in on different things than yours do. You go to the same places, walk the same streets and she notices an altogether different set of signifiers. And what she finds is always grist for her mill. While you browse the Rai music CDs in the giftshop of the Institute du Monde Arabe, she sets about teaching herself French the old fashioned way – by reading the comics. Between the images, idioms and the slapstick humor, Gwen's hooked – she must have one of the books in the *Malika* series, even if it costs nearly eight Euros. She offers to pay for it out of her allowance. We'll see, you say. Have a look for yourself.

Not difficult to spot the protagonist: a shapely, streetwise French-Algerian girl on the cusp of womanhood. With her lower lip set in a perpetual pout and pigtails sticking up like rabbit ears, Malika Secouss (earthquake) – wears outsized black parachute boots and romps with unrestrained joie de vivre through an ongoing comedy of errors set in and around her home turf, La Cité des Pâquerettes (daisies), a prison-like Corbusian highrise ghetto. Backed up her motley copains and dogged by her brainy kid sister Zouli, Malika's an authentic late adolescent – brash, impulsive and deeply clueless. But, like a proper heroine, she triumphs by pluck or luck, and never fails to

get the better of the National Front goons and racist *flics* who hassle her – sometimes by virtue of a well-aimed kick in the groin: *GNOK!*

Ten or so books in the series, all written and drawn by Tehem, but this is the particular one Gwen wants. Terrific visual style, lots of vernacular-filled word balloons. Eight Euros! Well, it's big, full color and hardcover. Sure, why not? Carpe bloody diem. And some postcards for you and Kate.

July 6

A cloudburst as you walk along the embankment near Notre Dame, so you take shelter under Pont Neuf. When the rain passes, Katie steps out and starts to sketch the grotesque faces carved into the masonry of the bridge arches. Clever how they've hidden the lighting behind panels painted the color of the stonework itself.

You wipe a bench dry and sit with Gwen waiting for Katie to finish. Gwen reads Malika and you quarter a peach. Katie puts away her pad. As you get up you notice you've been sitting on some magic-markered graffiti, nearly worn-away by the friction of your and countless other asses. But still visible: *Je décrète l'état de bonheur!* "I decree a state of happiness."

July 7 – Basel

A fountain by designed by Jean Tinguely, "Fasnachts Brunnen." A dozen black-painted machine-creatures inhabit a rectangular pool about eighteen inches deep. Each apparatus does its own thing: one splashes, another mills; others spout or spoon water, one swings a kind of miner's lantern to and fro. The individual mechanisms repeat a particular motion, but because each is set to a rhythm all its own, the ensemble produces endless variations.

It's hypnotically playful in daytime, but underlit at night, the fountain's denizens take on a deliberate quality, like a gang of flesh and blood workers – somewhere between automaton and autonomous – and not entirely benign.

July 8

On your way out of town, you don't take the tram straight to the bahnhof. Instead you head for the ferry across the Rhine. This means trundling your luggage a

good distance, over curbs and cobblestones, then down and up the embankment steps, but you've only this one opportunity and the effort looks to be worthwhile.

The ferries are like nothing you've seen before. Tethered to cables stretched across the river – their sole motive power is the river's current. East to west, west to east. Either way you go with the flow.

When you reach the dock, the ferry is stationed at the far shore so you ring the bell and it comes across to get you. The boats ride low in the water, seat about a dozen. You step in first, stow the bags, then give Gwen and Katie each a hand aboard. The ferry-woman reverses the tiller and off you go. Midstream, look back. A half dozen intrepid bathers clamber down the embankment, plunge into the water and ride the fast-moving water a few hundred yards downstream. Then they find a landing, climb the steps, jog back along the footpath and dive in again.

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Thun – the lake, and then the mountains. Last night dream of pleasure boats. Their masts and sails are long, slender feathers, like quill pens. They might be writing on the sea. In the morning it begins to dawn on you: when you return in September, you will have no packets of student work to respond to. Nor likely face and avalanche of calls from the media about the World Trade Center. Not a lot of drama in a second anniversary.

July 10 – Venice

Everywhere you turn, *PACE* banners: white block letters on rainbow fabric, scores of them, tied to wrought iron balconies, stretched across narrow ramos, ubiquitous as the laundry draped all round the campos, hung up in shop windows, billowing out from the facades along the Canal Grande. Rarely a moment passes between sightings. And thus, to navigate the city is to take up its visual chant for peace.

July 11

The three graces inhabit Campo Santa Maria Formosa. You discover this when you take your coffee at a table outside the café, before the sun fully catches the white-pink of the campanile, gone pastel since Guardi painted it.

Ten yards distant, an astoundingly beautiful woman, brown-haired and impeccably tanned sets up her fruit and vegetable stand. Silver hoop earrings and Chinese red lipstick. She emerges from beneath the forest green umbrella, circles the perimeter of her domain, a black shawl tied round her hips. Applies architectonics to a pile of tomatoes, shakes lettuces out to maximum effusion, trims off brown leaves with a scissors, palms the heads of cauliflowers as if lining up young children for a procession.

Her partner appears, a compact man with a handsome, mobile face, close-cropped hair and a couple of days growth of dark beard. He helps arrange the stock, begins to sing, and for two or three stanzas, her voice joins his. The flow of people through the campo accelerates steadily, and with it come a steady stream of customers. From beneath the umbrella, the woman greets, banters, selects, weighs, fills sacks, receives money and makes change. A momentary lull. She gazes out across the campo, reaches into her blouse and adjusts her bra.

On your way here, just before crossing the Ponte del Ferali over a narrow canal, you found your way blocked – the white-gloved palm of a policeman literally in your face. Taken aback, you nearly reverted into New York *whassup* mode, but in the instant saw the coffin, two men unloading it from a wheeled metal cart. Not a typical angular coffin shape, rather a gray plastic box, hinged and latched, rounded corners giving it the appearance of an elongated clam shell or a machine with which to press oversized panini. Up the steps and over the bridge the men carried it, then set it down on the opposite bank. One man returned to fetch the cart, onto which the coffin was lifted again. The way clear, the policeman waved you across and you followed the little party to the fondamenta of the Rio Santa Maria Formosa where the coffin was removed from the cart again, and this time put onto the deck of a police boat. You don't recall whether the men stayed on or got off, but you have an indelible image of the dark oblong shape against the red-brown planking as the launch, accelerating with a belch of diesel fuel, motored away.

A dog emerges from beneath the chair of the man at the next table and breaks your reverie. Small, whitish and woolly, the dog scents something. The man continues to read the newspaper and sip his coffee. Did he buy the paper at the kiosk you passed as you entered the campo? The interior of the kiosk lay in shadow, so all you could see of the woman within it was a clean line of cheek curtained by wavy light brown hair. A second grace. Suddenly, the little dog bolts, runs off to greet a brown-spotted Dalmatian who, seeing his comrade dashing toward him, tugs free of his owner's grasp.

"Eh!" The fellow's shout sounds more like pro forma annoyance than genuine rebuke. Nor does he not look particularly distressed as the two dogs bound round the perimeter of the campo, the Dalmatian dragging his lead behind him, its handle as bright a red as the fruit-seller's lipstick. You glance over at the owner of the shaggy little dog. He's back at his reading, *imperturbe*. You'd scarcely noticed him before, but come to think of it, he resembles your friend Wolfgang. You can't imagine Wolfgang owning a dog, nor living in Venice. Umbria's more his style.

A strikingly handsome blonde woman pulling a cart behind her enters the campo by way Calle Lunga. She parks close by the entrance to the church, unfurls a blue and white striped umbrella, then crosses back across the campo to exchange hugs with the grace of fruits and vegetables. When she returns to her cart, she begins to set up shop. Ah, the grace of souvenirs. In no time at all, a cornucopia of wares: sunshades, straw hats, velvety, pointed sequined wizard's hats, sandals, batik scarves.

You didn't see him leave, but the compact man is not at the fruit stand anymore. Instead, another fellow's appeared, seemingly from nowhere – young, agile, wearing cut off jeans and sandals, curly-haired. His head seems huge, precarious atop his slight body. Even in the shadows, a clever, playful spark to his eyes. He fills customers' bags with movements so fluid they seem like sleights of hand.

A woman walks past your table into the café – it's the second grace, emerged from the cave of her news kiosk. You hear her voice above the hubbub as she calls out her order for a macchiato and falls into conversation with the bar's owner, a garrulous, raspy-voiced woman who banters with the clientele while her glum, silent husband tends the counter. A man takes a paper from the kiosk's rack and looks about for someone to pay. The fruit and vegetable grace spots him and runs out from beneath her umbrella to cover for her friend. It's getting warm. You look toward the campanile and

unfocus your eyes. "Ciao, bella!" the patroness calls. Back to her kiosk the news grace strolls. All the time in the world. You look over at the fellow who reminds you of Wolfgang. He's still reading, the little white dog once again beneath his chair.

The rumble of another wheeled cart, this one dragged as one would a rickshaw, by a young woman wearing green pants, a blue shirt and thick, yellow plastic work gloves. A visored cap pulled low shades her face, almost masks her strong, clear features. Her hair, the little you can see of it, orange red. The cart's piled high with trash bags. She must be hauling them to the garbage boat you saw on the rio, tied up across from the police launch. Four graces, sure why not? – albeit this one's passing through.

Your body says get moving. Bring your cup back to the bar, then stroll about the campo. How is it possible for the souvenir vendor's cart to have held such a quantity of things? And she still hasn't finished unpacking her wares. As you move past, your reflection flashes in the mirror she's set up so customers can satisfy themselves that they are making just the right purchase.

A bell tolls from the direction of San Marco, too many strokes to count. The whole campo is buzzing now. Yet another cart arrives, tall, oblong, propelled from behind. Ah, it's the fruiterer's compact partner returned with a stand of his own. Head down between his arms, he's bent nearly double with the effort of pushing its weight over the cobbles. Something immemorial in his gesture – he could be one of Pharaoh's slaves laboring to roll a stone block toward its pyramid. Atop the cart, perched like the Queen of Sheba, a girl, perhaps eight years old with long brown hair. His daughter? Seems so. Is the fruit grace her mother? The girl jumps down, runs toward the fruit stand, but spies another girl around her age and abruptly changes course. Meeting, the two girls put their heads together, entwine arms and stroll, as thick as proper conspirators.

The fruit-seller's partner begins to set up his concession. Ice cream. It's just past eight o'clock, but then with this sun, the place will heat up fast. In no time at all, he'll find customers. As tourists congregate, a queue may form.

Leaving the campo, you walk backward for a few yards. Long enough to see the grace of souvenirs stretch up to hang one fringed shawl, and then another from the spokes of her umbrella.

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Afternoon espresso. Imprinted into the white porcelain of your cup, a brand logo of a coffee pot drinking a cup of itself.

• • •

Once there were three pawnshops doing business in the Gheto Nuovo. Each one gave a different colored ticket: red, green and black. Who knows what haughty fellows – perhaps even members of the Council of Ten – slunk through the gates after dark in search of an "uncle with three balls" to save them from embarrassment?

• • •

In the San Marco mosaics, when God creates Adam, he makes him very black indeed.

Hallucinations in the marble floor patterns – Escher eat your heart out. In the golden mosaic bays of the entranceway, concrete and realist imagery: the Tower of Babel depicted as a fourteenth century construction site.

• • •

The city is depopulating fast – too expensive now for its natives to live in. And ground floors can't be inhabited because of the danger of floods. But Venice still has its beauty to trade on. What sort of coin will New York exchange when it's no longer a center of raw economic power?

July 13

This morning, you fall into a strange broken English-Italian conversation with the desk clerk at your hotel. Somehow the subject of l'albero di Cucagnia comes up, the tree of Cockayne, a slippery pole that must be climbed to claim one's prize.

• • •

On the vaporetto, you boost Gwen up so she can sit on the luggage rack and look out over the sea of heads. She points to a sign riveted to the bulkhead and asks what it says. What to do in case of emergency. If a person falls overboard, you must inform the captain at once. If it is too crowded on the deck for you to reach the wheelhouse, shout *Uomo di mare!* as loud as you can.

• • •

Evening of the day before Gwen's eleventh birthday. As dusk falls, you walk along the Fondamenta Nuove searching for a restaurant where you'd eaten a wonderful calamari and polenta back in 1991. What got you there was a writing fellowship you'd won earlier that year. Instead of doing something sensible like paying off your credit card you headed for Europe. It was Katie who insisted on Venice. You'd seen its effect on other northern eyes, as in Turner's paintings, but never imagined that the experience would definitively alter your own way of seeing, down to what feels like a physiological level. That first time, making your way from the train station toward the Canal Grande you damn near walked into the water. No hallucinogen had ever rearranged your visual consciousness so profoundly, or permanently.

But both Venice and the memory are tricky and you cannot find the restaurant you're searching for. Katie too recalls that it was near a vaporetto stop and faced out onto an island. Perhaps it was not on the Fondamenta Nuove, but rather on one of the Rivas with a view of S. Georgio Maggiore instead of Isola di S. Michele. As the three of you walk back toward your hotel, Gwen spots another place you'd hoped to find, trattoria Da Bruno, so it's through that door you go.

The place has changed, of course. Dark walls repainted in a lighter shade and overall the place seems less like a cave where a bear named Bruno would hang out. Younger waiters too than the ancient fellow you remembered from before, and on the menu the spaghetti dish with squid ink that used to be called "black shirt" has been politically blanched into "alla Veneziana."

A carafe of wine arrives. Uncharacteristically you guzzle down two glasses and are working on a third before eating anything at all with the result that even the piebald sunburned skin of the tourist woman at the next table begins to look delicious. And then, goddam, you flash back on dinner at Jonathan and Elizabeth's Rhinecliff palazzo the weekend after 9/11 – how you coughed your way through Katie's succulent brisket with cranberries and orange sauce, and riced potatoes, the energy draining out your feet, overcome by the sense of getting sicker by the instant, of your lungs drowning in a cold, dry storm of granular concrete. You'd felt shame then, that's not too strong a word for it, mixed with resignation, because you simply could not rise to the conversation round the table, so absent from your awareness was anything but an ebbing sense of life. Even Katie and Gwen seemed to exist at a terrible remove. But now, assisted by the passage of time and awash in wine, the recollection only registers a twinge, the kind reserved for long gone toothaches – both the molar and its vanished nerve reduced to a ghost sensation.

Across the table, Katie and Gwen are talking. You could enter their dialogue at any time, but it doesn't feel urgent. Nobody is drifting. It's all hanging together. So what comes into mind is a canvas you saw yesterday at Ca' Renzonnico by an eighteenth century painter, Antonio Diziani, whose work you hadn't known of before. *Bertoldino che vola legato alle oche* – you have to find out exactly what the title means – shows a young boy bound by strings to a flock of birds, which are also tethered to one another. Upwards the birds fly, pulling the boy out of the bucolic farmyard in which he stood and into the sky. A woman runs toward him, his mother likely, crying out in distress. But already he's too high up for her to bodily intervene. Nothing visible to stop his ascent. And Bertoldino himself, who may have set the whole thing in motion by tying himself to the birds and perhaps the birds to one another, now looks very regretful at the turn events have taken.

Then you came upon a gallery you remember vividly from twelve years ago, full of the frescos of Giandomenico Tiepolo, son of and assistant to the renowned Gianbattista. From what you've seen of Giandomenico's work, he could have continued cranking out the ceiling apotheoses his father perfected: noble couples and other personages ascending into gorgeously beclouded heavens escorted by Apollo or Athena, or else symbolic figures of Fame, Virtue, and the four continents, invariably

attended by huge flocks of putti. But Giandomenico's work moved in quite a different direction as he matured. Though his paintings too are fantastical and allegorical, he lavished his attention – and, you sense, his love – on more vernacular and earthbound subject matter. His images chronicle the many lives and deaths of Pulcinella, a grotesque, hunchbacked Comedia figure in white costume, beak-nosed mask and conical hat. Usually Giandomenico depicts several Pulcinellas, sometimes whole tribes of them, engaged in some absurd play among themselves. At other times, his Pulcinellas mix in among polite and everyday society. Wherever they appear, it is impossible to distinguish one Pulcinella from another. But this uniformity, anonymity even, leads to a paradox. For the Pulcinellas possess a range of gestures and expressions so highly nuanced that, upon close observation, each one betrays an individuality all the more moving for its being so well concealed.

You spend a good deal of time with the each painting in the series, but the one that arrests you longest – so long, in fact that you lose consciousness of time – is an image containing only one Pulcinella. A crowd scene set in a park. Giandomenico has painted himself, looking foolish and standing behind his elegant father into an assemblage of contemporary Venetian men, women and children that presses in from both sides of the composition. They wait their turn to stand before a little circular structure and peek through a pair of eyeholes cut into the wall. Somehow, one senses that Pulcinella, the only figure not angling for a view, is the instigator of this spectacle. Giandomenico does not show us what these people are so eager to behold. But the explanatory note next to the painting says that they have in order come to peer into "a kind of cosmorama, where they will see pictures and scenes of a distant world."

It's been ten years and more since you read *All That is Solid Melts into Air*. But the image that remains most immediate from Marshall's book is his description of a fantastical mural, myriad faces and motives of the city's lives, painted along the walls of the Cross Bronx Expressway, visible to all who drive past. Each time a reader creates this mural in her or his mind, something important happens. It is not as though Robert Moses's great wound upon the city heals up and vanishes into thin air. That is wish-fulfillment. Somehow though, the imagined mural expands, manyfold, the story it is possible to tell oneself about what the Expressway, and the city it cuts through, is.

There's danger always in turning the symbolic into the literal. But might this not be the time to build a New York Cosmorama? It needn't – oughtn't – be a grandiose affair. A modest edifice like the one in Giandomenico's painting would do fine. Prospect park seems as good a place as any, though location doesn't really matter. Wherever it starts out, it could migrate through all five boroughs. The important thing is that everybody gets a turn.

So what's inside? Don't know yet. You'll just have to see.

July 14

Twilight gondola ride to celebrate Gwen's eleventh birthday. Big luxury – the sort of thing you couldn't imagine doing if it weren't for her. Your gondolier is tall, tanned, stunningly handsome – and skilled. When he breaks into song, the voice is unforced and strong. But he sings in fragments only, and at seemingly random moments, as though his phrases are triggered by some unseen, intermittent impulse. Grand finale, the glide under the Rialto and out the other side. Gwen delighted, in her straw hat, gracious, at ease.

Un forcuolo, that's what they call the gondolier's oar lock. Made to be removed, it can easily be transferred from one gondola to another, Carved from a hard wood, in accordance with the height and proportions of the individual gondolier, he will use it for a whole working lifetime. But gondoliers retire early, because their backs give out.

July 16

Some moments need to be written down as soon as they happen, if only as evidence to be unpacked at a later date that you didn't dream them. That said, two days in Salzburg sounded fine when Katie, planning the trip, suggested stopping there on the way to Vienna. Mozart's birthplace, an Alpine surround. Your lungs expanded in anticipation of the purity of the air. The name itself lilted on the tongue. On top of which you remembered – incorrectly it turned out – having heard about a palace there with Tiepolo ceilings.

Thus by train northeast from Venice through the Dolomites – the view so visually overwhelming that when you change trains at Villach and head into the Austrian Alps, you already feel lightheaded.

Hot in your new compartment. Will the AC kick on when the train gets moving? No. Check the other compartments. Same deal. The conductor confirms that the ventilation system for the whole car is broken. Ultra-modern train, climate-controlled, so the windows are sealed. You check the cars bookending yours. A bit cooler with free spaces in some compartments, but none of them vacant. And you have this one to yourselves. Katie's for sticking it out. Too much of a hassle moving the luggage. Gwen's fine – doesn't seem to mind broiling when she can adventure with Malika, write in her diary, or, if she's moved to, fold the armrests up into the seat back, stretch out across three cushions and nap. Half an hour of marinating in your own sweat and you and Katie head for the dining car.

Where the heat's no longer infernal, but it's not chilly either. The early afternoon sun, intensely bright, has got an edge on the AC, so you both order bottles of Ottakringer beer, the brand the rest of the car is drinking. Between its potency and the incrementally rising temperature, you soon work up a fair buzz. And suddenly become aware, all around you, of the sound of German.

In Italy, you could grasp whole bits of meaning in what you heard. Sometimes, if the sentence was simple, or close enough to French, the significance itself came through. But here, apart from the rare recognizable word – schlecht, or fahrt, or ruach – all language has become a wash of Ottakringer-inflected babble. The train stops at Bishofshoven and after that, the Alps get serious. Gwen sidles up to your table to claim a kiss, and ask you what the subtitle of her Malika book means: *Groove ton chemin.* It's Franglais you tell her: *groove* your way, your path. We're riding on iron rails, you explain, *un chemin de fer*. Does she want anything to drink? No, she's fine. Back she goes to puzzle out the rest of Malika on her own.

Groove grove-groove grove-groove sing the wheels. You've brought your commonplace book in case you wanted to scribble anything down. But now you rifle the pages looking for that bit of Tennyson you stumbled over months ago, him writing circa 1850 about his poem, Locksley Hall. Did you jot it down in this book, or the one before? Ah, there it is: *"Grooves of change": When I went by the first train from Liverpool to Manchester (1830), I thought that the wheels ran in a groove. It was black night and there was such a vast crowd round the train at the station that we could not see the wheels. Then I made this line.*

You look up, into Katie's eyes. She's half smiling, feeling no pain. Then your eyes focus behind her. One table down the line, a large fellow of middle years with a round, open face has begun talking to you – perhaps about the heat. *Ich habe keine Deutch!* you call out, raising your open palms in the universal sign of the ruefully clueless. The man nods, appears to take in what you've said, but continues to talk at you, undeterred.

Which is when you realize that he may have boarded this train considerably earlier than you did and therefore the bottle on his table may not represent the only Ottakringer he's consumed. This could explain why he does not seem particularly concerned with the quality, much less the content of your responses. Suddenly he pauses in his monologue and gives a comic shrug. You shrug back and he claps his palms over his forehead, swipes them downward over his face and reveals an even broader grin, a gesture that reminds you of one of the Little Rascals – Spanky was it? – realizing he's in trouble, but ain't he cute? You nod and smile *hello I must be going*, and take the opportunity of the shift in tempo to break eye contact and look at your watch, unfold your map and spread it before you.

Let's see… train's going at a good clip. Should be getting close to Salzburg – you trace along the route – approximately here… then what, from Katie's point of view, must be a classic double take as you register a little circle, a location point on the map just west of where the tracks run – its placename printed in the same innocuous letters as all the others. If your estimate is right, you're about to pass within spitting distance of Berchtesgaden.

A black and white cascade of images spills onto your inner screen: Adolf in a sober, doublebreasted suit. He ushers Göering around the grounds, gesturing to things offscreen. On the terrace, Eva frolics in a cute two-piece against a stunning backdrop. Cut back to the Führer as he chats with Göbbels. A hand in close-up points to figures on a table-top terrain. Another hand reaches out to advance little infantry pieces and tiny Panzer brigades. Pull back to Hitler again, medium shot, surrounded by generals all in a jovial mood. Perhaps they're congratulating him on a particularly Eagle's-lair-ish move – perhaps he's just launched Barbarossa. You stare at your map, one edge now damp from Ottakringer perspiration. Nothing before you coheres. You

understand what it feels like to be the bumpkin who gets whacked with a two-by-four in an animated cartoon. Perhaps Katie sees you shake your head.

When you step off the train at Salzburg, the platform dips and rises as if it were the deck of a vaporetto, bucking across the lagoon toward Murano. A troupe of boy scouts strides past doubletime, flag held aloft, singing their marching song. Katie goes rigid at your side. Gwen trundles gamely along, pulling her little wheeled valise. You don't react at all. This is Austria. Young fellows with uniforms and badges are just part of the mix.

July 17

Morning, and you sit in a comfortable chair in the common room of your hotel, drinking coffee. Again, comes the sensation on the platform yesterday. The floor tilts, slowly, not unpleasantly, then corrects to the other side. Look up in search of a horizon. Light pours in from the window at your right. On the wall behind you, a full-sized lute set in a gold frame. Straight ahead, through an open glass-paned door into the adjacent dining room, two women sit at breakfast near an old-fashioned domed oven faced with green-glazed tiles. Above them, hanging from a chain affixed to the wall, an odd-looking candelabrum, too far off to make out clearly.

Notice what's closer. Against the wall separating the two rooms, an upright piano. Next to it, just beside the doorway, a rack of morning newspapers clipped to batons. Across the whole upper third of the wall, scattered like wildflowers, a collection of vividly colored straw hats.

Behind the bar, a maritime theme: sailing ship models, a dozen or more limpet shells artistically arranged within a frame. To the right of the shells, sticking perpendicularly out from the wall, and open-mouthed as if caught in mid-sentence, the head of a fish whose body must once have measured the length of your arm. Get up to take a closer look. At which point Peter, the hotel's owner, enters, sees you studying the fish head and answers before you can ask. Max, he says, came from a friend who'd used the fish to make a bouillabaisse. Close up, the Max's head is astoundingly ugly – he looks strangely varnished. Is Max preserved? No, Peter answers, just mounted on a board, exactly as you see him. For a while, he smelled bad. But not for several years.

Why is he called Max? A guest once asked if he had a name, and, well, he just looked like a Max.

You ask Peter if he was born in Salzburg? Yes, he says, and he tells you that he inherited the hotel from his grandfather, who built it at the close of the 19th Century. And it's been a hotel all along? Not exactly. In 1944, a bomb hit the building. From an American plane, intended for the railway station a half mile away. We rebuilt it completely after the war.

Peter excuses himself to attend to the business of the dining room and you return to your coffee. Katie and Gwen will be down to breakfast any minute. In the meantime, flip through your guidebook. No, you weren't hallucinating on the train. There it is, the first item listed under Country Excursions – not just Berchtesgaden, but *Berchtesgadener Land*: "25 km west of the Festival City – just across the border (autobahn exit 'Salzburg Süd').

Here, in 1937, a "tea house" atop Kehlstein Mountain was given to Hitler by an admirer as a fiftieth birthday present. To make the ascent to the Eagle's Nest easier for the "Führer" (his *nomme de guerre* appears in quotes) a 6.5 km road and tunnel access-way was carved into the rock. Today, busses depart regularly from the Third Reich Documentation Center at the foot of the road, and an elevator carries visitors up the final 124 meters up to the Nest itself. "So you see, even this 'memorial of admonishment' to megalomania and insane deeds can be reached conveniently. You shouldn't," the entry concludes, "miss the panoramic view, as far as 200km away."

When you look up, you see that Katie and Gwen are sitting in the dining room. They motion for you to join them. The two women at the table by the oven have vanished so now, as you make your way over, you can examine more closely the ornament hanging above their table. It's a wood-carved figure of fellow wearing an apron like a blacksmith's. He bears two keys in one hand. With the other, he holds a candle aloft. From the hips down, where a man's legs ought to be, two stag horns spiral out.

Perhaps it is the influence of Max, the shells and sailing ships, but somehow you think, *this creature ought to swim*. You pour more coffee, compose a ham and cheese sandwich on a warm roll. Choose a hardboiled egg and some stewed fruit. Yet more coffee. A sumptuous repast. *Frühstück*!

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The rainbow banners here say *FRIEDE*. A good number of them, but fewer than in Venice, where the populace seemed intent on sending a message. In a shopwindow you a spot TV screen. Cyclists pouring thorough a mountain pass. A yellow shirt. Close-up on a face intensely fixed. Somewhere, in a country to the north and west of here, Lance Armstrong is on his way to winning his fifth consecutive Tour de France.

July 19 – Vienna

Café Aïda is the spot where you come to greet the day. You didn't have far to look that first morning, nor wander far – the Aïda is just down Mariahilfer Straße, less than a minute's walk from your pensione, if you cut diagonally across the stream of traffic.

A run of clear, balmy weather, ideal for sitting at a sidewalk table. If it rained, you could move inside. As ever, you would gravitate toward the natural light near the glass door and generous windows.

Mariahilfer Straße is a broad thoroughfare, once a suburban faubourg, radiating from the southwest corner of the Ring, out to the West Bahnhof where your train arrived. The afternoon was a hot one and as you dragged your valise in search of the pensione, you growled something unfriendly at Katie about her having booked rooms in the middle of a global bloody mall. With sweat pouring down your neck and hordes of cattle-like shoppers blocking your way, Mariahilfer Straße seemed as Viennese as Roosevelt Field.

Unlike most of the storefronts on the strip, the Aïda isn't brand new. You suspect it's been here a while – the decor has an authentic fifties feel to it. Turns out that this Aïda is an outpost of a venerable café in the center of town. What drew you to the place, aside from its anomaly, is the clean, Italianate quality of its design. In other ways it is classically Viennese. The first day, before you knew the drill, you ordered at the counter from a pink-uniformed woman, but you needn't have. Today you sit at a table outside and in no time at all, she emerges to take your order. What she brings on

her return is called an espresso. It isn't really, though it's strong enough to start the blood circulating, and the cup sits on a little oval steel tray accompanied by a glass of water.

Maybe you should have ordered a pastry. No, wait for Katie and Gwen to get up and ready and you'll go out to breakfast together. Pensione Hargita is located on the piano nobile and second floors of a building straight out of *The Third Man*, complete with the kind of doorway one feels like an outlaw entering, and two broad, spiraling marble staircases that issue to the left and right off a paved entrance passage.

An unselfconsciously friendly Hungarian woman of middle years runs the place, maybe owns it. In any case, she's there at all hours. She must be thirty years the junior of the youngest Gabor sister, but nonetheless carries forward into the new millennium the full panoply of their traditional appeals, among them, blonde hair loud as a trumpet cadenza and huge, lively, copiously made-up eyes. It would be a hard-hearted soul indeed who did not find her captivating. Borderline zaftig she is, in clingy floral dresses levitated by heels a half inch shy of fetishistic. This morning as you left, you asked for directions to the local laundromat and she pulled out a pad and drew you the route from memory.

But laundry is a collective job and it's early yet. Coffee finished and plenty of time for a solo walkabout. Which is how you discover, though it's no surprise really, that Mariahilfer Straße, and the neighborhood itself, take their names from an 18th Century church a few blocks closer to the center city. Though the church is hardly small, you hadn't really registered it before, set back from the commercial facades across a shallow square, where this morning, a market's setting up. Make your way through the stalls and enter. Once inside, you instantly want to flee – the visual excess of Rococo feels particularly aggressive this early in the day – but you take a deep breath and hold your ground. On the table near the entrance lie stacks of little pink pamphlets. You find an English version and sit down in a pew to read it. Thus you learn that up in the tower hangs a bell which has pealed regularly since 1720, and is second in size only to the great Pummerin of St. Steven's cathedral.

A curious painting hangs over the altar, a Madonna and child. You approach to take a closer look. The pamphlet informs you that the image possesses "miraculous powers." It is – and here the description is accurate – a "rough copy" of an original by

Cranach the elder. Well into the 19th century "great processions of more than ten thousand people" made pilgrimages to view this image of an infant Jesus, naked but for a gold king's crown worn at a jaunty angle, and nuzzling his regally adorned mother.

Jesus's eyes roll cartoonishly upward to focus on the face of his love object, but the Mary who gazes out from within her frame appears caught in a paradox. With wideset, Byzantine, absolutely tranquil eyes, long, elegant nose and cupid's bow mouth, she seems both abstracted and acknowledging of your presence at the same moment. "You see?" you can almost hear her voice, "this is how it is." You'd like to dismiss this image, but it won't go quietly. It's not a good painting. Yet the effect is undeniable. And it comes to you, as it has many times, and always with a sense of being brought up short: you are as helpless before the power of your sense-impressions as you are in your dreams.

Nothing else in the church holds your interest long, yet you linger for a few moments to gather yourself up for the day and read the other side of the pamphlet: *The whole building suffered a major threat through the construction of the underground in the Mariahilfer Straße…at the beginning of the nineteen nineties. As a consequence of the excavation, the two towers began to lean towards Mariahilfer Straße and the nave started drifting toward Gumpendorfer Straße.* The trauma to the old building, when translated into English, suggests that its constituent parts each possess a will of their own. *Thanks to a great and problem-free cooperation between parish, archbishopric and the municipality of Vienna…the catastrophe (was) averted by installing four steel anchors which have joined together the towers with the nave permanently.*

You've observed, in many old churches, a crack, often widening as it travels upward, between the tower or narthex section and the nave. You've always assumed this to be a structural problem with this particular building form, but today it amuses you to imagine that Christ's feet are trying to head off in a different direction from the rest of him.

Walk around the back of the church to the street in whose direction the nave was drifting – a different route to your hotel. But after a couple of blocks, Gumpendorfer Straße, which you thought ran parallel to Mariahilfer Straße, seems to be veering away, so you hang a right and come all at once upon a huge freestanding concrete tower, oblong, windowless – hard to tell, perhaps twelve to sixteen stories tall. Around twenty

feet from the very top, four disk-shaped platforms jut out from the corners like stylized petals. This monstrous form rears up out of a triangular park, an incongruity compounded by the presence of a cascade fountain at the edge of the greenery surmounted by several Baroque-style statues drawn from the Greek pantheon. Look skyward again to read the giant block letters painted across the width of the tower's summit: *ZERSCHMETTERT IN STÜKE (IM FRIEDEN DER NACHT)*. You backtrack now and circle around to see the opposite side. Up on top, in the same bold characters: SMASHED TO PIECES IN THE STILL OF THE NIGHT.

Enter the park. Sit down. Take it all in. You've heard about these towers – built in the city and around the outskirts during the war as elevated anti-aircraft batteries. Bomb shelters dug below them – immense ones too, room enough for several thousand. What the hell is this used for today? No sooner asked than you see a sign, down toward the base: *Haus des Meeres*, aquarium and zoo. Zoo?

A woman walks past your bench. Black pants and a teeshirt cropped to bare her midriff. She's thirty, maybe, and she swings her hips, scuffing bare feet along the gravel path. *Strange hippie*, you think. But your mind's not making connections right so it takes a couple of beats to vibe out that she's a little mad. She claps her hands in a proprietary way to shoo the pigeons off, then stops at the fountain to splash water on her face. It begins to dawn on you that on several of the nearby benches someone is asleep.

As you stand up she turns toward you. You nod and she nods back. This woman, the early bird, is mayor of this park. You walk round the tower again. To one side is a kiosk-like structure that serves as the entrance to a staircase. The stairs lead down below ground level to what must have been the bomb shelter. Above the entrance, a sign: *Die Geschister der FOLTER*, and in smaller letters: *Museum für mittelalterliche Rechsgeschiste*. Out comes your pocket dictionary. The Museum of Torture.

Directly in front of the entrance, a man wrapped in a blanket lies sleeping. He's good there for another hour or so. It's early yet and the sign on the door says the museum won't open till 10.

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Trzesniewski: die unaussprechlich guten brötchen. The unspeakably good roll – slogan of a popular bakery. The storefront is decorated with a series of naïvely-drawn, chalkboard-style plays on Austrian bewilderment when confronted with the name Trzesniewski. One cartoon shows a long roll shaped like an ocean liner, its aft sticking out of the water, poised to disappear beneath the waves. Dictionary time again. *No,* the caption reads, *Trzesniewski is not a brötchen disaster at sea*. It's just *die unaussprechlich guten brötchen.*

July 20

Along Mariahilfer Straße, at regular intervals of thirty meters or so, bronze plaques embedded in the sidewalk – impressions of the palms and soles of dozens of Austrian Olympic medalists. Beneath each set of hand and footprints, the athlete's signature, their sport, and date of victory are inscribed in relief. Occasionally the plaques include a symbol – the equestrian, for example, has included a horseshoe. You do a double take when you come to the one signed Arnold Schwartzenegger. His handprints are there alright, and they are mighty big hands. All the other plaques give testament to the vulnerability of naked toes, plantar mounds, arches and heels. But alone among his compatriots, when the moment of casting came, Arnold said, if not in so many words: *The boots stay on.*

July 22

One more in a string of gorgeous, temperate mornings – this one your last in Vienna. And the waitress at Aïda recognizes you. When you order "ein große cafe bitte," she smiles and asks "Schwartz?" – more confirmation than question mark in her voice.

Early yet, but you don't linger. Not far from the café, only a few blocks away, stands the house that Haydn bought at his wife's behest as a retreat for her anticipated widowhood. As it turned out, Haydn lived there too, in his last years, beyond the city walls in what was then Vienna's tranquil suburbs. And it is also where he died, a few days after Napoleon's troops marched in.

Haydngaße 19 is easy enough to find. You've come on a mini-pilgrimage on behalf of your mother. However much Bea loved the music that emanated from this culture, and however much of a literary Germanophile her own mother had been, Bea would have found it impossible to set foot in a country associated with Nazism. She admired Wagner's orchestrations, but turned the radio low when WNYC played one of his operas – shut it off altogether if a piece was conducted by Herbert von Karajan. Nor, you recall, was she entirely sanguine about your owning a Volkswagen. You stand across the street and survey the low, broad house: two stories plus an attic with a couple of unassuming gables. It's a museum now, and incorporates a Brahms "Gedenkenraum" – remembrance room.

Bea could, and often did, live with very little. After walking became difficult, and reading impossible, her zone of wellbeing distilled down to the chair at her kitchen table, and the KLH radio. The two of you had bought it for her sister in the early '60s, and after Gladys died, the radio came to its spiritual home atop Bea's refrigerator, tuned during every waking hour to "her" music. Toward the end, apart from the joy she plainly experienced in the presence of her grandchild, the radio came to serve most of her psychic needs. At least that's how it seemed. What came out of the speaker merged seamlessly with the sense-landscape internalized over decades at the keyboard. Though the radio could not have substituted entirely for her own abandoned – you almost wrote abundant – musicianship, the sounds it transmitted made whole, or nearly so, the circuitry between her youth, her life as a concert pianist and the spirits of her idealized loves: Schumann, Chopin, Beethoven, Brahms.

A man passes, walking a brown dog which sniffs at your leg. You scratch its wiry head. For an instant, you imagine yourself back home in Chelsea, out front of Le Gamin. Then you hear a jingle of keys from across the street where a woman in a flowered dress is opening the door to #19. She enters and the lock clicks behind her. It's 8:30 a.m. Your mother will, you think, forgive your not waiting the half hour until the museum opens. Gwen and Katie, back at the pensione, are no doubt hungry for breakfast. And there's laundry to be done before you take the train to Prague. You came to pay your respects to Papa and Johannes – isn't that the important thing? How much would it matter that you didn't go inside?

Yesterday, at St. Stephen's cathedral you climbed bell tower to where the enormous Pummerin once hung. Another thing Bea couldn't have done. Her acrophobia was so severe, she would stand far back from the edge of any high place, for fear she would somehow be vertigoed off the edge of the precipice. You did not inherit this condition, but on the way back from the Haydn house, you suppressed, while crossing a street, a perverse impulse to stop and stand still in front of an oncoming BMW. Later Katie remarks on how everyone assumes you're Austrian – immediately starts speaking German to you.

It's all a mix, thought Empedocles, and Freud agreed, among earth, air, water and fire, arrayed into contending forces of love and strife. But something needs to be added. Something about the qualities of opacity, translucency, and transparency too. Particularly the translucent – the almost see-through.

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Vienna still with you as you rail it toward Prague. Yesterday, you visited the Freud museum – housed in the apartment he had to flee in '38, the year before he died – and read, posted on the wall, an observation he wrote in 1921 on the nature of dictatorship: "We have interpreted this prodigy as meaning that the individual gives up his ego ideal and substitutes for it the group ideal as embodied in the leader. And we must add by way of correction that the prodigy is not equally great in every case." No, sometimes not great at all, rather a feeble, shrunken thing, the more pernicious for its neediness.

And it was out on the street, in Austria, a place where you couldn't make head nor tail of the language, that the homophone "not see" sounded in your ear.

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Round and round with Gwen on the ferris wheel from *The Third Man*. Out there, on the edge of the amusement park, two more flack towers. No large-scale graffiti visible on these.

SMASHED TO PIECES IN THE STILL OF THE NIGHT. Still wondering at it. At first you thought the message was about the bombs that fell on Vienna. But somehow that doesn't sit right. Could the writer(s) have been alluding to Kristallnacht?

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Your Goddard cap, embroidered with the college logo, abandoned under a chaise-longue in the Stadionbad out at the Prater. You'd emerged so pleasantly pummeled from the wave pool, it was only a question of what piece of personalty you were going to leave behind.

Freudian thing that. You took off your metaphorical Goddard Hat when you quit teaching there, then traveled three thousand miles to deposit the *ding an sich* in Vienna. Perhaps the cap waits in the lost-and-found, or moves about on someone else's head. In any case, for the time being, you've shed your cover.

July 23 – Prague, Mother of Cities

A whole life in passageways. This one like a maze. You entered off V Jame. The left branch goes to Vodickova, the right to Stepanska. Though it's not marked on the map, your guess is it will also lead out onto Wencenslas Square.

Unlike the glassed-over Parisian arcades, these are cavernous hallways tunneling through a densely constructed amalgam of buildings. Past shops, cafés, a theater, you navigate a true internal cityscape, artificially illuminated and so subterranean in feel that your head can't quite convince your feet they are treading at street level. Turn a corner and without warning – behold a dead horse! A sculptural one at any rate – twice life size or more, and suspended upside down from the rafters of a skylit atrium by ropes attached to its legs.

Not just kaput, but grotesquely so. Eyes abulge and tongue lolling out, the head dangles from a hyperextended neck. Despite which, the horse does not lack for a rider. Astride the creature's chest, armored legs hugging its barrel-stave ribs sits Wenceslas himself. Prague's patron saint wears his signature conical helmet, holds his lance upright, as one would bear a standard into battle. His resolute demeanor, eyes fixed on a presumptive horizon, makes plain his determination to advance against all odds. Is it

possibly that he doesn't appreciate the condition of his mount, or is he simply indifferent to it?

What a strange welcoming gift from Prague to throw this anti-Wenceslas into the path of a wanderer – even as he makes his way toward the official Wenceslas whose statue commands the heights above his namesake square. In measurable distance, only a few hundred meters separate one Wenceslas from the other, but what a gulf between them.

Onward then, through the passageway, and out into the open air. Look to your right and upward. There stand rider and horse in classic pose, the latter dutifully on all fours, hooves planted on a pedestal. From atop his equestrian throne, the saint-monarch both surveys and extends his beneficence to the city below. Hierarchy, authority, clear sightlines. It's a deadly mix – just deadly.

And now you're walking back inside to where the sculpture in the passageway inverts the game, makes a protagonist of the horse. Stone dead, the beast exudes more stuff-of-life than poor King W., who, ridden like a hobby horse by one ideology after another, has ended up the straight man in a mordant farce.

There is at least one further twist. As dead weight the horse turns gravity itself into a threat. One imagines that this rider might prove the last straw. At any instant the sculpture could come crashing down and carry the roof with it. Feels like you're tempting fate when you walk directly beneath the macabre head, reach up and try to touch it its ear, just out of reach.

July 24

The selfsame passageway turns out to be your chosen a.m. hangout – a café-bakery, branch of the Odkolek chain founded, according to the menu, in 1840. It's a bright shop, patronized, apart from you, by local folk dressed like they're on their way to work. You buy some pastries to take back to Katie and Gwen, then find a table near the wide window facing the indoor street. Coffee's pretty good. Strange not to see traffic outside, but what looks to be a cross between the mall at Rockefeller Center and the corridor of a Soviet ministry. Dim but pervasive lighting. Bleak, unlovely geometric molding where wall meets ceiling.

Shift your gaze back inside – it's far less depressing. Between the tables and the counter, a rack hung with newspapers. Let's see what they've got. Nothing in English, so the *Hospodarske Noviny* seems as good a choice as any. Unhook the wooden baton and carry it back to your table. Written Czech seems as impenetrable as spoken, so you forego any attempt to decipher the words and scan the images on the front page. In the largest photo, a sickly, watery-eyed Václav Havel stands pressed against, and literally tête-à-tête, with George W. Bush.

Havel wears a medal draped around his neck on a brightly colored ribbon and Bush, half a head taller, has his arm flung round Havel's shoulder. They are caught in a pose which looks as though George is about to whisper something in Václav's ear, or plant a kiss his on forehead as a father might a little boy. Awful but true, Havel's face has the wooden, rouged quality of a ventriloquist's dummy, while Dubya's features seem suffused with raw vitality and an almost unseemly affection. Above the photo, the headline HAVEL DOSTAL NEJVYSSI CENU. Bush, apparently, has bestowed an award upon him – something, no doubt, to do with freedom.

You put your pastry, half-eaten in the bag. Perhaps your appetite will improve later. Return the newspaper to the rack. Out into the corridor one foot before the other and it's not long before you emerge into the light of Wenceslas Square. A real look around this time. Check your guidebook. Aha – number 36/793 – the Melantrich Building, named for the famed 16th century Czech printer. More recently it housed the offices of *Svobodné Slovo*, The Free World, the newspaper that first broke with the Soviet line. It's also where Havel, Dubcek and as many velvet revolutionaries as could fit on the balcony stood looking out over a sea of celebrants – not so long ago. You recall the news broadcasts, the unconstrained, unmediated voices of tens of thousands collectively proclaiming the end of a great tyranny.

Today, No. 36/793 is undergoing a full-scale renovation. You stand well back to take it all in. Across the height and breadth of the scaffolding, fabric has been stretched to create an enormous billboard: a trompe l'oeil version of the building's façade onto which the faces and figures of trendy young Czechs have been superimposed by the score. Some of them pack the famous balcony, pressing against the rail in their excitement. Others lean precipitously out of the surrounding windows, similarly transfigured with awe. The whole scene recapitulates the ecstatic moment of 1989.

Except in one respect. Rather than making a revolution, these artfully dubbed-in twenty-somethings lend their wills and wonderment to an unfolding miracle of capitalism. Just beyond reach of the crowd straining toward it, a gleaming canary yellow Skoda Fabia RS – several times larger than an actual sports car – is being lowered on the cables of an invisible derrick, as if by the hand of God.

You want to grab the first passerby and shake him by the lapels. *Look what they're doing to you!* There's a fresh-faced fellow now, about the same age as his counterparts in the ad, though not quite so glamorous. The impulse to accost him surges, then wanes. By which time he's vanished into the crowd. What if he didn't speak English? What if he did? How could you argue the case against consumer culture to a Praguer half your age? And did you really imagine that any place under the sun remained immune to the market and its blandishments, sustained in its soul by the honey of organic socialism? What to do but sit on a bench and laugh at yourself.

Reapproach the building. The closer you get, the more translucent the image becomes. You begin to catch architectural details printed on the fabric echoed by those on the structure behind it. Peek up into the gap between scaffold and façade and you can spot the four voluptuous karyatids who support the balcony. Walk away again to observe how they're rendered on the billboard. Almost invisible – faces cast in shadow by the Skoda's chassis. Back to the gap for a reality check. The karyatids' heads angle down – the effort of supporting the balcony distorts the beauty of their features. No wonder they were deep-sixed in the visual mix. Best not to undermine the product with ambivalent expressions. Bad idea to draw attention from the radiant faces and their object of adoration. You'd have made the same decision in the days when you were art-directing ads.

A final double-take, like an aftershock, when, just before you turn to go, you notice the name of the site's developer. Lordly Estates. Sure, why not? The new Prague. Makes all the sense in the world.

July 25

Clearance of the Ghetto, or *asanance*, first considered by Prague city council in 1850. Prague's official civic myth holds it that as well-to-do Jews moved out and

assimilated into other quarters, the site of the oldest Jewish community in Europe became a haven of vice and sordid living – a regular Five Points, Bohemia-style.

In 1886, Alfred Hurtig's proposal, "Finis Ghetto," won the planning competition. Sale of properties began in 1895. Demolitions followed in late 1896, over the protests of many Czech cultural figures. The leveling continued until 1907. All that remains today are traces of old street networks, a half dozen synagogues, the old Jewish Town Hall and cemetery.

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The Synagogue museum is a cabinet of curiosities, wherein one finds a sampling of medieval Kabbalistic texts. Interpretations of the alphabet, discussions of the transmigration of souls, and the *sephirot* – those emanations by which God creates and rules the world. To Empedocles's four elements the mystics added the qualities of permeability by light, hence translucent air, opaque fire, transparent water.

In one 17th Century engraving, a bearded Jew dances with the Devil and a fox. Another depicts the great fire of 1679.

Amidst display cases filled with Nazi-era artifacts, one tiny object strikes your eye: a special postage issue used for mailing parcels to Terezin (Theresenstadt). The stamp shows a farmhouse nestled in rolling hills, the scene overarched by billowing, cumulous clouds. Printed in teal green monochrome, the imagery is undulant as a landscape by Grant Wood. So much so that even knowing what you do, you feel an urge to vanish through the picture's plane and live inside this idyll.

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The traffic lights make a peculiar accelerating, agitated sound as they switch colors: green to red, red to green, as though a mechanical bird were flapping its wings inside the steel boxes, trying to take flight.

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A city of the young, on the make, seekers after the great Skoda Fabia RS in the sky. Not many folks your age around. How could a family afford to live here? Extraordinary faces on the few old Praguers you do see, as though their inner life's distilled down to a single fixed expression: impassive, astonished, shell-shocked.

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Moldavite gems everywhere, jewelry and crystals: deep green stone – legacy of a meteorite that hit down south fifteen million years before a Jew danced, an official defenestrated, a traffic light flapped, or Franz and Max stepped out on the town.

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Velvet brand beer – dark, smooth, a good deal less robust than Staropramen. Named for the revolution?

Food's good. Whipped cream on meat! Who'd a' thunk it?

July 26

A day of music appreciation starting with morning coffee. Low but steady against the rise and ebb of room noise, the radio at Odkolek plays a song you've heard a thousand times. At first you pay no attention, but then you notice a subtle alteration in the phrasing of the lyrics. Get up and go over to the counter to listen more closely. The young woman who made your coffee and bagged your pastries assumes naturally enough that you want to order something else. So you smile, point to your ear, then at the radio. She smiles too, but probably thinks *he's barmy*.

Apart from the refrain, "pretty woman," the words are indecipherable. Yet the vocalist's timbre and intonation – in fact the whole arrangement – is so authentic-sounding that you consider for a moment the possibility that Roy Orbison recorded the original in Czech and version you grew up with is a cover.

Noon approaches and you wait with Katie and Gwen amidst the crowd in the old town square for Master Hanus's astronomical clock to chime and set the automaton figures in motion for their allegorical play. The throng parts as a van drives slowly

through and pulls up in front of a café. Two fellows jump out and set to work carrying empty gas bottles out and rolling new ones inside. They've left the cab doors open, and you hear the dashboard radio thumping a familiar bass line, and skittering over it, a raspy, sassy, woman's voice. It only takes a couple of bars to register "These Boots are Made for Walking" in its spot-on accurate Bohemian emulation.

Later still, over dinner in a little pizzeria near your apartment, the sound of another radio drifts in from the kitchen. As though by a conditioned reflex you recognize Roberta Flack's "Killing Me Softly." But once again, it is and isn't.

The waitress seems a sympathetic soul. Does she somehow intuit your disconcertion, the ambivalence occasioned by your last night in Prague? She suggests you and Katie finish your meal with a becherovka. You look at one another. Sure why not? Just say "Ano" – one of six Czech words you've managed to learn in five days. When your glass is drained, you have the opportunity to exchange nearly all of them. "Uchet prokim," you say. The waitress nods. "De-equay," she says, and as you leave, "Nashledanou." That's a bit much for you to manage in return. But you think she understands your "S'bohem." It's an easy word, one you could get used to.

July 27 – To Nuremberg

There's nothing for it: if one must use the WC on the train, one must. What makes the experience less than pleasant is the way the flimsy plastic seat lid bangs against your back every time the train takes a curve. You push it away repeatedly, as if it were the arm of an overfriendly stranger in a bar. It is only when you stand up and wash your hands that you notice the metal clip that would have enabled you to secure the lid to the wall. Everywhere new codes, new lessons in perception. Everywhere new opportunities to adapt.

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So often these past couple of years, you sense that the world has become a china shop and you have mutated into a bull. However deliberate and careful you try to be, every time you move, your ears are alarmed by the crash of crystal shattering. And then, of course, you twitch in response. You've not an ounce of cool left in you.

July 28 – To Strasbourg

On the train between Manheim and Karlsruhe, a shift in the internal landscape. Or, more accurately, a lifting of veils, as though cataracts had dissolved and your eyes, and perhaps other occluded organs as well, reassumed a once-customary, but nearly forgotten directness of experience.

You had a preview of this yesterday as the train approached Nürnberg: the rolling shapes of the hillsides echoed one another in subtle modulations – dark to light, near to farther green. How fast and clear the waters of the streams you rode over seemed to flow.

Now as you near Baden Baden you notice an object too far off to make out clearly. It hangs suspended, a bit up from the far treeline, flashing sunlight. Does it move? If so, it travels slowly. *Blimp*, some part of you thinks. But how and why here in the countryside? There's something in this moment about the dance of the possible and the impossible, but you don't try to unpack it, just let your mood lift. Certain substances are like your spirit at times, they defy gravity.

The train stops in Kehl, but not for long. The conductor's whistle sounds. Rails carry you across the river and into France.

July 30

Warm, bright morning in Strasbourg. Last night's sound and light display – gorgeously colored projections onto the cathedral's facade syncopated by illuminations of the windows from within – has the quality of an ancient, still vivid dream. Sitting with your family at a smooth wooden table in this little café, tugging apart your croissant, the rhythm of yesterday's train wheels comes back – adduces, in retrospect, a sensation you couldn't fully register at the time: such a palpable relief to see, above the passing housetops, the first tricolor on the French side of the border. Nothing special about it, just a piece of cloth flapping from a pole atop a mairie. You're not much for nations or their symbols, and this flag comes bundled with as much baggage as any other. But there it was, an unmistakable, altogether unexpected lightening of the heart. You felt another turning too, an emanation out of the ground: Alsace retaken by French

troops under Leclerc in winter '44, before they pushed into Germany and Austria, even unto Berchtesgaden.

In the shadow of the cathedral, the market peace. You buy hats for yourself and Gwen, who, perhaps sympathetically, lost hers as well. Her new hat looks even better than the one it replaces. It's navy blue with little zippered pockets on each side of the crown – a style that falls somewhere between Vietnam Ranger, *le golfing*, and the young LL Cool J.

Yours is a visored cap, black at the band, transmuting to a kind of warm brick orange at the crown. Katie swears it suits you more than your vanished khaki Goddard cap. Pure color on this one, chromas in transition. No logos, no identifiable marks or scars.

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Pedal to the metal from Strasbourg toward Lyon in your dark gray Opel Vectra. You'd hoped for the same model Renault you had last year, but this was the closest thing to it. The Opel's a real gas guzzler, but the seats are comfortable and it's stable on the road. Time for lunch. You pull off the A36 at Aire de Champoux Besançon and spot an empty picnic table. While Katie and Gwen unpack the cheese, bread, tomatoes and fruit you head for the cafeteria to buy a coffee.

Walking there, the brightness makes you squint, and you hear more clearly the respectively higher and deeper whiz-whines of the passing cars and lorries just beyond the scrim of trees. A cloud covers the sun momentarily and you open your eyes. A man squats by the open door of a red Peugeot pouring water from a liter bottle into a bowl for his curly little dog. Another man sits at a picnic table, but your view of him is blocked by the back of the woman facing him, straddling his legs. Her hair is short and blondish. They enjoy a nearly motionless, unhurried kiss.

On your return trip you notice a woman with a thickening waist and brown hair up in a ponytail. She leans against the hood of a silver Renault with a *bison* luggage rack clamped to its roof feeding a newborn from a bottle. When she pulls the nipple away, the baby begins to cry, twisting fretfully in its yellow onesie. The father, sitting in the driver's seat, sticks his hand out the window and wiggles his fingers to distract

the child. It persists in wailing. The woman lets the baby suck again and settles back against the car hood.

The couple at the picnic table remains glued together. Who knows when this kiss began or when it will end? You brush your right hand up over your forehead and back across your crown. It's an old gesture, from when you had more hair, and a forelock that occasionally got in your way. Why did you suddenly revive a once-familiar movement, its utility definitively past? Hard to account for. But one thing's sure. You don't know which time you're living in, do you?

July 31 – Saline d'Arc et Senans

The great saltworks of Claude Nicolas Ledoux. For years you've seen this place in prints, read references in books and now your feet kick up fine gravel dust along its calibrated paths. The same bloke who ringed Paris in those silly tax gatehouses designed this too. His boss, Louis XIV, past master of architectural control, also possessed a more than passing interest in the politics of salt.

This was to be a single-product factory. But more than that, a town designed on ideal lines. Here every aspect of its population's life and labor would be taken into account, all things provided for, all energies rationalized, distilled into the functions of a unified machine. What's science but efficiency? Build your town by a forest so fuel is close to hand. Divert a river while you're at it. Far easier to shift water to woods than vice versa.

Ledoux drew out a vast circle of uniform stone buildings – workshops, stores and living quarters – evenly spaced around the town's perimeter. "Its form is pure like that described by the sun during its course." From dead center, spoke-like avenues radiated out from the Director's house, symbolic of the King's all-seeing eye. "Nothing escapes surveillance. A hundred eyes open, while another hundred doze. Keen pupils relentlessly scour the restless night." With such perfected sightlines, happy the worker with nothing to hide. "The eye surveys the shortest line with ease. Work proceeds down it quickly and the burden of the worker is lightened."

It is possible, of course, to be rational in the particulars and stark mad in the whole. Everywhere you look, symbols of the saltworks hewn into the masonry and so

numbingly repetitive they might as well be corporate logos cast in concrete. As if without constant reminder one would forget one's place and purpose.

But Arc et Senans never came fully on-line. It took so long to build it that in the intervening years efficiencies in salt production leaped ahead, outstripped the advantages of centralized production. Obsolescence unplanned, Ledoux's wheel-city ended up a semi-circle. Very little salt was made here, in this half-built, half-ruined dreamscape.

It's hot as blazes. No real trees in this utopia. Set for a spell in the shadow of the massive gatehouse looking toward the Director's building. There's an oculus built into the pediment, like a cyclops staring you down.

Normally you don't get these recorded audio devices, but this one's been worth, literally, its salt. Not least for the quote from Ledoux it just intoned in your ear. Did he really say that? Rewind. Playback again. Write it down.

Beauty, which is nothing but proportion, has an authority over humans which they cannot defend themselves against.

Holy cow. And maybe he believed it too.

August 2

Besançon, home of the world famous astronomical clock that shows the tides in a dozen far-flung ports, complete with ships tossed on painted waves moved by hidden gears and crankshafts. This is the clock that resurrects Christ at noon and shuts him back up in the tomb at three. An astonishing array of timekeeping modes from the immediate to the impossibly distant. One hand marks leap centuries – it moves a tick every four hundred years. And it was there, two days ago, in the presence of this glorious mechanism that you noticed your watch had stopped dead at five to eleven. The classiest Swatch ever made – an Irony, with a chromed metal casing. Bought for you by Katie twelve years ago in a Geneva airport's duty-free shop and taken for granted ever since.

Today, when you reach Brive, you park near the central square and walk off in search of a battery, optimistic even though it's lunchtime. And there's a jewelry shop open – will wonders never cease? – in an understated, air-conditioned mini-mall just off the market square. The lab-coated clerk changes the battery, but the hands won't

budge, and she informs you with a certain pert fatalism that once a Swatch exceeds its lifespan, "c'est poubelle." In one smooth ensemble of motions, her toe depresses the pedal of the garbage bin, the lid flies up and she suspends your watch, its strap end held lightly between her thumb and forefinger, over the chasm. She cocks her head questioningly. You explain that the watch has sentimental value, and she returns it to you with a good humored shrug. *Chacun à son delusion* you can almost hear her think. Into your pocket it goes, and later, into a zippered compartment in your luggage. It's turning to a ghost on your wrist now, visible only in its pallid shape set against the sun-darkened skin.

August 5 – Saint-Rabier

You had counted on accommodations at Janet and Patrick's new house, but the truth is, neither your presumptive hosts nor the place itself are in any condition to receive guests, so after two days of uncertain plumbing and strained friendship, your tribe of three decamps to Villa des Courtissous. Intense sticker shock over the room rate, particularly since you hadn't imagined staying in a hotel for this leg of the journey. But then M. Jacques and Mme. Jacqueline have softened the blow by only charging for two. Gwen's *gratuit*, breakfast's included. And then begin the intangibles. The moment you pulled into the driveway, the three of you felt the tranquility of the place as a palpable thing and fixed on it like a magnet.

Drive down to dinner beneath the trees at La Mule Blanche *in* La Mule Blanche. At the close of the meal, the waitress trundles the cheese cart out onto the terrace. You choose three pieces: chèvre, St. Nectaire and a local variety shot with blue. As she cuts this last one, she spots a little fly that has drowned itself in the fromage blanc. With a light, swift movement, she dips a spoon, removes the fly and wipes it on a towel lying on the shelf below, perhaps for just such a purpose. Absorbed in the play of evening light, Katie has not noticed any of this. When she orders the fromage blanc, you almost reach across the table to touch her wrist, alert her. Reflexively. But to what? The fly is gone. No real cause for alarm.

August 6

On the lawn between the side entrance and the swimming pool lies a piece of white limestone about two meters across, a meter high, and perhaps half a meter deep. Extravagantly ornamented with scrolls, it looks like a fragment of an arch over a colonnade or else a door lintel. Where does it come from? Katie asks M. Jean. It's a remnant of the building's original masonry. During the war, the Nazis learned that a group of Jewish children were being harbored in the villa and leveled it with the occupants inside. Incendiary shells, he says.

Later you read that in March 1944, fighting between the maquisards and the 2nd S.S. Panzer Division raged through the district. Local resistance centered in La Mule Blanche, the unprepossessing collection of buildings six kilometers to the south at the junction of the D704 and N89, the latter serving as the main east-west military supply route. Nowadays a steady stream of civilian traffic whizzes straight past the crossroads. Nothing much to draw the attention besides the restaurant's painted emblem of a coquettishly-winking white mule.

Difficult to imagine the S.S. headquartered just down the road from where you sit. Or, on the far side of those hills, tanks pummeling Château Rastignac into rubble. Like Villa des Courtissous, Rastignac has been rebuilt. But the expropriated paintings – the Degas, Cezannes and Mondrians – never returned. Nor did those deported, the family whose ancestors had lived in the château since the eighteenth century. In all probability, they passed through Lyon, before traveling farther east than you've been this trip. On rail lines that probably passed close by Prague. If not through it.

You write these notes on the broad front terrace overlooking the lawn with its white stone fragment and the swimming pool. The view's cut off from where you sit, but if you got up and went to the rail you would see them – your family's towels hung over the pool's balustrade, drying. Three terrycloth American flags in a row. When Mme. Jacqueline handed them to you in a neatly folded pile, you nearly recoiled, but sensed from her affect that the gesture was motivated by an underlying warmth. Later she said she'd hoped they would make you feel "welcome and at home" in France, as she has in the U.S. Before they restored the villa and started running it as a chambre d'hôte, M. Jean and Mme. Jacqueline visited friends in Fort Meyers every year or so, and often, en route, spent a few days in New York. They've toured Ellis Island and Harlem, took a helicopter ride around lower Manhattan. Right. You've seen on one of

the kitchen walls, amidst a score of family photographs, several framed snapshots of the World Trade Center from a seagull's coign of vantage, taken on a cloudy day.

This morning's sky is very clear, but it will soon become breathlessly hot. La canicule.

Nothing shaking anywhere but the lightest possible breeze through the treetops between the villa and the road. Upward you rise until you hang suspended in the basket of a great white balloon. Your view is split and unified. There's your craft from afar, as though it's a dot on a postcard's blue, yet in the same instant, you can look down from precisely where it flies. That's how you locate yourself – the shadow of balloon and basket passing over the tiled roof of Strasbourg cathedral. Someone waves to you from the platform of the spire. The figure, distinct in the twilight, is too small to identify, but you're pretty sure it's Goethe. Which thought causes you to laugh out loud. The sky above is a dome, and you lean back the better to look up into it. When you pull the balloon's cords, if the wind is right, you can almost guide it in the direction you want to go.

August 7

Forest fires, deadly ones, sweep across southern Europe. And drought up north. For the past several days, from ten-thirty on, like clockwork, blindingly hot.

In the evening, you drive to Montignac and eat on the terrace of one of Gwen's favorite restaurants. From here you can see la Vésère as it flows by, nearly a meter shallower than this time last year.

Mid-meal, out of nowhere, comes a gust of wind, then another, and you notice banks of clouds massing up on the southern horizon. A shower of dry leaves falls and you think: ah, the first breath of autumn, but the gusts persist, grow stronger, and soon greener leaves lie scattered on the flagstones too. You pick one up and plant the stem in your empty water bottle. With the next gust, the leaf whirls in place like a gyroscope.

August 8

You've gotten into the habit of writing early mornings on the front terrace overlooking the pool. This time, Mme. brought you a little tray of coffee, madelines freshly baked, and her own cherry confiture. She approached so silently you saw her

shadow before you heard her step. Perhaps beneath the level of consciousness, you smelled the coffee first.

From time to time, flights of a dozen or more tiny birds wheel overhead. You stretch out full length on the stone bench. Above, the shutters against the white stucco, two shades deeper than the lightening sky. Apart from the birds, cloudless blue. At the topmost edge of your peripheral vision, the villa's pediment and entrance portico. If you roll your eyes downward, beyond the tip of your nose, a spray of black lace formed by the silhouettes of the treetops. The bench is still cool. Two hours before the heat sets in.

Very high above, traversing the oculus of the dome, a bright glint. Reason tells you it's an airliner heading toward Bordeaux, metal skin reflecting the rays. But just now, you credit it as the gesture of some thing moving beyond the world you know.

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Mars is big this summer. And near. The blue and red planets have come within hailing distance of one another. They did in the past too, long before we recorded what we saw, back when our eyes were still stark naked. In another seventy thousand years the orbits will come this close again. But not until then.

The Dullins, a Lyonnais family you met last summer, friends of Janet and Patrick, spend every August in Périgord and invite you to join them for the annual gathering of the Thiviers astronomical club. There'll be a slide lecture, and afterward one and all will have an opportunity to view Mars through a telescope. Thus your Opel takes its place in the great caravan of cars winding its way up to the high field where the club has set up its observatory.

The sun sets. You sit amidst a crowd of several hundred arrayed on the stubbly pasture, watching and listening patiently, raptly even, to the unhurried unfolding of several thousand years of Martian lore and, more recently, scientific study and exploration. It's an engaging presentation, and only when Gwen nudges you and whispers in English how beautiful the moon looks peeking from behind a cloud bank do you realize how much of the voice-over you've understood without trying.

A picture of Orson Welles flashes on the screen surrounded by headlines of the hysteria unleashed by radio adaptation of *The War of the Worlds*. The well of fear must have gone very deep in order for a hoax news broadcast of an invasion from Mars to set off the reaction it did. It hits you suddenly, an obvious thing you'd never considered before: the present moment is not the first time Americans have responded to perceived dangers from within or without by flying into a panic. We have a history of absurd, grotesque misestimations of objective threat.

What could possibly be the origin of this vast water table of collective fear? You sense it has something to do with a buried past in which so many of us were displaced children. You feel stupid not being able to put your finger on it. Out there in the kosmos lies a no-brainer just beyond your grasp. An image comes of your grandfather Meyer riding the tram in Paris. It's 1905 and he'd walked across Europe from Kalish. What was he, nineteen? And then his voice, old as you remember it: "Vat are *you* scared of, Charlie?"

When the show is over, Gwen and the two Dullin daughters disappear into a tent-planetarium set up for the children, and the adults queue up for the telescope. Word passes down the line that the atmospheric conditions tonight are not optimal for viewing Mars. So instead, the instrument has been trained on the moon. You lower your expectations and anticipate the familiar view, just a bit closer-up this time. But as you put your eye to the lens, it literally fills with an astonishingly detailed and luminous terrain, almost painfully bright. As you step down off the platform, you shake your head in wonderment. Right away you feel it. The image has gone deep.

August 10

At the abbey church at Cadoin, Katie draws an exquisite Virgin Mary, one of the few intact sculptures in the area, ravaged as it was by the Hundred Years War and the religious conflicts that came after. The church and cloister, and all the buildings in this area are made of a rich, yellow-ochre sandstone. The sun angles low as you leave, and you remark on the peculiar pattern of conical erosion, like pockmarks, on the lower part of the church's facade. And then it occurs to you that these are more than likely the evidence of a more recent war, one that seems evermore part of a remote and absolute past.

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Unbelievable heat. Taking refuge in the air-conditioned Monoprix in Périgueux, you buy Renaud's latest CD. Now *toute la famille* can listen to "Docteur Renaud, Mister Renard" in compensation for being stuck behind caravans of vacationers head to and from Bordeaux along the N89. Track five, "Manhattan-Kaboul," is the song Katie anticipates while the first four play. It's Renaud's cri de coeur over 9/11 and the invasion of Afghanistan, a duet with the clear-voiced young Belgian singer Axelle Red. Gwen also scores "Chihuahua," a novelty mambo she saw the video of on the hotel TV in Venice. She's pined for the single ever since – though it's all over the airwaves, the pan-European *tube de l'été*. Now she can hear it 24/7. Wonder if her friends back home are listening to it. Hard to imagine it getting any airplay there at all. Such a fearlessly silly, self-mocking, life-affirming song.

August 11

For the past seven mornings you've walked barefoot from your room downstairs to the terrace, laptop under your arm, your soles encountering four distinct textures and temperatures along the way. Each time you sat writing at the stone table, Mme. Jacqueline, also barefoot, snuck up on you with a little tray of coffee, cake and homemade confiture. The two of you have a little game going, of seeing how close she can get before you register she's there. Today the thought organizes itself in your mind that in these moments while you still hold off the tide of the day, you have felt more at peace than at any time these past two years.

Villa des Courtissous is not, in fact, Paradise. The D704 runs only a hundred meters off to your right, and from behind the screen of pines, it is possible to hear the hiss of cars. Occasionally air is fragranced with cow manure drifting over from the farm just the other side of the wall behind the pool. But this place, and the consideration with which you are treated here, has gradually worked to undercut your reflexive state of alarm.

A South African family's been staying for a few days. The mother teaches Afrikaans at a public school near Capetown. In middle age, she still possesses the air of

an Indian princess, and has made a morning ritual of swimming laps. Once you looked up from your iBook as she climbed out and you greeted one another with an exchange of waves. But today you listen to her rhythmic splashes, her crawl, breaststroke, then backstroke, then silence.

August 11. Psychologically you are still half geared up for a repeat of last year's phone call. In the early, deeply somnolent hours of the morning after Katie's birthday on the 12th, the cell chirped on the nightstand and her brother, via satellite, announced that their mother had suffered a stroke. The phone's electronic riff – soon inextricably associated with Peter's evermore despairing calls from Wilma's bedside – eventually triggered so much anxiety in Katie, and nausea in you, that you changed the ring tone to a playful warble called "natural" – something like what the Emperor's nightingale must have sounded like. But however much you assert control over a host of particularities, at the drop of a hat, so much energy still rushes out to counter – what?

The tranquility of this place feels strange, anomalous to a harsher, more saw-toothed, and presumably truer nature of things. It's foolish, risky, to try to claim on behalf of yourself and Katie and Gwen these moments of surcease from the fray, to suspend for howeverlong you may the pervasive sense of another shoe about to drop off a centipede. On top of which, you find it disconcerting to be so well taken care of. Not very Manhattan. Well, not your Manhattan. A voice in you head says: *The three of you deserve this – it's been a rough go.* But another voice answers: *Deserving has nothing to do with it. What came before came before. What is, is. What's next comes. There's no cosmic meritocracy. You're just bloody lucky to be here in this moment. Faster than you can see, or think or imagine, you'll be someplace else.*

August 13

Just like last year, you spent Katie's birthday canoeing down la Vésère – though you make twice as long a trip this time, from Montignac to St. Léon, and the river's notably shallower from the drought. Again, a sumptuous dinner beneath the umbrellas at Le Petit Léon.

The heat kept you up into the early hours, but after you fell asleep on your damp sheets, no phone call awakened you.

August 15

Assumption. Today the Virgin Mary ascends to heaven. And the canicule breaks, at least for now. The *Sud Ouest* puts the number of heat-related deaths at 3,000. On the front page, a picture of crews in Paris raking up enormous quantities of fallen leaves "en plein été." After yesterday's cloud cover and last night's rainstorm, the terrace floor is cool enough to invite you to put on your sandals. But you decline, preferring the smoothness of the stone beneath your feet. Going barefoot outdoors still feels like a luxury. Mme. Jacqueline brings you coffee, madelines and confiture – *comme d'habitude*, she whispers.

You write, cut and paste, and re-write, struggling over the story of the two Wenceslas statues. Why is it so difficult to find clear, descriptive language? Is it because Prague reminds you of your city – the old, still-vital New York City, before it started keeling over like a dead horse? But has it really, or is it just that an accumulation of traumas keep you from seeing it clearly any more? No – that doesn't describe the situation. The fact is that when you look at New York, you see what it could be – the way someone like Woody Guthrie saw the whole country and imagined it fair and just and decent to itself and others. Undriven by greed. *Pastures of plenty* – for all. With our resources and energy, we ought to live in the most humane, enlightened city in the world. A place no one would think of bombing because it would be such a crime against the life force within their own souls. Silly bugger. Here you sit in the middle of La France Profonde and what plays in your mind is the voice of Mavis Staples, scratchy as on your ancient 45:

Help me, come on, somebody help me now – I'll take you there – help me y'all – I'll take you there – I, oh I – I know a place, mmm – ain't nobody cryin' – ain't nobody worried – just take my hand – I know a place – oh let me, let me, let me take you there…

Time passes. When M. Jean appears, it is as a silhouette and it literally dawns on you that the sun has risen over the treetops and your right shoulder is damp with sweat. New York, he tells you, is experiencing a huge blackout, une grand panne d'électricité, along with the much of the eastern third of the country and up into Canada. Fifty million people without power. Which explains why the circuits were busy when Gwen tried to call her friend Daphne last night.

M. Jean feels compelled, on your behalf, to turn on the huge TV in his living room and search for news. It soon becomes apparent that CNN is down – a salt and pepper noise and static roar has taken its place. The closest representation to be found of your *mère patrie* is an episode of "Married With Children" dubbed into French. Al Bundy stares into the camera, utterly confounded. M. Jean continues to channel-surf. Ah, Bloomberg News – in German. Beneath commodity prices, the headlines crawl by: the blackout covers the same area as one that shut down the Niagara-Mohawk power grid in 1965. Not terrorism, says Bush. Right. Al Bundy's face cycles round again, still dumbstruck, then suddenly bursts into delight at some venal epiphany.

You thank M. Jean and walk back out onto the terrace. Here you are, deep, deep in the heart of someplace else. You've actually managed to miss a significant New York event. Is it possible your fate and your city's are not inextricable after all?

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Windows up, AC pumping, you cruise through the desiccated Périgord countryside. Gwen sorts through the CDs, hands you the Beach Boys anthology you bought in the Monoprix. Slide it in and crank it. *And she'll have fun fun fun till her daddy takes the T-Bird away*.

August 16

Last night, with the Virgin safely ascended to heaven, Katie told you she no longer feels like an American. The return to Paris for her will be like a homecoming, she said. A few nights ago she dreamed she was back in New York. Her circumstances were comfortable enough, yet she woke up in a panic. The two of you have shifted positions these last eighteen months. After 9/11 and the bombing of Afghanistan, she dug her heels in while you desperately tried to convince her to consider a move to Europe, however temporary – something you'd been agitating for since long before the planes flew into the towers. Now she's not sure she can stand to go back.

But this summer, the length and breadth of your travels, has shown you clearly what leaving the states would cost – in every way. Beyond all else, you've got a lifetime of practice invested in your language instrument. You've honed, to the highest degree

possible, your capacity to communicate – not least in written words. Just the thought of having to begin from infancy again! *Je suis un écrivain américain…*

And then there are these notes.

August 17

In two days you leave for Paris – *nous duvons partir*. As usual, you began to pack in advance, in part as a way of shifting your mind into a transitional gear. As you slid flyers and keepsakes into the meshed pocket of your valise, you felt the familiar shape of your watch and pulled it out – saw the second hand moving. Reset the hour and date and left it on the desk. When you came back from dinner, it was bang on time.

August 18

Afternoon. M. Jean invites you down to his cave, of which he is unabashedly proud. Nicely vaulted, the cellar seems to have been built before the house was burned. What you don't know about wine would fill volumes. Still, it's an impressive array he's gathered. Lining a ridge on the walls, wooden crate ends branded with impressions of a score of famous vintages. You raise your eyebrows at the sight, and he catches you out, laughs puckishly. He bought the crates at a brocante he says, since he could never afford the wine. Then he gives you a snapshot he took last week of you on the terrace, at work on your laptop, the breakfast tray cleaned of pastries. A silly smile, but there's no denying it, you look happy.

August 19

You leave Villa des Courtissous at seven in the morning to catch your train from Brive to Paris. At the door, Mme. presents you and Katie each with a little brocade sackful of walnuts harvested from the trees on their property. She also gives Gwen a tiny book, not much larger than a postage stamp and with a spine about three sixteenths of an inch thick. On the cover, a brightly colored cubist portrait of young woman, somewhat androgynous. The book is a micro-edition of the *Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man*, published by Reporters Sans Frontieres – all thirty articles compressed into two score ultra-thin pages. On the inside front cover, Mme. has written: *Souvenir de Villa des Courtissous, le 19/8/2003 – Jacky.*

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On the train you open the tiny book and your pocket dictionary and attempt to read Gwen the first article. *Tous les êtres humains naissent libres et égaux en dignité et en droits.…* All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.… *Il sont doués de raison et de conscience et doivent agir les uns envers les autres dans un espirit de fraternité*. They are endowed with reason and conscience, and should act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

But the sun pours warm through the compartment window, and so halting is your translation that, by the time you finish, she's fallen peaceably asleep.

August 20 – Asnières

Two months seemed an oceanic stretch not long ago – now your time has irised down to two handsworth of days. At the presse in the station near your hotel you buy a copy of *Libération*, then make for Le Rallye, just across the square. The lead story: a huge explosion at the UN compound in Baghdad, one that nullifies indefinitely any possible international effort there. Turn the page. Another Hammas leader and several bystanders killed by missiles fired from an Israeli helicopter into a car driving through the streets of Gaza. Tomorrow's paper, or the next day's will, almost certainly, report the suicide bombing of a Jerusalem bus or a Tel Aviv café. Page 3: a would-be conqueror worm tried to gobble up the internet. None of it is really news.

You're running out of clean clothes again, so the three of you walk through the echoing passageway under the tracks to the Courbevoie side and the more cheerful launderette. By mistake you push a button on the washing machine that will cause it to run for nearly an hour. With unexpected time on your hands, you make for the park, situated on a bluff over the river. Below, cars rush along the Quai Maréchal Joffre. Here the highway traces the course of the Seine as it loops northeast and divides to flow around the Île de la Grande Jatte. From this vantage, you can see the tops of the Eiffel and Montparnasse towers over the line of buildings on the opposite bank.

Closer by, at the upper perimeter of the park, flanked by benches and flower beds, stands a stone sculpture of Psyche and Eros. The immortals disport with

authentic abandon and great fineness of gesture and line. Each has lost an arm, those formerly upraised and entwined, but what does it matter? It's a small thing in the face of such passion – *ce n'est pas grave*.

Katie and Gwen sit on a bench and translate their way through a book you picked up in FNAC the other day, a crime-solving game for kids, lavishly illustrated with famous paintings in both authentic and subtly-altered versions. The idea is that a gang of art forgers has called into question the entire collection of a great fictional museum by brashly substituting a series of fakes for the true masterpieces. Each fake has been altered in the style of particular gang member whom the reader must identify in order to solve the mystery and save the museum from disgrace. A plastic magnifying glass attached to a ribbon bound into the book aids the young detective in her task.

Gwen reads aloud in French and it sneaks up on you how much she's learned and how fluid and accurate her phrases sound. You leave the scene of the investigation and stroll in the park, kicking your way through the carpet of dried leaves you read about back in Périgord. No exaggeration. In the countryside, says *Libération*, the canicule has occasioned the earliest harvest since 1893. There'll be a premature vendange too, but the fast-ripened grapes should yield exceptionally good wines.

You make your way along a shaded path perpendicular to the main esplanade, and fall to reading the little plastic signs identifying the trees. As you walk on, you realize that without any fanfare, this modest suburban park comprises an arboretum gathered from afar: Algeria, Vietnam, Brazil – even darkest California. You wind down to the base of the garden where a bed of highly disciplined plantings stretches nearly to the highway. Then you climb the formal staircase back up toward your detective girls and the statue of the trysting principles of love.

On the wall of the landing just below the terrace there's a plaque dedicating the park to General Leclerc. His profile is carved in low relief and he wears a kepi, the visored, cylindrical military hat you associate with de Gaulle and the gendarmerie. Incised beneath the Maréchal's likeness, a pronouncement uttered from Morocco in 1941: "We will not lay down our arms until the tricolor, the beautiful tricolor, flies over the spire of Strasbourg cathedral."

To some modest extent, you understand the spirit of his words. You've been there, Strasbourg that is. You walked up, or rather round and up, the two hundred and ninety steps to the tower. You stuck your hands out and ran your fingertips along the red sandstone *harpes de pierre*, craned over the banister and spotted the most recondite chimera – the beasts and man-beasts the masons carved high up to please no one but themselves. You grasp and then let go, the sense of something kindred that loosely knits across gaps of time and culture in a world where your insignificance shifts for itself among seven billion other insignificances. Where you vie for some sort of brief equilibrium between what you are alive to, and that which you do not – cannot – imagine. Small moments in the groove.

August 24

Sunday, First Day they call it, and you attend Quaker meeting in a basement room on the Rue Vaugirard, the longest street in Paris. One of the elders is a retired professor of American Studies. You leaf through a book of her essays and your eye falls on a quote by her mentor Bernard Vincent:

U.S. diplomacy, economy, education, art, culture, ways of thinking and writing and creating have all, at one time or another, been affected by the temptation of isolation, isolationism, parochialism, self-sufficiency, and other forms of imperviousness to, or ignorance of external, distant foreign influences.

Against the ever-present background of the American quest for identity, this insular and sometimes almost autistic obsession has naturally met, over the years, with various forms of criticism and resistance, both inside and outside the U.S.

Autism, that's a powerful word and it hits you like the heel of a hand against your forehead. *Il a raison*. How and where did we catch it? And what to do now?

August 27

This last night you will spend in town at the Hôtel du Quai Voltaire the better to uncomplicate the trip to the airport tomorrow. So you trundle your luggage out the door and down Rue Sablière, across the plaza to the station and the train that will take you into Gare St-Lazare. But not before an exchange of hugs with M. Claude and Emilia and a snapshot of them standing with Gwen and Katie in front of the hotel. We

take his heart back to New York, proclaims M. Claude. Emilia calls out "À l'année prochaine!" and over your shoulder you echo the phrase.

As the train nears St-Lazare, you try for a photo through the window of a bright red and yellow graffiti tag painted in a coffer of the railway embankment by an artist who uses the nom-de-spray *Cham*. It cheers you up every time you pass it: the fat, rounded letters of the artist's name morphing into a near life-size cartoon camel. Hopefully you got the shot straight on. The proof is in the pudding. You'll see when you develop the film back home.

All three of you take a mid-day nap at the hotel, then in the afternoon, head off to a museum you've never visited before, the Jacquemart André, on Boulevard Haussmann in the 8th Arrondisement near Parc Monceau.

A real Second Empire mansion this place. Extraordinary paintings too: a couple of absolutely wild Giandomenico Tiepolos – huge, half-beautiful, half hideous. Portraits by Hals and Rembrandt, and the latter's tiny masterpiece of Christ at Emmaus. The rush of the presence of what you've only seen in reproduction. And then a strange, unfamiliar Van Dyck: an ancient, wizened man, his face contorted with hate, enacts a terrible, shadowed mutilation upon a plump infant who struggles in the patriarch's iron grasp. A scythe lies to one side at the old man's feet, and at the other, a skull. And then, on second glance it comes to you that the victim is no ordinary child. "Le Temps coupe les ailes de l'Amour" the catalogue reads. Time clipping the wings of love. Ah, now it all makes sense.

Tonight, says *Libération*'s front page, "Mars approche." Less than half the customary distance. Red planet virtually twinned with blue.

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Your room at the Quai Voltaire faces out over the Seine, and on the opposite side stands the Louvre. The sound of cars rushing along the street is so loud, even after midnight, that you close the windows. In near silence, tourist boats glide by, one after another, their floodlights trained upon the facades of buildings along the riverbanks. Before they penetrate your windows, the luminous broadsides strike the trees along the quai, turning their leaves translucent yellow green. Then comes a wash of color that

moves across the ceiling overhead, a chroma so intense you swear you've stored the distillation of it in some deep coffer of your memory. Suddenly exhausted. Almost asleep. Tomorrow when you're fresher, you'll find a way to give sensation words. But you know that game. You'd better write it now.

August 28

In preparation for leaving, you bought your RER tickets to the airport in advance. Today when you reach the turnstiles, a workman, Afro-Français, is repairing one of them. He sizes the three of you up, hauling your baggage, then with a barely perceptible nod toward the open gate, motions you through. You'll use the tickets "l'année prochaine."

The B-line passes by a huge stadium, some astonishingly grim residential cités and industrial suburbs, and delivers you to the spanking new departures terminal at Charles de Gaulle airport. It's designed like one of Boullée's fantasies – an absurdly long barrel vault with mind-boggling perspectives. Newly opened and still unfinished, the place has the air of precocious ruin. Easy to imagine a section of the ceiling collapsed, grass growing around the fissure where light pours in to illuminate a herd of Hubert Robert's wandering cows.

You amble about in search of a coffee and drinks for your girls, and seeing no signs for services, find the snack bar by sheer persistence, located in a kind of basement cum slit-trench, visible only down a narrow escalator. On the ride back up, bearing beverages, the escalator's rumble gates into a murmur that becomes a chant inside your brainpan: Trust your path. This sounds so pat, so stupidly new age coming from wherever it does that you turn at once turn it into a satiric acronym: TYP. Down the vast cavern you walk, in the direction where you last saw Katie and Gwen, sitting with the luggage. Sure, why not? TYP.

Takeoff, more or less on time. The instant the plane levels off, the guy in front of you tilts his chair as far back as it will go. You try to open up your laptop, but the space is too tight, and you can only unfold it half way. But you refuse to be defeated. You angle the computer so the hinge rests on your thighs, as though it was a large, half-opened cockle shell, and reach your hands inside to type, peering obliquely at the screen. You turn to Katie. The noise of the engines has masked her weeping. You

comfort her as best you can. A flash of envy at her rush of emotional freedom. Now it's Gwen's turn, her face buried in the pillow. You reach across Katie's seat to stroke her hair. Close the computer and twist forward to reach the handkerchief in your back pocket.

What are you going to do now, back home? Turbulence over La Manche. Gwen and Katie watch a movie on the little display screens built into the seat backs: a French 18th century costume farce. Afterward comes another movie: Queen Latifa and Steve Martin enacting a tired Hollywood comedy of the races.

Switch off your display. A parade of town names parades across your eyelids: La Bachelerie, La Mule Blanche, Fossemagne (Big Hole). And the sidestreets in Montignac: Chemin d'Araignée (Spider Way) and Impasse au bout de monde (Dead End of the End of the World). In Paris, near Quai Voltaire, the Impasse de deux anges (two angles) and Rue du chat qui pêche (cat that fishes) off the Quai St-Michel. Sudden memory on the tongue of a pastis you drank at a brasserie called Au père tranquille. The chilled-out dad. That must refer to you. The flight attendant is coming round with apéritifs. Atlantic below. Three layers of clouds. Groove through. Brother, you're flying now.

September 6

To Jones Beach seeking saltwater cures for the back-in-New-York blues. Afternoon wanes. You walk along the shore, out toward Robert Moses, then turn to face the sea, letting the water lap over your ankles and calves. A few yards to your left, a young woman, dark-haired, wades out. A wave slaps her thighs, she pauses, then forges on. When she's in waist high, she raises her left arm, and you see the white plaster cast from hand to elbow. A breaker hits her chest, knocks her back a step, but she keeps going, rests her arm on top of her head. She's found her spot and stands there as wave after wave pummel her. The cast must be getting heavy, for she reaches up with her right arm to support it. Now she jumps up to clear a breaker.

There is something wonderful about this woman. You could watch her until the sun goes down. Doing exactly what she wants. Unto herself. Gone in as deep as she can go.

September 15

"They told us when we first got deployed it would be six months – the whole thing. I thought I could handle that. I wasn't aware of my wife's situation [pregnancy] and I thought I could suck it up and drive on, as the soldiers say." So Jory Preston, Specialist, 870th National Guard, told *The New York Times*.

September 19

Hurricane Isabel gives us a miss. Beats the stuffing out of North Carolina and Virginia instead. D.C. shuts down for fear of the wind god. But all NYC gets is a flick of her tail. After a night of rain and gusts, bright sun, warm and windy. And the clouds. Follow one across an expanse of sky and you find yourself tracking with your whole head. And even then its form has transmuted. And why not. This matter hurtling overhead is neither earth nor concrete. What passes is the play of air.

October 5 – Evening

Anna and Stephan's wedding party on a chartered yacht, the Diplomat, circumnavigating Manhattan island. Black tie – a first time for everything. Turn turn turn.

Hang out at the forward end of the cabin with Katie, BJ and Ko, who try to spot landmarks in the twilight, through the rainspattered windows. Neon haze off the superstores of Fort Lee. Under the George-a-da-wash you go.

The Diplomat's an elegant boat, late twenties or early thirties probably – clean lines, warm woodwork. Must've been a swank place to gamble back in the day. Against the bulkhead, a display case filled with models, one of them a battleship. This, according the little plaque beneath it, is "exactly what the Arizona looked like at 8 a.m. on December 7, 1941, just minutes before the attack on Pearl Harbor." Aha, there's a mind-blowing concept for you. When a ship's about to sink, she shrinks!

October 6

Attempt to keep a portion of your French by reading *Micromegas*, wherein Voltaire recommends "il faut bien citer ce qu'on ne comprend point du tout dans la

langue qu'on entend le moins." One must quote what one doesn't understand at all in the language one understands the least.

October 9

Up and went to Gagosian to see the Richard Serra sculptures. Serra had to go to Austria to find a plant that could fabricate the steel to his specifications. In one section of the vast gallery, a flotilla of sharp-ended, wavy, ship-like forms. But the huge maze, *Blind Spot* is the one that takes the cake – what's illusory and impenetrable wrap round eachother inseparably. Not much to say. One simply has to navigate inward, following the course of the too-high stained, spattered, workboot scuffed walls, curving up and around, abruptly shifting direction when one faces no choice, until one reaches the implacable, unremitting center. Not immediately, only when you leave the gallery and walk east, no longer in the grip of the thing, it comes to you: *Blind Spot* is the only expression of form that would make sense where the WTC used to stand. The Bathtub must remain as it is. Build nothing above ground, honor the form of the foundation and the barrier against the tides. *Blind Spot* would go somewhere on that great concrete sub-surface platform. Then you could look down on its strange, crimped spiral shape from above. Or venture below, into that great cellar of the world, wend your way round all these impenetrable walls within walls. See what's happening from within.

October 10 – Early Morning

The wind blowing up Eighth Avenue, heavy, cool and salty, writes a maritime end to Indian Summer.

But it's not so foggy that you can't check out the latest augmentations to the top of the Empire State Building. Ah, the things that go on up there in the dead of night!

Hours after the great colored floodlights that illuminate the summit have been turned off, with the observation deck closed and its hordes of sight-seers sent safely back to terra firma, the welders and their torches take over. Gradually, over the past couple of years, a fantastic array of telecommunications gear has been attached to the main antenna and the superstructure just below it. And where else would it go, given that the Empire State has become, once again, the tallest point around? The result is that, by day, the spire has come to resemble an electronic cactus.

It was Eric B. who alerted you to the lightshow and he was right, it's well worth staying up for. Sparks cascade out and down in chemical arcs of near blinding intensity. One can only imagine that something's gone terribly wrong – a short circuit or worse. But soon the spectacle takes on a kind of pyrotechnic beauty. Empyre State you think. Occasionally, an incandescent burst shows off the whole shebang: brackets, braces, dishes, guywires, weird pods the shape of bass drums, an antenna crown of thorns.

Gazing at it now, you can't help but think that with every bit of techno-crap they stick up there the spire looks goofier, more out-of-control – a mockery of the clearly articulated lines of the structure below. Christ, what are they thinking? Comes a point where you might as well hang up a neon sign: Shoot Here.

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Outside the café, a battered sanitation sweeping truck rumbles and hisses by on its quotidian pass – displacing the dust and refuse that gravitate into the gutters along the avenue. For some reason the name JOHNSTON has been stenciled below the windshield in large black letters. Who is JOHNSTON? The vehicle? The woman of medium build and early middle years who sits stolidly in the cab? Not likely her name since you've several other folks operating this same sweeper.

Steady at the wheel, she negotiates the right onto 21st Street and weaves deftly round an illegally parked car. Glimpsed in profile, the woman's face seems rather carved by the elements than born of mortal clay. Could she be the reincarnation, in female form, of the Great Stone Face, lately crumbled in New Hampshire? Yes, and with big gold hoop earrings this time around!

Now can a traffic cop be far behind? Ah, there he is in his little three-wheeled clown cart, bearing tickets for the malingerers. If you had a kazoo, you'd run out on the street and play a fanfare now.

October 14

They took off their high heels as they left their offices in the trade center. Scores of women, hundreds of them. Took off their shoes and left them behind. Abandoned

their desks while men in far greater numbers stayed behind as the PA public address repeated: *No cause for alarm*. And beneath the field of fireworks? Does the city that has marched too long in its impossible shoes reclaim at last the ground for what can only be a barefoot dance? Something of moonlight. And over east, something of the morning too.

She goes to school by herself now. Your one and only daughter. Slings on her too-heavy backpack. Sometimes you calculate how long it takes the elevator to reach ground, then stand and watch her from your windows facing south. Which corner will she cross at? Twenty-fifth, Twenty-fourth? It all depends on which way the lights are with her. But sooner or later she'll negotiate Eighth Avenue and before her lies broad expanse of Twenty-third Street. Fifty feet or so in from the southeast corner, she'll wait beneath the scaffolding with the other kids and workers for the crosstown bus. You want to run downstairs and reel the years back, carry her on your forearm again. But if you did, even if it were possible, how could she claim the city for herself? How could she take it all in?

Once a year, you can see the sun set from your apartment. On that day, the sun drops not behind, but in the gap between two close-set buildings. You never remember the precise date. But you can sense it in the angle of the sunrise. You couldn't swear to it, but you're pretty sure today's the day.

November 9 – Late Afternoon

Bea's birthday. She'd be 94. And proud of Gwen's artwork, her poetry, and strong, elegant touch on the piano.

Who knows why, but on your way toward Le G., you flash back to once upon a time – got to be at least four years ago – when you went by the café, more or less in the same graying, soon-to-fade light to clear your head and have a coffee before going back to work on *Divided*…. As you approached down the street, you saw a man standing outside staring through the windows in a manner you imagined wistful.

"How long has this place been here?" he asked. You told him and he nodded. He used to live in the neighborhood, remembered the mom and pop store that came before. Where does he live now? "I'm homeless," he said, "I live everywhere."

Standing there, you fell into a conversation and before long he reached into his pocket, took out a small piece of black paper and a tiny scissors and began cutting, pausing every now and then to look up at you. It took a while for you to realize he was forming a miniature portrait, in silhouette. "Contact paper," he responded to your unasked question. When he finished, he asked if you had a piece of paper. You pulled one of the manuscript pages from *Divided…* out of your bag. Carefully he peeled the backing off and adhered your image to the blank side of the page, pressing with his thumb against his palm. Handed it to you. Extraordinary. A fair likeness, and so finely wrought.

"I'd love to give you something for this," you said, "but I've hardly anything on me."

He cocked his head to one side and looked at you squarely, almost accusingly. "What's the matter? Can't you accept a blessing?"

In truth not really. Not in the moment. Just stood there calculating what was in your pocket.

"I can stand you to a cup of coffee."

"Sure," he said. And thus continued the conversation inside, until in an hour or so you went your separate ways.

"You'll talk to anybody," Jack used to say to Bea, half disparaging, half admiring. And he was right. But then the fact was, he'd talk to anyone too.

November 17

Fog but not too cold. Open the window, put on a Cheb Mami CD. Hop on the Nordic Trak. Close your eyes and cross country ski in your living room. Open your eyes when you're close to the end of your workout. What's that? A big chunk missing from a stepped roof down at the WFC. Look harder – nothing amiss – only steam rising off a lower building, the foreground gray blending with the sky beyond. Everywhere across the Lower Manhattan skyline, tops of buildings with bites taken out, restored in the next windshift, then demolished again.

Most days, you relish the view of facing south, the play of clouds over the buildings, particularly when they're scudding east. It's then that a horrible apparition

comes to mind, not of the towers falling, but of the towers looming like threats at a distance. And then you see them crumbling and the nausea comes.

December 12

Dinner at Teddy and Ladan's – always a convivial and fascinating affair. Philippa, an Episcopal priest of a lively air explains the difference between Catholic transubstantiation and Protestant *con*substantiation. For the latter, during the timespan of the communion, the host and wine coexist with the actual body and blood, as in Luther's example of the temporary unity between an iron and the fire that turns it red-hot. What happens to the leftovers then, after the Eucharist is over? Do they return to being so much wine and wafer? Well, in a sense yes, says Philippa. Yet the interesting thing is this: the wine is not just poured down the sink, nor the wafer chucked out with the everyday garbage. Instead they are stored discretely, and disposed of in a special ritual.

December 20 – Le G. – Early Morning

A man you've never seen sits at Table 4. Usually you are that man in the corner spot by the windows, but today another fellow's beaten you to the draw. He's got a roundish open face – head shaved a week or so back, growing out stubble – square black-framed glasses, a wedding band, and what used to be called a downtown air. He chuckles his way through the *New York Post*, and then as he reads the A section of the *Times* he breaks into several protracted bouts of laughter.

Yesterday, over coffee, Eric B. said he might move back to Liverpool. It makes a certain sense. He has a back to move to, complete with a grown daughter and grandchild, possibly a flat in the family's house. It would be an adjustment for Rebecca and Veronica, but Becky's young enough to see it mostly as adventure, and Veronica would be Veronica anywhere.

In early February, Bronwyn's off to Turkey – got a gig teaching English at a university in Istanbul. All the Jacks and Jills seem to be hitting the road. Where would you move to? Will you live out your life here – entailed to you birthplace – unable to wrest yourself from the spot where multitudes flock for a taste of freedom? Your father expatriated to Vermont when he was ten years younger than you are now. But he'd

grown up on the other side of the Hudson, and for him, like all those other millions, New York City was – however ephemerally – El Dorado. Destination, not origin. Like her father, Gwen was born here. Where does her path lead?

The other day you came upon a line in Bloch's *Principle of Hope*. "If the world caves in, I will stand amidst the falling rubble." The wonder is not how the words got on the page, but how they got inside you, long before you read them. It might not help, but still you wish you knew. In what year, on what day, in what precise hour, did you become that "I"?

BUSH OF GHOSTS

January 17, 2004 – February 11, 2005

Something infinite behind everything appeared, which talked with my expectation and moved my desire.

– Thomas Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations*

1 THE THAUMATROPE

2004

January 17 – Early Morning

Cold snap, dry as a bone. Looking south over the rooftops, scores of evaporation sprites leaping off their chimneys.

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This morning, the café is an ice forest. On the windows you face, toward the north and east, a coating of condensation froze overnight into a pattern of exquisite leafy shapes, like ferns from a past geological era. The cold outside must have drawn the heat toward it and the glass intervened. Now you gaze at the crystallized evidence of an unrequited exchange of atmospheres.

A part of you wishes this scrim could be permanent, but even now the sun begins to crest over the roofs of the houses across Ninth Avenue, so it is only a mater of time before droplets form and gravity pulls them into downward-running streams. For the moment though, the ice leaves hang suspended as if the glass itself was host to invisible stalks. And now, come to notice it, the leaf shapes seem to grow outward from spines that look something like rock candy formed along sinuous strings running top to bottom on the panes. It dawns on you that this event and your beholding of it constitute some sort of rare gift. Only the windows near your table have been so endowed. Sit and watch. Betsy brings your coffee. As she turns back to the counter she pauses, stands leaning against the back of the opposite chair. Betsy's new to Le G. – hails from Arkansas. Together you stare at the ice relief, collude in suspending the moment. Don't hardly want to breathe.

The sun does its brave work. Before long, out of the original forest, only two stalks remain. And then it strikes you that you've imagined this frozen world into the past, when it may actually be a creature of an era to come. But certainly, it is manifesting now.

Almost gone. Where the sun strikes most directly, the ice has liquefied, run down, left glass nearly as clear as if it weren't wet at all. In the ever-narrowing hold-out zone, a strange pattern of curving lines, like stems stripped of their leaves, persisting. The forest has turned to fun house. And through its wavy field move the distorted shapes of every passerby. You too, on your way out of here, any minute now.

January 28

Extraordinary coincidences. Yesterday, the day of the Democratic primary in New Hampshire, the most powerful worm yet was launched onto the internet.

February 11 – Early Evening

Gathering for Falencki at Judson Memorial. Shades of Nancy T., but two more different deaths one couldn't imagine. Last December, so the story goes, Falencki was on vacation with his family in the Caribbean, swimming. His wife saw him floating on his back looking blissed-out, and went her own aquatic way. Ten minutes later, she saw him still in the same position and grew alarmed. Massive internal event.

After the circular sharing of words, you hug Jerry and Helena and Falencki's wife Maureen whom you've never until now. Inscribe your name in the book set up for that purpose. On the same table as the book, a card stood up vertically. It reads:

Muddy water,
Let stand
Becomes clear.
– Lao Tse

February 15

Mark and Bruce to dinner. They toast your completion of *Orogene* with Veuve Clicquot. Passing via bubbles across a real threshold. You've never done this with a book before, nor had to – a rewrite so deep you learned its secret name.

February 17 – Le G. – Early Morning

Avid *Times* and *Post* readers with their noses buried in the papers, like dogs trying to figure out who pissed there.

February 21 – Early Morning

Up betimes and by subway to the Alliance Française to try to jam some lingo into your ever-fewer available slots. Ascending the grand escalator at Fifth Avenue, a voice reverberates off the tiles, familiar after lo these many years. It's the station's tutelary deity, a man as rhetorically gifted as he is stark mad, holding forth on the landing above.

"Real men don't pay child support!" This in his authoritative, preacher's cadence. "Oh you, you're a real man," his tone subtly sliding toward mockery. Dramatic pause. "Baby maker!" Outrage – then a lightning switch of personas into high and wheedling. "I ain't never seen you *or* the kid before…"

• • •

Two hours later and you're headed home the way you came, your head filled with conditional verbs that seem to exhale out as vapor every time you breathe. This time he's leaning against the wall, halfway down the stairs just below street level, bringing another rant to its crescendo while his eyes search out another pair to batten on. *C'est un vif-argent* – a real live wire. In an instant, you're below him, round the bend and out of view. You've missed the ramp-up but still you hear its culmination, delivered in the steely key of a high inquisitor: "Now – tell me all you know about… *blood – sucking – lesbians!*"

He owns this station, every inch of it: platforms, escalators, mezzanine, staircases, *touts compris!*

March 2

Off goes *Orogene* to Gloria in its bright orange box, specially purchased for the occasion, zinging with optimism. Pure formality this. She'll have no more idea what to do with this novel than if you presented her with an ostrich. In these times and circumstances, who would?

March 3

Pedro Pietri died today. At sixty.

do not dream
if you want your dreams to come true
if you want
to feel very rich
look at your hands
that is where
the definition of magic is located

• • •

Katie's latest painting, a reclining nude, done last night in a matter of three hours now hangs on the wall facing south, over your bed. The modeling of woman's thighs, breasts, upper arms, and most of all her stomach speak a direct, almost aggressive language of volumes. Yet her eyes stare at and past you, a gaze so internal that yours must compensate by reaching out to her. Sketched in behind the figure, a low chest of drawers with a cluster of small objects atop it, and further back still, a wash of blue.

You hung the painting where it seemed to want to go, between your two bedroom windows – one about four feet to its right, the other to the left on the perpendicular wall. In this afternoon's light, when you face the picture straight on, you've a powerful sensation of looking not at a surface, but through another portal. The woman appears to float over the street outside, while the bureau and the objects on it turn to elements on a distant skyline. You can come forward, touch the canvass and feel its give and weave. Shift it to one side and press your palm against the solid wall.

But step back to where the windows come into your peripheral field, and the edges of the painting turn to mullions. Your mind will not give actuality the ghost of a chance.

March 4

In the subway, a poster for the "Airtrain," joint project of the MTA and the Port Authority linking subways and busses with a monorail to JFK and Newark airports. The logo superimposes a jetliner's wingspan and fuselage over a section of cross-tied railroad track. Clunky, uninspired, but effective enough. But oh how this image would stick in Austin Tobin's craw were he alive today. Emperor of the Port Authority, Tobin built bridges and tunnels for a great automotive future that held no brief with any sort of choo-choo. But now the roads no longer travel well. The arteries are too jammed up. And so, however modestly, we're back on track.

March 18 – Late Morning

Gloria on the phone, her voice fatalistic. *Well, you've perfected the novel, but there's nothing I can do with it.* You feel the pull of continents separating, each to your own worlds again, the sinking of the land bridge across the isthmus. *You know what kind of market this is,* she says. *Especially for fiction*. And indeed you do. You wish one another well and ring off. That's it. You're a free agent. Agent-free.

For a moment you feel guilty for having presented her with, and trying to foist off onto the world, another confounding book. But the problem isn't really the book. If marketed with any intelligence it would find more than enough readers to justify its publication. It's the nature of the industry, like so many others, propelled on one hand by greed, and fear on the other – the malaise trickling down from boardrooms to editors who'd rather be hung for a lamb than a sheep.

And now comes something you never thought you'd do. Put it on the shelf. Get back to these notes. One day, who knows, perhaps the veil of stupidity will lift long enough for *Orogene* to march out into the light of print. Or the absurdity of everyday life will make it read like reportage. Until then, it's living in an orange box, where it can only ripen.

March 24

Phone Frank to check on how he's doing and apologize for not making it down to see him in a month of Sundays. *Not running like I used to* – a line he's used for a good ten years now. Then he waxes choleric about Bush and his cabal. Just wants to live long enough to see the bastards thrown out of office – his voice full of vigor. Jesus, just listening to the news for ten minutes makes you ill, yet somehow this carnival of horrors seems to invigorate him. Well bless his heart – whatever keeps him going. And then he's onto a story about being a kid in Brooklyn, and seeing the first police cars – a brand new fleet of Chevys – their doors all painted with a big initial PD. Naturally he assumed that stood for Paddy Diamond, the local Democratic boss, because, hey, who owned the cops? Some things are just common sense. Looked at straight on.

Next month when the Queen Mary 2 arrives after its first cross-Atlantic run, the captain on the bridge will stand at eye level with the Statue of Liberty. Once upon a time in the fifties, you watched as the original Cunard sister ships – Elizabeth with two funnels, Mary with three – steamed past one another in the harbor attended by the celebratory spraying of a retinue of fire boats.

A few years later came the Verrazano Narrows bridge across the Narrows. At the time the span seemed to stretch nearly across the horizon and soar unimaginably high. But your notion of scale has changed since then, and so has the built world – to the point where, at high tide the new Mary's funnel will clear the undergirding of the bridge by only thirteen feet. Ah, Bartleby. Ah, engineering. It's all in the tolerances.

March 25

Damn, you never made it out to Scalamandré, kept vowing to book a tour some day and now it's too late, they've closed up shop. Moved from Long Island City to a new plant in South Carolina. Gone by the wayside, fifty highly-skilled weavers, two dozen other workers and twenty Jacquard looms – the most astonishing machines. You fell in love with these looms, the idea of them anyway, when you were teaching Media, Technology and Cultural Change at Hunter College back in the now-dim nineties. Rooting through the antecedents of the digiterati, you encountered Jacques Vaucanson, divine madman of the Age of Reason, who invented not only an automaton duck and flute player, but also, around 1745, a loom that used a system of hand-punched cards to control warp patterns and potentially repeat them ad infinitum.

Fiftysomething years later, at the opening of the nineteenth century, Joseph Marie Jacquard, a Lyon silk manufacturer, improved Vaucanson's prototype and adapted it for widespread use. A portrait of Jacquard woven in silk, and created via a daisychain of ten thousand punch cards now hangs in the Victoria and Albert Museum. By 1812, thousands of Jacquard's looms were operating in French textile centers, producing extraordinary volumes of fabric and foreshadowing the age of industrial cybernetics.

Fast forward to 1923 when Franco Scalamandré, fleeing Fascism in Italy arrived on the shore of the New World and settled in Paterson, NJ, then the heart of the American silk industry. There, according to family legend, by virtue of a happy accident, he spotted a truckload of looms headed for the dump and offered the driver $10 for the lot. The deal being struck, out of the cab jumped the truck's passenger, a master weaver. Kismet. In 1929, Scalamandré moved a major part of his operation to a red brick factory in Long Island City. Since then, three generations of weavers have produced fabrics, tassels and trimmings to decorate the likes of Hearst's San Simeon, the Metropolitan Opera, the Oval Office and Red Room, and scores of garden-variety mansions from Newport to Vizcaya. Today's buyers pony up $300 plus per yard for a sumptuous damask. But the move south, and the shift to computerized production was prompted, so the company says, by price pressures from abroad. Same old mantra, heard rumbling round the Western world.

Though Scalamandré's looms were built by a Massachusetts company circa 1900, except for the changes in motive power – first water and animals, then steam and electricity – their method of weaving is essentially the same as the original Jacquards. Six have been donated to the future Smithsonian National Museum of Industrial History to be located, appropriately, in Bethlehem, PA. All the other looms will be scrapped, save one, for display in the new Scalamandré factory's lobby. That'll learn you for not getting your ass on the subway when you had the chance. Be worth researching if there are any working Jacquards left in France.

March 26

Fragment of a dream. Somewhere uptown on a posh cross street, you carried on a delightful communication via hand gestures and silent vocalizing with a young man,

a clerk, through the oval window of A La Vielle Russie. He on the inside, you on the street, though in dream-memory you might have been inside the shop earlier.

You turned to go, then thought of a last question and walked back again. *Are you a branch of the same shop down the street?* you signed to him. *Yes,* he nodded vigorously, and in the dream you imagined with great clarity the northeast corner of 58th Street & Fifth Avenue, the site of the actual La Vielle Russie. You looked down and there, inset in the sidewalk cement, manhole-sized in gleaming brass, the logo of the Sherry Netherland hotel, its SN capital letters nestled in an arc of laurel. Go figure. Two places on the same block that always seemed so far beyond your realm of access that they scarcely registered in your conscious mind – no matter how many times you passed outside. But the dream city, powerful creature that it is, accepts no restrictions on its topography.

March 27 – Fifth Avenue & 53rd Street Subway Stop – Morning

Against the wall at the top of the escalator, the brilliant madman you've heard haranguing the station all these years lies on his side, fully clothed, hands pillowing his head. Sleeping, you can't but think, like a baby.

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Post meridian: wherever you go in the city it feels as though you sit on a great fat bull's eye. Vast Saturday crowds at Canal and Broadway and again, later, along Spring Street. Temperate weather.

At Enchanted Forest on Mercer Street you find a package of facsimile mid-19th century French *Thaumatropie* discs. An illusion game. You pull strings and the little discs spins, a brightly-colored chromolithographed scene on one side, a stark silhouette, black against white on the other. When you've got them going fast enough, the two images blend into one another – almost. Rather they hover in a kind of dynamic suspension, their forced juxtaposition calling out their essential irreconcilability: a kitchen maid working her churn flickers together with a flock of sheep on a hillside. Another shows a long perspective of a boy and dog on a street leading out into the

countryside while another boy watches from a balcony. The only one that feels "possible" projects a puppet into a magic lantern show.

From a coffer on the counter, Gwen chooses twenty glass beads for a dollar. Katie buys a strange and lovely handmade wire basket, with the head, legs and tail of a horse. A miniature oriental carpet, no more than four inches by six, and *woven in Istanbul* draws your eye and touch.

When you get home and bring the carpet into your room, it dawns on you that you need another tchotchke like a hole in the head. But then you spot the pocket compass you bought in Madrid, replica of a medieval one. On your desk by the lamp, always showing you where north is. The proportions of the two rectangles are perfect. Now the compass sits squarely, perfect on the medallion of its carpet. Will it fly?

March 28

Early this Sunday morning the most amazing sensation. Your dreams were washing you ashore. One last wave and then you lay on solid ground. Awake.

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Midday. Schlepping two bags of groceries home across 25th Street from Whole Foods – Whole Paycheck as they call it in Texas – you hear the alarm. It's a Corolla CE, howling, uncomforted. As you pass, the ramping electronic blares modulate into an insistent question: *WhyWhyWhyWhyWhyWhy?* Utterance without breath.

• • •

Oh to see a bit of tone around the edges of the white noise.

March 29

There's a realization for you: you used to range over the whole of your city. Every borough and all parts of Manhattan. Now you're borderline agoraphobic. Partly it's the density of the crowds you encounter nearly everywhere, but it also has something to do with the quality of the mass experience. If you stay away from home

too long, you get so tired you have to sleep, as though recuperating from a long journey.

And the energy out there, its fluctuations, its wild swings from civility to on-the-edge to over the top. Is it you that's changed, congealing into middle-aged? Or is it a response to external sensations, or both? Are your own states of mind and body a kind of litmus test for the moods and sub-moods of the city? Have you deeply internalized its emotional fluctuations after all these years like those of an immensely complex parent? Or are you a canary in a mine? If the latter, how come you don't have sense enough to fly the coop?

March 30 – Kid's Gap, Washington Street & Sixth Avenue – Early afternoon

You and Katie duck in to try and replace, on sale, Gwen's lost, lamented hooded sweatshirt. Amidst the hubbub of low-intensity commerce, a zaftig salesclerk, early twenties, with gorgeous mocha skin, attempts to start a conversation with a blond, square-faced little white kid, about six years old, whose baby brother reclines, passed out, in the stroller pushed by their black care-giver.

"How ya doin'" asks the salesclerk.

Silence. He eyelocks her, sets his jaw.

"You alright?" Raising her eyebrows, still upbeat.

Niente, nada, garnicht. Just those bluegreen eyes staring up at, or is it past her?

An odd suspicion comes over you that perhaps this child knows he is not alright – knows too in some deeper, more global way that things are not alright. You'd like to be projecting. But there's something cold, and old, in those eyes. You'd give a lot to hear his mind speak.

March 31

Iraqi guerrillas blow up an American vehicle. The *Times* online shows a frontal shot of the burned-out carcass, with as many insurgents as will fit standing triumphantly upon its roof. Subdued colors – the now-familiar ochre tones of media repetition. Does the Sunni Triangle really look like that? One man, very tall and thin holds a long stick diagonally – his gesture evokes a ferryman upon his raft. Is he crossing a river, or poling up or down one? Either way, a sense of flow.

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Cousin Danny died last night. What a story.

April 1

Danny's funeral at Sinai Chapel in deepest Queens.

Called upon, you read Neruda: *If I die, survive me with such sheer force…*

Then the 23rd Psalm rumbles through the room like a subway.

April 2

A dream from when you were napping yesterday after the funeral: you approach a long, rectangular, low-rise building, one high storey, set in gently rolling countryside. It's up a bit off the ground and you have to ascend some Greek temple-like steps to get to the doorway. A common enough double door, modern, institutional, glass in aluminum frames. Across the doorway and all round the inside of the building hang diaphanous white curtains. You try the left hand door, but it's locked. You can even see the bolt in place in the crack between the doors. You move sideways and find yourself inside the structure with the curtains at your back. Indeed there are no walls.

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Another dream last night: a uniformed policeman, perhaps a woman, is sent with orders to arrest you on a plainly false charge. But she seems open to your arguing the point. The dream ends inconclusively. You have not entirely convinced her, she remains skeptical, but appears now to question the premise of her mission. She leaves to report to her findings at the station house and get further instructions.

April 4

Spring forward, the sun sets as disconcertingly late, but no complaints. Everything shifts toward summer, except the temperature.

At ten p.m. you notice outside your bedroom window a string of lights in the dark sky, jetliners overflying Manhattan, making their approaches to Kennedy – some way up there, others roaring too bloody low for comfort, as though their flight patterns have been generated by a randomizing machine that doesn't seem to recognize there's a city down here.

Will they hit New York again? And whom is they? In the depths of many a mind, where the riverbottom's really silty, where if you were a ferryman, the pole would get stuck, there's the latent consciousness that the spread between Bin Laden and Bush isn't so very wide. No greater than between the Democrats and Republicans. So who and what will whack us? Whatever comes, it'll likely not take the form of traumas past. Nor fulfill an anticipated horror conjured out of fear and shaped by our desire for control. It will be whatever comes.

April 9 – Woods Hole, MA

Tian Kan moves on the deck of BJ's house. Mid-morning. Hands cold, body warm. An incredible ruckus of birds. Then they all fall silent except one who calls: *maybe, maybe, maybe*…. Finish with a lung qi gong for that racketing cough.

On your early trip into the bakery in town, you bought Katie a *Times* which lies on the low table in the living room. Front page divided up the middle by big twin stories. On the right, Condoleezza Rice appears before the 9/11 commission. All parties, the headline reports, are "sticking to script." On the left, Iraq continues to insurge against the occupation. The latest: a number of Japanese civilians taken captive by the guerillas. Ever more obvious that the Coalition has, as Melinda would put it in her Aussie vernacular, "lost the plot."

April 10

Tian Kan on the deck. Midday. Again, great discourse among the birds. When they stop, they go mute in unison and you hear rustlings among the leaves in the woods below and to your left. How could that awkward noise be anything but a fellow human? Nothing materializes. You've left your glasses folded on the railing, so the view is impressionistic at best. Severe clear blue sky above. Sound of a small plane, it too unseen. Then to your right, more rustling. You try to keep with your form, "drill

and chop" though it feels like dangerous are converging on you. Eventually, only the noise at your right. You arrive at the final and most combative exercise, "rocking horse with three roots." Persistent, loud and large, the sounds continue. Must be a dog. You've finished now and retrieve your glasses. There it is, a squirrel rooting in the leaves, a good sized one, filled with the energy of spring. One day different and the shift is palpable. One season's past, the new one's moved into its place.

April 11 – Early Morning

A white birch stands about thirty yards off, directly in front of your extended arm as your other arm sweeps across in a horizontal chop. You press your palms toward it in the shoulder roll. Grasp and release it when you drill and chop. For the rest of your exercises, you keep your eye focused on a dark crescent-shape on the trunk near where the leftmost of its three main branches splits off. Are you going crazy or has the tree had become your Tian Kan partner? Are you playing with one another's energies? Truth to tell, at the moment, you feel markedly less crazy than you have these past two and a half years.

When you do your upward arm spirals you loose sight of your focal point for an instant, the view blocked by the rising motion of your own limbs. Twelve sets. You alternate the leading arm for a count of twenty four. Each time the dark spot vanishes, a flash of alarm. Now this is not what infants experience. They delight in watching objects disappear only to reappear again. To them, it's the most amusing thing in the world. If, say, at the café, you lower your head behind your newspaper and then pop it up again, the baby watching you will chortle with delight no matter how many times the trick's repeated. You'll get tired of the game far sooner than the baby will.

You know the dark spot is there. It returns the moment you lower your arms. So what's the problem?

April 15 – Early Morning

They beat you by a hair. A gaggle of six Episcopalians, three couples by the look of it, ranging from middle aged to elderly, take over not just the table you think of as yours, but the whole southeast corner of Le Gamin. You made it in the door at 8:04, before the gates were pushed all the way back and the chairs taken down off the rear

tables. But the early birds were already at work, prevailing upon Marcos and Adi to push four tables together to form a grand square.

You shift your person and your expectations to your second favorite position: the banquette opposite the door, but at a slight diagonal to it. A different angle from which to observe the passing scene. Mario, the cook arrives, the *Times* and *Post* under his arm. Does a classic double take at the sight of the colonization, smiles and shrugs when he spots you in your shadowed outpost in the corner.

In comes the handsome young Irishman who works for Jumper the plumber. He pumps away at the coffee urn, adds milk and three sugars, and is off in a shot. Early job. He's the one who seems to do most of the running about now that Carl Jumper has all but retired. It's rare nowadays to see the old man in work clothes. But he remains a local presence, stepping through the doorway each morning for a coffee to go, tall and nattily dressed, skinny as a beanpole – or a pipe now that you think about it. He lingers, and when he departs, offers the room a kind of gallant salute, having exchanged greetings with the kitchen staff and received kisses from the waitresses. You know very little about Carl, other than that he carries himself, in his own more knife-edged way, with the Maurice Chevalier-like air of a man who, age notwithstanding, savors it all. At one time or another, he's worked in nearly every building in the neighborhood and when a job, say in the basement of a hundred-odd year old townhouse, gets too knotty for the new fellows, he'll come in to untangle the skein of pipes. He knows what what's what, and remembers when it was done, possesses a vast internal topographic map of Chelsea valves and joints

The Episcopalians, the men at any rate, discuss logistics – their exit strategy from New York. "There's a five forty-one from Penn Station," says the man in the chronological center. "Five-forty one," echoes the eldest. "From Penn Station," youngest man affirms. Finally they decamp, the tables heaped with detritus are bussed, maneuvered back into position, the energy of the room subsides.

A judgment call now whether it's worth grabbing Table 4 for the few minutes remaining before you head home. Why not? Strike east to catch the sun. Move your computer and bag over to the accustomed spot. When you turn round to make a second trip for your coffee and water, Marcos is already bringing them over.

Turn in your seat to look down Ninth Avenue. No further pilgrim flocks heading this way from the Seminary. Only a woman far down the block pushing a stroller with a little dog tethered to it. Still, some sort of convocation – post Easter? – must be afoot at General Theological. Yesterday as you sat talking with Katie and Eric B., a churchman of considerable bearing made the northeast corner of Le G. his temporary cathedra. There he sat, attended by a pair of fellows in business suits both of whom, under other circumstances, would have ranked as alpha males in their own rights. But the cleric seemed to fill up the room all by himself, his presence ramped still higher by the golden cross worn round his neck, flashing out against his black shirtfront. In the instant you concluded that he had to be a bishop.

Behind him and to his right, on the counter near the cash register, stood a tall glass vase from which sprang a profusion of flowers. One tulip in particular, yellow, red and fiery orange, seemed to sweep its long stem down to where, from your angle, the petals nearly touched his shoulder. Nature itself making advances toward the divine?

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"Who was that just passed?" asked the emissary from another country.

"Why that was the King!"

"And who were those men on horseback surrounding him?"

"That was the King's cavalcade."

"Are they holding him hostage?"

"No they are all his sworn men – his bodyguards!"

"Well," said the visitor, "The King must be a very weak and fearful fellow indeed to have to travel in the company of so many armed men."

April 16 – Le G.

Early coffee with Eduardo and Thomas. Eduardo's daughter lives a block from Atocha station and was jolted awake in her bed by the bomb going off. In the pandemonium she snuck through the security cordon to offer aid. Several people died in her arms, Eduardo says. But she is strong, so she hasn't broken down.

The worst of it for her was the ringing of the corpses' cell phones as they were carried away. It's clear that Eduardo is proud of his daughter, admires her intelligence, her radicalism, stoicism. You tell him, though it flies in the face of Spanish reserve, that he should feel free to give her your phone number, just in case she wants to talk.

By the time T. and E. leave, the café is filling up fast, getting noisy, but you linger a few minutes to collect your thoughts. How to say it in so many words? That the terrible crime in Madrid comes compounded with a domestic political outrage: the Republican National Convention has been scheduled to be held here in early September. This will mark a new stage in the ripening of the trauma of 9/11 2001, and perhaps its perfection. The sound of the other shoe – is there only one? – dropping. The unspeakable aftershock – no a fraternal twin event, born three years later. Mixed with your disgust is a certain admiration for the cabal that seized this opportunity to hogtie your city once it was knocked flat on its face. You would do the same thing if you were them – if the only human impulse left in you was to reflexively display your triumph over a conquered republic.

How to say – to whomever may read this – that the force bearing down on New York is not a benign one? That our city soul was not broken by radical Islamicists. It's been ground down by the powers to which it is vulnerable: the authoritarian, messianic, viciously anti-urban impulses of the country to which it has been subsumed.

And the awful reality of it is that in order for this legion of corporate militarists to descend upon us, more than the towers had to fall first. We had to make ourselves an abject and therefore indefensible city. To practice harming ourselves – our best self-interests – we elected mayors who would successively undermine any sense of our integrity as a plural culture: Koch, lickspittle to the landlords, that Quisling Dinkins, then Giuliani, our millennial Peter Stuyvesant. For political generations, we spiced the inequities we applauded or endured or tolerated, with cynicism. Then bring on Bloomberg, not so much a mayor as a CEO – a man who accumulated billions by monopolizing information – or, put another way, making millions stupider. Bring on the Convention Center and Stadium. Do what you want, build what you want, tear down anything, shuffle it round as you like, no one real lives here any more. Not in Manhattan leastwise.

To get to this point, we had first to learn to not take care of our own, to feed the greedy among us first and fattest, to shovel privilege toward the privileged badabing badaboom. We had to practice long and hard to end up here – finally a colony of an America that no longer fights wars of national interest, or even ideology, but in order to play out the great pyramid game a corporate quarter longer, or until China takes over for real and shows us how to do capitalism the right way, minus all that Protestant cant about charity for the deserving poor.

We had to sell ourselves down the river. We had go a step beyond what any external enemy could visit on us. We had to annihilate our own city soul.

You see it everywhere in Manhattan, a Bombay of the rich. Or of those simply awash in venality whatever their credit limits, or lack thereof.

Today's *Daily News* front page: a full cover photo of the Donald standing next to the winner of the latest reality-based spectacle – an event to be celebrated by one and all. And who has Trump chosen as his "apprentice"? *Bien sur*, a white guy. But it really doesn't matter. Any race or gender will do, as long as they demonstrate that fine titration of greed and brutality. Don't be fooled by the relative lack of blood in the streets: a war's gone on here and we lost.

April 18 – Le G. – Early Morning

DEAD AGAIN: *New York Post* headline on the Israeli assassination of Abdel Asiz Rantisi. Every day, the war gets holier. *BushLaden, BushLaden, what will you do now?*

April 19 – Le G. – Early Morning

Sound of the chopper that woke you up still beating in your head. Part of what made its presence so creepy was that its sound seemed to come from everywhere. There it hung, parked, nearly stationary, over a spot you judged to be around 30th Street and Madison Avenue. No clue why. This happens evermore frequently – one or more helicopters maintaining their positions over fixed spots for extended periods of time. Various hours of the day or evening. No predicting it, or them. Might be traffic or weather, some "law enforcement" or "security" function – who can tell?

Yesterday a small chopper buzzed your building, flew diagonally overhead bearing southeast, cleared the water tower by maybe fifty feet.

Once there was a time you loved helicopters, thought them magical, and fun to draw. When you first moved into your apartment on the twentieth floor, one of the wonders of the view from your bedroom window was the whirlybirds taking off and landing on the helipad atop the Port Authority building nine blocks to the south. You were twelve, but even before then you'd been smitten by the little, insect-like 'copters with the bubble cockpits – the ones that dusted crops, or, fitted out with pontoons, performed rescues on the high seas. One of that make, a Bell-47D1, hung from the ceiling beneath the escalator of the old MoMA. Later you learned it was designed by Arthur Young, a poet, painter and philosopher, who had a pretty good run of it – lived from 1905 until the year you started these notes. The 47D1 weighed 1,380 pounds, made ninety-two mph in a tailwind and hovered at 10,000 feet. Your teenage idea of the perfect machine. Perfect in the way you found Nefertiti's bust at an even younger age, maybe three, your first time at the Met. Though you could never have said so at the time, she struck you as the perfect woman, particular unto herself, yet distilling all womankind.

Whatever became of the little white plaster Nefertiti your father bought you? Couldn't have been too expensive, but a first rate reproduction nonetheless, modeled with great delicacy. Green felt on the bottom of the base, one corner chipped slightly. What became of her?

Awful to think she might have been vortexed into the maelstrom of your Life Before Katie. Probably not. Even then, in the days of your greatest anomie, you wouldn't have been indifferent to her fate. You've a trace memory of seeing her on one of the bookshelves in Jack's living room up in Vermont. Better there than nowhere. Ask brother David next time you speak to him. It would be lovely to pass her on to Gwen.

Last night when you kissed Gwen goodnight she said how happy she was to feel so safe. That nothing could get to her there in her bed. Now that's a state of being to treasure. What you hoped at the time, as you turned off the light, distilled all your hopes: that by the glow of the nightlight Meyer made for you, her sleep would be sound, that the membrane would hold through one more cycle from dark to light.

Mario walks into the café bearing the *Post* and *Times* under his arm. Do you want to see the paper? You're tempted. On the front page of the *Times*, a Blackwater

chopper circles over Baghdad. A mercenary stands outside the bubble, feet planted on the rungs of the landing skid. He's vigilant, scanning below. Sixteen in the clip and one in the hole.

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Midmorning run up Third Avenue to the Queens Midtown Tunnel. Return the Taurus to Sea Cliff. Zoom past a double-parked van, its side painted with a silhouetted skyline. Survival of the World Trade Center towers as twin cutaway spaces between the legs of the M in a MARTINEZ – big block lettering, white on black. But Martínez-what? You're moving too fast to see. Martínez Floor Covering? Carpeting? Plumbing? Heating and Air Conditioning? Electrician? *¿Quien Sabe?*

April 21

Some mornings you get to Gamin a few minutes before it's officially open. The gates are unlocked, but drawn shut and you pull them aside, close them behind you and open the door. If the chairs are still up on the tables, you help the waitstaff take them down.

Yesterday, when you went to remove the chairs the from Table 4, you noticed a little figurine standing on the tabletop grouped together with the sugar bowl and salt and pepper shakers. Odd man out among these utilitarian objects, his presence for an instant played a trick of scale – transformed the chairlegs into pillars the great canopy of wicker stretched above him. Of course when you sat down you picked him up. About three quarters of an inch taller than the salt shaker. Wooden probably, beneath the paint. He's a little banged up, lost his head once and had it glued back on pretty straight. Purple robes, with a teal green cloak, gold hat – square-shaped with a round knob on top, bracelets, shoes. And he bears a golden jar, his hands clasped round its base. Who is the mystery king? Show him to Mario who reckons he's Balthazar, because of the long white beard. But is Balthazar's gift gold, myrrh or frankincense? Mario doesn't remember. Dimly, you recall that Balthazar is usually depicted as quite black, and without a beard. This fellow's skin is painted bandaid pink. Melchior?

The Magi with no name kept you company through your morning writing. Figuring he had to belong to somebody who might return to look for him, you left the king standing on the sill to the right of the table, next to the oversized pot of the unhappy little plant. And it is here he remains this morning. No one's claimed him. Pick him up again. Features rendered with a fine brush, but in haste – his eyes seem to roll upward. The painter may have intended to convey a devotional expression, but the bright, persimmon daub of a mouth makes him look more piqued than solemn. Still, his bearing is dignified as he walks forward – right foot extending out from under his cloak – and his air is of a man determined to go on. Even separated from his procession. Unguided by any star.

When you pick up the *Times* your eye falls on article about the enduring popularity of amnesia as a theme in American movies. Rare forms of amnesia that hardly ever occur in real life. You wonder if this king has lost his memory. Does he know what he's carrying and why? Remind me, Jesus, where do I find my focus here?

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Gwen's inherited a combination of your teeth and Katie's. Oy vay. Off to the dentist to discuss braces. But first pick her up at her school where the guard, uniformed like a policeman is trying to disperse a knot of recalcitrant kids from the corner of Second Avenue and 21st Street.

"Cross over! Cross over!" he shouts, moving bodily in on them. "Let's go! Let's go! What you looking at? I'm not a statue!"

April 22 – Early Morning

You watch out your bedroom window for the helicopter vanguard, then comes the fireboat – a movable fountain up the Hudson. Four beats later, you see the tip of her prow and in an instant she has filled the whole visible U of river between the Port Authority Building and the Penn South highrise just to your south.

Her superstructure's immense, not beautiful, and so tall it obscures the Holland Tunnel ventilation tower and even the Jersey side high-rises of Newport behind her.

Through your binoculars you can make out silhouettes of onlookers standing on the roofs of lower buildings on this side of the river.

You called out to Gwen and Katie when you first spotted the arc of spray from the approaching fireboat. But they'd already heard the horn blasts, two of them. Not like the standard foggy moans, these came as deep tonal rumblings that shook the window screens like drumsnares. Gwen perches on your bed for the high angle view, and Katie stands to your right. The QM2 moves fast – in a long instant her aft has vanished behind the building to the right, and then, like a bookend, another fireboat and chopper complete the procession. Gwen will be a little late to school, but this isn't every day, is it?

• • •

A year ago exactly, the three of you were headed for Costa Rica. At Kennedy, you picked up a copy of the *Times* and flipped directly to the last page of the A-section to see they'd run Wolfgang's op-ed piece. Bingo: "The Loneliest Victors," and beneath the title, his byline. Something startling about the expected happening just where and when it is supposed to. A surge of excitement for his moment in the sun, and then an undertow of jealousy. It will be a cold day in July that the *Times* prints a syllable of yours. There ought to be a word for what you've done – "Timesacide" perhaps, though that sounds awkward – by taking them to task so frontally, however small your voice. Now and again, you even indulge the morbid speculation that when you die, they'll either run no obit at all, or do one of the dismissive hatchet-jobs with which they brush *those who won't play* into the cultural dustheap. But then, though the odds are against it, you just might outlive the *Times*.

But as you stood there reading Wolfgang's essay, felt his measured accumulation of historical material, appreciated its nuances – all the more admirable for a person writing in an adopted language – the toxic sense subsided, transformed into pride in having him for a friend and you bathed, for a moment, in his brilliance.

The piece was pure Wolfgang in that he used a charged image to trigger his dropping of a social plumbline – in this case a widely-reproduced photograph of several high American military commanders seated at a rococo table in one of Saddam's

captured palaces. Wolfgang traced the surrender table as a shifting signifier of power relations, and the conditions of surrender as a harbinger of things to come. When Talleyrand appeared before the Congress of Vienna in 1815, he did so as the representative of a defeated nation, yet was treated as an equal. In 1918, no such politesse obtained. At a table in the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles the Germans signed a treaty they regarded as a *diktat* rather than the terms of an honorable peace.

"Still," Wolfgang wrote, "even in 1945, the presence of the vanquished at the surrender ceremony was regarded as an essential part of victory. …Last week in Baghdad, however the degradation of this tradition reached a new level. …There were no vanquished…. The Americans were seen among themselves."

The essay closed with the observation that the Baghdad victory was "consciously or not, an ersatz surrender for the simple reason that the defeated regime vanished without a trace."

When you called him from the airport to offer congratulations, he told you that the editors had cut his final paragraph, but that in the scheme of things, he didn't think it too important. Now you pull out the original manuscript he faxed you and the words that hadn't made it into print.

"History may still have one irony in store. It may well be that instead of the evermore elusive idea of a cache of weapons of mass destruction – on behalf of which the war was started – the real danger for America may turn out to be the army that presumably vanished into nowhere, but possibly underground."

April 23

Fallujah. Within the greater nightmare, a very particular nausea – one that puts you off your coffee. If your spirit cycled through this world before, you must have lived in a besieged city, or else, Lord help you, been one of the besiegers.

April 24

She's closing in on twelve. Right around this age you had to start taking your heart back from your father. You know that in the process of growing into her own autonomous being, Gwen will need to withdraw from you too. Though maybe, if you

play your end of the letting go better, the separation won't leave such disfiguring scars. And the weave can be rebuilt at another level when she's an adult. Enchallah.

April 25 – Chinatown – Midmorning

As you thread through the crowd on Canal toward Lafayette, her vendor's cry sounds shrill and birdlike: *DVD-DVD-DVD-DVD!* Pause. Repeat. Suddenly a surge of street traffic pushes you directly in front of her. Look into her eyes – no contact – then down. Atop a corrugated carton, all her bootlegs in a row: *13 Going on 30, The Passion of The Christ, Starsky & Hutch, The Alamo, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* multiple iterations of the *Matrix, Harry Potter, Kill Bill* – name it, she got it.

Hang a left, walk north Kamwo on Grand. Pick up your Chinese herbs. Look up along Mott Street – the Empire State stands absolutely unto itself. Diagonally across to DiPalo's – Katie wants to pick up mozzarella, homemade ricotta, pumpkin ravioli and, if you're lucky, a carton of imported blood orange juice.

Wend uptown to fetch Gwen from her theater class. All the way to 28th and Broadway. Maybe it's the on-and-off rain, the late afternoon gray light, the season's cool – for whatever reasons, the city has never looked or felt more magnificent.

April 26 – Early Morning

Down the block along Eighth Avenue, the gorgeous camo bark of sycamores in the rain. And cherry blossoms, holding up, downpour notwithstanding. Too in their prime to fall.

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Café newspapers full of Ryongchon, North Korea. Who knows what happened there? Kaboom is all anyone can agree on. Diesel fuel and ammonium nitrate are the latest culprits, the same cocktail they say caused Oklahoma City. First report: a collision, dynamite. *Two trains running* as the blues song goes. Then no collision, but a single trainload of what? set off by an electrical spark. Rumors of a tactical nuke. Attempted assassination of Kim Jung Il. Pick a theory or chalk it up to shit happens.

When was the last time you read or heard a news account you placed any confidence in? Maybe never. When you were six, way before the remarkable events in Dealy Plaza, you recall how confused the grown-ups got trying to explain what was happening in Suez. *Good night and good luck.*

And more recently, do folks really believe that a homemade bomb did that kind of damage to the Federal Building? Or that the attack was planned and carried out by a pair of Desert Storm vets run amok? Shades of *The Manchurian Candidate* more like it, but who are the programmers? So many traumas left open and raw – more damaging by far than the hits themselves. Persistently denied a firm accounting, how incrementally dominant becomes our blood-language of fear. In South Africa they have a truth and reconciliation commission. Lord how we need one of our own.

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From the roofdeck of Shana and Mark's apartment house way west on 23rd, a terrific view last night of the QM2's downriver passage. Out she sailed, one great silly barge, her name writ huge along the hull like a billboard lest she be mistaken for what – a Staten Island ferry? And such a swarm of boats and choppers round as to look less like a display of fealty than encirclement by scavengers.

Above the Statue of Liberty as she passed, smiley-face fireworks bursting in air – straight on, sideways, upside down.

April 28

It's never occurred to you precisely this way before, but for some reason, today it clicks: the city feels like it's at the end point of its manic phase – a state that's really a denial of mind, spun out beyond all reason and expectation. Or is this just a micro-plateau before the next spinning out?

April 29 – Early Morning

The little girl upstairs must live bathed in tears. Three generations and way too much misery in that two bedroom apartment, the same layout as yours. The girl's father is rapper, white and weasily, ridiculously do-ragged. Abysmally unmusical – a

whiny voice, no sense of phrase nor rhythm. Fortunately the words don't carry – you hear only their bludgeoning repetition, and bass thuds that vibrate the ceiling to the point where you imagine the cement confecting down the walls with every beat. One day the concrete will give way altogether and this imbecile will end up falling through the floor and into your living room.

You've nicknamed him The Teenager, though he has to be in his twenties, and you see him now and again with the little girl. She's maybe two years old and change, curly-haired, looks brightly at the world around her. It's clear she wants some give-and-take with dad. But though he holds her hand, the gesture is perfunctory – like that of a distracted older brother. Grudging even. No mom on the scene from what you can tell.

Sometimes in the lobby or laundry room, or when the elevator for the odd-numbered floors is out of service, you'll run into an incredibly non-descript middle-aged guy who's likely the Teenager's father. A woman roughly in her forties, who may or may not be the Teenager's mother, but is probably Grand Dad's wife, lives up there too. But when bedlam rages above, it's the Teenager's voice you hear querulous and aggrieved, cursing out his father or upbraiding his daughter, amidst banging doors, crashing objects and what can only be flung furniture. Only higher in the mix, and more enduring, the uncomforted wailing of the child.

More than once you've called the cops and Penn South security. For all her tortured sounds, you've seen no evidence that the girl is being physically hurt. But even if she isn't being hit, Lord what it must be like to have your father scream at you like that, protractedly, and in such a hideously adenoidal timbre. Then too, you hear her, several times a week and sometimes two or three days running, shrieking like a banshee for an hour or more on end, without any apparent trigger. You try to imagine – out of sheer psychic and aural self-protection – that her cries are those of a muezzin or a street vendor, momentarily standing in relief, but ultimately all of a piece with the surrounding din of the city.

Back in your early twenties you entertained the fantasy of kidnapping your half-brother David, thirteen years your junior, and rescuing him from the jaws of Jack. At times you wish you could snatch this girl out of her nightmare too, though by now

she'd be a handful to cope with. What you'd like to do to her father would land you up in jail.

Sounds of her crying in your hallway not fifteen minutes ago, just after you saw Gwen off to school. The odd elevator must be down. Made a foray outside to check, weigh in with the presence of a Senior Male, and there she stood, isolated, arms at her sides, inconsolable. Nearby, the Teenager and Grand Dad, standing apart from her and one another, impassive as a pair of golems. But the Teenager turned round at your approach, and you fixed him with a look you hope conveyed something on the order of "pick up your child, you idiot," but then the elevator door opened and the three of them filed on, the girl still crying.

• • •

At the café you flip through the *Post*, land on the "opinion" page. Ralph Peters' column, "Getting Iraq Right." Scan. Your eye sticks on a sentence and an old Kate Bush lyric leaps from deep storage into subvocalization: *Wow, wow, wow – unbelievable!* But what you utter is a low whistle. It takes a lot to pull you up short these day, but Murdock's boy has done it. "If any adult touches a damaged or destroyed U.S. military vehicle, he must be shot."

No time, really, to take this in when in rapid order, as if emerging pop, pop, pop! your mates come in: Eric B., Jacques, Mark and Shana – whose pugs Bauer and Brusché look in through the window from their perch on the bench outside – and Leslie W., who only wanted to read her Ram Dass book in peace but soon gets vortexed into the collective hubbub that passes for conversation. Clock hands fly fast. Beyond your cluster of tables, the café clicks by in time-lapse motion, out of which Kimsey emerges, efficient and unhurried, with another round of coffee. Today her teeshirt is a white one. *Will live in a castle* read the discreet red letters across her chest. And when she turns her back: *Soon*. And now it strikes you that this message is no mass market, wish-fulfillment trope. Later this year, Kimsey is going back to southern Germany with her American boyfriend to get married there. Raise children. It never occurred to you before, but it's not impossible that the "von" in front of her surname actually comes *mit schloss*.

It's a headspin, all of it. Not least, this place where, just as on Love Street, *all the creatures meet*.

May 2 – Peekskill – Midafternoon

At the memorial for Uncle Joe, you sit at a table next to Gioia. She's wearing a button with a slogan on her jacket. Type's so small you have to lean in and raise your glasses up to read it: *The meek are getting ready*.

May 3

Big scandal breaking about the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. troops. What a strange country – so deeply Puritan, so steeped in the culture of war as redemption. No moral problem dropping radioactive shells on civilian populations, or, as in the last war, burying enemy soldiers alive. But when our warriors take the hate and fear and dominance game we trained them to an explicitly sexual level, then off we go a-reprehending. Won't face up to the inescapable logic of it all: if you're already violating someone's country, why not fuck them up the ass as well?

May 4 – Flatiron District – Midafternoon

You see them in the street a lot these temperate days: victims of bilateral disconcertion, folks unsure whether to take a drag on their cell phones or check their cigarettes for messages. A whole society hydroplaning.

May 5

Globalization flattens the world. Of that there is no doubt. Yet even in mallest-Manhattan, the city resists all uniformities of surface or experience. The wondrous refraction of this place doesn't require changing one neighborhood for another – every step over a sidewalk crack can precipitate you into another world. Nearly any path – say this one, made up of hexagonal paving blocks, that runs around the perimeter of Central Park – leads through a fantastic multiplicity. In a space of only a few blocks, so many ways of ways of being human.

Breakfast with Elizabeth at Café Sabarsky, a gorgeous simulacrum of a Viennese interior down to the newspapers hanging from batons on a rack next to the

Böesendorfer. Out the window, across Fifth Avenue, the south end of the reservoir. Through the now-burgeoning leaves, glimpses of folks jogging.

Downtown again. Pop out of the subway like a rabbit, still stepping to the Radetzky March. Sidewalk's unusually crowded. A pair of young women dead ahead and closing fast. In the gap between cropped jackets and low rise jeans, requisite flashes of belly. No room to maneuver round them, so keep straight on. Big chrome-lettered belt buckles, near enough to read. Passing on the right: ANGELA – to your left: BITCH.

Weaving through the streets these days, the body language of a strange bipolar mood. Some folks walking slumped and dispirited-looking turn giddy on unexpectedly meeting an acquaintance. Parting ways, they press on bravely a few paces, then sink back into depletion. Others stride about with a bright "Right, I'm on it!" air that feels more like they're applying for a job than negotiating an urban space of flows.

Bea occasionally used a phrase to describe what it felt like to be suspended between her mania and depression: *schweben in der luft*, floating on air. In your mind this sounded like a pretty appealing state, but as she meant it, and perhaps in its German connotation, this floating was not so much a carefree, feather-like sensation, as a feeling of indeterminacy, a lack of proper mooring, unease.

As always this morning's conversation with Elizabeth wandered through a maze full of associative turns. And scraped up a lot of something from the bottom of the pot. A strange parting note after you hugged goodbye at the corner of 86th and Lex. You'd been talking about your children and the tenor of the times with its all-pervasive sense of threat. Heavy of heart. "We're going to get whacked again," you said, or something close to that. "You think so?" she asked. It sounded partly like a question, and partly like "Ah, so you think so too." Spooked.

May 7

You've never seen such density on the streets – on nearly every thoroughfare, crowds surging like those in the panicked descriptions of the garment district's masses in early nineteen hundreds. It's after seven p.m. on 23rd and Eighth by Kesban's fruit

stand. Around and about it and up, down the subway stairs, rivers of people, rolling and tumbling.

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On the radio, a "semi-staged" New York Philharmonic performance of Bernstein's *Candide*. You keep hoping for a liberatory laugh, but the listening just makes you queasy: a litany of flippant rapes and massacres, the Lisbon earthquake, the laughter of an audience imagining itself immune to such calamity. Presented this way and at this time it doesn't feel like satire, more like intellectual porn. Can a New York audience afford this – smugness spiced with a pinch of warding-off? And if Voltaire were alive today, he'd probably be in Guantánamo wearing an orange boiler suit. Or, Lord help us, a dog-man in Abu Ghraib. And what would stand for Lisbon, Fallujah? Or some flat city yet to come?

Jeeze, Jeremiah, lighten up. Still it plays in your head, a wayward line from a psalm: *Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.*

May 10 – Le G. – Early Morning

Conversation with Eric B. You agree *this*, right now, is World War I. The shootup in 1914 over the Rhine, didn't count.

• • •

Semper infotainment. Online on the *Times* front page, you can either click on the latest movie trailer or view a horrorshow that culminates with Lynndie England and her "dog." *Coming Soon to a Theater Near You: Harry Potter & the Prisoner of Abu Ghraib.*

Keep scanning. Every day it seems the Gray Lady sinks another level deeper into a kind of senile dadaism. A fellow described as "a financial analyst," has taken to showing up in Washington Square Park (on Sunday afternoons when the markets are closed) and giving hugs to passersby "for free." Just beneath his photo runs another story's headline: "Stocks Fall to New Lows for Year."

Good Lord, if there were any evidence of mindfulness behind this kind of apposition, one could almost call it dialectic.

May 11 – Chelsea Post Office – Midafternoon

Young woman ahead of you in line. Flimsy blue jeans. Printed across her ass, in huge, distressed, white block letters: RQUST RCK CTY. Ain't got a vowel to sit on.

May 13 – Le G. – Midmorning

Funny snatch of conversation leaks into your left ear from Table 5. A guy telling his friend about a former partner, a fellow afflicted with "male answer syndrome." No matter what the question, his partner always came back with an authoritative pronouncement. Laughable yes, but wouldn't it be great to inhabit, if only for a moment, a little island of certainty where the insistent refrain inside your head might fall silent – the evermore tired and frustrating mantra "I don't know"?

If there's a reader here, you'd love to reach out and embrace him now, reassure him that the narrator survives spiritually intact, that it's worth pressing on through a few more pages until the great turning comes. But you don't know, do you? All you can say is that the bloke who's walking through this landscape is trying to square with himself as best he can. At the Met he saw it, caligraphed on a 17th century scroll by Chen Hongshou:

Tall ancient trees, broken banana leaves, sparse bamboo, bony rocks and dying grass. Does anybody notice this kind of scenery? Does anybody notice?

If only you'd been in the Boy Scouts. Perhaps you could sing the reader a marching song.

• • •

Caption to a photo on the front page of the *New York Times*: "Daniel Stanley, a deputy secretary of defense, and an officer carried images of the abuse of Iraqi prisoners to a viewing session for senators." The officer wears an Army uniform covered with a regiment's supply of fruit salad and brass. Both he and Stanley bear satchels in their left hands as they stride in semi-blur across the columned, marble-paved gallery.

Incongruous – the satchels look innocent, like school lunch bags. Whatever they hold, the cat's already out. Any time he wants he can look at a king.

The news is just too toxic. Back to reading Bloch in search of a bracing dose of ethics. *Sefer Hasidim*, written in the thirteenth century. It states, very clearly: "If a Jew attempts to kill a non-Jew, help the non-Jew." Keep to your book.

May 14 – Le G. – Midmorning

The WC door is bolted from within. By the shadow through the crack you can tell someone's perched on the crapper. You're certain it's a man. Take your time, bro. His cell phone goes off, the alarm set on rapidfire whine: *anh-aan-ahn-aan-anh-aan-anh-aan-aahn.* A conversation ensues. You move a few steps back so as not to hear words. Muffled tones. He rings off. Flush. Sink water. Dryer. Bolt flies back, door swings. He exits, speed dialing another call. You put down the *Times* you've been scanning while you wait. The picture is of Rumsfeld wearing a business suite and pair of beige shitkickers – Timberlands? – stomping around Al-Ghraib in company with that oxymoron, a Major General, and a host of other certified fools.

How many exit wounds does it take to make an exit strategy? An eggshit strategy. Don't put all your eggshit into one basket. Don't get too eggshited. It'll all end in tears.

On the way here, you passed a man walking two dogs so similar in type, so closely leashed together that you registered, for an instant, one dog with two heads. Cerberus in Chelsea. No Cerberus has three heads. Flash back to a Assyrian dog figurine you saw once at the museum. Made of terra-cotta, its base inscribed with the motto: *Don't think, bite!*

Your blizzard of confusion must have something to do with the arrival of the movie *Troy* in a theatre near you. You've clicked on the trailer and at least they got the horse right.

Hard to imagine it's less than three years since the fall of your own topless towers. So far removed in feeling that they might as well be myth. Once upon a time, the firemen took charge of digging down. No one appointed them, they just did it, and when they got to where they found the human ash and other stuff of what had once been people, they called a halt. Declared the ground sacred. Would dig no further. So

Giuliani called the cops in and forced the firemen out, at gunpoint. Ask anyone who was there. They'll tell you what went down.

May 16 – Early Morning

Impossible to perfect the world. So try getting the words right on a page. Sunday morning fugue and fumble – that's the game.

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Two women, blind, make their way north on Eighth Avenue between 23rd and 24th. The first sweeps and taps a white cane with a ball on the end. About seven paces behind, her companion follows, holding fast to the harness of a sweet-faced black Labrador. Seeming to lose track of where she is, the woman in the lead tucks her cane beneath her arm and begins to feel her way along the windows and mullions of the storefronts.

"Are you looking for Dunkin Donuts?"

She turns toward you. "Yes."

"Just about ten steps further on."

"Thank you!"

You watch as she negotiates the distance, feels the edge of the doorway, grasps the handle, swings it open. "Come on, Sandy!" she calls. Sandy and the Lab close the gap. When you turn back, they're all inside.

Chances are they've journeyed crosstown from Selis Manor on 23rd Street, a quarter mile away. They could've stopped at Krispee Kreme – it's closer – but they didn't, so this must be *the* place. Taste – taste and texture are all!

At the corner you wait for the cars to pass, then cross against the light. An image of Sandy comes easily to you. She's dunking a cruller with brightly colored sprinkles into a light coffee with one sugar. It was the other woman you spoke to, made verbal contact with. But your mind won't conjure what kind of donut she's having.

Instead, unbidden, a nightmare vision comes to you of your country as a snake, desperately trying to keep itself cool by exporting heat. By toasting others. Grilling them in displaced thermal energy. Frantically importing the oil it takes to chill things

out. Of course, now it makes sense, you're a cell in a reptile, not a mammal. A cold-blooded beast. A thing that sloughs off skins.

• • •

Late afternoon. Word comes that a girl Gwen met for the first time at a birthday party yesterday was run over and killed a few hours later, near her home in Sunnyside. Gwen had mentioned her, said she thought she might have made a new friend. Now it dawns on you that you met her too – tall for eleven, pretty, with braces – just didn't catch her name at the time.

When you arrived at the restaurant, the guests were dispersing and the birthday girl's mom asked you and Gwen to wait outside with Hallie since her father had phoned to say he was on his way. So you stood there, chatting a moment, under the awning of La Bonne Soupe.

"Where's he coming from?"

"I don't know."

"What I mean is, do you live in Manhattan?"

"Queens."

Then dad arrived, pulled his SUV over on the far side of the street. Spotting him, Hallie took off. "Watch out," you called after her, but she seemed not to hear you, blithely jaywalked 54th Street without a glance to her left or right.

You were a few blocks from to Central Park, and the weather was decent, so you went climbing with Gwen on her favorite rocks. Then see-sawed, then swung. As she worked to get higher, you held your hand up as a benchmark for her toe to touch, until, pumping with all her might, she surpassed even your height on tiptoe and her feet soared out of reach.

May 17 – Le G. – Early Morning

Big coverage of Hallie's death in both tabloids. Front page photos. Language so sentimental it would make DW Griffith's fillings twinge. Both articles call her "an angel."

May 18 – Midtown – Early Morning

Some enterprising person has set up an impromptu newsstand on the corner near where you come out of the subway: two milkcrates, side by side, with stacks of the twin tabloids stacked atop them.

By their headlines shall they be known. Keeping on the Hallie story, the *Daily News*, (New York's Hometown Newspaper,) devotes its front page to *AMAZING GRACE: Mourning Dad Consoles Woman Who Ran Down His Daughter*. The *Post*, on the other hand, is back to hardball minimalism: "WMD" – this in the largest white capital letters on a black background available in Christendom. What's that about? You pony up a quarter. Flip to the article as you walk. Ah, a sarin-tainted shell has been "discovered" in Iraq. There ya go – proof!

May 19 – Early Morning

Before you leave for the café, you turn on the radio and the room fills with the youthful, yet fulsome and self-satisfied voice of Satirius Johnson. Most mornings you find the smugness of these NPR personalities unbearable, particularly before coffee, and end up flipping off the switch before you even hear what they're saying. But today Satirius is so plainly hugging himself as he reels off the list of upcoming programs that you find your mood leavening into an almost nitrous oxide headspace. Then, in a trice, the broadcast switches to news from Washington delivered by a fixture of public radio, a deeply earnest fellow, and so venerable that the audible clicking of his dentures provides a welcome punctuation to his monotone.

You let the radio play on, but tune your mind out, having set your bad-tidings threshold pretty low and proceed to pull-wrestle the bedclothes into a semblance of "made." But then, from out of the acoustic wash, a snatch of recorded testimony by Rudy's former police commissioner juts up, sharp-pointed as bowsprit of a sinking ship: "Go to any of the communications companies out there, go to the best, go to Motorola, go to the best there is, show me one radio show me one radio that they will guarantee you this radio will go through that metal, it will go through the debris, it will go through the dust, you will have one hundred percent communications one hundred percent of the time. There is none. There is none!"

Hit the power switch. In the relative silence of your bedroom, the heated atmosphere of the 9/11 commission chamber slowly dissipates. Unplug your laptop to take to the café. Mildly surprised not to have to sweep off a dusting of ash.

• • •

On the street, fully half of the kids head for PS 11, Gwen's old school, pull wheeled bags behind them, looking for all the world like a tribe of flight attendants in training. But it's nomadism they're prepping for. How many will ever see their names in a fat paper directory of folks whose households are connected to a "land line"? And there you walk, caught in the backdraft of their revving engines.

Post page five: A knife-wielding lunatic attacks the crowd in the midtown Square named for Horace Greely ("Mechanics, artisans, laborers, the unemployed, you who are able to leave the cities should do so without delay. Fly – scatter through the land – go to the Great West"). He injures three, one critically, before the cops shoot him. And the wonder is, this doesn't happen every day and twice on Mondays.

May 20

Giuliani heckled at the Commission by families demanding "answers." By all accounts the proceedings are more "o" than "co," and probably that first syllable ought to be dropped altogether.

Yesterday late afternoon you had coffee with Wolfgang – the last before he's off to Europe for the summer. You sat on his terrace, in the shadows of the cranes and fast-rising steelwork of the new WTC 7. Talked about his "consumption" book – in particular how only form is changed in the transit from state to state, matter itself being indestructible. Funny how time and again and always by wide margins, New Yorkers tell pollsters that they want the WTC rebuilt *exactly as it was*. Often with Wolfgang, your thoughts turn in wide circles, impossible to steer productively into the conversation. Both *Alcestis* and *A Winter's Tale* feature women – wives – brought back from the dead, their forms unchanged. Yet something's not the same about them.

You looked over too at the Woolworth Building, and from that angle, in that light – saw, for the first time in all these years, how exquisitely the copper-clad buttresses at the pinnacle support its spire.

• • •

Midafternoon. Walking west on 22nd toward Le G., you spot a sparrow, its beak clamped on a length of plastic twine a good yard long, hopping tentatively across the street. When a car comes down the block, or a pedestrian walks too close, it flies off, but returns as soon as the coast is clear. No way it will get aloft with something so heavy. Or perhaps it's not a question of gross weight, but of the unwieldiness of the thing. But by fits and starts it succeeds in dragging its burden about a third of the way across. But then, startled into flight again, it disappears. You pause a moment, wondering if it will come back. Look toward the tree the sparrow flew toward and become aware of a great commotion of bird voices coming from where its leaves grow thickest. Were they calling this loud all along, or have you only noticed the sound now that your attention's been drawn there?

You face the afternoon with a sick feeling. Late this morning, you got a phone call from an agent you met through a mutual friend. She praises your work to the stars, but allows as how she "doesn't think she's right for you." Cool. That's cool. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Your talks were interesting in and of themselves. But still, there's that fucking string to get up into the nest, somehow. Do you have the wherewithal to press on? *See,* your thoughts run, *that sparrow's got more sense than you.* But then, you *made* the string yourself, Charlie. You gauged the load. And you know how to wind the cord up so you can lift it. Or cut it into manageable sections. And then too, the work has its own heart's desire. What's needed is a movement of the Tao.

• • •

p.m. Au Gamin, immersed in writing. You look up just as fellow bops through the door, the spitting image of Peter Rondinone. *Jesus, Peter, what are you doing here?*

Michael told me you were dead. Right here, in this café two minutes before I was supposed to meet a student for a tutorial. Completely fucked me up.

Hang on. This dude's not Peter – it's a guy with eerily similar body language. Still, it pulls back in time to when Peter was a morning regular at the old café, Lanciani's. Italian-Russian, Peter grew up in East Harlem – one of the few working-class white writers around. Strange guy, smart. Playing the angles. Conned himself into a job teaching at Lehman. Managed to get one collection out from Picador. Always upbeat. Hung himself. Had a daughter around Gwen's age. No, this guy looks nothing like Peter.

Smell of mega garlic wafts over from the kitchen area. 3:45. Changing of the waitress guard. Eyoko's on the evening shift, comes over to give you a hug. She's got a kind of Gwen-nature – small but wiry enough to crack ribs. Which reminds you, in half an hour, Gwen will stop by on her way to her piano lesson. Your stomach's begins its transit back up its accustomed position. String's got a little lighter. Uncountable vehicles roll by, early rush hour. Like a Friday, only it's Thursday. Red van across the Avenue, parked in front of Aphrodite cleaners. Shadow play of the honey locust's leaves along its flanks. A big tree for these parts, three stories plus. Full spring bloom.

A woman strolls by with her little daughter who's maybe two. They hold hands, arms swing easy. Mom's slender: dark, dark brown skin, copper hair in spiral strands escaping from beneath her puffy visored denim hat. And her top's a stretch affair, a stylized wildflower field so bright you blink, and for a moment it all slides back thirty-something years to where you're tripping through a frictionless universe. A mile of string, give me a mile. Two cans. And we'll make a telephone.

May 21

The other day, toward the end of your conversation with your ex-prospective agent, came an image nearly Dantean in its vividness. You saw a wall before you – an unbreachable, unleapable, intransigent blockade of indifference and contempt confronting – affronting – any work of active imagination.

Even as she waxed admiring, her words reinforced the wall, piled on more blocks. And flowing beneath her praise, an undertone of accusation: how dare you write books she feared she could not sell?

But why, in a culture devoted to indifference and contempt should your, or anyone else's writing be spared? What were you thinking? That somehow the wall would make a grand exception, that its stones would part wide enough to allow your volumes through?

This morning, you leaned into a shoulder stretch against the tiled wall in the shower and in the warmth and steam, as you breathed into them, your muscles gave, loosened. You'd better learn to play it looser still, or pack it up.

May 22

The 9/11 hearings grind on. The bereaved – at least those most publicly vocal – demand to know who's responsible. There's a part of you that wants ask them, in classic Jewish question-for-question style: *So, how many SUVs does your family drive?*

Another part of you would love to put Cheney, Bush and Rumsfeld on waterboards and hear in their own words why they made it, or let it, happen. You've heard it said that torture produces bad intelligence – people, after all, just want the awfulness to stop. They'll confess to anything. But you'd bet that Dubya et al might use it as an opportunity, however unsought, to unburden themselves. There must be some part of them, however armored-over, that would rejoice to tell the truth – to find release from the burden of their constant lies.

Once, back when you were sixteen or so, inflexible in your radicalism and aggrievedness, you had a conversation with your Uncle Joe, or, more accurately, subjected him to a diatribe against the injustices and abuses of the world. He listened to it all with a combination of respect for your passion, and the bemusement of one who had spent his life careful not to overreach his own emotional limits. When you paused for breath, he said simply, "You can make a case for anything."

At the time you took this badly. Such deplorable moral relativism – though you didn't know the term then. Utterly dismissible. Clearly your father's brother was nothing more than a spineless Panglossian. In the intervening years you have come to believe that Joe, in his unassuming way, was attempting to plant in your awareness the notion that the material of self-justification lies in language. He was telling you to be careful what you build.

• • •

Maritime day – a commemoration, now largely forgotten, of the first transatlantic steamship crossing in 1819. Celebrated this year with boat tours of the harbor. Thus the three of you aboard a hokey fake paddlewheeler bound out from the Frying Pan pier at 24th Street, down river and then west along the Kill Van Kull, the ship channel between Staten Island and Jersey that leads to the Newark-Elizabeth container port. All the way to the Bayonne Bridge and back round again. Out of the mud in the Kill rise the masts of sunken ships. Over there, on the Staten Island side, the ferry, the one that was in that horrible accident last year – pilot zoned out and she plowed straight into the side of a concrete pier without slowing, killed eleven people – up in drydock, almost ready to go into back service. Over in Jersey, a huge scrap yard, the largest in the New York area. Exports all its metal to China. Do the beams in those vast new Shanghai skyscrapers contain recycled H-girders from the WTC? And what would that do to the Feng-Shui? Where, oh where did all that material go? Did anyone keep track, or was it more effectual not to?

See where the Moran and McAllister tugs live when they're not taking harbor pilots out to board tankers at Ambrose light, nudging freighters into port, or hauling Bouchard barges full of pretty much anything that can pass along a waterway. As you head upriver, a glimpse of great ships in a line stretching under the Verrazano and into the narrows beyond. And in South Brooklyn, the only active freight docks left in New York City. Coffee, coffee, coffee.

May 23 – Early Morning

You're taking a shower when Katie cracks the door to deliver a newsflash. She's been calling out to you from the living room, where she checks the online *Times* first thing, but you couldn't hear her over the rush of the water. Part of the roof of the new wing at Charles de Gaulle airport has collapsed. At least six people dead. The same terminal you'd passed through coming back from Paris late last August – not nine months gone. Dry off and make a beeline for the bedroom. Open your notes, search for what you wrote down then:

…It's designed like one of Boullée's fantasies – an absurdly long barrel vault with mind-boggling perspectives. Newly opened and still unfinished, the place has the air of precocious ruin. Easy to imagine a section of the ceiling collapsed, grass growing around the fissure where light pours in to illuminate a herd of Hubert Robert's wandering cows.

May 24 – Le G. – Early Morning

Mark walks in, sans Bruce. He's intent on working on his French homework, but you make small talk for a few minutes, then read him the passage above – Mark being one of the five people on the planet who'd get the references. He listens, eyes widening by degrees as his mental energy gathers itself into a burst of words. "You're Tennyson!" *Say what?* He begins to recite from "Locksley Hall" wherein the poet's imagination sends airships flying above a gothic ruin. As often with Mark, you're being half-flattered, half goofed on. But the truth is you've never been good at seeing the specifics of a future. At best you can occasionally read traces of former worlds embedded in the present. You do seem to have a nose for endangered architecture though. What would you have smelled walking beneath the newly-erected choir vaultings of Beauvais cathedral in the year of our Lord 1283? Under orders from the abbot to surpass the its nearest competition, Beauvais's masons pushed upward to 48 meters – roughly fifteen stories. That was it – they'd outstripped Amiens by 8 meters. A year later, the roof fell in. To this day, Beauvais cathedral remains unfinished, part ruin, and what still stands is shored up with scaffolding.

Scan the *Times* article. Way back in 2002, the airport's chief architect referred to his massive columnless concrete shell as "a significant first." And the first will be last.

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Back home and rummaging through your poetry collections for the lines Mark quoted:

Saw the heavens fill with commerce, argosies of magic sails
Pilots of the purple twilight dropping down with costly bales…

And then a stunning apocalyptic finale:

Comes a vapor from the margin, blackening over heath and holt,
Cramming all the blast before it, in its breast a thunderbolt.

Let it fall on Locksley Hall, with rain or hail, or fire or snow;
For the mighty wind arises, roaring seaward, and I go.

May 25

Pretty breathtaking the images of the Bush speech – the clarity of their insanity. He talks of building a new, high-tech, maximum security prison "as a symbol of the new Iraq." Of course, what better emblem of freedom than a prison? Then we can knock down Abu Ghraib. Such a raw delight in Bush's pronouncement, like that of boy in a playground who's discovered that if he lifts up the back of the dumptruck, the sand tumbles out. Finally something he, and we, and Halliburton can actually do. An epiphany moment wherein Dumbo realizes he can fly. *That's what these ears are for!*

Add to this, the strange, ritualized, puppet-theatre-like quality of the proceedings – the fear written on the faces of his audience. There sat Bush's core supporters, in ordered rows in their expensive clothes, passive on the razor edge of panic. You noted their programmatic bursts applause and its abrupt almost violent cessation. He stands there, a man of middle years, regressed into a horrifically over-endowed child – makeup plastered over the booboo on his chin sustained in a recent tumble off his bike.

Is it really possible, you ask yourself, that the majority of Americans remain ignorant – almost innocent – when so much rich and vivid information constructs itself before them? Assembles itself into wondrously unambiguous narrative. Perhaps their fear is too deep to allow them to feel that there are no longer rails beneath the train. And then too, it takes a lot of energy to keep the lights full on and still live in the darkness.

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Midafternoon. On the subway uptown, a stocky fellow in work clothes stands, one arm wrapped around the central pole. He's facing away from you, so you can't see

his face, much less than the front of his gray teeshirt. But the back of it is imprinted with a curious amalgam of messages competing for legibility. A graphic of the World Trace Center, encircled by the words *United Brotherhood of Carpenters & Joiners of America*. Superimposed over the towers, a company logo: *Resilient Floor Coverers*, and beneath, in smaller letters: *In Memory of Our Fallen Brothers*.

What short of teeshirt might you wear? One that reads: *No slogan left behind!*?

May 27 – 77th Street Subway Stop – Early Afternoon

Savvy. What a savvy New Yorker you are, walking to the far north end of the platform. That way, when the 6 train reaches 51st street, you can zip directly downstairs. If you're not positioned just right, you'll have to shuffle along amidst a crowd of other passengers also making the transfer to the E or simply trying to get out into the light and air. To the veteran subway rider flow is all, and this staircase is so narrow that it only takes a few people trying to get on it at once to turn it into a near-impassible bottleneck. There's an up escalator just to the left of the stairs and on certain occasions, when you've felt particularly frisky, you've run down against the grain, just for the rush of it. But that trick only works when no one's riding the escalator up from below, since there's no room to run around them. Too crowded this time of day, and you're hardly in top form.

You peer up the tracks, but no train's in sight, so you glance across to the uptown platform where a large rat is meandering south in unhurried, almost genial way. Now the rat hears the noise of an approaching uptown train, and reverses his direction – heads back north, by no means alarmed or even, it seems, in any great hurry. At the very far end of the station, for whatever ratty reason, he leaps up onto a black plastic garbage bag that's been left in the corner, whether by accident or design, who can say?

But the rat hasn't leaped high enough and his claws scrabble on the plastic as he attempts to get a purchase, and the bag threatens to roll over on top of him. You watch in fascination, along with your fellow passengers, who, however repulsed by his presence, seem to be thinking something along the same lines as you: *Wow, rat, I though you had it more together than that. Like where are you from, outa town?*

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Body of a disappeared Juilliard student found in Inwood Park. Twenty-one. Goddamn goddamn. Who witnessed? Bald eagles, wood thrushes, wild turkeys, a red tailed-hawk?

Geographically it's part of Manhattan Island, but Inwood rises up in a microcosm of wilderness – two hundred acres trapped within and all against the grain of the surrounding streets, the steam-table hominess of the Dominican restaurants, the storefront churches of Broadway that lie just west of its stone-banked border. That city of comfort might as well be a thousand miles away.

Inwood was haunted ground when you were a kid. It still feels eldritch – where else do you find stands of old growth hickory and oak? Ten thousand years gone, glacial push came to shove and up came the schist that elsewhere knuckles under – bedrock in which to nail the tallest spires.

Lenape hunted fox there, wolf and bear. When you were maybe eight, you biked up one summer day with Jack. Exploring on your own you found a cave, crawled through its mouth and found within, way back where the light grew dim, a toolbox, metal, red. Opened up the spring clasps. Pictures of women, dozens of 'em, but not like any you had seen before. He scrambled in on hands and knees to see the discovery you'd thought warranted a shout. Laughed when he saw the cache. You had an idea about being helpful, taking the box to the lost and found. No need said Jack, whomever it belonged to knew where they'd left it. They'd be back. All else aside, he was a man of the world, your old man.

June 1

In the land of the one-eyed, the truly blind is king. Today you weep, less from joy or misery than from the fumes of the great onion of madness, stripping off its numberless layers.

Like gasoline, the price of milk is taking wing. Let them drink Coke!

Tiny crustaceans discovered in the water supply. Copepods. However microscopic, they're ingestion is forbidden by Jewish Law. Trayf City. Don't drink the lobsters!

June 2 – Early Morning

Light breeze comes at you across 22nd Street. The day feels like a time capsule accumulating signifiers out of the atmosphere. A young woman, headphoned to her CD player walks east as you head west. Otherwise unremarkable, she wears a brown sweatshirt emblazoned in pink letters: FREE MARTHA. A laugh of solidarity with her irony nearly rises to the surface before you realize that, in all likelihood, she's dead serious.

Photo in the *NY Post*: Bush stares quizzically at his umbrella, inverted in a hailstorm's gust. The anti-Mary Poppins.

Petroleum. China. Ind'ja. Where it's been, where it's going, where it's gone. Flash on a line from a Dylan Thomas story, "The End of the River": *The birds, said the Gardner, 'ave 'ad the seeds.*

June 5

You look evermore at the city as an organism subject to trauma and healing, both internal and externally generated. And how these combine.

Haussmannization of Paris – the physical transformation of the city, compounded by the enormous growth of the urban population as previously outlying areas were encompassed into twenty districts. Then, the virtual expulsion to the suburbs and beyond of the thousands who could not pay the new taxes imposed upon them. How do such episodes effect, even at a distance, and played out over generations, the character of a city's citizens? Who needs Bin Laden when we have ourselves?

So, if New York City were a boa constrictor, and 9/11 a large, angular, scaly and toxic rabbit, how is it affecting us, passing through our digestive tract? For the moment we seem to soldier on, doing what we did before, *as though it was before*. But it's too early to tell really – not until the material resounds from the surface to the depths, from the organ to the molecular level, and back again. And how does one parse it, given that no phenomenon is an island unto itself? It may be that a bona fide trauma like 9/11 proves more survivable in the long run than slow death by a thousand Starbucks.

If this were a sane place, peopled by folk less distracted by fear and greed, it would be worth handing out extracts of Mabel Todd's *The Thinking Body* at every major streetcorner. Her belief in the creation of balance between the *proprioceptive* (perceiving

of self) and the *exterioceptive* (how we perceive the outer world). Of all the creatures, she wrote, "man alone, can be afraid all the time – of what has happened, of what is happening, of what may happen. He thus interferes with the wise workings of the body."

June 6

Unexpected sense of grief over Reagan's death. He's escaped. Cheated us out again. First through Alzheimers, now his whole body's untouchable. Not even a shell to stand trial for his awful crimes. What was it he said? Something on the order of how the Contras were the moral equivalent of the founding fathers? And the founding fathers, who were they the moral equivalent of?

Even without a mind, his unerring sense of timing. Or, conspiracy-wise, what better time to declare him dead? Just as nascent questions were began to percolate up from the tarpit. Now no slots in the surround for anything but for the free-floating images of his face – somewhere between a raptor's and a prune – the spectacle of official ritual, the seventy-six trombones of orchestrated grief. His face everywhere, full spectrum, the gauze-spinners of nostalgia wrapping us ever tighter to our couches. Now *that's* security. The media clicks, and the people change their channel.

June 7

Awakened around half past three by terrible heartburn. That and a car alarm. The former as if being stabbed in the back repeatedly, yet languidly, in waves such as Katie's described to you of her labor. The latter sounds like the braying of a mechanical ass.

Groggily up to crunch two Tums, forgetting the Mylanta in the closet, then back to bed. The pain subsides, but moves around to the front. Finally, you sleep, but not before imagining in a delirious way, that the reason your body is sick is because it is digesting all of Ronald Reagan's unprocessed thoughts.

June 8

Morning headlines – twin media death fests: the 60th anniversary of D-Day and Reagan's apotheosis. Combined they make vomit, sheer vomit.

But the universe still works. Early morning transit of Venus viewed on the web. Lovely to see the little dot a-moving on its way. Mit glick and mazel you'll be around in 2012 to see it again. After that, Venus won't be viewable again until you're a hundred and sixty-seven, by which time your atoms are not likely to be organized into a human form any more. Whether that change in status will make you more or less receptive to the wonders of the universe, only time will tell.

All this before 6:45 a.m. when you're out the door to Ba Gua class on West 28th Street. Wholesale plant district just awakening. You enter the building through a moving thicket – truck to storefront, storefront to curbside – Burnham Woods come to Gotham, six days a week. Up in the elevator to Yee's Hung Ga. Concrete-floored loft from the days when this neighborhood was about printing and sewing. In one corner a rack bristling with medieval-looking weapons. Across the lower halves of each of the tall windows, like oversized child guards, a couple of two by fours, slid horizontally into brackets – a precautionary measure in case someone gets thrown farther than intended.

Near the ceiling, above the mirrors lining on one wall hangs a large dragon head, used for New Years processions. On a perpendicular wall, a bit above eye level, framed photos of the grand master and master – the former quite venerable. The photos themselves appear ancient. Below, a bench-like shrine flanked left and right by vertically hung strips of brick red paper caligraphed in black ink. On the shelves, red stems of burnt-out incense protrude from holders surrounded by rings of ash. Between them, a bowl of puckering oranges. Orange, red and gold. That's the color play in this particular spot in the world.

For an hour and a half, you sweat buckets moving very slowly. Learn a new way to walk.

June 9 – Le G.

Why this particular morning, in the midst of conversation with John the dealmaker, Eric the economist cum biscuit-baker and Thomas the *philosophe* – surrounded by your mates and customary comforts, well-coffee'd and breakfasted, protected by a thousand baffles – why now do you find your ears not processing a single word, your mind unmoored and drifting toward a hostile shore?

On the island of brutality, the one true currency is fear. Make someone more afraid than you are. Show them their weakness – cock one fist back and name the price of tempering your blow. If they capitulate, the rest's at your discretion. If not, look to your balls.

Gary comes in, sits down opposite John. Clara sashays over, takes his order, shoots the breeze with the gang. Eric says something and everybody laughs. A long truck rockets down Ninth Avenue. Ba-bang of flatbed against chassis. Metal to metal.

June 14 – 42nd Street Between Fifth & Sixth Avenues – Midafternoon

A black man of late-middle years, thin and balding, sits on a standpipe not far from the entrance of the CUNY Graduate Center. Stripped to the waist in the muggy heat, he wears a headband improvised from a rolled piece of lime green cloth. His ragged khaki pant legs are cuffed up *à la* Robinson Crusoe, and he holds up for display a plank of wood which rests upon his thighs. On its surface, hand written in black magic marker: TELL ME OFF FOR $2.

If you were in the mood to tell off someone who had done you no offense, this would certainly be a bargain. But the people you are furious with have yet to make themselves available at any price. And then too, times have changed. You're old enough to remember the halcyon days – when New Yorkers seized any opportunity to tell eachother off for free.

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Gwen's math teacher divides her class into groups of four to work on a collaborative project out-of-school. The subject is probability. Gwen proposes a wheel of fortune, an idea the rest of her team enthusiastically supports. After much phoning and emailing a plan emerges: the kids will divide up the labor of securing the materials, and then gather to assemble it at your house. Comes the appointed day and hour. Lucia cannot come because of a seemingly oceanic piano lesson. Nor can Keith for similar reasons, or non-reasons.

Stephanie however is a real trooper and arrives at 4:45 bearing the wheel she has pre-painted. Very prettily too, though the Win, Lose and Spin Again are not all quite equal in width. No matter – how pure is chance anyway?

You roll back the living room rug, get out boards, wood glue, screws, bolts, washers, nuts and a battery of tools. Under your tutelage, the girls think through the design. Horizontal? No, it should stand up. OK, if it's going to stand up, what will support it? A vertical plank. How to keep it from falling over? A base. How wide does the base need to be to stabilize a vertical plank *x*-inches tall?

A host of questions on how to make a working, three-dimensional device – amazing but true, a first for both of them. And it's then you realize that in Gwen's lifetime you've hardly built anything. She's watched you paint walls and you let her hold the electric drill and squeeze the trigger when you hung a towel rack. That's pretty much it. No experience of measuring, squaring or sawing, much less nailing, or drilling, or using a screw driver. What were you thinking – that she'd gain these skills by osmosis?

Gwen and Stephanie work with a will. It's closing in on 8 p.m. when Fortuna is ready to roll. Stephanie goes home and you hop across to Kyung's and buy a beer to drink with the Chinese takeout Katie has ordered. Still light. Days getting longer.

Wait on the corner for the light to change. Odd couple next to you: a well-muscled young man in shorts and a sleeveless teeshirt. She's slender, business-suited. The man hails a cab and opens the door. As the woman gets inside, he says goodbye to her in Hebrew. The cab pulls away. He's crossing in the same direction you are, but you're a few steps ahead. On an impulse, you turn round to read his teeshirt: DO I LOOK LIKE A FUCKING PEOPLE PERSON?

He starts to jog, and in a second overtakes you. Runs west down 25th street. Steady pace. Your last glimpse of him, before you veer right and your building's edge cuts off your sightline, is as a small black figure vibrating in the copper light.

June 15 – 28th Street Between Sixth & Seventh Avenues – Early Morning

Ten minutes early for Ba Gua. Where's a place to perch for a moment and scribble? You never noticed this before – along the whole block, serrated metal strips have been welded to the top of every standpipe so as to discourage would-be sitters.

These are the human version of the spikes they put on windowsills and lintels to keep pigeons from roosting.

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Hundredth anniversary of the General Slocum disaster. Packed to the rafters with members of an immigrant *bund* and their families bound for an excursion to Long Island, the boat caught fire in the East River at roughly 90th Street. The captain, afraid of trying to dock at the nearest piers because of oil tanks close by, headed full steam for Brother Island. But the fire spread so rapidly that the boat, newly coated with extremely flammable paint, was soon engulfed in flames. Passengers jumped off en masse, some of them seizing preservers so old they had lost all buoyancy. Of the 1,300 on board, fewer than three hundred swam to shore or were pulled from the water alive.

In the immediate aftermath, a pier at 23rd Street – today a marina and heliport – was turned into a temporary morgue and scores of wagons loaded with ice converged on the scene. During the next few days, several people who had lost their entire families killed themselves. In the next months came the virtual abandonment of Kleindeutchland on the Lower East Side. With so many neighbors and loved ones gone, few could imagine continuing to live in a place so filled with grief. The greater part of the German-American community moved northward to Yorkville. Downtown, their places were taken by more recent immigrants, mostly Jews from Eastern Europe.

In 1911, a blaze at the Triangle Shirtwaist company forced scores of young women, mostly Jewish and Italian, to leap from the windows of the sweatshop at Greene Street and Washington Place to their deaths on the street below. Thus, after only seven years, was the carnage of the General Slocum displaced in the city's collective mythology of disasters.

June 17

Drip by drip. The 9/11 Omission holds its last day of hearings, squeezes its droplets of obscurity into the great pool of ignorance.

Juneteenth

Is it just you, or have strangers' faces growing more mask-like? Do you appear opaque to them? You know you've responded to your perception by scanning rather than looking directly at folks' eyes. Especially if they've got headphones on or are talking on a cell phone. Open and present. You'd like to be, but it's exhausting. And you feel foolish into the bargain.

That said, good conversation this a.m. with the woman at Table 5, a philosophy professor from Berkeley – an American Pragmatist, whatever species that is – with an unusual Irish first name that slips out of your mind before it gets a toehold in memory. She's in town to visit her new granddaughter. Ah, you say, you'll look forward to talking with her again. Not this trip, she's heading home tomorrow. But she'll be back again for the Republican Convention.

You shudder inwardly. Neither you nor Katie have any inclination to be in town for the Convention, especially since you live only six blocks from Madison Square Garden, well inside the area that will effectively be placed under lockdown for the duration. In fact, if all goes as hoped, you three will get outa Dodge as soon as Gwen finishes a high school prep program that'll eat up most of July. It's billed as an opportunity for kids who are bright, but not math geniuses, to get a leg up on the entrance exam for Stuyvesant, Bronx Sci. and Brooklyn Tech. Though you doubt she'll apply to any of them, the level of study promised seems a virtue in itself. Maybe. It could also turn out to be one of those pointlessly draconian exercises served up by the Board of Ed. that serves to raise the anxiety bar for no compelling reason other than to give parents with Ivy League aspirations for their kids in public school the sense that they've positioned them competitively. Or it could be something in between. One way or another you'll soon find out. In New York, everything, even pre-schooling, comes down to a real estate game of the mind. Location, location, bloody location.

No sooner has the philosopher waved through the window and set off across Ninth Avenue than you remember her name: Markate. And then an image strikes you funny: the Berkeley hills emptying out, the Bay Area on the march to rescue New York. People of good will from around the country converging to try to do what we cannot, or will not, do ourselves. If ever a situation cried out for a general strike this is it. But look at you. Apart from gripe to a few friends, what have you done?

June 21

Sick with frustration. How do you rationalize not standing up on your hind legs – not publicly stating that *over your dead body* will the Republicans march in to claim their victory? What would you do, jump down in front of a limo? Throw your bicycle through the window of Cheney's car if you could get close enough to it? Infantile bullshit, but it's all you can come up with.

Or is it that you've become habituated to a cowardice that's crept up on you by degrees? Afraid of pain and being hauled off to jail? Sure, everyone is. No more than anyone else do you want to end up in an orange boiler suit with a bucket on your head. Kneeling, hands behind your back – cuffed not even with metal but something that looks like a glorified plastic bag tie. That's the currency now, pops.

But what happened to you? You used to be an organizer – and a creative one too. Got in cops' faces. Made a kind of militant theater that got the blood up. Does being married, and having a kid mean you exempt yourself from the directives of your own conscience? Did your bit in the sixties and now it's someone else's turn? Looks like.

Or is this risk-aversion just as much or more a failure of the imagination that's personal and at the same time way beyond you? An incapacity to conceive of any form of resistance that would actually matter today? No matter how you push your mind to grasp for an image that might, with courage, turn concrete, you feel nothing but an enervation of the spirit – one that stretches way beyond you – an undermining of the wills of those who given other circumstances might struggle with you. Back then there was no shortage of conviction either in yourself or those around you. But when and how will you, and the sweet and arty middle-aged folks who hang around Le G. get off the dime? *There's a permanent crease in your right and wrong. Stand!* It's a wonder you can bear to look one another in the eye.

Idiot wind, It's a wonder that we still know how to breathe.

June 23

Officially summer, but pure, springlike after yesterday's deluge. The neighborhood's taking some hits. Last night around nine, someone was shot to death getting off an uptown #1 subway at 23rd Street. His assailants escaped, blended in with

the fleeing crowd. This morning, on 23rd just east of Eighth, a westbound taxi combusted. Coming home from the café, you saw the skeleton of the car still steaming and it drew you across the street, to observe at closer hand the sagging tires, the blackened, heat-bubbled once-yellow hood. Firetrucks galore, some of the bravest rolling up their hoses even as others dragged charred seat cushions and bits of partition to the gutter with long, steel-hooked poles that look like medieval implements of war. EMS vans, if any there were any are gone. Read about it in tomorrow's *Post* assuming there are victims.

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Early afternoon. Cab carcass has been hauled away. Two hours gone and it's as though nothing happened. You and Katie head for the #1. Descend the same steps that scores of panicked folks rushed up less than one rotation of the globe ago. Up out of the subway at 79th Street. Katie to a meeting, you to wait for her in the park, perhaps to doze on the lawn by the pond beneath the Belvedere Castle. Past the Museum of Natural History. There, still at his post at the top of the stairs, facing out from under the grand columned portico, Teddy Roosevelt, equestrian, an Indian flanking him on his left, a Negro on his right. Though Teddy rides high and his companions walk, all three men stare straight forward, eyes fixed on the future.

When you were a kid, the view as you left through the main entrance struck you as funny and a bit risqué. Right in front of you and slightly up, the horse's cast bronze hindquarters complete with green-patina'd balls. And today you wonder: if someone took a big stick and prodded that horse just right, would it leap clear across the park – crash down onto Fifth Avenue, or better yet through the ceiling of the Met's "primitive" wing? Would the Indian and Negro grasp onto Teddy's stirrups and take the trip with him? Or do the pair of them stay rooted to their plinth and watch the Rough Rider fly?

July 2 – Midmorning

Department of Never Again: breakfast at Le Pain Quotidien up on Seventh Avenue just south of the Central Park. Delightful conversation with Clive, but $9 for a

piteously dry blueberry danish and weak coffee – Lord love a duck. If you broke your daily bread there, *you'd* go broke 'ere many a sun had set.

Clive heads for his office and you amble downtown. At the corner of 58th street, a man in a yarmulke sits on a crate beneath a canary yellow beach umbrella, a shopping cart heaped with his belongings close to hand. Portly and of middle years, he glances about with an air of bemused, knowing detachment. Propped behind a container for offerings, his placard bears a Star of David and the words SHALOM HUNGRY JEW.

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Early in the afternoon "the first of several memos… regarding the impact of the Republican National Convention on our community" slides under your door.

Authored and distributed by Penn South management, it contains several bulleted points, among them: "Be sure to shop for extra food and water (as well as any necessary medicines) before the conventions begins," and "If at all possible, stay inside during the times the convention is in session." You are also advised to carry a photo ID at all times "to show police in case access to your street or building is limited."

Reproduced on the reverse side of the flyer, a press release on Bloomie's official letterhead which reads like a straight transcription of his verbal utterances:

"The Republican National Convention going [sic] to attract thousands of people to the City during a slow time in the summer, giving our economy a $250 million dollar shot in the arm and creating several thousand jobs in the process. The event will require some street closures, but that's nothing new for our city which hosts so many public events each year. …If you aren't in the area around the Garden, you probably won't even know the convention is in town – unless a delegate asks directions. In that case, do as Ed Koch says and *Make Nice.*"

Not only will you not be around the Garden, you'll be taking off for Europe the day after Gwen's done with her summer program. Truth is you act on the motive to split New York whenever you've got the coincident means and opportunity. But the Convention has brought into even higher relief the degree to which, over time, you've de-invested in your city. Fast vanishing any real sense of engagement in what goes down here, apart from day-to-day family life and the circumstances of your friends.

Which is a bloody weird way to feel given that you've lived, if not built, the better part of a life on this island. It's one great bush of ghosts. Apart from the topography of growing up, you've communed, crashed, rented, squatted, been hired, fired and quit all over town. That was the corner where you met so-and-so. There's the bar where you broke up. That's the subway stop in which – it goes on and on. Drove a cab, ran a business, met and married Katie, started a non-profit, toured the city with a band, played a dozen clubs. Had Gwen, near on twelve years ago. Saw her born, caught her – right up there on the eighth floor of St. Vincent's, that corner room. A couple of hours later, Katie asleep and cradling Gwen, you went downstairs to grab a hamburger and walked out and into a wall of heat. A young Dominican guy took your order at the coffee shop across Greenwich Avenue. Skinny in his oversized white shirt. You shot the breeze while he packed your take-out and he owned as how he couldn't hardly stand it, so many beautiful girls passing by half-dressed – and he couldn't touch them. Ah, you wuz young once yourself. Back upstairs to watch the two people you've loved most breathe. Not in unison, but somehow in tandem.

You'd think, all things being equal, that living so much history here would add up to enmeshment. But all things are not equal so it doesn't compute, and it occurs to you now, in the writing itself, that your sense of psychic exile may be bound up with Jack pulling up stakes for Vermont when you were sixteen. The prodigal father who never returns. No feast, no fatted calf. So, New York Son, where does this leave you? What kind of inheritance can you claim? Or is there some other question you ought to be asking?

July 3 – 5:31 am

When all else fails, sleep too, the dawn is still the dawn. The sun, up but invisible from your angle, turns the windows of one building into a matrix of copper jewels, casts a cluster of downtown towers in the chromas of Ferrara, shrinks them to scale of a hill town and thus to something you could hold in a picture frame, or walk a winding path up toward in a heat-drenched afternoon. From the summit you'd look out over the valley.

That range of oranges, and the green of so many roof gardens, gone lush with the summer after a wet spring. See how the elements forgive our thoughtlessness? The

sunrise so like dusk that has somehow remained alive with possibilities not yet exhausted, whose infancy reminds you of how much is still fresh, coming on unexpected, still undecided.

Over behind the Empire State, a bank of clouds so sumptuous you could sit on them, and from that vantage view the Hudson, shimmering all the way to Saratoga.

A breeze blows through the partly open window. Katie still asleep, that regular breathing you hope means peace inside, covers tossed aside. You feel the cool against your back, but it's on your calves that goosebumps rise. A gull glides north over Eighth Avenue, maybe five floors below and just behind it, another gull, a few meters lower. Look downtown again. It's all brightening now, but the lights on the spires keep flashing to warn off planes that can now see them perfectly well. And the beacon atop Met Life fights a losing battle with the ambient glow in the east. The lights don't understand and their timers are indifferent to qualities. Someone has to turn them on and off. Someone who knows day from night, even in dark times.

July 6 – Early Evening

A subtle turning, a softening in the air. This atmosphere is one to remember. Down into the subway to Writing X. Comes the train. A young woman in a summer dress sits across from you. She's thin with straight hair, bangs, high cheekbones, slight toothgap. Deepset eyes, limpid and anxious. No visible tattoos or piercings. You get the uncanny sensation that she's doesn't belong to the here and now, that she's a time traveler from the 60s – the last unguarded age.

July 12 – 59th Street Subway Station

Rainy midafternoon. A strange tribe of midwestern-looking young folk, a dozen or so of them, canvas the platform, loosely constellated around a card table above which a banner hangs: PRAYER STATION.

The youthful evangelists wear bright red smocks the same color as the banner and emblazoned with an emblem of clasped hands circled by the words *Prayer Changes Everything*. They hand out little flyers and attempt to engage anyone who takes one in conversation. Chatting amiably away two columns down from you, a sweet-faced Latino woman of middle years and a red-smocked gal nearly twice her size smile at one

another with a warmth that makes you imagine their exchange as a sustained strewing of rose petals.

Suddenly, a sparrow streaks though the grating near the stairway up to Columbus Circle, followed in rapid succession by three others. They've found a bit of stepped-on pretzel which they peck at and reduce considerably in the time it takes the train lights to sweep against the steel columns and the subway to shudder into the station. At a cue, shared among them but invisible to you, the sparrows rocket back out the grating they flew in through, fast and accurate, into the open, misty air.

July 15

Celebrated Gwen's twelfth last night with a party at Melinda's loft. From the head of the great distressed wood plank table Gwen presided with easy grace over a company of six of her best girlfriends. There they sat, ranged three to a side, in the chairs Melinda designed from big steel pipe sections, plushly upholstered in green. It all looked so extraordinary that at one point you exclaimed: "There it is, the future board of directors!" and Stephanie, sitting at Gwen's right hand, turned, smiled and said, "You're fired!"

"Absolutely!" you replied, that scenario being your greatest hope – the unseating of your godawful generation by Gwen's hopefully wiser cohort. But a second later it struck you that Stephanie was not asserting a prerogative of liberated youth, but rather role-playing off the punchline of Donald Trump's "reality" TV show, *The Apprentice*. Where your wish-fulfillment had read militancy, she'd flipped you a media trope.

Mostly though you stayed behind the scenes. And from that vantage, the party seemed, as it progressed, increasingly like a rite of passage. Augmented by the shadowy, primal atmospherics of Melinda's space the sense overcame you of Gwen's emergence into womanhood – and this on a more than symbolic level. And in the funny way that liminal events can cluster, yesterday constituted a threshold of a different sort – the closing on Wilma's house. Deal done. Katie and her brother's childhood home now belongs to another family, and the burden of the property's off Katie, she's clear of it. Whew. All these many months, you've had a kind of daydream image of her carrying the house on her back, literally – the whole big white structure with its wrap-around porch – her family hanging out the windows complaining about

the rough ride they were getting and warning her to watch her step and not drop them. A big burden gone. Already she feels lighter, yet more present.

July 17

Still a city of wonders: a brand new gold coast booming on the far west side between the meat district and Tribeca – a host of conversions and brand new buildings. The most stylish, by far, are the twin-ish residential Richard Meier towers on West Street flanking Perry, their footprints either trapezoidal or non-rectangular parallelograms, it's hard to tell. In any case, they're airily designed, sixteen or so stories tall, and their copious glass strikes the eye with a gentle blue-green chroma that makes one wonder, for an instant, if the Hudson hasn't morphed into a tributary of the Mediterranean. They've an air of Beirut, in its modernist heyday, before the shells. Truly, this is the only housing you've seen, new or old, in New York that has ever aroused in you an undeniable desire to Possess. You've always loved the look of the classic brick West Village Federal townhouse – the kind that Frank lives in – but it's not as though you readily imagine yourself inhabiting one. These buildings, on the other hand, make you feel as though, in some cosmic way, you "ought" to live there. Clearly they were designed with you in mind, barring the unfortunate detail about the money.

You pass the Meier towers, still in the last stages of construction, every weekday morning and afternoon. That's when you and Gwen ride together along the bicycle path to and from Stuyvesant High School. The program she's in there, the Special High Schools Initiative – which she's nicknamed "sushi" – goes on for another couple of weeks and biking along the river to the top of the Battery Park City, and sometimes to the Battery itself after school, is a ritual you've come to savor. So far, it's only been once or twice that rain has forced you underground.

Most afternoons you stop midway home to buy her an ice from the concession at the foot of Pier 45 at 10th Street. While she eats it, you sit on a gently sloping grass embankment watching people broil, yoga stretch, juggle. Toddlers negotiate the grassy ground then land, unexpectedly on their diapered bottoms. Yellow water taxis dock, take on passengers and motor on. When you swing back onto the bike path heading north, you get a good, fairly straight-on look at these posh buildings, and despite living in an objectively terrific apartment, up wells a real estate lust for the fabulous,

esthetically gorgeous and spanking new. These buildings have called out an aspect of yourself that stays mostly dormant. So much of your life has been a perfection of the art of *not* wanting things. Yet here you are, salivating like Pavlov done rung the bell. Contradiction, my man, contradiction.

• • •

Before NBC was the National Broadcasting Company, it was the National Biscuit Company which, at some inspired corporate moment, collapsed its mouthful into Nabisco. NBC's biscuits were once made in and, distributed from a two great brick buildings, one which took up a whole square block between 15th and 16th Streets, Ninth to Tenth Avenues, in heart of the west side industrial area, through which the High Line railway ran.

Long down at the heels, the NBC building became, in the late '90s, another runaway real estate success story, with the upper stories converted to office space and the vast ground floor of the easternmost building becoming home to the Chelsea Market. Pretty much anything edible may be had there: the widest range of imported Italian products north of Grand Street and south of Arthur Avenue, all sorts of baked goods, wines, fish, meats – mostly too expensive – but also fresh, reasonably-priced fruits and vegetables. Throw a florist, newsstand, café and juice bar into the mix, add it all up and you've got a kind of playful, upscaled version of the old public produce markets – an indoor "retail platform" that feels genuinely urban.

Partly the Market succeeds at this social level because it is essentially food-themed – no presence of national chains, nor consumer crap on sale – and then there's the way the space is organized. The shops face onto a broad central corridor that runs, or rather meanders – a bit like a pre-grid downtown street – through the entire east-west axis of the building and features, more or less at the center, a dramatic fountain consisting of an industrial pipe, ten inches or so in diameter, hung horizontally along the ceiling and gushing water into a well-like declivity in the floor.

Though flanked by stores, the area around the fountain forms a kind of miniature square, complete with stone benches that serves as a focus for art exhibits and community events, among them a regular Saturday afternoon gathering of Tango

aficionados. It's a rare treat indeed to watch the dancers, some costumed to the teeth, as they perform their stylized rite of passion amidst farm carts overflowing with hundreds of pumpkins.

What most Tangoists, shop patrons and passers-though probably aren't aware of though, is that one of the Market's upstairs neighbors is the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Displaced from their headquarters in 7 World Trade Center when it collapsed – or as seems increasingly likely, was imploded several hours after the twin towers came down – the FBI relocated two miles north to the NBC building. Thus the more than esthetic purpose for the inch thick glass on the ground floor doors and windows. Needless to say, anyone seeking to put a hurting on the agency would probably cause collateral damage to the Market as well. But this is the brave new Gotham, wherein a former biscuit plant, gussied up in a now-hot neighborhood may achieve the most elastic articulation yet of that wonderfully ductile real estate concept "mixed use."

Beyond delirious the image that while you're shopping for squid ink pasta, or red potatoes, or drinking the best espresso in New York, two levels up they're sweating a confession out of an Al-Qaeda suspect. Naw, you're outa your mind – that's impossible.

• • •

New York City's annual budget: $47.2 billion. Starting next year, shortfalls of $4 billion. Chump change.

July 22

Manhattan street kills noted while biking round the neighborhood these past three days: one flattened cat, black; two rats; pigeon.

July 29

The city tear by tear shredding its social fabric. Everywhere an awful sense of entitlement, as though the implicit democracy of urban life has deteriorated to the point where it can only manifest as aggression. In the rain, for example, a strange, irreducible

calculus. It's a small thing, but telling. Two people approach one another. The one with the smaller umbrella will be expected to yield to the one with the larger. The one with the larger will make no attempt to tilt or lift their umbrella, they've got right of way, like an ocean liner, or an oil tanker. Coming through.

Out biking, an SUV will hang on your tail and honk, then roar past, missing you by a coat of paint, umbraged that so annoying a thing as a two-wheeled creature should even exist. You wish you were making this up. That it hadn't come to this pass. But it has. It is not as though there are no longer gestures of kindness and civility, but these seem evermore perfunctory. And anachronistic, like an ancient household object held up by a tourgide at a colonial restoration – a thing outmoded, to be regarded with bemusement, and perhaps a little contempt. *Now can anybody guess what this is? A warming pan – that's right – very good!*

And there's the nub of it – from where you sit. Why should your city be immune to the global epidemic of contempt – contempt as a psychic refuge from helplessness and fear, an extension of greed and brutality spiced with the stupid – of disposability and thoughtlessness, of detachment from everything except *my stuff* and trinkets, of which one makes a fetish. Lord knows you don't want to see yourself this way, nor your sisters and brothers, yet how can you not? It's in your face and all around – the consumption-driven acting out. At every turn, a cynical twist – a farcical repetition of the fabled real estate deal: the Algonquins scammed by the clever Dutchman. We trade the very ground we stand on for a handful of bling.

August 1

Radio radio. You sit in Wilma's ex-car, waiting for it to be legal – doing the alternate-side-of-the-street dance when word comes over NPR that Big Black, chief of security of the Attica inmates in D-Yard died at the age of 71. Born September 11, 1933 to Ellen Pearl Smith, cotton picker and daughter of a slave. But that birthdate's only recently confirmed, since the state of South Carolina never officially recorded his birth.

Some quick arithmetic. 2004 minus 1971. Jesus – in just over a month, on September 9, it'll be thirty-three years since the uprising. Fast and vivid as any memory-tumble set off by the smell of madelines come the textures of the exact moment you heard. Perched on a ladder up in Rutland, VT, painting the weather-thinned

shingles of your father's house, the radio you'd balanced on the sill of an open window offered up the news that the State Police assault had gone down. You weren't really listening, rather frozen, half-craned round to watch a girl you'd never seen before walk past on the opposite side of the street. Wow. Unreal. Wait a minute – who walked in Rutland when you could drive? Was she a mirage from New York? Midback-length hair – not some Martian do – cut-off jeans, shirt tied in front – no one dressed that way here. Not so much out of Puritanism as a deep commitment to boredom. Squaresville. Attica. Holy shit. Thirty-six dead. What about Robin? Ran to the phone and made a bunch of expensive calls to New York. Pay Jack back later. Fuck it, he could dock your pay if he ever decided to pay you. No, no one knew anything.

You couldn't have said it in so many words at the time, but the days, not so long past, when you were close with Robin, saw him as a kind of brilliant, screwy older-brother-you-never-had seemed like they belonged to a different geologic epoch. You'd tripped with Robin – helped guide his virgin flight on hallucinogens – and lots more besides. He'd stood up for you in particular situations, and he genuinely appreciated your artwork. You can tell when someone really gets it, allows themselves an unguarded enthusiasm. That night or the next – you remember it was dark out – your ex called to say Robin had survived.

It took years for you to figure out that when Governor Rockefeller broke off negotiations and ordered the prison retaken, the long counter-revolution began. Slowly the knowledge began to creep into your bones that despite the brave slogans – *Attica Means Fight Back!* – the spine of the movement had been broken.

And here we are now. Who'll drink cup of kindness to Big Black tonight? And Auld Lang Syne.

August 3

On the verge of flying to Europe – fourth summer in a row. You began migrating regularly just pre-9/11. Since those days, you've heeded even more zealously than before Kafka's exhortation to *keep to your book* – move the words around little by little however much your inner furies drive you toward silence. Convinced, finally, your writing isn't therapy, yet nonetheless has granted some presumptive claim to sanity. And what if on your August 2001 rambles you hadn't spent a morning at

Père Lachaise and seen with your own eyes Richard Wright's niche – number 848, with a handpainted sign planted below: YOUR BROTHERS REMEMBER. Colette's gravesite too, and Wilde's, and Michelet's jaw-dropping marble cenotaph – the winged muse of history leaping from his supine breast, triumphant? What if you hadn't found Jabès's house on rue de l'Épée de bois, or the café on rue de Tournon where Wright used to hang out. What if you hadn't made that pilgrimage to the resting places of your ancestors who also kept to their books?

Was "before" really so before? Back in '86, in a whole 'nother era, before Gwen was even an idea, you and Katie got flush enough to clear your debts and head across the pond. One day in Paris, you passed by a mansion surrounded by a sloping lawn, guards in camo patrolling, staring out warily through the black iron fence palings. M-16's slung at the ready. Whoa, that's a place to steer clear of. Whatta vibe! So you sat in a bench off the Champs Elysée and checked your map. Sure enough, your very own embassy.

2 NOUVELLES DE NULLE PART

August 5 – Air India to London

On the movie screen, a computer-generated cartoon character named Stan the Exercise Man instructs you on how to avoid deep vein thrombosis, a.k.a. "Tourist Class Syndrome."

August 10 – Oxford – Midmorning

Port Meadow, the last remaining preserve of Common Land in England. Cows and horses freely graze upon it, and of course anyone can walk here where ever and whenever they like. In winter sometimes, the Thames partially floods it and several hundred acres turn to skating rink. Remains of iron, and even bronze age settlements. Still possible to trace the outlines of livestock pens dating back perhaps a hundred generations. Despite the boundaries clearly visible on the map, when you set out to explore it on foot, the Commons seems as though it could go on for ever.

August 11 – Kelmscott Manor

Walking round the grounds of William Morris's home, now turned museum, Gwen gets a nettle sting. Seeing her distress, a woman on the staff, about your age, searches along the bank of the stream for some dock leaves and finding a patch, pulls one off and plasters it to Gwen's knee. Remarkable how quickly the irritation vanishes.

In the bookshop, pick up a copy of *News from Nowhere* which you've somehow missed reading all these years. The narrator, after awakening in a utopian future, rows up from London, through a transfigured landscape cleansed of industry, to this "resting place" on the Upper Thames. Flash back on a quote of Morris's you dug up for your talk at Byrdcliffe last year. In 1884, as the black smoke of a thousand factories engulfed the countryside, he'd imagined "Wonderful days a-coming, when all shall be better than well."

August 12 – Hay-on-Wye, Wales

A town full of bookstores. Off a kiosk packed with mouldering paperbacks, a battered volume practically leaps into your hands. Hoaxes. In 1824 a rumor went round that Mayor Allen was worried about the accumulated weight of the new buildings at the south end of Manhattan. The solution: saw across the island horizontally below the surface and turn it round so the Battery faces north. Broadsheets circulated showing the amazing, elaborately engineered tools to be employed in the heroic endeavor. On the appointed day, numerous contractors and thousands of workmen converged where the earthworks were to begin. Somewhere, someone was laughing up their sleeve.

August 14 – Bath – Late Afternoon

You pause to look across the expanse of lawn – take in as much of as you can of the sweep of Royal Crescent. A local woman, white-haired and eager to share with a visitor, engages you in conversation. Some of the houses, she says, were damaged by bombs during the war and a church destroyed over on the convex side of the arc. But why bomb Bath? you ask – it hardly seems strategic target. "Oh no, not at all strategic. It was what we used to call a Baedeker raid. They went after anything that rated three stars."

August 15 – Oxford – Afternoon

The sign says PRIVATE, but you walk straight past it and into the quad at University College. Then through a passageway and into a second quad. A well-dressed, well-fed fellow of middle years and his lady eye you as they exit through the door onto High Street, but don't raise an alarm. You've come on a tip from Eric B. who studied at Oriel in the eighties. In the middle of the quad, two men in gardening clothes, neither of them young – one pink-cheeked and bony, the other a squarely-built fellow with the air of a Rastafarian – stand conversing, leaning on their shovels. You chance it and approach them. "Excuse me, I understand there is a statue of Shelley here. Can you tell me where I might find it?"

The Rastaman looks at you sidelong. His pink-cheeked companion replies, "I'm not certain, but it's very likely through that doorway there." You thank him and follow

where he points. At the corner of the quad, you open the door and enter a narrow vestibule which gates onto a circular room not much larger than a dozen feet in diameter. There he is, sunk a yard below grade and screened off by an iron gate: Percy B. in pure white marble, naked and supine upon a bier-like altar. Newly, impossibly, romantically dead. Life sized. Kneeling before and beneath his figure, a winged muse. Sculpted in deep green stone, she gestures to the heavens with one hand and in the other holds the poet's now-silent lyre.

A starry dome above, skylit by an oculus and clerestory window. Round about, the walls are inscribed with his words:

He has outsoared the shadow of the night.
Envy and calumny and hate and pain
And that unrest men miscall delight.

You return to the lane that runs behind the college and rejoin your family who've been waiting patiently for your return. Gwen, who pronounced him "a good poet" after you read her "Ozymandias" in a Hay-on-Wye bookshop, demands to see Shelley now that you've found him. Over Katie's misgivings about the potential consequences of trespassing, the lot of you troop back in. Shelley lies there still and since no one is around, you copy down another inscription:

The One remains, the many change and pass;
Heaven's light forever shines. Earth's shadows fly;
Life, like a dome of many-colored glass.

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Anarchist graffito on a Broad Street wall: a stylized heart shape with an A set inside it. Below, the words UTOPIA IS *IN YOU*.

August 17 – Museum of London

Was Jack Jewish, at least in part? Who knows? Semitic-looking for sure, and he seemed to have an affinity for Jews, not least your mother and her family. Darton lore has it that your paternal grandmother was a true Cockney. Born within the sound of

Bow bells and all that – though where precisely – well who knows that either? Perhaps your late aunt Nell knew, but you never asked her and now its too late. Raised nominally Episcopalian, Nell's cosmology probably came closer to a mix of self-invented paganism and Confucianism than anything else. She sent out intelligently-chosen and beautifully wrapped Christmas gifts, but you recall her speaking about the Solstice in an excited, almost conspiratorial way that got you thinking *that* had to be the real holiday. Once, late in her life, she told you over lunch that she wasn't worried about death – she was happy to imagine herself as an atom of hydrogen orbiting out in the universe somewhere.

Dartons as a whole, yourself included, aren't big backward-lookers. You get curious about ancestors from time to time, but that seems less fun than speculating about the future. So the genealogical bug has yet to bite. That said, the exhibit on Cockney London, and specifically the note that from the 1880s, large numbers of Jews from the Pale settled in the East End – 140,000 by 1905 – re-begs the question of Jack's, and therefore your and Gwen's gene pool. Great grandfather Isaac? Great grandmother Rachel? "I do not know," says the Great Bell of Bow.

A host of strange and telling social material here too. One engraving, dated 1817, shows a black street performer named Joseph Johnson. Crippled while serving as a merchant sailor and discharged, Johnson couldn't collect a pension or parish relief because he was a foreigner – probably born in the West Indies. So he got a living by mounting a model of a fully-rigged ship on his cap and performing a kind of dance on the street – propped up by a crutch and cane – bowing his head to simulate the action of the rolling seas.

Here too, evidence of world in which young people were seen as merely smaller, more exploitable creatures than their elders. Documents relating to the Society for Superceding the Necessity for Climbing Boys, an organization founded circa 1800. The society advocated the use of brushes on poles, instead of children armed with rags for cleaning chimneys. Their great success was an act of Parliament in 1834 forbidding the apprenticing of chimneysweeps younger than fourteen.

August 18

At St. George's Library, Windsor, you come upon Roberts' *Marchants' Map of Commerce*, 1671, which shows California as detached from the North American mainland, and the following inscription: "This California was in times past thought to be part of the Continent, and so made in all maps, but by further discoveries was found to be an islande." Another persistent error set right by the clearsighted Brits!

August 21 – Putney

Something's snagged you, a bad cold or bronchitis. A lung thing for sure. And this as you're revisiting the 9/11 material of these notes. Did the writing bring on the illness? Doesn't matter. Part of you says, you're crazy, you're 102 degrees, just get into bed and sleep. But the other, stronger part of you wants to burn through those days. Get it done. In a fever. In a blaze of sweat. Half-shielded by delirium.

August 22 – Westminster Abbey – 11:30 a.m.

You've come for Eucharist service. See the inside of this place without getting clobbered for the admission fee, and give Gwen a taste of High Church. Gorgeous choir in the midst of singing *Glory Be to God on High* when your coughing kicks in – pretty bad for a moment before you manage to get it under control. A hand touches your shoulder. In the aisle, next to you stands a steward, holding out a cup of water. Perhaps he's Indian, certainly not a whitefella. His face wears smile that can only be described as real. A small kindness. The water helps.

Absurdly banal sermon. Your eyes stray about. Mounted on a column to your right, a bronze memorial bust of Blake, looking as mad as mad can be. You crane round, look at the statuary behind you. By some odd pull of gravity, you've ended up beside the poet's corner. The service over, you take a quick walk round. Pass the tombs of Chaucer, Byron, Dylan Thomas, Auden – a host of others. On the way out, down the nave, you pass the Newton cenotaph. Quite a piece of statuary: the wing'd Genius of the alchemist-turned-scientist springs forth from a transfigured world.

August 23

Not across, but under the Channel, via Eurostar to Paris. The exterior sides of your train, apart from the windows, have been covered in a kind of wallpaper graphic of every imaginable Disney character. Grotesque for starts, and totally unnerving.

But now, here you are in Montparnasse walking down one of the most beautiful alleys in creation, rue des Thermopyles. Mind the dog poop on the cobblestones, gaze at the overflowing windowboxes. Read the walls. Neighborhood notices and spontaneous artworks. At intervals, a stenciled graffito: *World Without Bush*.

August 25 – Midafternoon

Sixty years ago, give or take an hour or so, the tricouleur flew from atop the Tour Eiffel and General von Choltitz was taken as a prisoner to Hotel Meurice, where he formally signed the surrender of the city to General Leclerc.

Today, just before a cloudburst drives the crowd under every available awning, you watch down the rue des Lavanderies as a procession of olive green Sherman tanks belching clouds of petrol exhaust rumbles along the quai de la Mégisserie. On the turret and flanks of each *blindé*, some painted with American insignias, others with French, perch several men in military uniform. For some reason, the tanks are rolling backwards.

August 27

As they have since the anniversary of D-Day on June 6, the pages of *Libération* continue to chronicle the advance of the Allies three score years ago. Recent stories have concentrated on the FFI's (Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur) battle for Paris. Two days from now, the Republicans will officially occupy New York City – a city that, like Jerusalem, truly belongs to the world – in order to demonstrate their unquestionable hold on power. There is no Arc de Triomphe for them to march beneath, yet their coming signifies an act of conquest nonetheless. The populace has been admonished, by domestic Vichyists of every stripe – including ex-Mayor Koch, nominal Democrat and staunch Bush supporter – to "make nice" and yield the city up obligingly to those who've wounded it and insult it still.

You're here. Ought you be there instead? Four summers now you've traveled abroad – always incorporating a Paris sojourn into your trip – in an attempt to wean

yourself from sympathetically – you want to say symbiotically – tracking New York through its every sigh and murmur. For several weeks per year, you've deliberately sat out several weeks of your city's dance.

Then too, since the mid-'90s – apart from a frenzy of media interviews and public appearances in the days immediately following 9/11 – you've done bloody little, coasting by at a level of cultivated dispassion that feels ever less vital. What to do? You've waited for the emergence of some sort of resistant strain to join up with, and felt disgust and disappointment that nothing's materialized. As a bulwark against utter alienation, you turned to writing about your city's life in relation to your own. If you sensed the presence of any sort of solidarity, even incipient, that you might align yourself with, there's no question about it, you'd be home now.

What you haven't tried these past years is moving beyond the cold comfort of collective victimhood and actively rattling the cage. When you return, it will be nearly three years to the day since you watched plane number two hook round and make its plunge into the south tower. Whatever happens at the convention will have happened. The city will be what it is. You'll reset your watch to New York time and call it Year 0.

In the course of deciphering *Libération*, you've had to look up a host of words, among them *rappeler*. It's a goodie, full of evocation – meaning variously to call back, call up, to recall, to remind somebody of something. And then there's the reflexive form *se rappeler*: to remember, to recall, to recollect.

August 30

Libération estimates the number of protesters in the march against *l'occupation de l'Irak et de Manhattan* at 300,000 – a number you sense is conservative, even for a leftist daily.

August 31

What to preserve and what to efface? What to protect and what to dismantle?

In 1793, when the eradication of the symbols of the *ancien régime* was at its height, a revolutionary journalist wrote: "Soon it will at last be possible for a republican to walk through the streets of Paris without running the risk of damaging his eyes by

having to see all those emblems, all those degrading attributes of royalty, which have been carved or painted on almost every public building or private house."

The term for such attempts to undo visual reminders of the old order was coined the next year by Abbé Henri-Baptiste Grégoire – a revolutionary who somehow managed to retain his common sense and humanity: *vandalisme*.

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At a cyber café on rue Raymond Losserand, you check the *Times* online. In the Metro section, a story about Republican delegates shocked by protestors getting in their faces, making not so nice. Filled with gratitude for the saturation level of cops shielding the delegates, Joseph Kyrillos, Republican chairman for the garden state gushes: "New York City is a fortress and I love it!"

September 1

Welcome that month.

After considerable experimentation, you've found your a.m. café: Le 57. Not the equivalent of Le G. – nothing is – but the atmosphere feels a lot more casual and inclusive than any other place you've found. A couple of blocks from Levent's apartment on the south side of rue Pernety a few yards west of the rue Raymond Losserand, the 57's front is entirely glass. If you sit on the banquette side of the table closest to the sidewalk, you can take in what's happening at the intersection and on Pernety, even behind, you via mirrors that run up the windowframe and the bar opposite.

The young woman who runs the place mornings has an edge to her. Dark haired, with very pale skin, full, almost mouée'd lips and small, snaggled front teeth, she chews her cuticles as she waits by the espresso machine for the cup to fill, delivers your café allongé with a swagger that plays up her navel stud and, as she turns back to the bar, flashes the tattoo on her upper arm: a rotund devil, bright red, brandishing a black pitchfork. Four days now and she anticipates your order as you walk in and offers a smile and a wave as you leave.

The ambience yes, and the coffee is good, but the main draw of Le 57 is the light. At five to nine the interior lies in shadow. At 9:02, the sun pops up behind the chimney stacks of the buildings on Losserand and casts its beneficent rays with such intensity that you have to squint. And the angle's such that it turns shadows of the ashtray and your cup and saucer into fantastic architectural silhouettes on the simulated mahogany tabletop.

The sound system pumps an American funk-jazz mix that somehow feels created for export to *trop cool* Paris cafés. *Maybe I'm invisible to the world* warbles the soul chanteuse. This followed by a catchy dance tune organized around a rap refrain you couldn't make up if you tried: "Everybody, everybody – get into it, let's get stoopid – get retarded [a beat] Let's get retarded in here!" Repeat, repeat.

Nine fifteen, and the globe has rotated to the point where the sun hits a bit more obliquely. Go Pegasus. Light muted enough to read *Libération*. Find out what's happening with the two French journalists taken hostage in Iraq.

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Heading to the Metro, thence to Versailles. Bought bread, a half wheel of Reblochon cheese, a sackful of mirabelle plums. All that's missing is a tomato. Stop outside Chez Rachid, the épicerie just down rue de l'Ouest near the corner of rue Pernety. "Pour aujourd'hui," you say. Rachid picks a ripe one out of the basket for you. He's got something of Bassry's solid, genial affect. If you were going to be around a little longer, you'd find out where he's from. And learn the name of the young woman at the 57, and the Chinese guy who runs the place at night and with whom you exchange waves when you pass. But the tomato, the tomato is excellent.

You lie on the grass with a view down Louis XIV's immense canal. Gwen leans her back against your legs and draws in her sketchbook. Katie lies perpendicular to you, rests her head in the hollow of your stomach. Close your eyes. Sound of steel-shod hooves. You crane your neck back and glimpse them upside-down, two immense horses, a brown one and a dappled gray, drawing a wagon along the path thirty yards or so behind your head. In the distance, an indescribably green treeline feathers the

sky. Severe clear, not a cloud in it – the hue of early autumn, though the air still tastes of summer.

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All forms distinct. Hardly a black line around anything.

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Barbe-à-papa – daddy's beard = cotton candy.

September 2

Wonderful the confidence with which Gwen rode her bike yesterday over the bumpy, gravel-strewn paths of Versailles toward Le Petit Hameau. All that cycling down and back along the river to Stuyvesant stood her in good stead. You chained up the bikes and the three of you roamed about the fantastical arcadian potemkin village with its thatched roofs, farm animals and little watchtower, until you found the spot where, on your first visit three years ago, Gwen tumbled into a half-hidden creek. Out she came, dripping wet, camera held high and dry in her hand, forearm encased in its purple fiberglass cast.

Truth to tell, all you want, most fervently, is to somehow continue to support her extraordinary spirit, and though that becomes less an active practice as her independence grows, at least you hope not to lumber her with your melancholy, your blue-devils, your blackhole fits of rage and unconsoled displacement, which more and more, you believe constitute a permanent feature of your inner geography – like certain fields along the coast of Ireland where one can fall through the earth, directly into the rocky sea.

Again, on this voyage, Gwen finds ways to teach herself French. Last summer, she devoured Malika BD's. This year, she's moved onto Mangas, intricately plotted visual novels of adolescent romance chock full of vernacular French brought over from the Japanese originals. Thanks to Levent, the opportunity to stay in his apartment and experience his neighborhood – a real neighborhood too and as varied a mix in its way

as Chelsea – you've gained a sense of what it might be like to live in Paris day-to-day. Added to which, this is the first time you've been here during the *rentré*, when Parisians return from their holidays. Crowds of workers replace tourists on the metro and one experiences a city suffused with the capillary action of its population *entier*. Part of the mix, as you observed the other day in the 7th Arrondisement, some truly terrifying families – one wants to say "prides" – of hardcore bourgeois. Certainly the most stone-cold looking people you've ever seen. You wouldn't want to be Morocco if they wanted a piece of it.

These past two days, the weather has decided to become summer at last, and you write this in the brightness of a day that promises to reach 28. It'd be a different story to slog through several months of bleak, sunless winters, late dawns and 3 p.m. nightfalls. Yes, you can see Paris as an alternative city more clearly now. You could do it, might even get competent with the language. But now that you've wrapped your head a bit more around the essential texture of living here might be, what rises up in you most strongly is your desire to come home. To claim your right of citizenship in your native city. What keeps you from that promised land, in exile from your birthplace? The cause can't be laid to the objectively unpleasant attributes of Manhattan alone: ubiquitous post-yuppies, seething with that Bushian combination of smugness, belligerence and greed; Hummers multiplying like paramilitary rabbits; anesthetic, real-estate obsessed liberals, so infantile, so complicit in their failure of nerve. Let alone the hordes of aggressively dysfunctional people one encounters nearly everywhere on the street – and this in contrast with the suburban pseudo-friendliness of the new breed of chain store clerks whose affect seems the product of some pharmaceutical wonder that renders them at once incompetent and eager to please.

True, true – all true. But it's taken this particular time in Paris to look your relationship to New York in the eye and recognize how, over the years, you've taken up, incrementally and without really being aware of it, your father's baseline disquiet and the drive that compelled him eventually to leave. All of which has less do with your own experience than it does with being a good son – carrying on your filial duty long after it could do either you or him any good. Immediate and ever-present as your sense of not-belonging feels, is it, at bottom, yours or his?

The fact is that for all your father's apparent social ease, his seemingly effortless fellowship with a good handful of the real McCoy artists and intellectuals of his day, he was working off inputs altogether different than the ones that animate you. Did he come to the Village in the '40s out of a genuine gravitation toward bohemian life, or because, at least in part, he was charged with acting out a family myth of his own – Jack: golden youngest sibling, steeped in private distress, yet embarrassingly gifted in every art? In which case, what more natural a dwelling place could there be for such a creature than this urban Parnassus? Or it may have been some combination of both. One way or the other, you got born just down the street from Washington Square at a moment when it lay at the heart of a particularly vital American intelligentsia cum subculture. The White Horse, Lion's Head, Cedar Tavern, Cookery, Marie's Crisis (a cabaret on the site where Thomas Paine died) – the list went on and on, all within a ten minute walk or five minute bicycle ride.

If only. If only Jack had been a generation younger, he might have found what he needed in the Village, maybe come out as gay or bisexual, joined an AA meeting more congruent with his personality – in short, lived with a lighter burden of shame and anguish. But that story is a moribund one. So the question is: how can you honor him in spirit, weave something new with the materials of the city he bequeathed you and leave, hanging in the closet, his heavy coat of misery? Now's the moment, as Gwen – beautiful and brilliant as her grandfather once was – comes into her own.

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A book cover glimpsed through the window of a kiosk: *DON'T SPEAK ENGLISH: PARLEZ GLOBISH* – the "O" in Globish a crudely-drawn Earth. *Avec les 1500 mots pour communiquer facilement dans le monde entier*. Rats, the kiosk is closed for lunch. Make a mental note to come back when it's open. You gotta know what those 1500 words are – the ones that'll allow you to speak with the whole wide world.

September 5

No tough girl on duty at Le 57 this early Sunday a.m. And no customers either apart from you. Rather a young fellow, Korean, possibly Chinese, who you imagine to

be the owner or manager. He's only seen you once before up close, a few nights ago when you, Katie and Gwen ate dinner there, but since then, every time you pass by of an evening he's there and waves as you pass. Today, as you step up and in to enter, he comes out from behind the bar to shake your hand.

After he brings your coffee, he hangs out in the doorway, hails acquaintances as they walk by. Over the course of a few minutes, you hear him offer salutations in French, Spanish and Arabic. On the CD player, Tracy Chapman succeeds some anguished Italian rocker, and as *Talking About a Revolution* kicks in, he turns and boogies about the café, singing along vigorously and on key. An elderly man enters – casts him a mystified look – stands by the bar and drinks his coffee. When the old fellow departs, the young one follows him outside and sits at a table. Sunlight so strong at this hour you can hardly look at your page for the glare off its whiteness. A pretty girl passes and his eyes follow her. You can tell he wants to say something, but he doesn't seem to know her so he keeps clammed up. She's got a boulangerie bag stuffed with bread clutched to her chest, but the white peace sign on her black tee shirt is so huge, that even partly obscured, there's no mistaking it for any other symbol.

He stays sitting out there, swings his foot in time to Tracy's *Baby can I hold you tonight?* – raises his voice to match her pitch. You've never seen anyone quite so transparently blend anxious energy, eagerness and longing into the same affect. Over the decades you've internalized "be cool" – that mantra of your 60s cohort. A pang of envy that no trace of his unguarded verve remains available to you.

He's back behind the bar when a man, he knows, Indian or Pakistani walks in. "Bonjour, Monsieur!" He fires up the coffee machine and in the instant his gaze shifts to the street and he returns the wave and shouted greetings of the of a young man and woman zipping by on a huge gray motorcycle. On the corner of Pernety and Losserand the sanitation men have turned on the fire hydrant and begun sweeping street refuse into the water rushing along the gutter. A man passes, walking a dog so fluffy and white that in the intense sunlight – for the space of an eyeblink – you fancy it's a sheep. Along the gutter the dog moseys, in water up to its forelegs, between the curb and the tires of parked cars, pausing now and again to lap from this impromptu and less-than-salubrious urban stream. His owner's not alarmed – if anything bemused. A thin, gray-haired woman skirts round man and beast. She moves so quickly you only glimpse her

blouse printed with wildflowers, and the vividly-hued bouquet she carries in one hand.

The *patron* remains behind the bar chatting with a new customer, one you didn't see come in, whose Arabic-inflected French carries with it a pervasive undertone of complaint. During pauses in the conversation, the young man scans the streets, chews a fingernail. Tracy sings: *If not now, then when?*

• • •

A few days ago, Katie found a Seamus Heaney collection in English on one of Levent's bookshelves. This morning you read a few poems, then his Nobel acceptance speech – quite a poetic work in its own right, and nearly epic in its intimate reach. Beneath the title and in type nearly large enough to compete with it, a blurb by Edward Mendelson from the *New York Times*: "Eloquently confirms his status as the most skillful and profound poet writing in English today."

There is again, the compulsory assault of the superlative, that thumping cultural bludgeon on the skull-base of reader and poet alike. Isn't it enough that Heaney is both skilled and profound, and joyously so? Must he also be the *most*? Absent this adjective, would Heaney himself, or his work, stand in some way diminished? Would the *Times* forfeit its power of cultural arbitrage if it refrained from defining artists and artworks along a scale of most to least?

Or is the necessity of that "most" aimed further down the great chain of being, to those who dwell happier in the knowledge that there are such things as penthouses, not just top floors, even if they only glimpse them from below and are never invited up.

All this apart from whether it makes any sense to deal with experience as a quantitative game. Is the best bread from Ladurée, or that neighborhood place around the corner? Or is the bread you eat when you haven't eaten for a week?

• • •

The poster, super-sized for display in the vaulted Metro stations, advertises the hardware and electronics chainstore Darty. An ancient, craggy-faced shepherd, central-casting down to his beret, sits perched atop a rock in a verdant green mountain pass

staring fixedly at his laptop screen while his flock, spread over the hillside and down in the valley, wanders about unheeded. Pretty funny stuff. But the headline pulls the humor of the image up short: *BIENVENUE DANS UN MONDE OÙ LA TECHNOLOGIE N'OUBLIE PERSONNE* – WELCOME TO A WORLD WHERE TECHNOLOGY FORGETS NO ONE.

• • •

On the way to Parc des Buttes Chaumont your Metro stops at Barbès-Rochechouart. The decaying ironwork of the elevated station has recently gotten a fresh coat of silver paint. But downstairs on the street, it looks as chaotic as three years past.

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"How do you like your chicken?" (*Le poulet, comment vous l'aimez?*) asks Col. Sanders, smiling off a poster in the Metro passageway. To which some magic-marker wielding wag has added the rejoinder: *BIEN MORT* – really dead.

September 6

Actually the date is September 9 and you're in a plane flying home via London. No inclination to write, you'd rather nap, but you're tired and wide awake at the same time. Better to transcribe from notebook to computer now. If you wait until you get back, you'll be looking at raw words from which the sensations have entirely fled. The texture of life is so different in the states, your Europe-self vanishes, as though he was never there at all.

• • •

"Could Bush actually win?" Gwen asked a couple of days ago as the three of you waited for the Metro. She sounded utterly baffled and distressed by the possibility that such a cosmically wrong thing might occur.

You've talked with her before about the 2000 voter fraud. This time you tell her that many of the voting machines, now electronic, are probably rigged, but fraud may not be necessary since Kerry is such a weak personality by comparison with Bush – particularly on TV. You say that Bush appears to have no fear, which opens up the opportunity to talk about the Siegfried myth. But you reiterate that you're not sure of the election's outcome – that reality is too full of variables for anyone to account for.

And you reprise the old Chinese story of the ancient farmer who consistently falls victim to misfortunes – his horse runs away, his son breaks his leg – all of which turn out to be blessings in disguise. The horse returns with a mare, the son cannot be drafted into to Emperor's army, and on and on. You're not sure this comforts her much, but if you have anything to communicate to her besides your love, it's that the uncertainty of the actuality "out there" corresponds in some way to the space that must be cultivated if one is to reserve the freedom to possess one's own mind at all. One never knows what associations, conscious or unconscious, will offer themselves up for use, for any purpose between amusement and survival.

On verra – we shall see. Invariably different than our expectations.

September 7

Kerry made, it seems, an immense mistake by focusing attention on his Vietnam performance as a defining mark of his candidacy. Not that his personal bravery or leadership skills were necessarily hyped or falsified. Rather the problem lies in reminding Americans that there was ever anyplace called Viet Nam, and worse, that they had any part in a war there.

For many people, the subject of Vietnam is irreconcilable with any sense of well-being and this part of our history must be kept crammed resolutely in the bag labeled *don't go there*. Had Kerry any real politics to offer, that would change everything – he wouldn't have to rely on the past, he could speak of a future. This would constitute a revolution of sorts. Lacking substance, he must hold out, in response to Bush's saber rattling, the prospect of cheap gas and carefree living, at no cost whatever to the American consumer. His only viable campaign strategy is thus to venture even deeper into fantasy than his opponent.

And, of course, the desperately frightened, well-meaning leftish folks of the "anyone but Bush" camp, could not, and still cannot grasp that the Democratic party game was definitively up twelve years ago when Clinton's appropriated the Republican agenda in order to win. It's awful to say, but the first thing is to forget about winning the election. The Democrats simply have to be abandoned in favor of building, from the ground up, a strong, unapologetic socialist party which has the capacity to challenge the whole system of corporate control. You cannot, as Kerry is attempting to do, claim political power by proposing that you're a marginally nicer guy than the monster you're running against. Faced with such a choice, folks will opt for the alpha-dog every time.

Certainly the ex-radicals who support Kerry ought to know better and stop weeping in their beer. Fear: the great dumber down.

Sad, sad, stupid and sad.

But when has an empire had the wisdom to rescale its self-perception, renounce its arbitrary power, and plant its soles back on earth?

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A journalist from a Latin American paper based in San Salvador emails requesting an interview. You respond by sending your French cell phone number.

Nearly three years on, and it isn't the same seizing up of the heart you've felt as the last two anniversaries drew closer – more a warm, almost hot tickle that spirals up from the pit of your stomach to your throat like the twirling of a mildly dyspeptic internal barber pole.

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Last day in Paris. Over the course of the afternoon, furious at having to do an interview at all, and frustrated by a series of miscues in contacting the journalist, your mood worsens to the point where you are so snarlingly angry and disconcerted you scarcely notice when Katie points out a beautiful tie on the rue de Rennes. You enter

the shop, zombie-like, barely aware of your surroundings and only when the critical mass of gorgeous fabrics seizes your attention by main force are you able to focus at all.

A half hour later you emerge onto the street bearing a shopping bag from *NODUS masculin latin* which contains a shirt, two ties and a belt. The saleswoman – young and unassumingly beautiful – gave you an apparently spontaneous discount and offered, as she accompanied you to the door, the deadpan observation that you speak French very well. In view of the time she spent making certain that each item chosen was the right one, you suspect that she may actually have meant this. Not true though. You do, however, try to accurately pronounce your limited French. Still, it's a great note to ride back into Dodge on.

September 8 – Eurostar between Paris & London – Late Afternoon

On your way to the dining car for a Duvel, your last Belgian ale on the continent, you pass a young man working fixedly at his laptop. When you return, he is standing up stretching and as you pass you catch a whiff of his unbelievably ripe scent – hasn't bathed in days. What world is he living in?

The Duvel tastes heavenly with your sandwich, an amalgamation of three leftover cheeses stuffed into a baguette from one of the first-rate boulangeries of Montparnasse. You offer some mirabelles to the couple, more or less your age, sitting across the aisle. They proffer Portuguese cookies, and along with Katie and Gwen, you fall into conversation. Richard and Barbara Sweet they turn out to be, of Waterloo, returning from a week in Paris. A wide-ranging talk ensues in which you discover that Richard is now a working musician, a pianist having been, in his younger days, active in the Labor Party. He recalls, in the '70s, mixing at several functions with an ambitious young fellow, then known as Anthony Blair.

As the train emerges on the English side, Richard asks if you have you ever heard of Francis Kilvert. No, the name doesn't ring a bell. Well, you are the spitting image of him, isn't he, Barbara? Yes, it seems, you are. Who is Francis Kilvert? Was. A Victorian parson, preacher of some renown in the Welsh town of Hay-on-Wye, and a prolific diarist. Ah, there you go, the road not taken. If you hadn't let your scruples about being an atheist stand in your way, you could have had an easy gig for life –

spend your latter days dozing pleasantly in a garden while someone gently whispers "More tea, Vicar?"

Talk turns to Wales. Richard was born in Cardiff and he spoke of singing in choir there as a child – how the voices of the basses, nearly Russian in their fullness, would create what he called *hwyl* – an all-encompassing emotive atmosphere, a pure, shared feeling.

September 9

Leaving Putney early. You telephone to confirm the taxi that will take you to the airport. A man answers. "The car," he says "is on the way." And adds in the lilting tones of the subcontinent: "It will be a silver colored car, sir."

The driver is a tall fellow, Pakistani as it turns out. He drives smoothly and sedately through the residential neighborhoods, narrating what he knows of their character and demographics. Asks if you went to Kew Gardens, and when you reply no, shakes his head in genuine disappointment. Clearly it is a place for which he holds a deep appreciation. There is a park, he says, near Putney where "deer are open, bunnies open. You buy a bag of food and hold out in your hand – ten deer come, maybe fourteen." Something for the next trip, Kew Gardens, and more of the West End. And Southwark Cathedral. Has he been to New York? No, but he has an uncle there, and another in New Jersey.

You cross the Thames and join up with the A4. Out the window, in the middle distance, a battery of highrise apartment buildings – atypical for England – quite modern, obviously abandoned. "Those used to be beautiful flats," says the driver. He points out a half dozen other nearly new buildings, all large scale, flats and offices alike, all desolate, huge holes punched through the windows. "After September 11, they said terrorists would kill all. So nobody will live, nobody work." You're incredulous. Who said these would be targets? "Government," he replies, "so everyone afraid to go."

You drive in silence for a few minutes. He cuts effortlessly across three lanes into the Heathrow exit, then turns toward you, asks what the Americans thought after 9/11. Did they ask why? You say you don't think so, not for very long anyway. What do you know about your driver? Only that he appears to have a cold or sinus condition, that he's said he lives in Wandsworth, has two children living in Germany

with his ex-wife. Also that he considers himself educated and dislikes the "religious people" who "go like horses" – he holds his hand against his temple to indicate blinders – "without seeing outside, only narrow." That he thinks the war in Iraq is about oil and greed. He's a good driver and seems a decent man, so when you pull over at Terminal 3, you shake his hand and tell him your name, and hear that his is Jahn.

He helps you unload your bags. "Safe driving," you call as he gets into the car. It still looks odd to see a driver enter on what, for you, remains the passenger side. "Safe flight."

3 ENDARKENMENT

September 10 – Le G. – Early Morning

The Sanitation sweeper with JOHNSTON stenciled on the front rumbles by stirring up the dust with its great wire brushes. The woman driving it turns her implacable, chiseled face in your direction and you wave. She flashes the fingers of her right hand open in reply, but keeps her palm steady on the wheel.

September 11

Katie's out of bed just ahead of you, calls your attention to the most lambent possible dawn. The sky in the west awash in cast color. To the south, a spray of copper embers as the sun reflects off the windows of the lower Manhattan towers.

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Le G. encore. Clanks of steel and bangs of lumber pull you out of *News from Nowhere*. Across Ninth Avenue, over the façade of a modest four story building, four men are constructing a scaffold. The building's vacant storefront used to house Something Else, the strange little shop with wildly varying prices on its ornaments, paperweights and jewelry, where, for the birthday after her accident, you and Gwen bought Katie a beautiful pendant of rutilated quartz.

Eric B. arrives on his bicycle – first time you've seen one another these five weeks. He's had the flu hence been up early, like you with your jet lag, and consequently saw the daybreak from downtown. You talk too, about the sky, how it's been changing lately. Remarkable colors frame the day, more wild and vivid than you remember in all your years. Cloudbanks too, like those out west in the big sky country, or over Venice in life and in the paintings. From your south-facing windows there seems, at times, to be two distinct weather systems running roughly west-east. One for

the lower end of Manhattan and the upper bay, and another, further away, over Staten Island and out to sea.

Contrails too, in plenitude, gridding the space up there. A clear blue morning may yield a sky that looks weirdly grayish and feathery by afternoon. Sometimes at dusk, just after dawn, and occasionally in midday, a mass of clouds that look somehow nuclear, or the way one imagines the roiling sky in the moments before the after-storm.

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To Jones Beach as has become your tradition on this day. Straightaway Gwen takes out the big blue plastic shovel and begins to dig a hole in the sand, something she saw a teenage boy do last year until only his head was visible.

You lie in the sun a bit, then walk out into the surf for pummeling by the still-warm waves. Four military choppers fly in formation parallel to the shore and the trope comes unbidden: *I love the smell of napalm…*

You dry off, then relieve Gwen in digging while she spreads smooth the sand you heap around the hole's edges. You must be making progress because soon your hair begins to brush the side of the pit when you bend to shovel. Gwen wants to go to the concession stand. Give her leave. Take a break yourself – up to your waist. A dozen yards off, a slender young woman sits up amidst her cohort of prone and supine bronzers. Head motionless, face turned slightly upward and toward the sun, she moves first one hand and now the other, effecting subtle variations of distance and angle between them. There's a studied quality to her gestures and you laugh aloud when, after a few moments, you realize that she's not performing an arcane solar rite, but rather attempting to read the display on her cellphone, gone blank in the midday glare.

Gwen returns with a frozen lemonade and a story: a mother and her little girl were walking toward the boardwalk when right before the steps, the girl flopped down in the sand and refused to budge, saying "I'm a turtle."

The mother said: "We need to go now, turtle. What's the magic word? Is it turtle, turtle, turtle? Is it 'please'?" The girl stayed prone. "Is it mommy has to go to the bathroom really badly now? Is it 'open sesame'? Turtle remained unmoved and unmoving. Finally: "Is it mommy loves turtle very much?" At which the little girl

jumped up and the two of them trotted up the steps. Gwen much impressed by the mother's finessing.

From back on the blanket next to Katie you watch as Gwen labors on in the shade of the beach umbrella she's planted in the sand next to her hole. The afternoon passes. You take a long walk down the beach. As you return you discover that Gwen's dug herself in up to her shoulders. She hails you with the blue shovel. When you reach her, you find she's excavated the entirety of an ancient, soggy tabloid newspaper that's amalgamated into something that looks very like a slab of raw fish, but despite its clamminess, tears apart like something very overcooked. When she bends down to scoop out a shovelful, she disappears altogether.

Sit down and face the sea. Over the waves and gulls, Gwen's voice drifts, jazzily inflected – the tune and lyrics her own: "I'm stuck in a hole, I don't know how to get out. I need my daddy, but I can't disturb him – he's busy writing…"

You stand up. She's above her head. Squat down, grasp her wrists and haul her out. Jump in and take one more shift at shifting sand. Gwen wants to go deeper still. Until she strikes water.

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Driving west toward Manhattan on the Northern State a sunset as astonishing as the dawn – marbelized blues and magentas visible between striations of high clouds, while in the relative foreground a herd of misshapen cumulus, backlit red-amber stampede south to north. Suddenly brake lights proliferate in the thick traffic and as the road curves they evaporate into the immense fireball of the setting sun. You pulse the brakes and hope to stop before you hit the car in front of you since there's no reckoning where it is in the all-obliterating glow. Stop. You feel nothing, hear nothing but the engine. Amazingly, no one rearends you. Inch ahead until the brake lights ahead emerge out of the orange wash. Slowly round the curve until the trees along the parkway sweep the saturation behind them.

You make it home in one piece, look out the living room window. 8:04 p.m. and they've turned on those bloody stupid columns of light again, diffuse and vaguely blue against the black now-hazy sky. As if. Added to which, when you're not watching the

beams directly, but see them with your peripheral vision, if you shift your eyes suddenly, there's the bizarre illusion that they are sweeping across the heavens, or, more alarming still, toppling over. Each time this happens, you fall for it and have to look quickly to check. Of course they haven't moved an iota.

September 12

Is it your writing that improves? Someone could say, but it surely isn't you. Yet a corner's been turned. Your enmeshment with your words crosses a threshold from grudging to loving. Uncertain as ever of outcomes. Yet the book reaches out to embrace you at last.

September 13 – Chelsea Post Office – Early Afternoon

As you wait on queue, you enter the dates for your next round of writing workshop into your agenda and notice that this time Election Day coincides with the Day of the Dead. Oy.

It's been grating on you, pearl-like, that some weeks back, a friend, upper-middle class and deeply liberal in her politics, called you cynical for not embracing Kerry as an alternative to Bush. Though not in the sense she meant, you'd gladly cop to the attributes of the old-school cynic: doggedness, an emphasis on personal virtue, refusal to accept authority at face value – or sugar-coat the ethically unacceptable for expediency's sake.

At the time, your friend implied that it would be *your fault* if Bush wins. But the accusation seems silly now. The way it's lining up, Bush could take the election by such a wide margin that any votes Nader might divert from Kerry would be irrelevant to the outcome. The Republicans are poised to steal the show in a far more sophisticated way than they did in 2000, but they may not have to go that route this time.

Your turn. Time to buy some stamps. Holy cow, all the choices: Buckminster Fuller, James Baldwin, John Wayne – Paul Robeson yet. Go for the Snowy Egret. Truly, these must be the most pleasant, efficient postal clerks in Christendom. Is it something in the water? As you're leaving, it pops into your head. Nowadays a cynic is regarded as someone who sees only the most venal motivations behind every action, who takes it for granted that all human relations are corrupted. In which case your friend, not you is

the cynic. She, like so many others, has crossed over – without ever having to engage in active struggle – from political naivety to a contemptuous dismissal of anyone who doesn't share their own miscarried, or worse yet, self-aborted wishes.

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Reading away, you come to a reference to *The Natural History of Iceland*, written in 1758, in which chapter #24, Concerning Snakes, consists of one sentence: "No snakes of any kind are to be met with throughout the whole island."

September 16

Your Mac, when it receives an email makes a noise like a drop in a very resonant bucket. Open it up. Ah, the latest iteration of a pathetic appeal making the web rounds. This version, endorsed by a host of Nader 2000 supporters, repudiates Ralph and begs folks to vote for Kerry. The signatories includes the likes of Tim Robbins, Susan Sarandon, Phil Donahue and Cornell West. Sad creatures these luminaries, howsoever brilliant, who have elected to portray their failure of courage and imagination as a call to social responsibility. Bit of a surprise to see Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky on the list, though on second thought it makes sense given their almost numbing level of pessimism. Fear makes people stupid. And panic leads to digging a new level of denial. They're in deeper then Gwen at the beach. Eventually, they'll reach China.

And the question is, will Nader, for his part, come out strong in October and use his position to indict the entire framework of authority?

What was the slogan of Mao's you used to ridicule? – *Fail again, fight again*. These days, when you hear the word Kerry, you reach for your Buber: *The true history of man is not composed of sterile victories, but of fruitful defeats. A hopeless minority fighting an anti-human oppressor does not experience what we are used to call success; it "fails," but succumbing, it may announce and prepare a great turn.*

And there's something more. If you tell yourself you've got no power, you've got no power, no matter how strong you are.

• • •

Midmorning and you lean on your bicycle talking with Eric B. down at the junction of Desbrosses street and the riverside bike path. He proposes that, in a nutshell, Bush's election would be the best thing that could happen in terms of bringing the crisis to a head. You, you're not sure. You thought after 9/11: Ah, now we'll look at all the stuff that's been piling up under the rug since Vietnam. But we didn't. Why should a nation so politically moribund suddenly galvanize were Bush to remain in office, and why not? – declare himself President for Life? It's a theory, and only a theory, as cultures globalize, they may become congenitally incapable of mounting any sort of real challenge to the powers that rule them. The problem isn't confined to the U.S. by any means. The populations of Russia and India, for example, seem unable to respond to the terrors inflicted on them by their leaders. The gene for self-defense against abusive government may have been permanently neutralized.

Overhead, an army Chinook po-pocks upriver, not olive in the early fall glare, but dark gray. It looks, for all the world, like a flying galleon, propellers sprouting from its fore and sterncastles in place of masts. They carry things, these choppers. A Humvee or two. Maybe even a Bradley. That's just what Penn South's missing: a Bradley on the lawn standing guard by the cherry tree they planted the day JFK dedicated the place. Maybe the Chinook is bringing it to us. If not today, then when?

• • •

A new mantra for the public address to blast while you're cooling your heels waiting for a train:

Ladies and gentlemen – the voice is electro-female – *panhandling is illegal on the subway. Please do not give to lawbreakers. Give to charities that help people in need.*

This repeated several times in the absence of a train on which to potentially collude with a panhandler in perpetrating a criminal act. But look now, at last, lights at the end of the tunnel.

• • •

Mid-afternoon in New York. Dead of night in China. There, when the workday begins a few hours from now, a vast room will fill up with young women whose task it is to embroider, in frilly letters, the words *GIRL ATTITUDE – Deal With It* – or another slogan to similar effect, on a endless mountain of teeshirts, just like the one in the window of the wholesale store on 27th Street & Broadway.

• • •

Curiouser and curiouser. In Florida, the Democratic party challenges the legitimacy of Nader's candidacy, and a state judge agrees, throws him off the ballot. The state Attorney General, a Jeb Bush appointee, appeals the decision. You've lived through some strange political spectacles, but nothing as flat-out weird as this one: Democrats – disenfranchised in the last go-round – attempting to cut democracy off at the knees. A Republican avatar of corruption gallops, hurricane-like, to the rescue. Forget China – the hole we're digging – no bottom.

Has the English language, at least as spoken here, ceased to be capable of expressing a sense of loss?

• • •

Rain, as they say, heavy at times. This evening the top quarter of the Empire State, bathed in bright white floodlights truly out of Metropolis, shrouded in protean clouds that look like a universe unfolding in timelapse. The whine of jet turbines. You're looking at the building, out the waterspattered window facing northeast, there in all its immensity and for a couple of beats you're certain the plane, unseen, will burst against it. But the clouds roil on, the leviathan stands imperturbe, and the sirens, the blasting horns up Eighth Avenue turn west instead, heading to a fire somewhere else.

September 16 – Le G. – Early Morning

The vacant building across the street now boasts a completed scaffold shrouded in translucent black mesh, which if it were transferred to stockings, with a seam running up the back would read somewhere between formal and kinky. The leaves of

the two trees that overlap the building stand out vividly against the dark backcloth. They are classic New York trees, readily identifiable from across the Avenue: at the right, a ginkgo in questionable health, its leaf ends already browning. Of middle height this ginkgo, yet like many of its city fellows, it's never outgrown an awkward adolescent look – one waits in vain for it to fill out. The other tree's a honey locust, bushier and a bit more symmetrical, its pods getting ready to drop.

Curbside the dumpster has already appeared – the phone number of its purveyor stenciled in huge white figures against the rusty blue – and a good sized dumpster it is, which pretty well confirms the intent to gut the building. Nor was time wasted in plastering the freshly painted plywood hoardings with posters, all save the spot reserved for the author of this construction, which we now learn is Spring Scaffolding Inc. of Long Island City.

A woman walking a dog passes by, second time round the block at least. Don't recognize her from the neighborhood. She's thin, with a small head, and when she pauses to yawn, her mouth opens so wide you've a momentary apprehension that her jaws will invert and she'll swallow herself. Yipes, you're losing your grip.

Thus begins a new year, 5765 by Jewish reckoning. Which seems a propitious time to rename the city. Adamically. Not *tout court* necessarily, but little by little as the spirit moves us. One could use names similar to the old ones, but turned to a new aural angle, so they strike the ear afresh, jauntily, yet carrying some fundamental and perhaps esoteric meaning with them. In the spirit of Darryl/Natasha, your old next door neighbor at the Chelsea Hotel, who used talk about getting calls from The Ram-it-in, or How Hard's Johnson's. The new tags don't have to be scatological though. And anyone can join the game – no reason for something to have only one name – we'll all know what's being talked about.

Start, say, with some of mid-Manhattan's urban icons: Tom's Square (Dime Spare?) and Sensual Park. Lingam Center for the Contorting Arts. The prime meridian could become either Flip, Fish, Filch, or if the BIDs go out of bidness, Filth Avenue. Or Fitch, if one wanted to give props to the steamboat father. Which would only be fair given the multiple placenames memorializing Robert Fulton who, like a true New Yorker, figured out how to profit from the steamboat after Fitch died. In any case, Finch Avenue would intersect with Bawdway at the Fatfryin' Building. Moving

beastward: Mastodon, Medicine or Mad-as-Sin, then Bark, and there's a nice ring to Lexicon Avenue, but Dyslexington would suit the contrarians better. Next come Bird, Beckoned and Wurst Avenues (the latter recalling to the palate the glory days of echt-Yorkville) finishing off at Pork Avenue, which, south of the Roswell Island Tram becomes Glutton Place. Or Mutton. Take a ferry across the Yeast River to Wrong Island City. Or one from the Flattery to Alice Island. Spin the cube at Asked Her Place. On the wrest side, Sick, Heaven, Ape, Knife, Tent (or Tense, or Temp), then Leavened Avenues fly by before you skid onto the Wet Side Highway.

Crosswise now: Banal Street becomes the dividing line between Shlomo and Trifecta and further soused, near Waltz Street one would find the skyscraper that once housed the Chaste Bank. Visible from all these newly endowed places, and holding court above them all, the soaring, preeminent city icon: the Umpire, or – to commemorate the night in 1945 a B-25 crashed into it – the Empyre, or On-fire State Building. From the top of which there's a great view of Bland Central at Tawdry-Beckoned and Bark, whence trains run to points north like Cro-Magnon, Wastechester, or Newt Haven.

All this change and newness absent any displacement – without shifting a brick, a cobblestone, a mote of dust. An urban renewal of the mind. No need, as Kenneth Koch put it: *To shuffle little streets like cards. And deal them out as boulevards.* Not even a leaf need fall. But we'd feel the difference.

September 17 – Shifty-shift Street & Dyslexington Avenue – Early Afternoon

Aftermath of a cab having jumped the curb and plowed into a combined check-cashing and jewelry store. Trashed front end of car and stove-in storefront, copious quantities of glass and a small mountain of plastic display stands heaped near what had been the doorway. No EMS vans, denks Gott. Pocketful o' miracles. You arrived too late to find out whether, in the hectic moments after the cab came calling, the trinkets were retrieved by the owners or opportunistic passersby, or some combination of the two.

But the trajectory of the car is a real puzzle given that a bank of public telephones and a bus stop sign pole on the sidewalk near the curb and directly in front of the shop are still standing undamaged. So the taxi, traveling downtown, must have banked in at

a nearly perpendicular angle. As the wreck of the cab is towed away, you register the illuminated advertisement mounted on its roof: *NY Flashdancers: Gentlemen's Club and Cabaret*. Taped to a portion of crumpled storefront wall, protected perhaps by the now-ruined standpipe, a surviving sign: ALL PEARL EARRINGS $10.

• • •

On the grass of the Park Avenue meridian, on either side of 53rd Street, a large cor-ten steel sculpture that looks, for all the world, like an outsized, busted spring.

You've been at Kelly's getting needles stuck in you. Lying there while your energy gets shifted around. Most of the time acupuncture puts you in a deep trance, so that even though you're competent to write a check afterward and make a date for five weeks hence, you're not ready for the world outside. So you pause part way to the subway and sit on the ledge of the planter in the Lever House courtyard where a discrete little sign says not to sit. You can't imagine what the harm inheres in sitting there, but while you do, your mind conjures up all sorts of absurdities in fast succession: perhaps the taxi driver was heading into the store to cash a check and forgot the detail about first stopping his car. Perhaps the Democrats, the really progressive ones at any rate, are like Odysseus, binding themselves to the mast so the Siren song of Nader cannot tempt them to shipwreck. In truth the whole situation is out of myth: Kerry/Bush as Scylla and Charybdis – take your choice, unless you've the nerve to sail straight through.

September 18

Not the flash but the thunder, like a mountainous crumbling, wakes you. It takes a second to associate the sound with the elements and not some Baghdad come home to roost. Full rain whiteout this a.m., a little touch of Ivan from the Caribs. Taxis turning onto 24th street send up great sheets of water, even when they take the corner slow. Peculiar play of the atmosphere, one you recall happening years ago, or was it déja vu? Not mist, but a series of distinct, small clouds sailing fast between your building and the one to the south. They gallop through at around sixteen stories, forty feet below you, drawn across Eighth Avenue to disperse somewhere to the east.

Manhattan at ground level may be subjugated territory, but who conquers Avalon?

September 19 – Midmorning

Clear and brisk. First true fall morning. Not yet the equinox, but a palpable sense of pendulum swing, another cycle coming into play.

Back from the café, you wait in the lobby for the elevator. When it reaches Ground, the door opens and a beautiful young woman walks out wearing a long flowing black and white patterned dress and blue floatie sandals. It takes you a beat, maybe two, to recognize Gwen. She's come downstairs to look through the paper recycling bin for collage material. You give her a hug, kiss the top of her head – which you can still reach – and back your bicycle into the elevator. Holy cow, she must've grown half an inch overnight.

All the way up to the twentieth floor, a host of associations scramble to the top of the heap: *The Pearl*, where the poet dreams his infant daughter appears as a full-grown woman, an envoy from the Heavenly Jerusalem. 14th Century. Old stuff but with a ring to it. You once read or someone told you that Schiller said that what's seen as beauty here comes to us later as truth. Not fifteen minutes ago you were reading *News From Nowhere*, where the narrator is guided through the future by a fellow who, it's strongly implied is his descendant. Freaky stuff, pops. Let's do the time warp again.

• • •

One by one you hear little tales from friends who were here during the convention. At Le G., Kimsey tells you about the morning half the place was full of police, the other half of protestors. "Fortunately everyone was cool." Then a tone of something like irony slips into her normally even-toned voice. The cops, she says, all ate big breakfasts and left large tips, whereas "sixty protestors would sit there and share one croissant."

Tony, who lives and works on the top floor of a loft on 26th street said he was nearly driven crazy by the incessant sound of choppers.

Dave, the sculptor whose 24th Street studio adjoins, via a too-thin wall, Georgio Gomelsky's rock rehearsal space, says that some delegates went to eat on the Chelsea Piers, prompting the deployment of a small flotilla of gunboats along the Hudson, to protect them, weapons aimed at the shoreline.

From several people you hear that Eighth Avenue was closed to traffic north of 23rd Street, many businesses along the street shut down too. How weirdly quiet these blocks must have been. Sharpshooters stationed on the roof of your building.

From Eric B. you learn that the dramatic moment of the big march – half a million or more – came when someone set the giant dragon float alight just in front of Madison Square Garden. The flames soared stories high, no putting it out, people just moved back into the density, formed a permeter around the falling bits and watched it burn.

September 20 – Early morning

Vivid dream impressions. Some deeply sensual episode is supplanted by a buzzy kind of anxiety. In the earlier stage, for which the visuals have altogether vanished, you're pretty sure you were dreaming as a woman. In the latter part you shaded into a more immediately recognizable self, if not explicitly male. An image here of the dreamer's field of view: either he's forgotten to pack, or put off until too late the gathering of belongings strewn about a room he must imminently leave. There's the open valise on his bed, and the known impossibility of filling it in time. Something of the fall from grace in this. As a female, the dreamer sensed she was welcome in this house, had a role to play, found pleasure there. What happened over the course of the things to carry the dreamer to the brink of expulsion?

You could sit all morning pondering this. One sock on, one sock halfway on.

Shoes. Bike. Lock the door behind you. Off to the café.

• • •

Something off, fractured, about the whole texture of the morning – perhaps residue carried over from the dream state. You talk amiably with your mates, but you're disconcerted and try not to show it. Manhattan madness – chock full of must-

do's – the sort of day you dread, the sensation of being overwhelmed by things you might have enjoyed if not so densely clustered, yet here they are in the order you yourself set up. A dozen chores and appointments, a flightpath like a bee's – alighting then moving on. And it's all booked to the minute, no wiggle-room in between. Looked at another way, Monday as a Chinese puzzle.

September 21 – Late Morning

Beneath your windshield wiper two communiqués, one from the City, the other from the city. Look first at the parking ticket. Goddam. What for? – you're in a legal space. Ah, it says your inspection expired two days ago. Check the sticker. They're right, it did. Ouch. Sixty-five bucks. That's what you get for living in car denial. Still a ticket's just a ticket – nothing more to tell you.

The second message comes printed on a small sheet of light green paper, folded in half and trimmed raggedly across one side. Amazing, it's been here less than a day, yet the top flap has already got a fine dusting of soot. Paper feels damp from the recent rain. For a moment you stand there, all sensory information washing over you at equal value. But when you marshal your resources to unfold the little green sheet and read what's written inside, it seems to confirm that at some point, when you weren't paying attention, what passes for reality crossed an invisible nano-Rubicon and is now, with an almost encouraging gesture, beckoning you join it on the other shore:

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* DIRECTLY

Yes, hello Fernandez? – Darton here. Saw your flyer – very interesting indeed. Problem is, I have to deal with getting my car inspected. Right away. Before I can do anything else. You see, things have gotten complicated. It's like this: the space I'm in is good until Thursday, but the idea, until five minutes ago, was to jump the gun and park on the Friday side so I can go to lunch with Gary G. on Thursday when I'd otherwise have to move the car. Now, if I change sides, even if I put the summons back under the wiper – as though I never saw it – who's to say some a sharp-eyed cop won't notice that the car is in a different place from where the ticket was issued and write me another? You see my dilemma, Fernandez? Yes, I knew you'd understand.

Well, it's a crapshoot, but you'll have to chance it. With luck you can make a date to have the car inspected early Friday. Brownfield should be able get you out of there by around 11:30, in time to grab a Tuesday-Friday spot that will become legal at 12:30. You'll only have to wait an hour or so and won't have to cruise around looking for a parking space.

Whatever happens. Whatever.

Weird day. Autumnal Equinox – *Mabon* as it was, and continues to be called by followers of the Olde Way. Equality of day and night. Second harvest, final gathering of the crops. Bush addresses the UN. Plenty of choppers in the sky.

• • •

Shana's birthday. Shana of African descent who grew up in Fontainbleu, rather than Shana of California, owner, along with her husband, of the loveable pugs. No, this Shana, when not working at Le G., devotes her energies to fashion design and painting. A licensed architect in France, she made the bold, and by her family's standards,

reckless move to New York two years ago. In the café's micro-culture, she's become as renowned for showing up late for work, then bossing around the rest of the waitstaff, as for her extraordinary capacity to take shears and a bit of thread to almost any piece of material and improvise something stunning out of it. Something stunning on her at any rate.

One Saturday morning she arrived forty minutes after the place opened, when it was already in full cry, wearing a two-piece fuchsia ensemble that not only turned heads but stopped conversation cold. No sentence in mid-utterance, nor half-hatched thought could compete with the bold diagonals and vivid hue of the fabric against her near-black satin-sheened skin. Apart from which, she's a killer basketball player. Normally when she comes over to your table, you exchange the traditional pecks in the direction of cheeks, but on the couple of occasions when you've hugged, her muscle-mass and its definition have been flat-out shocking. Don't mess with Shana.

But she adores Gwen and vice versa, so today your girl swings by Le G. after school, just before Shana's shift ends to give her the card she's made – a cut-out fantastical cityscape, with a golden heart suspended in a sky-void on filaments of thread. Written out below, Gwen's wishes for a good year, as only she can phrase it. Shana dissolves in tears. Truly, your Gwen – her own Gwen – is a powerful soul.

September 23 – Le G. – Early Morning

Strange to say, across a range of conversations, it seems that even we of middle age have begun to adapt our thoughts and language to the tenor of the moment. Each of us colludes with, and contributes, in our own particular way, some small element of madness to the greater whole. How often have you heard someone begin a sentence "If I were a terrorist, I'd..." and scenario-build out from there? Ah, but how many can really think like terrorists?

In comes Robert, founder and, of late, mostly absentee *patron*. Clearly in an ebullient mood. A happy Robert is a lovely thing to see. He strides over to Table 4 and, after some small talk, imparts the news Le G. has just signed a ten-year lease with the landlord. He grins, winks, half-whacks, half pats you on the shoulder: "You're safe!"

Overdue for the loo but someone has barricaded themselves in for the long haul. Distraction's the key. Fortunately, the newspaper and magazine rack stands just to the

side of the door. Dig out today's *Post* from beneath a gazillion mauled-over sections of the *Times*. Lead Story: Homeland Security refuses to let singer-songwriter Yusuf Islam into the country, turns his plane back to England after diverting it from Dulles to Bangor. Only Rupert's copywriters could come up with the headline POSITIVE CAT SCAN.

The latch is thrown back and a zombie-like fellow you've never seen emerges from, lets the door slam though you're obviously waiting to enter. Now, vying with the roar of the overhead fan you've got those damn catchy lyrics cascading through your head – sung in that growly, more dog than cat-like voice: *Out on the edge of darkness, there rides a peace train. Peace train take this country, come take me home again… Peace train's a holy roller, everyone jump on the peace train…*

And then that odd bumpeta-bumpeta drumroll that sounds like someone falling downstairs.

• • •

Lovely day – an elegant tension in the handshake between summer and fall. Midtown for midday. You miss the twice-daily rides with Gwen along the Hudson River bikepath, passing joggers and bladers, faster cyclists zipping by you. How many of them are aware that the port of New York is becoming evermore Asian? That the green highrise, so prominent on the new Jersey City skyline is the headquarters of Evergreen – the world's dominant container shipping line, based in Hong Kong. A Chinese company operates Newark-Elizabeth's largest container facility, as well as sundry others in various East and West Coast ports. Oh, and the Panama Canal too. It ain't Teddy Roosevelt's any more.

Even as we pedal, jog or glide, the Chinese are building, on Grand Bahama, the largest-ever container port right at the gateway to Latin America. And all this maritime power grew, not out of the barrel of a gun, but because they cornered the market – back in the days when the World Trade Center was just a hole in the ground (the first time, that is) – on manufacturing the best quality freight containers. Who knew? Who knows? Anyone who wants to. It's all there in front of us.

More renaming of the city – why not? Instead of Downtown, *dantian*. And ultimately, it'll all be Chinatown.

• • •

Afternoon spent reconnecting with Carman. He's still up on Columbus and 66th, just east of Lincoln Center in an apartment on the fourth floor of the southernmost of a pair of adjacent, nineteenth century tenements you'd think they'd have pulled down years ago, so rife the whole neighborhood is with overawing "luxury" towers. What's it been, ten years since you visited him? How much longer would it have been if you hadn't run into one another on that horrible, freezing peace march?

The place has changed – lighter, more open. Back when, these walls were lined with Carman's collection of LPs – twelve thousand of 'em – of which he recently sold all but a few.

He makes a couple of mugs of coffee, pouring water through a one-cup filter, after which you sit on a cushion on the studio floor while he cues up recordings of his latest compositions. Eclectic as ever, but all unmistakably Carman: a chamber quintet, interpretations of the Bhagavad-Gita, a collaboration with his nine-year-old granddaughter – her punchy, earnest "Rap for Peace." As you listen, you experience that ever rarer sensation of the city falling away, of being borne into a wider universe that is in the same moment a kind of cocoon. The harmonics of Carman's works, the weave of acoustic and electronic textures draws you into a state of hearing beyond and beneath what pleases, stirs or moves you. For a few seconds there, you lose track of the barrier between energy and sound.

• • •

The image won't quit, though you weren't there as witness, and it thus becomes a twice-told tale. But who are you to begrudge a happening so urgently in need of writing down?

Two nights past at the first fall session of Writing X, you went round the table adducing, in essence, what everyone did on their summer vacation. When Marc's turn

came, he owned as how, during the convention, he'd joined an avowedly peaceable group assembled near the WTC pit, bent on marching to Union Square. By a prior understanding with the police brass, at the terminus there would be a mass arrest.

For two hours, broiling in the sun, Marc waited for the demonstration to move out. Finally he gave up and started walking north figuring he'd catch a subway uptown, wait until the crowd to arrived and join their number for the big bust. When he'd nearly reached the subway, he looked back and saw that the march had begun. But before the demonstrators had progressed more than a few yards, several hundred of them had been caught up in a gigantic red net – they'd been suckered into a trap.

Leslie shook her head. "Trawling for people," she said, her voice filled with in disgust and dismay.

September 25 – Le G. – Early Morning

Sick you were yesterday, or more properly, exhausted. Some physical or psychic straw must've broken your camel's back, since by eight o'clock, with Katie and Gwen in the living room, wrapped up in watching the season's first episode of a show about a high school girl who hears average folks speaking to her in the voice of God, you were struggling to make sentences out of the words in *News From Nowhere*.

Triumphant day for Gwen. She finally got her last year's report card and found she'd done wonderfully well in math, far better than either she or you had anticipated. Your only regret, as you laid your book on the headboard and closed your eyes, was passing out without reading to Gwen from *Kim*. Hopefully tomorrow.

Energy somewhat returned this morning, though it feels provisional.

The three Saturday Graces in action at Le G.: Kimsey, Eyoko and Shana.

Outside, a fellow you've chatted with walks his beautiful dog, a rescue – part beagle, part blue point bloodtick hound.

Big talk with John about energy – in rural China: one pig, one lightbulb.

You are what you burn.

September 26

Out of the east it pops, just after sundown, like a jack in the box. Waxing. Gibbous. Lunacy.

September 27 – Early Morning

Whatever this is on your left upper eyelid is turning into a right carbuncle. And it's sore. By good fortune Dr. Rick has an open slot this afternoon.

You hear Melinda's version this morning, but everyone else you know who went on the great half million demo during the convention has said essentially the same thing: it took half an hour to walk a block. And it strikes you that this is how it's been on all the recent marches – the cops have held the crowd to a snail's pace. What an incredibly effective tactic for undermining the collective cadence that can build up during a march – and you've been on real marches, the kind where people had their blood up and the rhythm of their feet told the tale of their intention, a message much more threatening to the powers that be than a rushing mob.

This method used by the civic bourgeois guard – the term Morris used for police in *News from Nowhere*, and it's just as apt now – of imposing a kind of shuffle on a mass of people creates a pervasive sense of uncertainty, short-circuits their momentum, embodies feebleness among the should-be powerful. Simply by making them constrict their stride. Bound footsteps. Slave chains. Guantánamo feet. Achilles tendonitis of the spirit. How to make us small, even when we're big.

A fellow at the next table whom you know slightly turns toward you and points out an article in the *Times* – a newly discovered Hemingway short story. There are the photos, side by side: Papa's face and a shot of the manuscript. "Here's your competition," he says.

Your eyes go to the headline above the images: *New Hemingway Story Comes to Light*. Point to it. Look directly at your interlocutor. Not often that you feel such a cold fury. "Eventually," you say, "it all comes to dark."

• • •

Midmorning, outside and around Le G., two distinct temporalities. In one, people walk leisurely dogs, push strollers to nowhere in particular, and stop for half-hours on end to gab. While on the Avenue, trucks, cabs and an endless fill of SUVs rush by in a blur of shuddering movement. So the whole Key-Westness of the sidewalk life

takes pace against the avalanche backdrop of hurtling metal and earthshake. This is the radical parallelism of the city in a nutshell – coexistent actualities in full view and smell of one another but never to meet unless – catastrophe!

• • •

If a room has got any sort of view, you gravitate toward the window. Today, the light is right and you see how the cladding – some indeterminate beige material – of Eichner's 57th Street tower already looks eroded, banged-up, falling off in bits. Can't be over a dozen years old. Graceful aging just isn't part of the post-modern schema.

These days, Paul flies in from Ithaca to conduct group and individual sessions every third Monday. His suite at the Hilton faces north, toward Central Park, a sliver of the Hudson at the ten o'clock position, and the dome, now nearly rebuilt, of City Center, thirty floors below. Not like in the old days, when you met in his apartment high up in the residential tower to the west of Worldwide Plaza. From there, you could, and did, see the whole sweep of the valley and beyond to Lower Manhattan.

This drama seems of a different, less exposed order. Certainly the massing of skyscrapers all around is striking, but there's a reassurance to it as well – like nesting halfway up a tall tree in a forest of giants. And the north light is lovely, never harsh. But it's for the first time today that you wonder: is it entirely accidental that this view is the diametrical opposite of the former one where you all witnessed, far away in the distance, yet clear, first one dreamlike billow of smoke, then another.

• • •

A man's passed out on the steps up to Union Square Park. Deep stupor, but not dead dead because you can see his belly moving in an out like a baby's. Near at hand, a young fellow – Parsons student maybe – sits a-sketching him. Such a rare thing, a luxury even, to find a model who'll *stay still* long enough to let you put some lines down. City of opportunity and limitless hard knocks! Seize the moment – that's the ticket!

• • •

Transformer fire, power fails at Penn Station, shuts down Long Island Railroad and New Jersey Transit. Down the block, on 24th and Seventh, a man is shot dead. Doesn't make the six o'clock news. Check the *Post* tomorrow. Michael Moore's showing his true running dog's colors: in one of his e-screeds he calls those who won't buy the Kerry line "Nader-impaired." Ever echoing, in new contexts, that motto on the ancient Assyrian dog statuette: *Don't think – bite!*

A viscous Monday. Petroleum gushes up past $50 the barrel. Lord's Prayer changed to "give us this day our daily ooze." Everything's turning out just like Osama wanted.

September 28 – Le G. – Midmorning

WILD WEST SIDE says the *Post*. Bonangeres Mota was the man who died. Berserk. A bicycle messenger and ex-con who'd done an eight-year bid for a machete assault. Yesterday the cops went to arrest him for pistol-whipping a fellow messenger last Friday. He pulled a gun. Ran. Cops gave chase, shot and hit him in the arm. He fell in the intersection of Seventh and 24th, within spitting distance of Whole Foods, where Katie shops nearly every day and Gwen may be found Thursday afternoons savoring samples on her way home from school.

They yelled for him to drop the gun. He didn't. Two more shots. The weapon taken from his hand was an "antique-style" derringer, incapable of firing anything. Suicide by cop.

Suicide by atrium too. A man clambered over the railing on the fourth level of the Time Warner Center, worked his way out onto the rafters, then plunged: past Samsung, Borders, Williams-Sonoma and on down. Landed in front of a big fat Botero bronze. A different trajectory would have carried him further, subterranean, down into the Whole Foods dining court. "It was like a boom," a witness said. "We thought a bomb went off. Everybody screamed." More discrete the dropping – when was it? – of AOL from the marquee. A few years ago, on it's way up, the complex was billed as the "Center of Everything." But now the PR spinners have something real to keep them busy. How do you fit death leaps into your definition of "mixed-use"?

So many strata in one building. Far above, higher even than the posh restaurants and corporate offices, condo pieds à terre like urban prairies, stretching 5,000 square feet – for the likes of Lady Henrietta Spencer Churchill, Wynton Marsalis, at least one supermodel, nesting pairs of Hollywood and Broadway producers and the former wife of a Senator from New Jersey whose ex must've got lucky in the market since her pod cost $9 mil. And, lest we forget, *changes in latitudes, changes in attitudes,* those beloved warblers migrated from southern climes: Jimmy Buffet and Ricky Martin. *Ay, ay, ay – la vida coca.*

Not too long ago you read, or rather scanned, a *Times* story about a bridge, perhaps in Shanghai, famous for its suicides, and how the awful regularity of the deaths, night after night, evoked a self-appointed guardian, a man who patrols the span looking for the tell-tale body language that says "jumper." If he senses that's their mission, he'll intervene.

So now the valence of the place changes. It becomes a challenge to kill one's self there, the act requires greater determination. But maybe it also draws out some for whom the outcome is less certain – those who want to gamble with fate? Will I vanish unnoticed? Or will the watcher be there, see me, rush in my direction, grab for me as I vault? Does he succeed, or end up holding an empty coat?

• • •

Every time you glance up from typing, there's her tattoo, bold as a brand logo, etched on her sacrum between ridden-up top and waistband. An ideogram. Looks a bit like an inverted T , double crossed through the upright, hanging from a gateway over a rectangle. She's sitting, her back toward you, with a couple of pals at tables eleven and twelve. Relative young 'uns, not Japanese you're pretty sure, but Asian in background, and where from? They've a distinctly out-of-town feel. Best guess would be West Coast, or Hawaii – which would explain a lot, including their fluent English and the USS Honolulu cap on the fella's head. His face, come to look closer, seems a mix of West and East. Handsome. As is the woman facing you, all in black, or rather she's very pretty.

A few sentences more. Despite the energy congealing in your nethers. The aspic at Table 4. You've overstayed, though justifiably, since it's rare you get to write here given the friends and acquaintances who gather most mornings. In response to which you've changed your pattern, gradually taught yourself the discipline of writing at home – ignoring phone calls, dust mice, the siren song of breakfast dishes entreating sweetly from the sink.

Hop la. Leave the money on the table, half under the saucer. Add an extra buck for the duration factor. Parallel with the door, en passant, you sense a pause in their conversation, lean in and ask: "What do you say back there?" She turns slightly, looks up at you, and now you see that her long hair, jeans and body language belie her age. A mature face – she's not your age, but no sprung chicken neither. She could be mother to one or both of those kids. Or their elder sister. A half smile, she's a little puzzled, then it clicks. "It's my last name."

"And do you have your first name in front?" Out it leaps before you've a hope of reeling it back in. "No!" she shakes her head, genuinely laughs now, and her companions do too. You'd love to know what that last name is, to connect a small cluster of ascending tones into a melisma that could lengthen into a riff. But stronger still comes the impulse to vanish on this high note – take your silly male, middle-aged wit and be gone before you or she, or the other two feel it necessary to utter anything more.

Grasp the handle, click the latch open and sweep out into the wall of water – a gift from Hurricane Jeanne. There's your bike, ten yards to the northeast, chained to its curbside pole, drowned, the fresh grease you applied this morning either washed down or on its way toward the gutter. When you looked out your window early, before you left home, the streets were dry. On-line the Weather Underground predicted "light, misting rain this morning…". Is it worth doubling back to grab some napkins, wipe the seat off so at least your bum stays dry? Nah. Keep to your momentum. Blood is thicker than water.

September 29 – Le G. – Morning

In the midst of your labors when a couple of parents you recognize from PS 11 show up and sit down at the banquette accompanied by one of their daughters. Why

isn't she in school? Mom explains she's "playing hooky" in order to be videotaped by one of the network news shows. You nod as if you're taking it all in but her words blow by. Uncomfortable this feeling you get sometimes of not being entirely here, but nowhere else either.

They're nice folk, middle-to-upper middle or higher, hard to tell. You get a sense of real money somewhere in the dynastic pool. Educated and well read. Mom hails from Summit, NJ, that utopia of the semi-pastoral bourgeoisie. You recall that this past spring they threw a fundraising bash for Kerry. This morning, they divide the *Times* and devote themselves to their respective sections between genteel sips of café au lait. Silence reigns until Mom looks up, speaks sharply to her daughter. "Don't torture your croissant." You can almost hear it scream.

Scan the *Post*. Tiny at the bottom of p. 17: *Debra Ann DiMartino, 36, has been added to the list of confirmed dead in the World Trade Center attacks.*

The couple and their daughter depart. Belatedly you remember their names. Damn, you're just hopeless with that. Repeat them over in your head to cement them for the next time you meet. Reach over for the A section of the *Times* they've left behind. Turn to the op-ed. Hmmm. Gore's pointers to Kerry on how to debate Bush. Like the French offering strategic advice to the Americans on how to whip the Vietnamese. It's a feeble piece, but the last sentence takes the cake: "Comparing these (Bush's) grandiose promises to his failed record, it's enough to make anyone want to, well, sigh."

And therein lies a tale. You flash on the fall of Granada, the completion of the Catholic *reconquesta* and of vanquished Boabdil as he departed for North Africa, never to return. Reaching the heights of what was afterward called *la cuesta de las Lágrimas*, the last Caliph of Spain paused to look back. There, across the valley, centuries before Washington Irving's setting sun cast its "melancholy effulgence on the ruddy towers of the Alhambra," Boabdil sighed his legendary sigh, and moved on. That's all there is Isabela, there isn't any Moor.

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Cycling home up Eighth past a bank of pay phones across the street from the Allerton. You can't see her face, it's hidden by the side of the booth, but her voice carries over the roar of traffic so forcefully aggrieved it's like a gust of wind: *Yeah, well if someone broke into your place and stole your shit,* you *wouldn't be such a happy fuckin' camper neither!*

• • •

Afternoon. A short nap after which you awaken with the name Vladimir Yusupidi reverberating in your head. What triggered that? First time you've thought of Vladimir in years. And how long since you saw him? A quarter century or more?

Back in the deep, dark mid-'70s, the closest thing you had to a steady job was driving a cab and the outfit you worked for most often was Chase, a fleet of maybe sixty cars on 47th Street between 11th and the river, near where the Intrepid's moored now. A few drivers had regularly assigned cars, but these were old-school guys out of the "follow that cab!" era. For you and most of your fellow night shifters, this was shape-up work. You'd slide your license – your "picture" in the parlance – through a bank teller-like slot, then hang around while returning cabs were gassed up, hoping you'd gotten there early enough, or that the dispatcher – an indescribable ogre – recognized the fact that you'd booked well for the garage last time they'd sent you out. Which meant you weren't stealing as much – doing trips off the meter – as some of the other guys. Invariably, as you were on the brink of giving up and trading penury against a night's freedom, you'd hear "DAH-TON!" squawked over the PA. Thence return to the window and retrieve your picture, along with a trip sheet on which to record your mileage and the pick-ups and destinations for your fares for that night.

These were the loophole years, when cheap apartments, though scarcer than hen's teeth could still be had in Manhattan, and artsy, often proto-new age folks did all kinds of funky jobs to get by. Including drive cabs. If one took taxis regularly in those days, and they were much more the luxury commodity than they are now, one could meet a fair slice of city's cultural capital: dancers, painters, musicians – most famously Philip Glass. But this was also the era immediately post-fiscal crisis, when robbing cabbies at gunpoint turned into a cottage industry for the city's lumpen. Three yellow

cab drivers were shot in one week, two fatally. The guy from your garage – you only knew him vaguely – survived several bullet wounds, but you never saw him again. The body counts were even higher for car service drivers, because they routinely served the communities most yellow cabs avoided, partly out of racism, partly from survival instinct.

Among the luminaries of the Chase shape-up pool was a fellow named Ramin, scion of an aristocratic Georgian family and a brilliant autodidact who'd grown up in the U.S. Naturally, you bonded, and the interminable wait on the bench for a car turned into something like a precursor – redolent of gas fumes, rather than garlic or burning cheese – of Le G. Particularly so when Vladimir turned up and expanded your dyad into a threesome. At once the most gregarious and needy of several just-off-the-boat Russians, who, by the vagaries of demographics, arrived in a cluster, Vladimir became, over time, for you and Ramin, a kind of shared Hyman Kaplan – though on another level, you recognized him as a kindred spirit. Both of you made yourselves available to the task of buoying Vladimir over the reefs and shoals of whatever odd variant of English is spoken in New York. Vladimir's questions also got you to pay a bit more attention to the nuances of a language whose facile use you took for granted. What, he once asked, was the difference between possibly (*pahssably*) and probably (*prahbably*)? You'd never thought about it until then.

And then there were the rough customs of the Americans to deal with, for despite purportedly hailing from Moscow, Vladimir was a tender soul. "Why he say me mazerfacker?" Vladdy asked once after an altercation with another cab driver had spoiled his night. Years later, when you saw Jim Jarmusch's *Down By Law* the set-up seemed oddly familiar, and then it clicked – you'd lived a variant of that movie, just as you had Scorcese's *Taxi Driver*. There were, indeed, folks just as crazy as Travis Bickle pushing cabs around New York back in the day.

A month or so after you met Vladimir, you and Ramin visited him in his Washington Heights digs. He poured Black Label. Hanging from a nail on the living room wall, a Playboy calendar. Already he'd grasped the basics of *his* America.

Vladdy said he was Jewish, a claim you never entirely bought. Not that you knew many Soviet Jews – the only Soviet citizens then arriving in New York in any numbers, and often via Israel. But something about him just didn't ring homeboy.

You'll never know for sure and it doesn't really matter, aside from the irony of someone passing themselves off as Jewish to gain an advantage.

Irregardless – as certain woiking-poisons used to say when putting on airs – the Vladdy era distills down to one particular moment. And this in your anomie-filled pre-Katie late twenties, when you genuinely held little, your own life included, of any great worth. One night around eleven, the three of you arrived, from different directions, at the same corner – 86th and Second at exactly the same time. On top of which the three of you were all driving "light" – meaning without passengers – and each honked as he recognized first one, then the other of the trio and you pulled over to marvel at the mildness of the spring air and the improbability of your convergence. Kosmic taxi driver synchronicity. This was before Ramin got weird and you fell out – before Vladdy brought his "wife" over from Russia.

Maybe five years later, making a delivery for your graphic design studio, you hailed a taxi, got in and then saw his picture on the partition – he'd put on weight, but retained those fine, sweet, almost feminine features – and then he recognized you and you weren't driving any more, but he was, and had bought his own medallion, hence worked for a bank and not the fleet anymore. Nor would he take your money at the end of the ride, no matter how you pressed him, which you probably shouldn't have. But there it is. Worth wondering where, in this city, or some other universe Vladimir Yusupidi could possibly be orbiting now.

September 30

Official cost of Larry Silverstein's new 7 World Trade Center to date: one life, a carpenter who fell down an elevator shaft. Twenty-eight years old. His name withheld for the present.

October 1

The oil, the oil. Neither Kerry nor Bush wanted any of that tar baby last night. Nor do Americans in our great pit of denial. Unhappily, when the collapse comes, economics will change awareness faster than awareness will change economics.

October 2 – Midmorning

A merry prank at the café: Tony and John show up early to find – surprise! – Table 4 vacant. Assuming you'll arrive momentarily, they settle in at Tables 5 and 6. Fact is, you'd woken up at 7:30, realized you'd probably blown any chance of getting there in time to claim your accustomed spot and decided this was a good morning to sleep in. Back at the café, it gets to be 8:15 and a trickle of weekend customers begins to come in. Desirous of of preventing your putative space being usurped by an auslander, John and Tony resort to improvisation. Finding a small piece of cardboard lying close to hand, they lean it against the sugar bowl on Table 4. Though the card is blank, to people coming in and scanning the room from the doorway, must read as a "reserved" sign, for when you finally walk in at 9:15, your table awaits – the only vacant one in the room. John and Tony look for all the world like two eight year olds who've gotten away with a five-finger discount from the candy store – they're red-faced with delight. No one, says John, even approached – they all headed for other parts of the room. You've never seen these guys so pleased with themselves, nor so youthful.

The trick was done – or could only have been carried on so long – via the collusion of Mario and the three Saturday Graces, who next week will be down to two. This is Kimsey's last shift at Le G. She's off to Germany next week. When you come up front to pay, she steps out from behind the counter, inclines her upper half toward you and bends her knees slightly in order to effect a straight-on hug. You resist the impulse to stand on tiptoe. Then she hands you a postcard. On the front, a novelty photo: Kimsey and her fiancée, both wearing leather flying helmets, aloft in a two-seater bi-plane. Turn the card over. Kimberly von Reisach and her new address: Schloss Reit. Ah yes, she did wear a teeshirt that read, *Will live in a castle*. And on the back: *Soon*. One way or another, soon comes to now.

• • •

It would be a stretch to say that Penn South, or Chelsea for that matter, is really Lower Manhattan. Still every week the latest issue of *Downtown Express* appears outside the lobby door in a fulsome pile. Keeps you abreast of happenings in and around the bathtub. Across the top of the front page, a series of teasers for the articles inside. You scan them – read one again. Is that what they meant to say? Or has

journalistic concision produced an unintended meaning? "DEUTSCHE DEBRIS – Falling glass affects Liberty."

Say what? Immediate flash on Kristallnacht. Wait a second – New York is not Berlin in '38. Yeah, but tell that to your associative matrix. It takes a few beats to extricate yourself from the historical well into which you've dropped and begin to haul the words before you up into the immediate now. First off, "Deutsche" means the Deutche Bank building – a great modernist slab built in the early 70's to the south of the World Trade Center, just across Liberty Street. Grievously damaged when the south tower collapsed on 9/11, the building had to be abandoned. Over time, it turned into an immense vertical toxic incubator so dangerous it was found advisable to entirely sealed it. A great ongoing to-do ensues among its owners, insurers and community activists over how best, and least dangerously, to tear the blasted thing down.

OK – turn to the article and scan. Aha. No one know precisely why but last week this tortured building began to shed its exterior glass panels. Autonomously and promiscuously. Which necessitated the closing of surrounding streets. Liberty Street among them. Speculation on the cause: recent heavy rains. Sure, why not?

• • •

An email from Jessamyn wherein she drops a Greek word you don't hear every day: *kakistocracy* – government by the worst, the ugliest fellows around. Excellent word – its aural texture so faithful to what it denotes. Repeat it a few times in your head and it trips a sluicegate. Like a kid you start grafting *kak* onto a whole cascade of word-ends: *kakodox, kakonoid, kakastrophic, kakalectic, kakodelic, kakobiotic, kakorama*. End up at last with *kakosphere* – the atmosphere surrounding a *kakotopia*. Better don't breathe too deeply when traveling in darkest Kakostan.

October 3 – Early Morning

You've been trying to grasp it for years – some sort of awareness of the means by which the counter-revolution we are living through produces such a nauseous, corrosive effect on the morale of so many, yourself included, working to make art. Too subtle a disquiet to take the form of words until now when it flows onto your page as a

concrete question: Why does our energy manifest as self-hatred, fragmentation, feebleness of spirit and acting-in – a pernicious defeatism that cuts us off at the knees before we can even contemplate standing up? Slippage, slippage everywhere. So what do these symptoms remind you of? Nothing so much as the self-revulsion of people betrayed by their idealizations. So perhaps it has to do, in part, with the way so many of your cohort feel made fools of by their common legacy.

We're all late children of the enormous generative forces of modernity, witnesses to its triumphs in every form: from painting to dance, symphonic music, architecture and the novel, not least in our own times the flowering of a popular culture of incredible intelligence and vitality. Yet it seems as though these works of active imagination, works we've internalized, allowed ourselves to be nurtured by, and whose metabolized nutrients give us strength to produce, count for nothing against the sheer, unmediated magnitude of the social death machine that's engulfed us now. Yeah, Western culture was a mixed bag when we were growing up, but who thought it would turn out like this? But has it turned out, or is it still turning?

Because we can't see that the multiplicity of wheels still in play, the spiraling of things, we've gotten stuck off balance – lost the capacity to root while moving, abandoned along the way the will to manifest our life-force as individuals or in any collectively meaningful way. Thus the best option, the default, the sorry excuse for autonomy, is to negate ourselves – beat culture to the punch. Contempt, contempt, contempt. For self and other. Yet if that's our home truth – doesn't this in fact knit into a patch of ground on which to stand? And make of this moment, more than any in recent memory, one that allows for the embrace of an unanticipated future – the granting ourselves, even and most especially now, license shift imaginative weight into a field of action not utterly foreclosed – an economy of purpose still carried on bit by bit. Together.

October 3

Mid-afternoon jaunt, upriver from the Chelsea piers, on as mild and sunny a day as you could want, Jonathan at the helm of the Lizzie J. Your little party lounges about, you schmooze with a book agent, finance guy, an attorney. Whatever pleasure inheres in this for Jonathan, it's work too. He's alert for other craft, scanning ahead for dark

anomalies that might be chunks of driftwood. Elizabeth descends into the cabin to urge their lads to come away from their videos and breathe the air abovedecks.

Vivid skyline. Gwen gets a little seasick, lays her head in Katie's lap. Under the GWB, half wrapped for renovation. Think Christo. Think Uncle Joe perched up there on the steelwork with his paint bucket, vertigo and all. At the tip of the island, you lie becalmed, sloshing side to side in wakes of passing boats until everyone looks a little green in the gills. At last, a northbound Acela rolls over the railroad bridge. The span rotates open again and you throttle through the Spuyten Duyvil currents, bear starboard and down, beneath the aqueduct and High Bridge till the Harlem River becomes East, then round the Battery. The marina is a labyrinth, plenty of tight-angled maneuvering, a good deal of it astern, and that's where Cap'n Jon shows his mettle. This is a man who, when motivated, can really sink his attention into the doing of things. You imagine him, his affect the same as it is now, but not calculating the space between two pilings, rather focused on a spreadsheet or whatever they call it in his biz. He punches a sequence of keys and somewhere on the tides of finance, a put transforms into a call. And there and then a ship comes in.

October 4 – Early Morning

You find yourself remarking to a café friend: "I'm seeing New York through fairly clean goggles now." Where did that come from? Sounds like Gwen when she was nine.

These days, one only has to imagine a person and they appear, either immediately, or a short while later in some unexpected place. The veil, as Katie would say, is thin this time of year. And recently, more than once, you've sighted a person, a friend or acquaintance, and been on the point of hailing them before you realize they are dead – yet something about the living person, the stranger you've projected onto, must carry their charge. The season of double takes. Triple even. No limit.

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Two women of late-middle years sit next to you at Table 5. Deep in your work, their conversation barely audible, you pay them little mind until a cell phone goes off

directly to your left, jarring as a car alarm. Instantly, on your internal screen, an image of Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint scrambling across the face of Mount Rushmore. The woman gropes in her bag, trying to locate the phone. Her companion looks on placidly. Meanwhile, Martin Landau grinds his shoe sole onto the knuckles of Cary Grant's hand as he dangles from the cliff face, Eva Marie clinging to his leg. Again and again the phone bleats the opening bars of the theme to *North By Northwest*.

On your way out, you stop by to visit Mark and Bruce ensconced side by side on the banquette seats of Tables 9 and 10, both working feverishly at their laptops. You relate the anecdote, if only to unjangle your nerves, forgetting for the moment that Mark is not only a Hitchcock freak, but a keen student of music into the bargain. Ah, he says, did not you know that for *North By Northwest*, Bernard Hermann took the motive from Shostakovich's 8th Symphony and reversed it, note for note? No, you had not know this until now. But you dimly remember that the 8th was supposed to have been written as an "homage" to the Great Soviet future.

Aha! On some level, it all makes nonsense.

October 7 – Early Morning

All these years to realize that the reason you gravitate to this corner of the café, the southeast, is that for better or worse, it's a catcher of waking dreams – though you don't know if it affects others who sit here the same way.

In England, *The Guardian* plays up a quote from John F. Kerry: "We must look into our souls to find our guts." They pronounce words differently over there. "Our souls," particularly when slurred, has an much more alimentary sound to it.

This morning, in the early sunlight, before Marcos cranks the awning out to block the rays, it comes to you that what the presidential debate was actually a Bush tantrum in which the president threatened, obliquely, to resign. "The job is hard, so hard." Too hard and thankless. You can't fire me, I quit. As if. Yet he wouldn't let go of the theme. Dogged. And querulous as a five-year old.

What a strange, compelling package of human energies. Support for Bush, apart from interests and ideology, must arise from him being, in some weird way, fascinating to a degree most politicians can only envy. You suspect that in many heads he sets off a psychological war over whether to smack him one or let him have the candy. Then,

while you're still deciding which to do, he grabs it from your hand and looks so happy! Fooled ya! This man gets over – though it's got to be completely unconscious both on his part and ours – by owning his country's demonically clever inner child.

A youngish woman, very earnest and put-together, sits down at Table 11. Unpacks her snazzy Mac and gets right to work. Her café au lait arrives, borne in the hands of the indescribably kind and efficient Marcos. She pauses, and her glance travels from her screen toward the bowl topped with gorgeous, sculptural foam, but not as far as Marcos's Mayan eyes. "Awesome," with just that lilt of indifference.

• • •

It's been preying on your mind lately: in what manner and to what degree are a people – a nation, say – responsible for the acts perpetrated in their name? We tend to assume, particularly when it suits us to do so, that a given leader or government may be evil, but the populace as a whole is not. But does this really stand up to examination? Or is it impossible to generalize? Is each case different? How to compare Uganda under Idi Amin with the United States today?

Does the nature of responsibility change when one is a citizen of an aggressor state, an empire even, and, however unwillingly, a material beneficiary of that empire's power? Some people exist trapped by the coercive force of a nation whose destructive energies are turned primarily inward and only secondarily, if ever, beyond its borders. How do, and should, their actions differ from those living in a state which asserts an exponentially greater level of violence toward others than toward its own population?

October 9

Saturday Gamin and the first palpable shock of no Kimsey. She's living in a castle. Now.

Eyoko, with the tiny, half-sliding steps she uses when transporting hot beverages, brings John his café au lait. It's sumptuous enough to make you want to break ranks with your daily café français. When she makes 'em the foam is extravagant – a bowlful of Tiepolo in 3-D. Mid-first sip John's cellphone goes off: *The Waltz of the*

Flowers. A Russian theme developing among the cellphones here. Wonder what *Waltz of the Flowers* sounds like backward.

October 11

Head's so muddled, absent-minded doesn't arf describe it. More like the vessel you carry atop that neck's gone breathless in the fall high pressure.

The other day, when Jessamyn came to town, she brought a maple leaf, red, partly black, tips curled, from up in Gill, Mass. – and it blew you there. Farther north too, over the border into Vermont. Mud wet jean knees by the creek. Early morning. Bright sun side by side with brown black shadow. All things distinct. How you got there, no idea. Jack must have borrowed a car. He and Bea inside the house talking with Rachel and Ed. Adult stuff. Very earnest. Leeward side of Joe McCarthy. You'd been in the country before – or more accurately out of the city – but never at the convergence point of all available qualities – a clarity of sensations that made you, for a breath or two, though you couldn't have said so at the time, aware of the earth and sky alive and up to something important in unison.

This morning when Frank threw down the key, just as you unlocked his door, a still-green ginkgo leaf blew up against the brass mud guard, settled on the threshold.

When you left, bright early afternoon, the leaf still lay there wanting to blow indoors. But if you let it settle in the vestibule, Alba would just sweep it out again. So into your shirtpocket the little fan went – stuck it later between the latest pages of your red and black notebook. The recto page still blank, and on the verso, a bit of piece in no hurry to go anywhere:

Ductile Men

Few people know about the statue of Percy Bysche Shelley in Oxford, and fewer still have seen it. But now that the axis has shifted and the veil is thin… Once there was a time when everyone, everyone, was born with a caul. And this goes a long way to explaining not the why, but how.…

Bought potatoes, fruit, juice at the Chelsea Market – all packed heavy in a single bag, guaranteed to unbalance the handlebars – you should've paid attention, asked for two bags to distribute the weight better. But no, too late. You'll just have to lean left,

compensate against the pull. And as it turns out, that's the only effort you'll use – the wind's more than happy to rush you up Eighth Avenue – a leaf on wheels. Don't fall.

October 12 – Early Morning

Ba Gua class. Before warmup, Mary, the book agent, tells you about her flight to Frankfort, sitting next to an Iraq war veteran missing an eye, much of his face and several digits. He's being flown to a ceremony in Wiessbaden. They argue the politics of the election – he's virulently anti-Kerry – gung ho Bush. But increasingly, he's open to what she says – asks her several times: "Do you have documentation for that?"

Over the course of the flight too, Mary looks around the plane. Sees that many of the passengers are, like her neighbor, missing pieces. On their way to be honored. By the time they part at the airport, her interlocutor's shown her what's underneath his eyepatch, and a polaroid taken four days after he got blown up.

The Germans are obsessed with the election, Mary says. The woman who checked her boarding pass on her return flight pleads to know who she's voting for, nearly wept when she hears its Kerry. "What's wrong with the Americans?" people keep asking her.

October 13 – Le G. – Early Morning

Just outside, a truck pulls out fast from its parking space and into the Ninth Avenue traffic. A scatter of locust leaves, fallen onto its roof overnight hang an instant in the displaced air. By the time they land on the macadam, well, who knows what else has changed?

October 14 – Le G. – Midafternoon

Judy spots you through the window, rushes inside. She's gotta tell you – she's been reading Paul Goldberger's new tome and in the introduction he calls *Divided…* too cynical, and the other fella's book not cynical enough. Will this get a rise out of you? Truth to tell, you are *so* not there. You'll cop to being a cynic though, no problem, in it's ur-sense of believing in virtue as the primary good. Sure. *As long as he spelled my name right*.

Cynical. Jacques Derrida dies, and next day, bang! Superman, or at any rate Christopher Reeve, the mortal man and seemingly a decent one too, who took on the mantle of demigod. How cynical are the fates?

October 15 – Early Morning

Alarm goes off. Friday. Second consciousness, Jim Mcguin's voice upside your head:

Nowhere is there hope to be found
Among those afraid of losing their ground…

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Two readings coming up. So you write the dates out on postcards – send them to the eight friends who, in such a day and age, still don't email. The image side shows the city on a peach-rose morning, shot from high up in the southeast. Spreading side to side in mythic gorgeousness, Brooklyn, two bridges, Manhattan and Jersey beyond. Got 'em six for a dollar on Canal Street. In tiny letters, at the very bottom of the message side, just below where you signed your name: PRINTED IN THAILAND.

What do they see – those who separate the colors, strip the plates, run the presses, cut the cards down to four by six – when this view flashes before them a hundred thousand times, amidst a myriad of other images? What goes on in their minds when they look at this dream of a city, those postcard-makers in a land beyond?

October 18

No fall to speak of. Winter's here. You've never been a retrospective person, always forward. But today you give a premature glance through the margins in your agenda book, a book that's still got two and a half months to run. Email addresses of people you've met, a reminder from Gwen's piano teacher, back in July, to get the sheetmusic for "Träumerei." You could have headed straight for Patelson's but first went hunting in Bea's old music cabinet, the most self-effacing piece of furniture in your living room, sandwiched between a filing cabinet and an end table, largely blocked from view by the Morris chair.

Once upon a time, Jack cut the legs off the cabinet, gave the outside a coat of green paint and glued yellow linoleum on top. Today, the paint's chipped and what remains of the linoleum looks like someone took a rasp to it. No one would recognize that it's made of cherrywood unless they opened the beautifully bowed-out door and looked inside. Which you did, and started unloading the music onto the floor. Sandwiched between Hanon exercises and your old recorder books, the whole of *Kinderscenen*, in pretty good shape too. Carl Fischer's Music Library: Cooper Square, New York: Price 50 Cents. And more where that came from – an archaeology of your mother's gifts. To be unwrapped as needed. Some of them brittle, bindings disintegrated. Chopin mazurkas printed in 1886, fragile as baked phyllo.

Return to your margins. Titles of books friends have recommended. Works by Gioconda Belli – Nicaraguan poet. Patrick Leigh Fermor's *Mani*. There's seven billion of us – somebody will read them. A bond investment tip. As if. The names of Mark and Shana's bacon-loving pugs: Bauer and Brusché. You know them better now, the pugs. Can even tell one from the other though the differences are subtle to the casual observer. And inexplicables: *La Terracita. Café and lunch. Order bread "à la Olga."* Why'd you write that down on March 11? What universe was that? So much to let go of.

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Noon at Columbus Circle. A woman from outatown, her accent broad as the great prairies, asks a vendor "How much are your prices?" The words almost leap out, but you stifle them in time. "He doesn't sell prices, ma'am. That'd be derivatives and they sell them downtown. But if you read the sign, you'll see his teeshirts are five dollars."

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Midafternoon, downtown local E train. The fellow to your right reads a hunting magazine. With a ballpoint pen, he makes circles at regular intervals down the page.

Ah, it's a quiz. You try to read his choices, but the type's too small. The headline's large enough though: WHAT'S YOUR WHITETAIL I.Q.?

October 21 – Early Morning

Another slow-welling, muted dawn.

Several journalistic reports of the Yankee's loss last night as a "monumental collapse." Do they know what such a phrase evokes? The dogs of language run wild. Yesterday the *Times* referred to the American military's lightning victory over the Iraqis as a "catastrophic success."

As a kid trading cards, you liked individual Yankees, but they never were your team. And you're more inclined toward the camp of those who revel in the lifting of a curse. For days you've had fun imagining these playoffs as a religious war between Catholic Boston and Protestant New York, played out by Latinos. The Red Sox even have Jesus on their team in the persona of Johnny Damon. Tongue in cheek, but then he delivered.

Particularly ugly Yankee fans, sending up chant of "Who's your daddy?" when Martinez took the mound. He'd opened himself to that one by casting the Yankees as similar to the father who beat him – the patriarch who in some deep, fatalistic way not only abuses power, but retains the right to. Last night that chant made Martinez angry enough to strike daddy out. What happens when you triumph over the one who's beaten you down?

The *Times* headline declares the Sox "Back From Dead," to "bury" the Yankees. Let loose too a sense of the miraculous, with no telling where that leads.

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You finish reading *News From Nowhere* on a rush hour E train packed with folks heading home. Fellow passengers not near so ragged and filthy as Morris's proletarians, yet looking every bit as beaten down, as made small. Can anyone justify the indignity of how we live?

You've felt bereft at the prospect of reaching *The End* ever since the bookmark advanced past mid-point, but Morris's narrator, dragged back from the future Equality

of Life into his own sordid era resolves to strive, "with whatsoever pain and labor must needs be, to build up little by little the new day of fellowship, and rest and happiness."

And then the writer-utopian – who scorned literature – gives his language a turn that weaves in More and Yeats: "Yes, surely! and if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream."

October 22 – Le G. – Early Morning

Two minutes after eight and already a pair of young marketing gumbies has usurped Table 4. You go for Table 6 to secure the quadrant for Tony, John, and whomever else may come. Territorial maneuvers – putting stones down in a game of café Go.

When you're up early on these dark, pre-daylights-savings almost-dawns, down toward the south, the living room window frames the luminescent shape of twin towers. Whether by accident or design, the worklights on Silverstein's new World Trade Center 7 skeleton have been arranged in parallel columns. Spooky and unseemly.

The gumbies leave. When they stand up they're squat, compact. As though gravity is stronger on the planet they hail from. Great quantities of salad remain on their plates. Crêpes half eaten. Somebody sewed the shirts these men were stuffed into. Ironed the cloth to the customary standard of neatness. Blimey, what a waste.

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The silliness continues, deadly as ever. Kerry, decked out in camo, bags a wild goose. Boston cops shoot rubber bullets into a rowdy delegation from Red Sox Nation, hit a young woman in the eye. Surely she's less dead for being killed by a non-lethal projectile.

Marsh and McLennan stock sinks by half after the state attorney general sues them for insurance fraud. Wondrous how the *Times* manages to cover the investigation in detail without resorting to the words "World Trade Center," or mentioning that it was the company's Tower One offices into which American Airlines flight 11 crashed that severe clear morning three-odd years ago. A mere detail. Yet, sharing the same

front page, a new forensic report, replete with schematic drawings, that spins a sober, sincere and utterly improbable yarn about why the towers fell.

In the elevator, you meet an elderly neighbor who recounts the tale of how she arrived at nine this morning at the Board of Health facility on Ninth and 26th at 9 a.m. Waited on line three hours. Sorry, we've run out of flu shots. Come back tomorrow.

Bicycling, *Eight Miles High* revisits you and you realize the word is *warmth* not *hope*. *Nowhere is there* warmth *to be found*…

October 24 – Early Evening

Golden, powdery dusk. As though the mesas have blown to New York and hang suspended over Lower Manhattan.

October 25 – Early Morning

You're pumping hard along 25th to secure Table 4 from the infidels. From between parked cars, a squirrel darts right across your path. No time to swerve. Your wheel passes just shy of its tail. Flash on scores of roadkill along the Taconic yesterday, Gwen thankfully sitting too low down in the backseat to notice. Keep barreling along. Just ahead, a woman stands a few steps out into the street. She'd started across at the same time as the squirrel, saw your near miss, came to a halt. You catch one another's eyes, and she raises one hand, thumb and index finger tips nearly touching in the universal sign of "whew, almost." Dazzling smile. Dark-skinned, middle years, unremarkably dressed. Odd sense of recognition – do you know her? Don't think so – yet she's just got that quality you value – the French have a word for it: *vif*.

Round the corner onto Ninth and cut sharp across the lanes to the right hand side. You've got a red at 24th, but the crosstown light is flashing, about to change. Nothing's coming, so you pour it on, try to get ahead of the wave surging downtown. How did you not see the yellow cab – eastward-bound on 24th and flooring it to make the light? You both hit your brakes. He veers to avoid you and screeches to a halt in the crosswalk. You jackknife to within a foot of his fender. Two misses as good as a mile in as many blocks. That kind of morning. Gesture of apology to the cab driver out of whom you must've scared the shit. Dismount and walk the bike the rest of the way to the café. Fuck the table. Which, as it turns out, is all yours anyhow.

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72nd Street subway turnstiles. Sounds like a hedgerow full of starlings – a gazillion metro cards, swiped through, chirping their rush hour song.

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The head of Marsh & McClellan resigns. A Greenberg. By an odd coincidence the boss of IAG is his papa. Between the Greenberg insurance-ocracy, and Bloomberg the info-macher, the bergs got this city pretty much crushed down. Who's to say what'll shake things up, cause those mountains to move? Not Spitzer, ultimately. No prosecutor works the at the base of things or under. He just cuts the tall poppies. The movement will have to come from below.

October 27

Some night – the earth's shadow passes entirely over the moon, yet it's still visible, deeply rust-colored – the blood moon. Red Sox Nation lifts the curse off itself. You called Frank before the game and he said he thought the spirit of the Brooklyn Dodgers had migrated to Boston. Why now, you asked, after all these years? It takes a generation or more to take hold, he replied. You'd never thought of it that way – the Dodgers hadn't even entered your mind. But Frank's theory explains certain things – up to and including why someone as habitually indifferent to sports as you are, got caught up in the post-season from game one against the Yankees. The way the Sox played must have reminded you of the New York you experienced as a child, called to mind the sense of your city in the days when it was still the world capital of hope.

And in the papers, the discovery, not an ancestor species, but of a parallel kind of human being, extinct for thirteen thousand years or so. Little ones they were, a yard or so tall, and perfectly in scale with the dwarf elephants they hunted once on the same Indonesian isle.

October 28 – Le G. – Early Morning

A wonder it took so long. Eric B. made a remark about the amount of energy it must take to get up in the morning and rationalize voting for Bush, and John went off like a roadside bomb. You were in the WC when whatever exactly it was got said, and returned find the peaceable kingdom of Tables 4 through 6 on the edge of eruption – John shaking with rage, on the brink of launching himself across the intervening table, caught, or so it looked, between throwing a punch and bursting into sobs.

Tony, Thomas M. and Eduardo caught in between, taken by surprise, embarrassed by the sudden high emotion, wanting to ameliorate, helpless. Eric didn't back down, but spoke softly, his expression regretful, and though John jumped up to leave, between one Eric and the other you managed to half chill him out. Eventually John put out his hand and Eric shook it. "I like you," said John, but the words carried a warped tonality, like he was speaking down a long coil. He paid at the register and then you saw him open the front door, not looking back, in profile only, still ashen and vulnerable in his big boxy suit.

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We're all blind, or half-blind. Need one another to help us see.

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Reuters says upwards of a hundred thousand Iraqis have been killed by our invasion. The term used is "excess deaths." Excess to what?

October 29

No action in the corner this a.m. No Eric, no John. Finally around ten-thirty, Tony rolls in, way late. Looking wary.

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Al-Jazeera broadcasts a videotape, purportedly of Bin Laden, in which he advises Americans on how to "avoid another Manhattan." He's right, of course, one Manhattan is sufficiency suffansified. Any more would be superfluous.

October 29

You make your own silence.

October 31 – Le G. – Early Morning

All hallows. Sprang forward, fell back. Dawn and endarkenment both a jot earlier. Surprise weather hits you like a fetid wave when you ride out. Back up into the 70s. What are the larvae to think? The trees?

Great moments in café music. The resident iPod delivers up a string of Billie Holiday's most downbeat tunes. The guy at Table 5, who you've never seen before, works diligently at his yogurt, muesli and fresh fruit. *A strange and bitter crop*. She lets the final note hang in the air. Noisy morning, the place filled early, agitated – even the dogs leashed outside yap a shriller pitch than usual. Trying to drown her out?

John walks in. Aha! Greetings. His customary table taken, he eyes your open laptop, proceeds back into the cave. *I sit in my chair, filled with despair… I know I'll soon go mad.* Tony's next in the door, still levitated from the Sox romp. Sees you're working, waves, goes back to join John.

A new waitress named Bébé has replaced Kimsey. Red hair. Strange kind of beauty. Almost no affect plays on those features. Skin smooth and uniform – it reveals no biography. Tall and light-boned, but she clumps around like a determined six-year-old. Marcos darts in and out among the tables, keeping things on track as best he can. The sweet, Scandinavian-looking young blonde guy at Table 7 stands up to leave and his shirt rides up over a substantial gut. KC and the sunshine band. See, it's all coming back. Coming round. Tinny amidst the clamor, Billie's still demented.

At Katz's last night, around eleven, the Halloween revelers began trickling in. One woman, Japanese probably, done up as a flawless Frida Kahlo. Then a man and a woman – twin white rabbits. You passed their table on the way out, checked for details. Excellently outlined pink noses. Good-looking beneath the make-up, the silly ears. Yet

still, they looked despondent, really glum. "Maybe they've been teased too much," said Katie.

Lady Day swings uptempo: *I've found eyes just a little bit bluer; I've found a heart just a little bit truer*.

You look over at Tony and John chatting amiably like the pals they are. Outside, beyond the campfire, on the edge of darkness, a world civil war, escalating toward a boil. And like so many bright colors of autumn, the figleaves falling away.

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Gwen, as Morticia, breezes through Chelsea Halloween territory, collecting her tribute, avowedly avid. But this fall, a year older, she doesn't insist on hitting every possible spot. Enough for her to get a flavor of the game, then break off to go to dinner. Last night, she partied with girls her age – a sleepover at Shana's in Stuyvesant Town. For the occasion, Shana wrote a mystery play, a highly sophisticated, convoluted plot in which all the guests had a part and the idea was to guess the murderer. Then they watched terrifying movies until who knows what hour – a great leap forward.

One Halloween, maybe four years ago, you and Eric B. paraded with your families through the same trick-or-treat circuit. The two of you hung back a moment, caught up in conversation. Truly, it seemed like only seconds had passed, but when you looked for your wives and daughters, they had disappeared. Gone Katie and Gwen, Veronica and Becky. You walked ahead fast to catch up with them, doubled back in case you'd overshot them, even hurried onto the next block on the prescribed route. Pretty silly. As though you were chasing ghosts. Two middle-aged guys, fundamentally rationalists, if not always rational. You knew they had to be somewhere. Couldn't have gone far. But after twenty-some minutes of making the rounds, asking common friends you encountered on the way if they'd seen them, the odd, horrifying sensation crept up, at least in you, that your families had stepped through some membrane and into another dimension.

Generally, you're not quick to panic, neither is Eric, yet rather than shrug it off and go have a drink, or a coffee, you kept searching, persisting beyond any bounds of common sense. Of course your wives and daughters were alive and well within six or

so square blocks of where you stood, looking up and down the block and then quizzically, even a bit embarrassed, at one another. No sirens, no ambulances, no alarms. But some chord of fear had been touched. Even after you met up with them, or found them back at home – and it's true now you can't remember how the episode ended – you remained bereft and shaky-feeling that whole evening. And you'll never forget it, that long, suspended moment of supreme uncertainty triumphing over your reason, trumping your cool.

November 1

Rumors run riot, while we stand still as stones. The sense of another 9/11 unfolding in slow motion – much worse, because it's us doing it to us this time, and the awfulness covers the whole of the country. And we feel it coming. Even more nauseous.

The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore. Would that the psalm carried more weight than wishes.

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Noon: Nader rally on Wall Street, in sight of the Stock Exchange. Sky above the canyons severe clear. Tonight he'll speak at Cooper Union, where once, when you were maybe eight, Jack took you with him when he went to hear a lecture by an American disciple of Ortega y Gasset. You recall being impressed by the room itself and the respectful attention focused on the man behind the podium, but of course didn't understand a word he said.

Tonight, at the Nader convocation, Patti Smith'll crank up *The People Have the Power*, agitate the mortar in the walls of the Great Hall. Out of the '80s – an age born dead – her anthem blossoms into new air. At least she hasn't knuckled under. The blue meanies gotta know their limits.

Sure the Democrats hate the Republicans. So it is with Catholics and Protestants. Both want us on our knees.

November 2

A day dawns. Whatever else happens, you'll celebrate Day Zero of the Republic of New York.

A century ago, Ward McAllister asserted that the city had four hundred important citizens. O. Henry wrote, so he said, for the city's whole four million. We're way more than that now – eight million and some odd, and that's the official count. Time to take New York beyond the bounds of its state and nation. First in our sovereign minds. Then with both feet planted on common ground.

November 3

Sudden distraction from yesterday's electoral frenzy. Your venerable clamshell Mac up and died – bingo, lights out – literally minutes after you backed up your latest revision to these *Notes*. Fritzed, according to the folks at TekServe, the circuit in the logic board that controls the display. Not beyond repair, but way too costly to be practical. So then and there you mortgaged, if not the farm, then the lower forty, and got a new iBookG4.

By evening, back up and running, but took a break to watch Rather as he waggled his jowls and predicted a "long night of uncertainty" – which could serve as a figure of speech for a wider future than he probably had in mind.

Back to your book and arrived at New Year's Eve 2000, which the three of you spent up in Rochester with Katie's aunt Elva. In that entry, you made a reference to an even earlier trip with Elva to Niagara Falls, back in the summer of '97. A pretty magical day all in all. Elva still spry enough to negotiate the walk from the parking lot to the Canadian overlook, you driving, or rather tobogganing her enormous '70s Oldsmobile and arriving back at her house filled with gratitude you hadn't crashed it.

For dinner ate the corn and tomatoes you'd bought at a roadside stand along the way. For dessert, donuts from wonderful place – a classic bakery surviving from the Rochester of another era. Mindblown at the falls, you'd jotted down some lines didn't make it into your first draft. As you gleaned your old notebooks for fragments out of which to make this narrative, you'd skipped transcribing that bit. It seemed too personal, and badly crafted. But Elva's gone now, and the moment itself now stands so remote as to seem – though Gwen was already five – like your childhood. The handwriting's still there, six notebooks ago, where you left it:

Horseshoe

On the Canadian side I got so excited I let my chocolate ice cream cone drip all over my pants. There was this beautiful young Québeçoise with a bare midriff whose boyfriend couldn't stop taking pictures of her against the rainbow mist, and a family of Jamaicans having their portrait taken by a family of Koreans. And an Indian girl with bare feet, whose brothers wore Nikes. And the blue green, rushing up to the edge and falling away.

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Email from Rosemary:

Pierrot & Rose-Marie de Paris

Dear Rosemary – I'm sure Katie will reply under separate cover. And her take, of course, is different from mine.

I'm very interested in how the election result is being perceived in France. When you have a moment, I'd love a wee disquisition.

Lots of bummed out, freaked-out people today. But I'm not among them. I think there are more unexpected turnings a-coming. And in any case, Kerry wasn't the answer. If anything, he'd have masked the problems temporarily. Better that the shit really hit the fan on Bush's watch.

What's shaping up are the conditions for real civil conflict here down the line. There's a real sense of the country, both geographically and institutionally, disarticulating itself. And there's a virtue – however scary – in the situation becoming clear, however polarized, however fragmented. The secession issue is a lot trickier than it was in the 1860s though. The politically dominant "heartland" has emerged as a culturally isolated block, with no affinity for Europe, Asia or Latin America, no ties to anything but God and its own rust.

It's made sense to me for many years that New York City affirm its autonomy – its world culture-ness – and take steps to revolutionize its economic basis – get out from under the boot of the state and the nation. I'd like to see us move toward being our own "free city," and now seems a moment when fewer people would reject such and argument out of hand. So I expect to be putting my energies in that direction unless the situation becomes so critical we literally have to leave. Which is possible. *On verra*, as you would say.

I hope you guys are well. Keep me posted.

xoxox, E.

November 4 – Midmorning

Underground, beneath the Citicorp Center, near the entrance to the subway: INFINITY SHOE REPAIR.

The neon outline of a high-heeled purple pump, and beneath it in hot yellow letters: SHINE.

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Threat du jour: "I earned capital in this election, and I'm going to spend it." More like he stole the rope with which to hang hisself.

This past Monday, Gwen's middle school held a kid's election, a choice between Bush or Kerry. Why only those two? Gwen asked. Why not the same candidates as on the adult ballot? We had to keep it simple. So said Mr. Asaro, her Language Arts teacher. Don't want it to get complicated. The tally: 186 for Bush to Kerry's 913. And so the city goes at more or less the same ratio.

The *Times* gives its own spin to the fragmentation, tries to sidestep the issue of fraud. New Yorkers "awoke yesterday…to confront once again how much of a 51st State they are." Quoth a film producer buttonholed by the reporter near Lincoln Center: "Do you know how I describe New York to my European friends? An island off the coast of Europe."

What might be done if this city, unique in the world, were to find its moral center? Who then could we not look in the eye?

Two short months since the Republicans came and pissed on a defeated city. Is there now a substrate, some kind of internal bedrock we can put our feet on, find some ground on which to stand?

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Ohio, Florida, New Mexico, Colorado, Nevada, Idaho. All those lines of expectant voters. And to think, to make those exit polls disappear only took a few lines of code. Magic, almost, in all the right places.

And now the media's job: steering us away from the fact that Kerry won, yet someone else is president. Accommodating us to the next level of self-nullification.

Somehow, as folks at the café comment on your sleek new iBook, the coincidence of your clamshell dying on election day gets elaborated into little tall tale. Your old machine, so you say, had too much integrity to survive November 2. It couldn't bear the abuse to which its cousins, the electronic voting machines, were being subjected – forced as they were to render false tallies, the integrity of their code corrupted. So your computer protested in the only way it could: self-immolation.

November 5

Viewed from your little corner, people's sense of grief and depression seems directly proportional to the hope they'd placed in Kerry. So much energy pinned on their little votes thrown into the sea. Too abject now to even stand and utter: "Cheat!" God forbid go for their pistol.

Sure it's a bummer, but there's only so far your sympathy goes. It could be worse, this could be Fallujah.

Eduardo's been trying to organize an international literary event at the Cervantes Institute. Since the election, more than one European writer has bowed out. John Berger sent a crisp email – he refuses to "set foot in a fascist country." Lots of reasons to hate the U.S., some more justified than others. Some former teapots calling the current one black. But now it's a free market in contempt.

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Biking, a line from Rabbie Burns pops into your head. The Scots, he lamented, bought and sold with English gold: *Such a parcel of rogues in a nation.*

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Ring up Frank to see how he's weathering the instauration. "I've got to live four more years now," he says.

The great granddaughter of an old friend called him, disconsolate beyond tears. She'd been working like a navvy, somewhere in the headless heartland, for the Democratic Party. So Frank, what did you tell her? You can picture it, almost hear him too. Perched on his living room rocker, stockinged feet up on the wooden massage rollers, crescent-shaped cushion propped behind his neck. Holding the white cordless phone he sings her *Joe Hill*.

• • •

Wolfgang's back in town – his yearly winter migration from Berlin. Subway downtown to visit him in his aerie, resume your traditional four o'clock conversations. Sit drinking tea at his kitchen table – gaze over the harbor as the sun plunges west. There's Liberty, always smaller than you remember her, and never in exactly same place. She doesn't look in your direction, yet a voice that must belong to her sounds in your head. *Time to turn me around. 180 degrees. To the west. Let them come, all those children of America, yearning to breathe free.*

November 8

Things you never noticed. The guy you say hello to almost every day in the elevator, Camillo, who delivers, rain or shine, meals on wheels for the Hudson Guild – what's that he wearing around his neck, hanging next to his name tag? He hold it up for you to see – a charm, Santería?, to protect his grandson in Iraq.

Bush celebrates his second coup with the erasure of Fallujah, just as Putin rang in the Millennium by flattening Grozny. Always a city must be sacrificed to whatever gods these monsters worship.

Pat Oliphant cartoon of a great headless giant labeled Bush Electorate, blindly following the malevolent elf in the outsize ten gallon hat off a cliff. But what use is satire now, when it lacks its enforcement arm, the outrage of the people?

November 10 – Le G. – Early Morning

At Writing X last night, Leslie passed around a map she'd printed out off the web and it got a good, bitter laugh all round. The blue bookend states were labeled "America" and the great beast within "Dumbfuckistan." Satisfying in some way, to see defeat writ out like that and mock it. On a purely graphic level, it would seem the east and west coasts have become a kind of parenthesis, no longer able to contain the malignant sentence they frame.

But maps lie. They don't say that Kerry threw the fight, which like any fixed bout was a sham, no real contest at all. Bush took Florida by twenty thousand more votes than there are registered Republicans, by contrast with the election four years ago, where, presumably, 85 per cent of the Republicans voted for him. There's something intellectually appealing to some folks about the whole center of the country going for Bush. It makes a tidy visual formulation. But if the count had been real, there'd be a bunch of blue speckles in the big red blob. And everywhere, multiple shades of purple.

We are where we are. Can we stand to look at it? And though you can almost hear Carville and company's magic markers squeaking out a new slogan: *It's the stupidity, stupid*, that doesn't get one very far, does it. If we, or they, are stupid, how did we get this way? Stupid born, or made? And are there different species of stupidity, each with its own Darwinian moment?

In the rosy dawn of the enlightenment, Athanasius Kircher invited a Jesuit professor to look through the telescope at Kirscher's latest discovery: sun-spots. The venerable priest waved him away: "It is useless, my son. I have read Aristotle twice and have not found anything in his writings about spots on the sun. So there cannot be spots on the sun. They arise either from the imperfections in your telescope, or from the defects in your own eyes."

Café's filled up and you hardly noticed. Folks waiting for tables by the door. To your right and behind you, the glass gone opaque with condensation. Raining now. Didn't think to take and umbrella. Tom cracks the door, wends his way toward the counter, orders his usual, an iced mocha to go. How he can drink it all year round? In the most bone-chilling, inclement weather – it's a mystery. But then he used to be a cowboy in the north country. He and Maureen are heading back to Vietnam and Cambodia in a couple of weeks for more shooting on her current project. They play it close to the vest, what she's working on, but Tom's hinted that this has something to do with the faces of those whose bodies have been edited by war. Amazing these two, how they plan out these photographic expeditions with an almost military precision, then improvise *mutatis mutandis*, with suitable and necessary alterations on the ground. Tom, coffee in hand comes over, notices your new laptop and you unreel another version of your yarn about how it suicided in response to the manipulation of the voting machines – a Buddhist monk in the land of zeroes and ones.

Then together, out into the rain. Walk north. From beneath the fruit store awning Tom can grabs a *Times*, disappears briefly inside to pay. A dark-skinned nanny pushes a stroller past. Head turned to one side, protected from the downpour, a pallid child reclines within its sheath of plastic, dozing. At 23rd and Ninth, Tom's got the light but waits for it to change in your direction. Here you've got to pay more than usual attention because the arrangement isn't binary like most Manhattan intersections. First comes a green arrow giving right of way to westbound cars turning south. For cars and pedestrians heading east the signal stay red. Not infrequently you've seen someone nearly get clipped – and once or twice that person has been you – assuming *hey, downtown traffic's stopped – guess I can cross now*.

Though all waits in New York seem interminable in about thirty seconds the red handprint signifying "Halt, yo!" flashes to a white silhouette of a little scurrying man meaning "Your turn, Pedestrian – chop-chop!" A quick handshake and you're off. On the other side, just before the bus shelter, you turn to look back. Tom's got the light and is striding across 23rd, umbrella tilted into the rain – determined: a man on a mission. You make a habit of walking purposefully, but in the blurriness of the day, you've lost the urgency of your own marching orders.

All around, as in a proper anthill, the business of the city grinds on.

November 13

Jerilou's putting together a book on the suburbanization of New York. True, that's part of the picture, but from where you sit, it doesn't fully describe what's going on. Something more complex is at work – a kind of molecular generification within the grosser gentrification, a rounding-off of the city's edges, though you've no sense of a genuine softening underneath. You propose what pops into your head – a piece on the Time Warner Center, apotheosis of the terror-chic mall.

Accordingly, you pick Katie up from her drawing class at the Art Student's League on 57th Street and head over through the early evening darkness to Columbus Circle to scope out the *ding an sich*. Ah, 'tis the season. Perched atop the housing of each revolving door, a huge silver Christmas tree ball. Festive yet threatening. Push and turn. Hope that if the vibrations disturb this unholy bauble, it will roll off onto the head of the next guy instead of you. Funny, or not so, how this place seems to induce that "I'm alright Jack" kind of thinking. Wheel of fortune. Whew, you're through.

Down the escalator into Whole Foods. Weirdly post-apocalyptic, putting a supermarket cum food court underground. You perch on adjacent stools, eat dinner of a sort from clear take-out containers. Other folk resort to green melmac-ish bowls the color of hospital basins. Less flimsy than what you've got, but the bowls are so steep-sided, the food must all run together at the bottom. The place is packed – turnover so fast it looks time-lapse. But the Indian food's not bad, considering. Look around and see feelgood Calcutta. Hopper on anti-depressives. Finish up your coffee – delicious, but jeez, a buck sixty-two for a cuppa joe that small?

The next move is up and out. In a hall off the big atrium, a black Lincoln Aviator squats, its cartoonish tires spreading just enough on the high-sheened marble floor to give a sense of just how much this grotesquely hypertrophed pile of metal weighs. *Win me!* No need to tie yourself to the mast, this siren can't reach you. Whatever car lust you possess is bound up in that elusive vintage Jaguar. As you detour around the Aviator, Katie shakes her head. "Exhibit A," she says. "Why we're in Iraq."

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Up at the Met, reluctant to depart, you stay till the alarm bleats its electronic bum's rush and massed ranks of guards channel you, along with a score or so others, cattle-like toward the exit. Dizzy from your immersion in five and a half centuries of the richest imaginable material. China, China, China!

• • •

At your desk, the squawk – like a deranged Stepford chicken – of a passing emergency vehicle pops you out of your work. Look up at the framed picture on the wall. A Katie drawing, from a bust by Houdin, of M. Arouet. If writing energy could be measured in units, couldn't they be called Voltaires? Would that you could tap into a tenth of one!

November 15 – Le G. – Early Morning

Pick the *Post* up off the magazine rack. Quoth Lenn Robbins: "Man, was there some action in the Garden Saturday night! Tempers flared, fists flew and the crowd of 12,777 rose to get a better view of the action. Unfortunately little of that took place in the ring. The Battle for Supremacy among a dubious group of eight 'Desperate Heavyweights' disintegrated into a night of fans swinging at each other. One particularly foolish fan made the mistake of taunting members of the Marine color guard who upheld the honor of the corps by disposing of said fan."

By a fluke, Eric B. was there and witnessed it all – said at least eight separate slugging matches broke out on in the stands, some of them simultaneously. Security had to hustle out one fighter's corner man, who got in a brawl with his opposite number. One of the heavyweights, Golota, is a Pole. Consequently, knots of men, faces painted half red, half white, cheering him on. Split decision, and the vibe so creepy that Eric split the scene, before the referees gave the fight to Ruiz.

Little by little, the cat's clawing her way out of the bag.

When were you last at the Garden? It's no garden, of course, pleasure or otherwise. Nor located anywhere near Madison Square. Went there with Gwen years ago with to see a young women's track meet. And before that, Jesus, the '70s. Bob

Marley, already the tumor working on him. Stanley Clarke opened the show and damn near stole it. Hip sounds, Daddy. Just inhale. *Kaya now, for the rain is falling…*

• • •

Conferences this afternoon with Gwen's teachers. Seems by and large, she's doing fine, but in what they now call "Language Arts," she's off the charts. And it's true. Nobody writes like her, connected at once to the ground and whatever it is out there.

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Clear evening and such a shaded, nuanced sky. The whole dome seems to have expanded. Fingernail moon to the south and beneath it, two planes approach on a widening vector. Track the flashing lights, one toward Newark, and in the east, Kennedy. Ah, there's a third. Passes behind the golden lantern atop Metropolitan Life. Angling down for La Guardia. No honking below, and only one siren, brief and distant. There's a rumble, takes you a few seconds to recognize. Don't hear the subway often – usually drowned out. Almost peace.

How can you live this way? Don't drink or take drugs, anti-depressive, erectile or otherwise. Nothing for anxiety except talking to Paul every third week, Ba Gua and Tian Kan. Don't hardly watch TV. Where's your anesthetic? What are you, crazy?

4 LITTLE BY LITTLE

November 16 – Early morning

Household's still asleep. Scan the *Times* online. A flurry of articles recently around and about the hundredth anniversary of the subway. Here's one on the graffiti artists of the '70s – whose presence has been expunged from the official records of the MTA. Here's a picture of Lee Quinones, whose full cars you remember well, in his Brooklyn studio. He stands before a fascinating canvas. He's still at it, still evolving. "If people are going to live in the dark, I'll leave the light on for them. The art will explain it all."

Off to Ba Gua in the mauve and green dawn. The Empire State a blank, slate gray, but for the amber crown she wears by night. That's enough.

November 17 – Le G. – Early Morning

So many of your extended family in manifest despair since Bush coup two. Can't read the papers. Don't find the *Daily Show* funny any more. Which makes sense, particularly given that in times like these, satire, instead of stripping power of its mystique lends an ephemeral buzz of self-congratulation to the circular logic of the powerless: *See, we're smarter than those idiots*. Yeah, but if we're so smart then why…? Like a boomerang wide of its mark, the energy of wit loops back on the thrower.

So all around you sense folks falling into a default position, an emotional line of least resistance, a strategy of avoidance. It's easier, perhaps, less disturbing, to imagine that Bush "won" than it is to acknowledge that the election was rigged, the Democrats went along for the ride and that we in the opposition lack whatever it takes to rise up and jail these bastards.

Thus much time at Writing X last night spent in a kind of grieving cum kvetching session. Some of it had to be aired, but you it let go on longer than you should've since it took energy away from work in the room. So easy for the group, yourself included, to collude in dismissing mere writing in the face of stark mad power.

And then at one point, Marc, who's been threatening to emigrate to Canada, uttered an aside on Kerry's rollover that sounded so defeatist and rationalizing you found yourself nearly shouting back, involuntarily mimicking the tone and cadence of Bea's long-dead cousin Aaron, the firebrand Yiddish Communist: *The billionaire is dead – long live the billionaire – is that good enough for us? You want change? You want change? Be different!*

And how now with these *Notes…*? Barring any major perturbations in your flightpath, before long you'll have two books to go out with – this one and the novel. But out into what? Hard to imagine a welcoming committee composed of agents and editors who, even before the great onslaught of fear and literalism routinely found your books "too difficult." No controlling that. Your job is to keep writing. Even if it's only for Katie and Gwen. For your own pleasure when you can take it. Fleeting moments of power too, in writing it right. *There ain't no hammer this side of this mountain that ring like mine…* Eventually some of the rocks get smaller.

November 20

A scuffle between players during a Pistons-Pacers game in Detroit last night escalated into a brawl with fans in the stands, then a full-fledged riot on the court. What a spectacle: enraged black giants vs. white fatties.

Whatever's bubbling beneath the surface of the country that's sent its kids out to claim Iraq for the multinationals – to plant their rifle butts in the backs of others – is beginning to crack through. Uglier and uglier. It all veers into the zone of extreme danger now, very, very fast.

Is it just your own neuroses – you who live in a city of seven-something million Woody Allens – or can you really smell it walking these streets: a stench in the wind. Rank in your nostrils as the meatbox you used to have to scrub out when you worked at the 9th Circle back when you were, what, twenty?

Funny place, the 9th Circle. A West Village venture by the founder of the far more famous Max's Kansas City. Similar look, white-on-black graphics, cave-like inside and redolent of hip. Grill-based food, excellent steaks, burgers and salads. One of the benefits of working there was definitely the chow. Then someone bought the place, a horrible, hirsute, man-like toad, who made a habit of ordering you, in the nastiest possible way, to scramble eggs for his Yorkie. Despite which you lasted there around

three months – long-term employment in those days. Until you showed up for your shift and the bartender-manager announced that the Circle was becoming a gay bar – effective immediately. Now, did you want to switch orientations, or find another job? He himself had seized the opportunity and already sported a bandana and earring – the Buccaneer look. Which was something to see since, as a nominally straight fella, he looked not entirely unlike Lee Van Cleef. For an instant he seemed puzzled by your decision, then turned back to inventorying his bottles.

Back then the restaurant business – and from what you can see it hasn't much changed – cultivated a fine disdain for such niceties as unemployment insurance, two weeks notice or severance pay. Nonetheless, when you walked down the steps and into a balmy late afternoon, you celebrated your sudden liberation from work with an extravagantly expensive take-out croissant and cappuccino from Sutter's on the corner of Greenwich Avenue. No benches then, but plenty of parked cars, so you hopped up on the hood of the poshest one nearby, reclined against the windshield and drank into your every fiber the fullness of the gathering dusk.

However cynically motivated, the decision to take the 9th Circle gay caught the wave of the changing West Village demographics and downtown culture as a whole. So it turned out, at least in the short term, to be a terrific business decision. The place had always been pretty busy. Now it was packed every evening, and the bar must have doubled its business.

A couple of years later, maybe '73, when you started driving a cab, you'd occasionally get a backseat full of conspicuously straight guys from out of town. They'd give you some bogus destination, but after about three blocks one of them would lean forward through the partition window and half-whisper: *So where can we, ah, get some action – like, ah, you know, some pussy?* You'd nod sagely, man of the world that you and all cab drivers were, then drop them at the 9th Circle. Gesture up the stairs. Go get 'em fellas, they're wet for you.

• • •

In store after store, Christmas decorations already in full flower. What happened to the traditional speedbump of Thanksgiving? Flattened by the great Hummer of marketing. And what's to be thankful for? Just cut to the frenzy.

November 22 – Early Morning

The art, in the face of all real evidence, of pretending conditions are the same as they once were. Such as riding your bicycle as though the herds of lunatic, or merely distracted drivers in evermore huge vehicles had never transformed the streets into an exponentially more unforgiving place.

As you pedal toward the café down the east side of Ninth Avenue, you look over your shoulder to see if you can start edging over to your right. Usually it's a solid wall of rushing cars, but this time, the pack is thin. So you stick out your arm to signal them, and start to cut across the lanes. Two of the three oncoming cars respect your move. But the third, furthest to the right, a slick, black SUV keeps bearing down – won't give you a break. You signal more emphatically, put on a burst and pass just in front of him nearly overshooting the café. What an asshole.

Slightly wobbly in the knees you lean your bike against the green parking sign pole it shares most mornings with a rusting, abandoned three-speed that's been chained there since the dawn of the Pleistocene, its basket held on with wires twisted round the handlebars, their ends sticking out and jagged enough to furnish you a nasty scratch if you're not careful to keep clear of them when you lock up. Wouldn't it make sense to bend them down? Caught up in your thoughts, the rogue SUV entirely flown out of your head, you sense someone's presence nearby and turn to see Robert, *père de tout les petits Gamins* standing next to you, his broad face alive with distress.

"I almost killed you," he says. "I was on the cell and I didn't see…" He points to the big black monstrosity parked just down the block. Then you both crack up at the prospect, the miss as good as a mile, the bullet dodged – safe now to laugh about it. "What if I had run over my first customer?" You weren't really his first, but it makes a better story this way. So print the legend. "I would have to take a handprint of your blood and put it up by your table. Here sat Eric…" On and on spins the yarn. He would have to take the lucky dollar bill down off the wall by the register and rip it up. Still red-faced from laughing, he holds the café door open and in you go.

• • •

Ah, the joys of car ownership – the endless alternate-side-of-the street game that keeps you one jump ahead of sanitation sweepers and parking tickets. One more rhythm, another step added to the dance.

This morning, when you move the car from 24th Street to a new space, you'll do an urban guerrilla job of it. Back up a dozen yards or so to the corner of Ninth Avenue then, as soon the opportunity permits, swing the tail round into the intersection and shift into drive just as the lights change and the traffic swoops south bearing you along with it. Of course you'll have to be careful not to back into the path of any oncoming cars or run over pedestrians in the process. And given the increased density of folks on the street and the fact that most of them are walking around utterly out of it, the whole enterprise carries more risk than it did twenty years past in the days of your VW bus. And then too, it's flagrantly illegal and a cop might nail you. By accident you've done this shenanigan right under their noses – not having seen them till afterward – but they've either been oblivious or simply didn't care. Its amazing what you can get away with if you move with deliberate intent and don't otherwise draw notice.

Silly really, performing this whole maneuver just to avoid blowing a precious New York minute driving across to Seventh Avenue, then down and around. But something in you still relishes the efficiency of the move, and at the same time, the deliberate against-the-grain of it – the imposition of your own micro-choreography on the official dance. When you do this backup trick, it's executed, if you say so yourself, with great care and impeccable timing. Thought out and acted though, paying full attention.

In general though, road rules are off. Lots of drivers blind to the existence of anything else – man, woman, child or mechanical beast. Who signals before turning any more? Precious few. When changing lanes? No one you've seen in a while. And some cyclists, particularly the restaurant delivery guys, have a very bracing "life is cheap" mode of action. Any direction, any surface, any time. Gotta stay sharp or else – voom! – they're on top of you.

Against the sickness of doing nothing while your robotized countrymen, in Apache helicopters you helped pay for, point and click and tear up human beings who have done neither you nor them any harm, you reverse the gray, dinged-up '91 Taurus Katie inherited from her mom into the intersection and turn it round. Cut across lanes and take the corner by Le Gamin too fast to see who's at Table 4 or 5. Sweeper JOHNSTON's just been through – you can see it at the far end of the block, swishing the debris around and wetting it down – plenty of parking spaces available. Nothing to do but sit and wait out the forty-five minutes till the clock makes you legal.

Turn on BBC news. Listen to their species of rationalization. A woman you recognize from the neighborhood approaches, walking her black Labrador. Wife of a veterinarian. Wavy hair, cream white skin, deep brown eyes and astonishingly broad cheekbones. Wide, full mouth – a kind of stillness to her features, yet all components integral in way that suggests a both a mask and a reincarnated beauty from some long-vanished Near Eastern Ipanema. She passes not more than five feet from the side of the car. You don't wave and she doesn't notice you there. In your salad days you played drums briefly for a punk band called the Fake Germans – its lead singer and song writer Tim Milk, a brilliant fellow. One of his lyrics described a man's face through the window of a jet on the runway: "a Napoleon sealed in glass." You be he.

November 23

Every night, if she's finished her homework, showered and hopped into bed on time, you read Gwen from Kipling's *Kim*. There's a character, Father Victor, a regimental chaplain who shows Kim some kindness. His stock exclamation sticks in your head: "Powers of Darkness below!" You feel them rise up every afternoon when the sun sets, seep through the cracks in the windows, rule your mood until midmorning the next day. And then, a little respite while they take their nap, gathering strength for the next assault.

While you read, Gwen draws. She swears that it calms her, makes her work leap forward. Tough for her to put her pencil down when ten o'clock rolls around. Tough for you to turn out the light over her bed – though her great-grandfather's glass lamp on the nightstand, with its tiny bulb, stays on through the night.

November 24

Tired. Too tired to write or think. Loads of right-now reading on your plate, all of which you resist. Not so much the subject matter as the contemporary voice itself you can't face. Whether a friend's novel, or a *Times* article on the port, it's all the same: every word reinforces the moment, nails you deeper into your mood. Instead, you pick up *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, find your bookmark somewhere in the middle of his chapter on the Crusades. On the march to Jerusalem, Mackay sows this casual footnote:

Guibert de Nogent relates a curious instance of the imitativeness of these juvenile Crusaders. He says that, during the siege of Antioch, the Christian and Saracen boys used to issue forth every evening from the town and camp in great numbers, under the command of captains chosen from among themselves. Armed with sticks instead of swords, and stones instead of arrows, they ranged themselves in battle order, and, shouting each the war-cry of their country, fought with the utmost desperation. Some of them lost their eyes, and many became cripples for life from the injuries they received on these occasions.

Go ahead, twenty-first century, beat that.

November 26

For Thanksgiving, one stuffed America, self-serving. Dignity-free.

Whereas the Ukrainians, whatever their shortcomings, at least have the *chutzpah* to turn out en masse to contest their stolen election. Granted that the opposition is backed by us. Still seems to be some genuine thermal energy pushing from beneath – an urgency to the protests that, at least from a distance, doesn't seem entirely contrived.

Early this morning at the café, a happy convergence of personalities. Gary's there first, then Thomas M. Next Mike, just in from Washington and soon to depart for Texas, after which, most likely Hawaii to write the new novel. Tom too, bound for Vietnam on Monday. As genial a group as could be imagined, all known to one another and primed for conversation. "Ah," says Clara, delivering Tom's mocha on ice, "all the boy scouts are back." And the talk is good, while it lasts.

Slowly, without your taking notice of it, the place has been filling up with people who've got Friday off, post-Thanksgiving. Suddenly, the atmosphere goes critical –

hysterical – poisonous with cell rings and braying laughter and the two of you find yourselves, on the strength of the vibe alone, nearly precipitated into the street.

"Who are those people?" asks Tom, looking back over his shoulder, almost furtively as if he expected to be pursued. You unchain your bike and walk doubletime, trying to put some distance between yourselves and the assaultive mob you've just fled. His question is rhetorical. You both know full well they are the clowns and clownettes who snap up the million dollar condos in the new highrises sprouted and sprouting west of Tenth Avenue. You can't see or hear the cacophony any more, but rather feel, even at the distance of half a block the ravenous energy of these beastfolk as they tear up Le Gamin.

The handlebars feel cold to the touch, but some part of you is too paralyzed or passive to reach into your pocket for your gloves. If it were really freezing out, and not just chilly, maybe that would motivate you.

"We're out of here in January," says Tom, "we're bailing."

"Where will you go?"

"Uptown… maybe…"

• • •

More frequently than usual these past days, you revisit certain sinking, nauseous moments, not once, but over and over. Moments that felt, even in realtime, like keys turning in locks, loosing frightful things from their cages. Reagan breaking PATCO – firing all the flight controllers, gambling with thousands of airborne lives – just a breathtaking power play. Flash on a phone call with Larsen way back during Contragate – Oliver North on trial, a Marine colonel assigned to the NSC who'd sold missiles to the Iranians to fund his covert war on Nicaragua. Neither of you generally at a loss for words, but this time, each sentence wandered off a cliff:

"Yeah man, they better convict this motherfucker…"

"He better do some serious time…"

Each ellipsis pregnant with an unspoken "or else…". But there it was, precisely drawn: the gap between your revolutionary yout' and the dawn of a spineless new day. *Or else what?* Not being prophets, you couldn't describe the world on the other side of

that threshold, nor what exactly hung in the balance. Years passed and now the embryonic words speak aloud: *Or else they can get away with anything.*

November 27

You come across an arresting idea whose lineage travels back through Giorgio Agamben and Walter Benjamin to Carl Schmitt, a Weimar-era legal theorist. Writing in *Cabinet*, Eric Schwab puts it this way: "The first and highest instance of legal power in every state, its basic sovereign authority, must itself be considered originally and ultimately exempt from the juridical order it enforces. The power that 'upholds' the law, must always be in some way beyond the law, 'exempted' from it…"

So the "paradox of sovereignty" lives always in a Kafkaesque space where "the force of law confronts the law of force."

• • •

What were you thinking when you arranged to meet Uwe at Le G. at noon on a Saturday? Completely overrun. You fight your way through to the inside, scan the tables, spot him standing, jammed in near the cash register. First you register his playful fedora, brown with leopard spots. Then his expression beneath it, utterly aghast. A repeat of yesterday, the atmosphere flings you out the door. As you walk south a block to the comparative sanity of La Bergamote, Uwe shakes his head. "Like flies!"

November 28

Sunday, and an absolute deluge for most of the morning. Couldn't see 23rd Street for the whiteout. Still, moved the car to a better parking space and hit the not-too-crowded Gamin for a coffee. Bad weather keeps most of the locusts at bay.

Back home only few minutes before Kelvin buzzed and came upstairs, half soaked from the torrent, dreads bundled under a jaunty woolen hat. Here to pick up some papers Katie drafted for him. Here's another first rate, absolutely uncompromising fiction writer whose work is all but unpublishable in the current market. Four novels waiting to go. Ten years past, his second novel fetched a six figure

advance. He's bearing up, posting his fables on his website. By training, Kelvin's a scientist. You don't know the details – it was before you met – but in the early '80s he worked in the lab at Harlem Hospital, where he developed a new kind of blood test.

How are his kids? Fantastic – fantastic. Doing great stuff all of them, twenty-one at last count, mothered by a succession of highly independent women on several continents. He's deeply proud of these children, almost in awe of their achievements: this one's a doctor, another's a Rhodes scholar, that one's a rising soccer star. You've met several of them and if they are in any way a representative sample, it's a remarkable set of progeny. Each one carries forward, it seems, some aspect of Kelvin's brilliance along with his signal trait: ambition tempered by discipline. If he had a coat of arms, that might be his motto, in Latin.

One of his sons, several grades Gwen's junior, goes to PS 11. So you dropping her off, you'd run into Kelvin there once in a while. Initially Kelvin came off overbearing and blustery, really turned Gwen off. So you gave her the lowdown: he's an old friend, known him years – since before she was born. When he first meets someone, he tests them to see what they're made of. Don't let him intimidate you. Counter his challenges, he can handle it. In fact the only people he respects are those who stand their ground. Next time Kelvin razzed her, she kept her cool, and his response was to extend her the protection of his not inconsiderable powers.

Now, overhearing your conversation, Gwen runs out of her room, down the hall and barrels into him with a nearly overpowering hug. You talk for a few minutes more, but he's got to go. In the hallway, as the elevator door opens, he wags his finger at her, repeats what he's said more than once before. "Listen to me, Gwen. Anyone gives you any trouble, you come to me. I'm your nigger."

For an instant you think, *while there's Kelvin, there's hope*. Does he know you're as solid behind him as he's been for you and yours?

• • •

This was it: the most beautiful sunset a city has ever seen. A gift of the heavens powerful enough to shake the faith of the devoutest atheist. First, that incendiary red-gold flashing off the highrise windows, all the facades to the east painted in Grand

Canyon chromas. And out your bedroom window, up the Empire State spire, a subtle compliment of iridescent, dragonfly green. It took you a second to think: that's not the color of the building, those are floodlights. In an hour, it'll turn saturation kelly, and below that red to mark the approach of Xmas. But for now, solar power plays down any human glow.

Then the glass-reflected embers die and comes the violet oranges to the west atop a bright band to the southwest, almost canary, that passes across the bay, makes a backdrop to the skyline. And then the layered clouds conspire, for five minutes – no more – to form a mock election map, blue on their far surface, liquid red facing toward the sun.

The covering lid of clouds goes mauve now – what Wilde called purple masquerading as gray. And below, the horizontal, once-canary band deepens, bloodens, assumes the palette of Arizona sand and stone and clay. Here they come, moving pinspots traversing the cloud ceiling, darkened except for a ragged blue gray gap: the approaching planes. And moving slowly east, across the southern band, a herd of clouds, treading on the color-demarcated air, as though it was the solid earth itself.

November 29 – Le G. – Early Morning

You're describing last night's sunset to Melinda when her eyes shift and she points out the window. A trailer truck's rushing past – no it's a flat truck hauling something squared-off and greenish that rises way above the cab. Nearly out of frame before you decode the cargo: must be a thousand Christmas trees, packed into a huge oblong mass. A few minutes later, perhaps two or three traffic light changes, an identical truck just as dense with compacted forest zooms past. The image comes of two thousand trees planted around the rim of the pit downtown – the sorcerer's apprentice version of Rockefeller center.

One winter, '95 probably, though you'd have to look it up in your own book to make sure, the Port Authority brought in some concessioneer to set up a skating rink in the WTC plaza. A one-season affair. No way to keep the plaza open consistently, much less the little Hans Brinker dreamworld tucked into a corner of it, so many were the days the towers threatened to shed their icicles from on high.

Nature calls, but the WC is *occupé*. Scan the periodical covers while U wait. *Self* magazine urges "Love Your Lower Half." Scattered on top of the glossies, today's newspapers, already browsed over. Ah, here's the *Times* A-section. That's odd – why is a still from *Apocalypse Now* spread across four columns of the front page? Backlit by sunrise, or is it sunset? a patrol boat plies a misty river, palm groves in silhouette lining the bank beyond: the Mekong, the way you've seen it depicted so many times. Until you read the headline "Shadow of Vietnam Falls Over Iraq River Raids: An Unseen Enemy in an Unfamiliar Landscape." Fooled you, and you'll bet a million others too.

Stop by Melinda's table on your way out. When she looks up from her paper she wears a kind of thousand yard stare. Attempts a gallant smile. So long she's been battling to extract some profit out of the tremendous resources she's poured into the building she leases. Money she wants to fund her utopian arts colony in the outback. Is it worth it? If you were her trainer you'd throw in the towel. These guys with deeper pockets know she's holding out by will alone. They're taking their time and when they slug, they do damage. Like Triburbia, the Meat District's on ugly, ugly steroids of greed. Walk in these quarters – one cannot say neighborhoods – and you can smell it, a parasite scent, leaking up through the cobblestones: the gangrene of globalization.

Out on the street, unlock your bike. By the curb a few yards north of the café, a parked taxi. A tall Sikh cabdriver feeds the meter. Blue turban, black beard. Off you go. Pedal hard to cut across before the onrushing traffic. A sprocket pops, then catches. Either the chain's too loose or else the gears slipped. Probably the former. Too cold to check here. Make it home in one piece first. On the opposite side of the Avenue you see another Sikh getting out of his taxi. Older, smaller, slighter build, gray beard, saffron turban. Why are they so far north? Usually they park at the taxi stand in front of the Halal food shop two blocks down. Go figure. Riddle to solve another day.

• • •

Read *Kim* to Gwen before bedtime as she draws her amazing Manga cartoons. She claims her drawing gets looser, easier when she's read to. You bathe in Kipling's language like an elephant in dust.

"Friend of the Stars, Friend of All the World," Kim is called. Hence Kim has many friends, who aid him when he gets into trouble. In the text, there's a running phrase with variations: "The Hand of Friendship turns aside the Whip of Calamity;" "Once again the Hand of Friendship averted the Whip of Calamity." Would that. Would that it would.

December 2

Whitman comes up, no surprise, in your correspondence with Jane W. You search through your files for a copy of a piece want to send her – an Ann Lauterbach essay on him from several years back. By happenstance, you also find, in the same folder, a single xeroxed sheet someone sent you – a page from *A Big Jewish Book*:

> The Baal Shem Tov used to go to a certain place in the woods & light a fire & pray when he was faced with an especially difficult task, and it was done.
>
> His successor followed his example & went to the same place but said: "the fire we can no longer light, but we can still say the prayer." And what he asked was done too.
>
> Another generation passed, & Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov went to the woods & said: "The fire we can no longer light, the prayer we no longer know: all that we know is the place in the woods, & that will have to be enough." And it was enough.
>
> In the fourth generation, Rabbi Israel of Rishin stayed at home & said: "The fire we can no longer light, the prayer we no longer know, nor do we know the place. All we can do is tell the story."
>
> And that, too, proved sufficient.

A part of you would like to buy this line, take comfort from it. Story yes, always. One can't not make narratives. But it's not enough.

December 3 – Midafternoon

Lexington Avenue in the 50s, a little mechanical Santa gyrates his hips in a jewelry store window.

Twentieth anniversary of mass murder by accident in Bhopal.

You run, unexpectedly, into Eric in the late afternoon, eating breakfast in Le G. How marvelous to see him, even in these heavy-hearted times, claiming again his sense of wonder.

Melinda calls, utterly blown out from her latest skirmish in the real estate wars. Getting uglier as the pot fattens. One of the creepier partners in the scheme to buy her out tried a heavy-handed six-figure shakedown. "Can we make this part of the book?" she asks. Sure, why not? Or in the words of the nasty little pop song: FUCK YEAH!

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Guess it's OK to have a billionaire mayor. See, he really cares. Gave the Dance Theater of Harlem half a million bucks. And anonymously too – except it leaked out by accident.

Don't mourn, temporize. And chant this chant to get you through: *There's always a way to make it OK – always a way to make it OK…*

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It now seems possible to imagine that there never was a concrete individual Osama bin Laden, only a meticulously-crafted shadow man. But in the game of lies, both the liar and the lied-to need to keep playing. Otherwise, the con breaks down, and what happens then?

December 6 – Le G. – Early Morning

A black Town Car pulls up at the curb. Shana gets out. Drops her sweater, trips over it, picks it up, shakes it, swings the car door closed. Is she angry with the driver? Did he disrespect her? Does she think he did?

You watch her in the space between the little potted tree and the window mullion as she walks toward the door, heavy-footed, like a soldier, bag slung over her

shoulder. She doesn't see you, eyes turned inward, face set, rigid with fatigue and something else, whatever's eating her, too deep to fathom. Eight brothers and a sister. Patriarchs and matriarchs who disapprove her? Who knows?

By the time you're ready to leave an hour later, her mood's lightened, she's fallen into the groove of the day. "Feel good," you say, "Si c'est possible."

She comes out from behind the counter, offers a genuine smile with her embrace. "Oui, tout est possible."

What's that perfume? Something familiar. Very like what your ex wore. Backward catapult. You always had to ask the clerk at Bigelows for it, since she was embarrassed to attempt the French, even in front of someone who probably grew up in no more privileged a world than she had. Shame and Circumstance. You see the box in your mind then the name comes, *L'heure bleue.* Guerlain. No, that wouldn't be Shana's style, not at this hour anyway. But goddam – your nose, even when it's fooled, leads you wherever it wants to go.

December 7 – Times Square Subway Station – Midafternoon

Suffused with a rare energy today. Leap over the enormous puddle at the bottom of the stairs, swipe your Metrocard and precipitate into the mixing chamber. For the first time in a couple of years you feel with the flow as opposed to swamped by it. A whole world of diagonal currents: people heading for the Shuttle maneuvering round the crowds pouring off it, and cutting against one another, folks making for the street, the tunnel to Port Authority, the up and downtown 1 and 9, and the Queensbound 7. What's that weird ethereal Theremin-like noise? Collects into a melody, one you know – that's it, the theme from *Dr. Zhivago*, "Somewhere My Love."

An Asian woman, maybe five-two, steps directly into your path. Mechanical smile. She tries to press a Falun-Gong pamphlet upon you – its cover features a garish close-up photograph of welts striped across someone's back. Scan the middle distance as you maneuver round her. Ah, a whole passel of Falun Gong-sters staging one of their "happenings." Over to your right against the tiled wall, they've arranged themselves in a series of tableaux vivants – like some bizarre revival of a medieval passion play. *En passant* you glimpse a man wearing Chinese military drag, frozen in a thuggish pose. Truncheon raised to strike, he astride a crouching woman, similarly

motionless, her hands bound behind her back, upturned face maquillaged with dreadful bruises.

"Somewhere My Love" ramps up in the mix. What a weird soundtrack to accompany these ghoulish images. But then through the crowd, you spot the source of the melody and the "MTA Music in the Stations," banner hung above her head and it registers that she's got nothing to do with the Falun Gong but is rather an officially-sponsored performer. A youngish woman, perched on a stool, eyes heavy-lidded in apparent transports, she plays a large cross-cut saw – bowing with one hand and bending the steel blade adroitly with the other. World class vibrato. And who'd have imagined it? In the subway mezzanine beneath Times Square, perfect acoustics for a Siberian logging camp. *Some day, we'll meet again, my love. Some day, whenever the spring breaks through…*

December 9

Is it worse here in your little corner of the world, or is this a new condition of the species? Never, never have you seen the city, and the people in it so abstracted, or alternatively, so stupidly aggressive – whether passive or active. Folks either bray or speak inaudibly. Sometimes the same person will do both one sentence after the next. If indeed it was a sentence at all. Scurry about like mice, or barge like rhinoceri. One moment's act of kindness, then the script flips into a zone of cold disconnect. No modulation in between – ranting and ga-ga and cooing and barking and ga-ga and drama. An entire social body infected with the mentality of a pissed off 10th-grader.

Someone is always the proximal cause of the ridiculous strife you see everywhere these days. But the discord really can't be pinned on any one person or thing. The underlying reasons lie far off beyond anyone's ken, so far in fact, so many generations removed, that one loses belief in underlying reasons and simply deals in the raw immediate. "See the problem is..." only gets you so far as one particular asshole or incompetent, or the person on the wrong side of the stairs with the cane or baby carriage – the explanation only gains a nanosecond of satisfaction before it's overwhelmed by a sense that there's no way of putting anything right for more than an instant before the whole dance goes out of whack again. Who's crazier, the abusive customer at the pharmacy, or the weird, resistant, untogether clerk on the other side of

the counter? Whose chip trumps whose shoulder? When humanity breaks down, it does so as a collective – one by one. Too bad we haven't learned to steady ourselves that way. When the boat starts keeling over, everyone jumps up.

And now Christmas, turned predator, upon us like a wolfpack scenting blood. The mailman hauls in bursting sacksful of absolute rubbish to stuff in the boxes as though they were the throats of helpless geese. For every genuine exchange of holiday greetings, a multitude of false communications – the seven deadlies working overtime to rip us one from another, destroy any sense of fellowship. How long can this go on? Our only remaining agency to lash out at the merest, nearest stimulus, or in anticipation thereof. Never so mindless as now, not in your lifetime leastwise.

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When was it put to a plebiscite? *Resolved: We shall attempt global domination in your name. In exchange for which, you and your children will live as a hated people, always in fear of retribution, consoled only by your ability to purchase vast amounts of crap, and the knowledge that your weapons, and willingness to use them, sharpens the thirst for vengeance in your enemies and wreaks terror among multitudes who mean you no harm. All in favor?*

December 13 – Le G. – Midday

Monday. Friday past you finished editing the first section of these notes and crashed into a wall you didn't see coming. Instead of any sense of triumph, just bone deep humiliation and diminishment. Fallen off the earth entirely. An awful feeling of exile not only from humanity, but from Katie and Gwen as well.

Scrape your energy together for a trip up to the Met. Dinner in the subterranean cafeteria you've semi-boycotted this past year partly because they close it at 7 p.m. whereas the great old upstairs restaurant – now being converted into an expansion of the Greek and Roman galleries – used to stay open till the museum closed. Plus it was vast and airy. Live music too. On alternating evenings, a florid and heavy-handed pianist, whose dour expression belay her "pops" repertoire, and a jazz-flamenco guitarist – a fellow with a shaved head, clothed all in black, whose style of playing seemed so internally focused as to render his listeners incidental.

Oddly you miss them both, though the pianist's showtune medleys sometimes made you twitch in anticipation of the next glissando. The guitar player, for his part, always pulled out some improvisation that cut through the white noise of the cafeteria, got you to listen closely.

The new space, with its piped-in music, would be less objectively awful if it didn't stand in relation to the former cafeteria which felt like the dining equivalent of the reading room at the main branch of the Library – a wonderful sense of "public" to it. One breathed more expansively there – the atmosphere itself invited a sense of open possibility. Like the way it felt to walk on Port Meadow, the great tract of common land just outside Oxford. By the gate, a little plaque with a line from Gerard Manley Hopkins: *Aftercomers cannot guess the beauty been.* But yes, you could guess at it. The ground was soaked that morning, but something besides water came up through your soles.

What are you aiming at? Laying down some trace of beauty been? That alone could never sustain you. Tenuous work, this casting of threads toward a beauty that may never come. Little by little.

Still, here you are, eating a meal together with your loved ones. Katie and Gwen gamely toast your achieved draft with a touching of the rims of plastic water cups delivered to your table by Hussein, one of the two cafeteria workers you befriended in the days when you used to eat at the Met nearly every week. Well over a year since you've seen him, and he was clearly delighted at your family's return. As you leave, Gwen gives him a hug, just like back in the upstairs days, and he drinks in her affection like water from some very deep well. He's looking grayer at the temples, a bit smaller too, though no doubt it's just that Gwen has grown. Who knows, maybe you'll be back over the holidays, but at this rate, not likely. Will Hussein have retired next time you come? In any case, Gwen will soon be too much a young woman for such hugs to be "appropriate." But now is now.

Upstairs to the Christmas tree, incredible as ever. Gwen wants to sketch one of Neapolitan angels, so you nudge her into asking the guard if she can set up her stool. He assents. You tell her you'll be back in twenty minutes and walk Katie to the sculpture court where she unfolds her stool before Carpeaux's marble sculpture of Ugolino – a piece so hypnotically wrenching that even the Met's urbanely bourgeois

surround cannot fully domesticate it. His eyes gone blank with horror, shoulders rounded inward toward his hollow chest, this most tortured of Dante's souls stuffs his fingers into his mouth desperate to ward off, however briefly, the moment he will turn on his own progeny and devour them. His sons gaze up at their father's face beseechingly, they cling to his legs, drawn up and nearly knotted in anguish. Ugolino's bony back arches forward, torqued like the spine of some supernatural animal. By the time you've walked all round, Katie's laying down lines, fully engaged.

Whither you? Your internal compass pulls toward Mesoamerica. Some of what you see there feels so Asian – or vice versa – you want to put up a sign: "Look at this Mayan dancer. Now go check out the postures of the Hindu deities. Incredible the similarities of gesture, no? This laughing child from central Mexico – isn't he the spitting image of Buddha, pendulous earlobes and all?" Amazing the conversations going on among these forms. But neither the little cards next to the artworks, nor the descriptions of their geographic origins so much as hint at it.

When you return for Gwen, she has produced a very delicate, stylized, sketch of an angel that looks more than a little like a fairy version of one of her Manga-girl characters. But the tilt of the head's spot on, and the weight of the censer has the quality of truth. Katie's still at work on Ugolino at closing time. She'll have to return and finish it another night. Altogether uncanny her drawing – as though the sculpture has melted away and she's rendered it from some original flesh and blood. You've seen her do this before. Her drawings of sculptures are less renderings of stone objects than windows in on the pre-subject itself. Rather than feeling like another generation of observation, they seem to erase whole layers, revealing the thing in its unmediated state.

Jesus, it's been a lousy few days. Constant tension on the homefront, sometimes skirmishes, occasionally outright war. On top of which, your body's decided to freak out on you. You feel like eighty, whatever that means. Right shoulder's so stiff you can hardly lift your arm. And your jaw, where it hinges on the left, seized up too. A horrible crepitating sound when you chew as though you're consuming yourself and your food at the same time. Wait it out. See if you're falling apart or just feel like you are.

Driving home, down Park Avenue, Katie spots a magical sight down and you loop around to get a closer look. The new crystal ornament suspended over the intersection of Fifth Avenue and 57th, flashes its myriad refractions. You'd never much cottoned to the giant snowflake that's hung there every Christmastime far back as you can remember. This new decoration is something different – its symmetries jewel-like, above and before geometry. Unearthly and in some ways a gorgeous, liberating sign – however meticulously crafted – of untamable forces that pre- and ante-date our posturings. Even in this zone of haute real estate, something whispers in this play of light: *Not so fast, humanity. You're not the whole story. Only a chip of it. Maybe not even that*.

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Funny quote in yesterday's *LA Times* from a guy named Clifford Arnebeck – an attorney in Columbus, Ohio, head of an alliance that's petitioning the state supreme court to throw out the official ballot results. "I can't for the life of me understand why Kerry isn't fighting harder for this. Maybe it's some secret Skull and Bones tradition, where you're not supposed to show up the other guy."

December 14 – Morning

Cold and damp. Move the car to 22nd Street. Wait it out until 10:30 for a space good until Friday. A little red Subaru pulls in behind you. Turn on BBC World Service. The newscaster, his intonation faithful to a thousand spoofs, is interviewing a man billed as "a Ukrainian novelist and shrewd social observer," who, for his part, reprises, parrot-like, and without missing a single one, every contemporary globalist cliché – albeit in Slavic-accented English. So predictable are the questions and responses that after a couple of minutes you turn down the volume and begin to mimic, in alternating accents, both sides of the pseudo-dialogue. A man passes by, sees you in animated conversation with yourself, shoots you a look. You raise your eyebrows in return: *So nu?*

Sudden yen for a takeout coffee from Le G. Lock the car and chance a ticket. Shouldn't take more than a minute to run to the corner and back and there's no cops

nowhere. When you return, you pass the Subaru, notice the bumper sticker: Delaware County Fair. A woman with white hair sits in the driver's seat, playing an alto recorder, sheet music spread across the steering wheel. Pretty sophisticated stuff. Bach? Can't hear it because the windows are up. You veer a bit closer to get a better look, but the furry gray dog in the backseat objects. He leaps up begins to bark furiously, teeth clicking against the glass, then quiets as you move away. Throughout, the woman plays on unperturbed. Eight million wonderments in the bundled-up city.

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You've just noticed it these last few nights from your bedroom window when you look toward Lower Manhattan: a flashing light on the roof of the Dow Jones/Oppenheimer building in the World Financial Center. Not like the accustomed red beacons on several other downtown towers, this one's almost photonically white, like it wants to punch a hole in the macula of its beholder. By far the most intense illumination downtown, it's made it impossible to take in the view from this angle without blinking. If you shift your gaze to another quadrant of the horizon, say toward Brooklyn, it pops in the corner of your eye like a nasty flashbulb. Bit by bit, this place is becoming unlivable at the level of the senses.

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Bedtime reading. No one like the venerable Mackay, of *Extraordinary Popular Delusions…* to help you see the here and now if not in perspective, than at least in a broader sweep of mad crowds down through time. "A company for carrying on an undertaking of great advantage, but nobody knows what it is." This the title of a scheme proposed by an anonymous fellow and subscribed to during the South Sea Bubble of the 17th century. In the space of one day, the author of this offering took in two thousand pounds, whereupon he vanished, presumably to the Continent.

December 15 – Midmorning

Up and out on your bike in the rabbit fur hat Katie and Gwen bought you two winters ago. Into the embrace of winter.

At the café, give a copy of the new *American Letters & Commentary* to Eduardo who's heading for Spain tomorrow. Seeing that you've got the first few pages of *Orogene* in there, he proposes to pass the magazine on to Constantino B., whom, Eduardo assures, you remains interested in your work. Off he goes into the cold with many good wishes, and thus ends the morning's *bonhomie*. Within moments of Eduardo's departure, Dylan, at Table 4 and Paul at Table 6, nearly come to blows after trading and upramping a series of evermore ad hominem insults. Lucky thing they're separated by a baffle of Erics at Table 5.

On the surface the fight would seem to be about different political views – for the past several years Dylan's been reading deeply from the well of alternative explanations and thinks he's got it figured out: the ills of the world devolve from a cabal perpetuated by the Pope – and Paul, for his part, articulates fragments of received wisdom as though they were the grand unifying theory of why-we're-in-deep-shit-now-worse-than-ever. But they've only just met, so most likely there's a goodly dose of projection here.

Eventually, as with John's blowups at Eric B., things sort of chill out. But all the kettles are near boiling over. You see it demonstrated everywhere in a thousand different ways – people unraveling, losing their cool, their religion, whatever. And you too bro, you too. Going off on all kinds of crazy shit. As if it mattered, as if the fate of nations hung in the balance on some real or imagined slight. Wisdom flees at every hand. The woods and welkin don't so much ring as clang.

Some desperate fear that we are unrecognized by others? Or a fear of aspects of self we can't or won't admit to consciousness? So back you go to Montaigne, that elaborator of what it was to be an individual spirit's sovereign and who thought to say in fifteen hundred-someodd: *We are all made up of fragments so shapelessly and strangely assembled that every moment, every piece plays its own game. And there is as much difference between us and ourselves as between us and others*.

When you get home, go straight to your shelf and find the passage you highlighted years ago from "On some lines of Virgil."

> I hunger to make myself known. …Or to put it better, I hunger for nothing, but I go in mortal fear of being mistaken for another by those who happen to know my name. If a man does all for honor and glory what does he think he gains by appearing before the world in a mask, concealing his true being from the people's knowledge? If you praise a hunchback for his fine build he ought to take it as an insult. Are people talking about *you* if they honor you for valor when you are really a coward? They mistake you for somebody else. It would amuse me as much if such a person were to be gratified when men raised their caps to him, thinking that he was master of the band when he was merely one of the retainers. When King Archelaus of Macedonia was going along the street somebody threw water over him. His entourage wanted to punish the man. 'Ah yes,' he replied 'but he never threw it at me but at the man he mistook me for.' When somebody told Socrates that people were gossiping about him he said, 'Not at all. There is nothing of me in what they are saying.' In my case, if a man were to praise me for being a good navigator, for being very proper or very chaste I would not owe him a thank you. Similarly, if anyone should call me a traitor, a thief or a drunkard I would not think that it was me he attacked. Men who misjudge what they are like may well feed on false approval. I can see myself and explore myself right into my inwards; I know what pertains to me. I am content with less praise provided that I am more known. People might think that I am wise with the kind of wisdom I hold to be daft.

What becomes of this morning's fracas? Paul, you don't know all that well. He's a father and an artist and middle-aged into the bargain. But you had a flash of fear for Dylan. Young, unattached, he could easily see himself captain of a band of freedom-fighters. Perhaps he'll find willing comrades. But what if he does not? Or deepens his isolation. Either way, it smells dangerous.

December 16

Finally plow through two massive, nearly month-old *Times* articles on the scramble to bring the re-burgeoning port up to speed with the tides of commerce. The

containers come in full of goods, much from Asia via the Panama Canal. They leave mostly empty, except for our waste paper and scrap metal. We make nothing more to send to the world. And the ever-larger ships arrive, their drafts already too deep to make it through our channel. And soon to be built, ships wider and longer than the Panama locks will accommodate. You want to grab someone, perhaps the *Times* reporter, perhaps one of the gray men who run the Port Authority, perhaps some fellow passing on the street, seize them all by the lapels and shout: *Why are we not building the ships and making things to fill them with? Could not this city engineer a line of freighters, superb, fast and capacious and suited to our port's conditions? Could we not set a new shipping standard for the world rather than dance to the tunes played by others?*

But then that would require a different quality of investment. One that had little to do with vanity. Nothing to do with symbols. And everything to do with how a city and its region get a living, how an economy weaves itself into the world. It requires asking the humbling question: what's needed, and how can we make it?

December 19

Held your annual Solstice bash the evening of the 16th – a livingroomful of your past and current students, a select few from among the Gamin circle and other extended families. A great success by all accounts. Then, after cleaning up, took to your bed on and off for nearly two days with a cold that's determined to leap down into your chest.

Made a brief appearance at the café attempting to feel cured. Dylan bounded up to your table and apologized for the ruckus of the other day, though in truth it was far from being entirely his fault. Said he's got a lot to learn about how to handle those kinds of situations. So open his affect, it allays, for now, your fears about where he's headed.

Put up the tree today – a fake – but apart from the lack of scent, good enough to fool almost anyone. And in any case you've gotten used to it over the years – a gift from Frank after Gloria died in '94, the *annus horribilis* which opened with Katie's father's death and closed with your mother's. Too many friends in between the two. You feel a bit guilty about Gwen not having a real tree, which you did as a kid, but she's said over and over she wouldn't want one that had been cut down for decoration. Done up with lights and ornaments, not least Katie's foil origami's and crowning star,

your ersatz tannenbaum's a modest, yet magnificent sight. When you go out to move the car, you see its tip, visible from aways down Eighth Avenue.

Turn on the radio to WNYC. "Wachet auf" is playing, and for a moment you're taken back somewhere, and dumbstruck by its beauty. For the timespan of a cantata, you're living in the Age of Reason in the age of Fallujah.

"Awake!" calls the voice of the watchman to us,
very high up on the battlements.
"Awake, you city of Jerusalem!
This is the hour of midnight,"
calling us with clear voice:
"Where are your wise virgins?
Prepare! The bridegroom is coming;
arise and take your lamps!
Alleluja!
Make yourselves ready for the wedding,
you must go forth to meet him!"

December 21 – Late Afternoon

Cheyney, your haircutter, works out of her apartment on 21st Street just west of Seventh. You and Katie have been going to her for years, first met her when she worked in a hideous, ripoff salon around the corner on Eighth. When she left, she took you and a passel of other customers with her. She'd be talented shaping any three-dimensional form and she makes jewelry on top of clipping. Born in Korea, raised by a pharmacist and his wife in Ohio, along with seven other adopted kids, she's one of those quietly remarkable souls.

Her TV's always on when you go for your shearing. A big monster dominating the living room, the volume cranked up way beyond your capacity to tune it out, though Cheyney takes little notice of the visual and sonic assault, has no problem conversing over the din. When your appointment is in the afternoon you get talk shows. Today, unfortunately, it's news hour. Amidst hazy smoke, guys in fatigues pull guys in blood-soaked fatigues out of a jumbled ruin. Ah, the rocket attack on the

American mess tent in Iraq. Twenty-something dead, scores grievously wounded. Wolf Blitzer on the left side of the split screen, hovering above the CNN logo like the Cheshire cat. Hard to believe your ears but he reads it straight-faced off the teleprompter, with no seeming distaste for having his mouth stuffed with so much pious alliteration: "In Mosul today, scenes of carnage and courage, horror and heroism." Cheyney doesn't bat an eye or skip a clip. She's twaddle-proof. Your talk runs to family and she shows you a picture of her beautiful five-year old niece in Florida. Keeps on clipping.

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Jack Newfield dies and your sadness catches you by surprise. Nearly if not the last of a fast-vanishing breed of professional journalists capable of eloquence and outrage. You only spoke to him once. A couple of days after 9/11 he called about an article he was doing for *New York Magazine*, one you'd actually been asked to do but begged off of saying you neither wrote fast enough to make their deadline, nor could craft prose in a style that would work for them. Newfield asked you a lot of questions and you told him pretty much everything you knew about the trade center. Intelligent, down-to-earth and collegial is how you recall his presence on the other end of the line.

December 22

Courthouse errand with Katie down to the civic center. Then lunch at New Green Bo on Bayard Street. On the way home, pick up a scarf and earrings – stocking-stuffers for Gwen. Prominently displayed outside every variety store, racks full of magnetic "Support Our Troops" ribbons – in yellow and stars and stripes – for plastering on the tailgates of gas guzzlers. Inexpensive enough to buy 'em by the dozen. Even cheaper if you bargain. And they're made, proudly or not, in… China.

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Amazing what you don't notice. How long has it been here? The sidewalk is hardly new. You must've walked over it a thousand times. Still today you register for

the first time the drawing someone scrawled in the still-wet cement on the corner across the street near Kyung's deli, perhaps before it *was* Kyung's deli. Floating in a square of pavement, the cartoonish outline of a ghost about eight inches high and incised, probably with an index finger, when the cement was wet. As though to leave no doubt about the figure's significance, three letters growing larger as they emerge from its mouth: BOO.

Now your mind must really be turning in ever smaller spirals, because as you contemplate the figure between your shoes you fall into a visual paradox. Given that the B sound precedes the OO sound as the word is uttered, it makes no sense – within our generally-accepted space-time – that the B is the closest letter to the ghost's mouth. It ought to be the other way round. If the B came out first, it should be furthest away, yes? No? Illogical or not, we're in the habit of reading from left to right and have also learned, from prior exposure to similar images, that ghosts don't say OOB.

So it goes to show that when the conditions are right, our decoding powers are altogether capable of neutralizing contradictions the way spirits move through solid walls. And we do this routinely, regardless of whether we believe in ghosts.

December 31

Shrunk to scale, the military posturings of an empire. The earth gives a little shrug and a tidal wave shows who's boss.

Down to Western Beef with Eric B. to buy provisions for tonight's party. The shopping cart's so huge, you didn't realize till checkout that you had a dozen bagsworth of stuff in it. Loaded into the trunk of a cab, then on to his new digs at Maria's loft in Triburbia.

Closest thing to a tradition here – things that happen more than twice running. How long have you been ushering in the New Year at Eric's? Five years now, the four prior at his old place in Chelsea. Every time, as the countdown approaches, he passes out copies of "Auld Lang Syne." And after the corks pop, all the verses get sung, with a chorus in between, embarrassment giving way to the lyrics' sentiment with every passing stanza. Despite the fact that no one understands what half the words mean. But that's alright – Rabbie probably didn't either. In one year, and out the other.

2005

January 1

All three of you roust yourselves out of bed in time to catch a special 9:30 a.m. subway run out to Coney Island. Six cars of different vintages, from the '30s through 1940. Red leatherette upholstered seats, ceiling fans, bare bulbs and hand-cranked destination signs. The first car jammed to the gills, you ride in the second, manufactured in 1932 and taken out of service in the early '70s. When the train hits a gap in the third rail and the lights dim for an instant – the way incandescents do and fluorescents don't – the stimulus throws you back some years, and it comes home how thoroughly you've shifted the textures of whole decades into a deep storage unit reserved for obsolete sensations. Adaptive will to the future. Your internal Swann would just get in the way.

Debark at Brighton Beach, wander around some, and then stroll the boardwalk to Coney Island. A greasy boardwalk brunch. As one o'clock nears, the three of you scramble onto a boulder jetty, and from this advantageous spot, watch as a few dozen hard core Polar Bears, and several hundred regular folks emboldened by the fluky sixty-degree air temperature, send up a great roar from the beach and charge headlong into the waves. A buzz-cut young brave in baggies holding aloft a large American flag makes three splashing sorties into the surf and back ashore, accompanied by a double handful of similarly gung-ho compatriots, who rally at last on the sand to send up a chorus "God Bless America," more shouted than sung.

Among the spectators sharing a perch on the jetty, a cluster of middle-aged, leather-clad bikers, their jacket backs emblazoned with red, yellow and green dragons surmounted by the club name in faux-calligraphic letters: the Nam Kings. Must've parked their bikes over across the boardwalk and crossed the sand in their boots. The guy closest to you has his name and "Brooklyn" embroidered on his jacket hem. He's stocky, with graying hair and chiseled features. From his belt-loop, like a rosary, hangs a loop of beads in the three colors of the dragon. He gazes out toward the ocean then

back again at the leaping, shrieking crowd. You've got more or less the same view. But no idea of what he sees.

January 4 – Midafternoon

To your left at the end of your near empty car on the downtown E-train sits a man of medium complexion with overgrown black hair and beard. Unusually long lashes. Intelligent, introspective eyes. Compact build, not fat, but round-featured. Your age more or less. His bulky jacket and pants, originally light colored fabrics, shine in spots with a patina of grime. He adjusts his position from sitting back, pulls one leg up across the knee of the other and with great deliberation, unties his tennis shoe and removes it. Head inclined, a flash of tonsure at the crown. Almost casually, he peels off his sock, lays it on the seat and unhurriedly rubs his foot, running his fingers over its whole surface and particularly between the toes. His brow furrows. The look is not so much troubled as one of deep mentation. From his coat pocket he withdraws another sock – at this distance indistinguishable from the one he removed – eases it on carefully, inserts his foot into the shoe and with unhurried and precise movements reties the laces. Caught up in watching him you almost miss your stop. But not quite. So you do not see what he does with the sock he took off, or whether he repeats the procedure with the other foot. How unusual it is, aside from all else, to witness any action carried out with such exactitude and attention to detail, such unforced ease of movement.

January 7

On the way to Le G. you encounter a cyclist heading toward you against the traffic on Ninth Avenue. It's a bit nip and tuck, but you get round one another. What makes it tricky is that his load is about four bikeswidth. He's carrying several immense plastic bags filled with cans and bottles slung over his shoulders and across the bike itself. If one didn't know otherwise, it'd look like a circus act. So quickly do you have to execute your swerve to avoid him yet not stray into the path of the cars rushing by, and so striking is the whole of the image, the robin's egg blue of one of the bags, that you hardly register his face, except that there's a kind of shadowed darkness to it, which may be cast by the hood of his parka. Some reminder too of the heavy-laden bikes that once plied the Ho Chi Minh trail. But their center of gravity was lower and

much of the time they were pushed, not pedaled – more two-wheeled carts than riding machines. Nor is this man bringing ammunition and supplies to the NLF. Instead, redeemables to Gristedes, maybe ten dollars' worth.

• • •

A piercing scream from the street. At your desk, writing, immersed in another world, you reenter this one fast, but having done so, check your spiked adrenalin, attune your ears to what comes next. Another scream. Subtly less blood-curdling, this one cues you that no awful thing has happened, recalibrates your alarm, assuages your bristling nerves, whisks you back to the age of fifteen when you heard it not from twenty floors above and over traffic noise – but directly in your ear, jostling down the steps onto Ludlow street after a day spent immured within the walls of Seward Park. School's out! No need to look out the window. Your mind's eye shows you the face of this afternoon's screamer, laughing now among her friends, having taken it upon herself to give voice to the collective energy of the students just uncorked from Fashion High and tumbling out onto 24th Street. Who was the founder of this sisterhood, one that must go back long past 1965? Did the first scream sound like this one? And if so, how did it cover the distance between then and now unadulterated, its force undiminished? Like a jolt of AC current traveling down a long, long wire.

January 13

Fallujah's a gated community of ghosts now. A nightmare city of corpses, dogs and rabid dogs. Strips of white tape to demarcate the *cordon sanitaire*.

Now Mosul. A 500-lb. bomb dropped on the wrong house. "…deeply regret the loss of possibly innocent lives…". Will the dead now be reborn as unambiguously innocent, or is it the fate of all such casualties to remain possibly guilty? Praise the lord and pass the qualifiers.

Check the anti-war websites online, see what's planned for inauguration day in DC. NARAL will be demonstrating, but the closest thing to a rallying cry for mass protest is a United For Peace and Justice statement urging "everyone who can to converge" on the capital. That's it.

Thus with nary a hiccup, not even a grimace, the country sucks up its smooth, fatal dose of kakistocracy. When the patient's this sedated, there's no gag reflex. It's just that easy.

• • •

Lexington and 53rd Street station, mid-afternoon. Wish you had some singles. Even a handful of change. All you've got is a five – way more than your superego allows you to give away, even to a singer this good. Gospel, à capella, and so deeply in the spirit you can feel the beat even after the oncoming train drowns out the words. So you give him nothing and get on board. Overriding a twinge of guilt, you sit near the open door, eking out a few more seconds.

You know I just can't hold my peace,
gotta run and tell somebody how good He's been.
Lord, He makes me love my enemies,
He makes me love my friends –

Bing-bong. *Stand clear of the closing doors. Fifth Avenue will be next. E-train to the World Trade Center.*

Should've put Abraham Lincoln in his cup. Next time you'll know better.

January 14 – Le G. – Early Morning

Funny coincidence. That woman across the room at Table 13 was in the audience last night when Gioia held court inside the red tent on the second floor of ABC Carpet. Thirty people or so, all making themselves as comfortable as possible, leaning against or sitting on pillows within a fantastical space, reserved during the day for women and girls, and composed of myriad fabrics in every imaginable shade of red.

You've seen Gioia's perform before, but this time found her presence nothing short of mind-blowing. As she spoke and gestured, queried and responded, you felt her discorporate and reembody, sometimes as another self and saw the forces of story play with her, like water and wind having a go at a small boat. Gioia is powerful, but she's mortal, and story isn't – at least not in the same way. And that's what you caught

there, its elemental nature. Several fragmentary tales of birds, a raven-child, crows, and one trickster who falsely claims to have a priceless jewel lodged within itself. And Hans, the hedgehog boy, creature of the margins. At certain moments, she seemed to transform into a central pole, rooted in the earth and holding up the tent itself.

Odd how these things go. For years you've walked past the ABC building on Broadway and 18th, little realizing that a vertical bazaar existed inside, stacked floor on floor, the whole so overwhelming in its abundance that it immediately trumped Urban Outfitters as Gwen's retail utopia. She wandered around among the Buddhas, oriental rugs and driftwood furniture in a kind of sense-overloaded trance. Why had you never ventured in there before? Once again, a holdover from your childhood – all these places you tell yourself you don't belong. Too expensive, too vulgar, too whatever it is you sense isn't congruent with "your" culture. Contradiction. How is it possible for an out-and-out mongrel to hold fast to the ideals of a purist? Pretty silly.

This morning the weather's silly too – temperature up in the high fifties, and you walked here in a rainsquall that blew waves of water everywhich way, so that even covered by an umbrella the size of a small yurt, you arrived soaked to mid-thigh. Battleship gray cloud cover, with angry slate-colored vapor shreds whipping across the building tops. If you didn't know better, you'd say that Gaia's talking and the these are the evidences of her breath – that story itself is shifting the balance, one way or another. And there's that woman at Table 13. No big thing. Only that it sharpens your suspicion that coincidence itself has changed.

Local intelligence at the café listening post: three shootings in as many months in and around the Elliot Houses and the public health clinic where they dole out methadone and flu vaccinations. Two fatalities, a lull, then more gunfire – bullets flying in broad daylight. Just down the block from PS 133 and the galleries, Tony's loft too. Drug war in West Chelsea – Martha Stewart's back yard.

Melinda's in this a.m. The court has decided she either has to "cure" or be out by February 11. Since she can't do the former, she'll crate up her belongings, works on paper and the piano, and ship it all down to Kingston. Time's up. Incredible, really, that she had the stamina to play it out this long. Somehow though, Melinda seems lighter, emerging from under the crush of the real estate nightmare. Agreed that you,

and all the others who were transformed by Bombora House, will find a way to ceremonially mark its decamping – to where?

• • •

Blown-off branches all over the sidewalks on the fast walk home. Temperature plummeting. Funny – you don't recall seeing all this debris on your way here, though it must've been pruned by last night's howling wind that woke Katie first, then you around four.

White delivery van – Mitchell London Foods – sits with its flashers on in the intersection of 22nd and Eighth, midway into a left turn. When you make the corner you see the fellow the van hit, lying in the crosswalk in the manner of a dropped marionette, eyes open. A cop in a slicker squats down by the man's head. "What's your name?" Sirens on their way uptown.

• • •

Noon. On your way up to Kelly's to get stuck with needles, a trio of bronze-pancaked, blonde women, Bergdorf shopping bags in tow, hop on the train at 34th Street. They're garrulous, loud enough for you to overhear one of them say she adores a TV show called "Eeyore." That's odd, she doesn't seem like a Winnie-the-Pooh type. Besides which, from her description the show sounds more like a hospital drama. It takes a long moment for your Manhattan ear to attune itself to the nuances of Long Island English. Right, that's it: "ER."

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Midafternoon. What a trip – invited to tea with Gioia at the Century Club. You'd met her there for lunch years before, but didn't remember you had to wear a jacket, but the fellow in the checkroom finds a spare navy blue blazer for you to borrow.

You find her upstairs, sitting in an immense room with a woodfire blazing beneath a mantelpiece broad and tall enough to drive a truck through. Sample your

first Century martini, gin, straight up, two olives. A discretely small glass, the rest of the dose served in a little steel pitcher on the side. Lethal. Clinical. Then comedy. From across the room, watch yourself try to get out of a wing chair.

• • •

Gwen goes off this evening with Mark and Bruce to see Savion Glover dance at the Joyce. Which leaves you free to trip up to the met with Katie, not least so she can finish Ugolino. At the cafeteria, Hussein asks: "Where is my daughter?" with that half-accusing look Gwen's fans give you whenever you have the temerity to show up without her.

You tell him she's out on the town with friends and he puts his arm on your shoulder, whispers as though imparting a confidence, "She is good girl. Ever since –" he puts his hand out at mid-thigh level, to recall her toddler height. "She is loving people. Soft heart. She is human being."

January 17 – Midmorning

MLK's birthday, celebrated. Overcast. Light dusting of snow. Head toward the café. Pigeon flock wheels over Eighth Avenue, flips you back to the old days when there were a half dozen or so coops on the roofs of the tenements in the lower 20s. But these are free range birds, doing their aerial routine, and eventually they alight in a row along the Allerton cornice.

As you make the right on to 22nd, you see two stragglers having at it under the hotel's marquee, pecking and beating their wings. The fight seem over who gets to perch on the left-hand pilaster top, but there's a vacant roost on the right side too, plenty of room for both, so why the rhubarb? But then perhaps the conflict's over something else altogether, something only a pigeon would know. The combatants are making such a protracted commotion that the two men hanging out in the doorway find it expedient to get out of their way and abandon their shelter for the open street. Animals fight and humans scatter. Don't see that every day.

• • •

A girl, 13, is identified as the mother of a newborn found wrapped in towels and stuffed a plastic bag outside a church in the Bronx. Apparent homicide. Grand jury deciding whether to prosecute her as an adult. Cops questioning the purported father. He's 15.

January 18

Bitter, baby, bitter cold snap.

Condi, the anti-Kundalini, soon to be confirmed as Secretary of State, appeared this a.m. before the Senate and, in response to a question on Iraq policy said: "We've had an evolution of attitude." *Evolution of attitude* – now what sort of animal is that? And toward what baleful spot is it slouching to be born?

• • •

Sitting across from you in the subway downtown, a heavy-set woman of middle years slumps in her seat, eyes half closed. Most likely not an active-duty member of the armed forces, she nonetheless wears a heavy, camouflage-patterned coat. A bulging olive-drab duffle bag lies on the floor before her. Balanced on the bag, a pair of waffle-soled shoes. Disconcerting image, yet comic. From this angle, it looks for all the world as if she's detached her feet and set them atop the bag. Logic tells you that can't be true, her feet are simply hidden from view. But try telling that to your mind, which ever so strives for some kind of order, even at the price of imposing absurdity.

January 20 – Early Morning

Christmas season being over, the lights are gone and shreds of plastic festoon the street trees, fluttering in the wind.

A laugh catches up from two days ago during the Condi hearings. Some senator – you missed his name – bemoaned the state of our foreign policy, and likened, in so many words, the circumstances of the U.S. of A. to those of Blanche Dubois, dependent as we are "on the kindness of strangers." Extraordinary association, particularly

coming from a capitol hill politician. On second thought not so remarkable really, given that *lobbyist* is just another way of saying *kind stranger*.

This morning on NPR news, a broadcast of soldiers taped as they prepare to leave Kuwait on a supply convoy into darkest Iraq. "Rock and roll!" shouts the sergeant as the trucks rev and rumble, then in a kind of mocking incantation: "Hajji can't shoot, Hajji can't surf!" – a whole litany of hysterical wardings-off. He's cranked on something, that's for sure. What's the pharmacology of choice for soldiers dealing with this war?

From Table 4 you see Tom push his way through the dark green floor-to-ceiling curtain Grainne's put up around the doorway area to keep out frigid drafts. Ridiculously ineffective, and the bloody thing looks like a shroud – cuts out a quarter of the sunlight that could help warm the place. Tom chats up Clara by the register, then, bearing his ice mocha to go – a stunning concept given the weather outside – saunters over to exchange greetings. You pose the question on your mind. He thinks a minute. "I don't know. Coke maybe. Or crystal. Probably crystal."

Sure, why not? The meth factor could help account for certain things. Perhaps even some of the tweaked anomie, the underclass, party-all-night vibe you got off those snapshots from Abu Ghraib. *Hajji can't sleep. Hajji can't dream. Fuck yeah.*

January 21 – Le G. – Early Morning

Sometimes, most often mornings, a small thing – slant of sun on windowsill plants, the green curtains hated yesterday, light passed through the water bottle to spill across the bogus stain of wood-grained table top, the round of a chair edge, gloss of fake rattan – suffuses you with hope. And the exhaust from the SUVs speeding down Ninth, the vapor trails that criss-cross the frigid sky, fluttering tree-trapped plastic bag shreds – all these visual hits sound as distinct chromatics, as if voices in an oratorio – praising what – who knows? yet raising you from the dead. Let it. Let it.

Shana's made an executive decision not to play music off the house iPod. Instead she plugs in her own walkman. Ben Harper and Five Blind Boys. Between customers, she *bavardes* with Mark at Table 10. Unusual to see him here on a Friday, but he's come to work on the piece he'll bring into Writing X next Thursday when he makes his debut. Slowly the café fills up: Peter, Leslie W., Melinda, a dorky-looking guy you

don't recall seeing before and soon after, the woman he's come to meet. Not conventionally pretty, but her mobile, responsive face impossible not to watch. She lowers her head to sip from her café au lait, lets out an almost audible *ah*! That and her bright red cardigan over a purple shirt. Hair pulled back into a careless pony tail, held by a rubber band. Chinese features, though probably born here, or came when young to judge from her talk and gestures. How is it possible to instantly feel an affinity with someone who isn't even aware that you exist?

Outside passes a thin woman pushing a stroller. Her breath emerges as gusts of mist. Sharp eyebrows over direct, focused eyes. High cheekbones, medium brown skin. Child's bundled up behind a plastic curtain hung from the stroller canopy, encapsulated like a pastry in a display case – they're gone before you can register more than that. Dylan chains up his bicycle at the parking meter. He's lost for an instant behind the curtains then enters through them, orange hair against their green, cheeks crimson, nearly pop-eyed with cold. Soon afterward a burst of folks you don't know. Ben and the Blind Boys still at it, but there's too much ambient noise and conversation to hear the words. You get up and walk over, stand as close as you can to the speaker mounted over the register near the ceiling. Comes the chorus: *There will be a light.*

Light will be and is right now. Causes steam off the surface of a tea bowl at Table 2 to spiral upward in flickering, wispy shoots. And a smaller wisp, evanescent white, plays like a candle's flame above the teabag the drinker's placed in her waterglass.

Back to your table. Glance at the red-cardigan'd back leaning in toward the guy who, from this angle, doesn't seem so dorky. Face alive in its own way. Triggered by her animation, or did you just not notice it before?

You can't see it all, much less take it in and lay it down. Just can't – fragments only, else there's nothing.

Is that Eric locking up his bike opposite Dylan's? Tribeca's a long ride on a day like this. In through the curtain as Peter's on his way out. On foot, after him comes Paul.

Little energy wasted on that sad, ugly show down in DC. Folks in the Republic of New York all busy inaugurating us.

January 22

On the other hand, your fellow citizens are a panicky lot, particularly when it comes to weather. Head to Garden of Eden with Katie to buy granny smiths for tonight's apple crisp. Bronwyn's in town on a flying visit from Istanbul and you're hosting a dinner and confab for her New York crew.

Pretty crowded in the store. But the price on apples is reasonable, so you bag 'em and try to find the end of the cashiers' line. Jeez, goes way to the back of the store. Katie's a quicker study than you on these things. "Must be the blizzard." Ah, sure enough, the weather bureau's predicting eight inches. Hoarding instinct's come to the fore – though in all your half century plus years you've never known the elements to shut the city down for long, nor entirely disrupt its supply routes. But then, most of these people grew up somewhere else. On the other hand, maybe Phobos really has the edge on Eros these days.

Right then, you'll wait on queue while Katie goes to Whole Foods to get butter and pasta – cheaper there. Five minutes later, you've advanced seven feet out of a probable fifty and she's back with the report that there's a line down the block to get into Whole Foods. Then it clicks: this is way beyond normal New York jitter – this is full-blown disaster mode. Fear of some equivalent to the tsunami? Post 9/11 anxiety always in the mix. And maybe deeper down, below most folks' awareness, a fear-guilt component washing back at us for what we let them do to that other city, the one we emptied and bombed to the ground. Others took the hits but we're the weak-kneed ones. In a Fallujah state of mind. Is the whole country like this, scared of its own shadow?

If New Yorkers pulled themselves together, drilled down deep enough, would we find some bedrock courage?

January 23

Missed one – a magical café moment. Left a couple of minutes too soon. But Eric calls and tells you the jist of it. He was talking to Paul who mentioned that he wants to record an album of sea shanties. The fellow at the next table, overheard him and responded by opening up his violin case and spontaneously beginning to play a reel. Apart from the fiddler, the whole room went into kind of suspended animation. No

conversation, roar of espresso machine, clatter of silverware on china. Mario – who's just had his third child, Marjorie Amanda – Shana, Maya and Marcos all suspended operations. Grainne too. Eric described her, standing back from her table, raptly listening. But the odd thing is that the moment he began to tell the story, you saw it all before he said it, clear images of what happened next preceded his words, even the sound waves vibrated in your skull and down your spine. You know you weren't there. How strange that this physical sense of witness should arise from a handful of suggestions.

January 24

Holy cow. A fire Sunday night at the Chambers Street station destroys the signal room and brings down the A and C lines. Chambers is a major node of the system, so service on the C is suspended indefinitely. Three to five years they're saying, to replace the 600-odd pieces of equipment that were destroyed. Initial report from the MTA is that the blaze was touched off unintentionally by a "homeless person."

In the Bronx, a tenement that's been carved up into SROs goes up in flames. Five firemen search the fourth floor to make sure no one's trapped there, but a rapid upward "extension" takes them by surprise, sears their oxygen tanks, forces them to jump out the windows. Two dead. Three survive, gravely injured. One of the latter used some plastic netting to lower himself a floor or so before he dropped. Regulations used to call for all firefighters to carry ropes. In 2000 that rule was changed to cover only those involved in rescue. What happened here?

January 25

A couple of doors up the avenue from Le G., a mystery storefront. Plants and tchotchkes in the window, but the blinds drawn behind them and over the door. Very rarely, a large, middle-aged woman stands on the step smoking an absurdly thin cigarette, the door ajar behind her. A desk, xerox machines, some shelves. A small bronze plaque at the building entranceway to the right: Chelsea Residence. In the past, frequently enough to recognize a few faces, you've seen group of perhaps a dozen retarded people pass by café, and made the association between them and the Residence, assuming it to be some kind of supervised home. But the whole operation

keeps a low profile. To the point where, most days, you don't notice the storefront at all and instead check out the glitzy, hard-edged new Indian restaurant next door, and adjacent to it, the evermore desperate-looking Italian place.

So much here, and in you, is about what's up ahead, forward focus, anticipation, pushing your eyes out like tentacles, down the block toward the café to see whether someone's sitting at Table 4 or if – oh happy day! – your spot is free. Whatever isn't overtly anomalous, becomes part of the wallpaper. So much stimulation all round, that if something doesn't poke you in the eye, it might as well not exist.

January 27

Finish editing the first section of these *Notes*. Well past 2 a.m. Not tired. Old Iggy Pop tune plays in your head:

…he looks through his window-side
he sees the things he
knows are his
he sees the bright
and hollow sky
he sees the city
sleep at night
he sees the stars are
out tonight
and all of it is yours and mine
and all of it is yours and mine…

And then there's Leizi, the Daoist sage who rejected worldly ties and, as legend tells it, flew away with the wind!

January 28 – 8:15 p.m.

You hear a chant building and look out the living room window to see who's raising the row. A brigade of cyclists, a hundred or more strong, pedals up Eighth Avenue, across its whole four-lane breadth, deliberately slowing traffic to a saner pace – a staple Friday evening happening for which, at different times, many have been

arrested. Hardy folk these must be, taking their time, even in this deepfreeze. Behind their formation, a mass of cars, incapable of doing more than honking their frustration.

Too exhausted yesterday to celebrate properly the completion of the first part of the manuscript – like a half-conscious fighter being told he's won a decision. Just glad it's over. Hence tonight, a tiny bottle of Perrier-Jouet in the refrigerator waiting to open when Gwen comes home from dogsitting at Tom and Maureen's. Since she doesn't like champagne, she can toast with a cup of steamed milk.

January 29

Up to the Met with some friends from Jersey: Chris and Donna, and their kids Vaughan, about Gwen's age, and Avery, 6. As you pass through the print gallery, your little cohort meanders over to the balcony above the sixteenth century patio brought stone for marble stone from the castle of Vélez Blanco in southern Spain. Looking down on the tops of the miniature trees in their red clay pots must jog Gwen's memory, because she asks you to tell your friends the story of the lime. Do they really want to hear it? They do.

So you begin: *Era y non era* (once upon a time there was and there wasn't…) as in the old Spanish tradition, derived from the even older Arabic *kan ya makan*. You describe the great city in which there was a museum like a treasure house that a little girl visited with her mother and her father. But Gwen wants you to tell the story straight, and happily you drop into your accustomed language, since you could never have sustained the narrative at that level for long. Reading Cervantes is one thing, trying to channel him another.

Nonetheless… years ago, when Gwen was around Avery's age, the three of you were strolling through the patio one night, and it was deserted except for a single guard. You'd always found it a magical space, but this time even more so because the lime trees were in full fruit. As you stood there admiring the crop, Katie made a snarky remark to the effect that Philippe de Montebello probably harvested them for his private stock. And here you had make an aside to the effect that the man you've nicknamed Philippe de Montebanco, was, and is, the museum's director and a very important fellow indeed.

Now what Katie said she said loud enough for the guard to overhear her, and he began to walk toward where you were standing. You thought perhaps he was going to say something, perhaps rebuke her, but instead, very quickly, he reached up, plucked a lime off a branch and handed it to Gwen. Which she took home. Katie used part of it for a salad dressing, but left you a wedge to flavor a glass of Mexican beer.

The anecdote goes over well, particularly with Chris, whose eyes light up as if can taste the tartness of the fruit itself. After a short consultation, you all agree to head for Asia where the young 'uns amuse themselves in the Chinese Garden Court, spotting goldfish in the darkened rocky pool. The adults disperse to the surrounding galleries. You wander among the scrolls and scholar's rocks, enjoying nothing so much as the quieting of your pulse. A scroll draws you over. Wild stuff – a "dragon painting" attributed to one Chen Rong, active in the 13th century. The card in the display case quotes an apocryphal account of his working methods: "He makes clouds by splashing ink, creates vapor by spraying water, and while drunk, shouting loudly, takes off his cap, soaks it in ink, smears and rubs with it, before finishing the painting with a brush." Whew. You are exhausted. Too many stories jostling in your head.

The bell rings and your party steers itself through the labyrinth toward the exit. Along the way, you fall in beside Gwen. "You were pretty surprised, weren't you?" She nods.

"I was too."

"Do you think if we walked through there, we could get another lime?"

"I don't think so. That kind of thing happens when you're not trying to make anything happen."

"Why do you think he did it?"

"What do you think?"

"I think he was trying to say, these limes belong as much to me as the guy who runs the museum."

• • •

This afternoon, on your way to the Met, you trudged this afternoon from Columbus Circle through still-snowy Central Park. In preparation for the installation of

The Gates archways, thousands of steel bases, each weighing seven hundred pounds, and fabricated in Brooklyn, have been laid down flanking the pathways – the snow meticulously cleared to accommodate them. As you approached the bandshell, along the Literary Walk, off to the right side, a bank of raw pine pallets full of something tube-shaped and wrapped in plastic. Reached your hand in and tore a tiny breach in the protective coating. As you thought – it's the banners themselves, orange-colored, dormant, waiting to bloom.

"But is it art?" asked Donna. Kipling's age-old *Conundrum of the Workshops*. You couldn't reply. Came into your head the line the man gave you years ago when he cut your silhouette out of black contact paper on the threshold of Le G. and presented it to you as a gift. Stiffened with discombobulation, confronted with your own unbidden image, you didn't know what sort of coin of exchange was appropriate to the moment – felt awkward and poor with nothing to offer in return but a cup of coffee. "What's the matter?" he'd asked. "Can't you accept a blessing?"

February 1

6:40 a.m. Chemtrails and contrails. Who know what they're doing up there and how it's shaking out down here. Crossing Eighth Avenue toward Ba Gua, one long strand, like handspun white yarn hangs in the perfectly blue sky. Looks like the plane headed due north, then made a strange near semi-circular detour over upper Manhattan or the South Bronx. Then the vector straightens out and continues straight on. Sometimes, by late afternoon, the sky is full of all kinds of trails, the whole dome turned a hazy white.

Weird sky at morning, people take warning.

Weird sky at night, people take fright.

The same SUV as you see every Tuesday dawning, parked with its flashers on by the big steel arch over the entrance to FIT. "Why Not U?" say the large Fraktur press-on letters spaced across the top of the windshield. And on the back window: "Nobody Move" with two pistol decals pointing inward, bracketing the type. And then the license plate: ME CRAZY.

February 2 – Le G. – 8:35

Department of Urban Miracles. Clearly Bloomberg is not man but god – and this god wants to continue on as mayor for another term – for lo, the C train is back running again in just over a week, as opposed to the five years that a mere mortal, the head of the MTA, had estimated. Seventy per cent service. Good enough for rock and roll.

As you read, a flash against the white paper. Lay aside the *Times*. Very sedately, in no hurry at all, an optical migraine kicks in, goes heavy-duty by increments, turns all before you into a vibrating crystal palace. Slight nausea. Put down your pain au chocolat. Wait it out.

February 3 – Late Evening

A terrific Writing X session – confluence of particularly strong work in the room. People seem to be playing off one another's' boldness. Three plus intense hours. Exhausted. But you told Melinda you'd come afterward to the official Bombora House sale and farewell, so instead of hopping a train home, you walk diagonally northwest. On your way up Positively 4th Street, between Horatio and 13th, you pass the side entrance of a big industrial building converted to office space. Peripherally, a splash of color draws your eye and you double back a few steps to stand in front of the glass doorway. Way down the length of the lobby, behind a stainless-steel topped security desk, a huge stars and stripes, hung vertically, wall to wall. You focus closer, on a bright red sign with white capital letters set on an easel few feet inside the doorway:

ATTENTION!
AS YOU ENTER THIS BUILDING, YOU ARE WARNED THAT YOU MAY BE VIDEO/AUDIO TAPED BY AS MANY AS 21 OR MORE SURVEILLANCE CAMERAS

Beyond the sign, a black velvet-roped cordon leads toward a monitor, camera and mic unit to which is attached a sign in the same bold white-on-red lettering.

STAND
AND
SPEAK

From some basement level of your kishkes wells up an enormous FUCK YOU! No one's about on the street and in that adrenalized instant of isolation you see yourself seizing a garbage can and hurling through the door, or battering at the glass with a length of wood or metal that would leap into your hand from the nearby gutter. You grab the handle and shake the door. It rattles but won't budge. All quiet, locked up for the night. Two video cameras trained on the entrance from second story height, mounted on the corners of the building. Is anybody watching?

Still buzzed with rage, you make a left and check the main entrance at 20 West 13th. The same signs here. But on the glass door, the name of the owner or principal tenant: Housing Works, Inc. What's this about? Why's a non-profit organization dedicated to fighting AIDS and homelessness putting out a vibe like that? Or is there something going on upstairs that's not so cool. Man, there's some screwy shit in this phobic new world.

Straight ahead, down the street, footlights bathe the lower floors of the big new, metal-clad hotel across from Melinda's in lurid violet. Close enough now to read the banner that's been hung from the cornice of her building: BANKRUPTCY – BELOW MARKET LEASE FOR SALE; HILCO REAL ESTATE.

Downstairs door is ajar. Up the creaking wooden stairs and into Bombora house. Wander about, first into the largest room of the loft. Damn near everything has a pricetag on it. At the far end, what appears to be a brazier balanced on a stand, glowing with impossibly-colored coals. Closer up, you see it's a metal bowl, perhaps four feet across, filled with roses floating in water, hit from above with a red-gelled spot. When Wandjina, her daughter, had her wedding party here, the same bowl held hundreds of oysters in a bed of ice.

A couple of yards to the left of the bowl, swinging sedately from a cable bolted to the rafters, a splintered timber, with a pair of rusted bolts stuck through one end, the four nuts like a double set of eyes on stalks – a Melinda mobile: "Deep Sea Fish."

You spot Melinda sitting at the long wooden table with a visitor, leafing through *Voussoir*. Your text – a short prose poem, once laser-printed on a chaste, white, standard sheet of paper – out of which she made a kind of outsized book painted in coffee and India ink on thick, toothy paper, the whole bound, or rather folded, into an dark, rough-grained envelope of cowhide.

A large blonde woman enters, avid to buy Melinda's objects at fire-sale prices, a flock of her cranked-up friends in tow. You break away, disgusted – despite your hopes that Melinda can make some bank tonight – by the acquisitive tide surging round you. Fall into a conversation with Lyudwig, a photographer from St. Petersburg, affiliated with the Anthropology Museum there. Lives most of the time in New York now. Incredible poise, and a beauty like Baryshnikov's, only finer-featured. The blonde collector homes in on Lyudwig. Has he brought any of his work? She wants to show it to so-and-so. Of course you'll excuse him.

You've had hardly anything to drink, but you feel completely smashed. Edlin's arrived during your sojourn in the main room. He's half reclining on his elbows before the fireplace and you join him. For how long, who cares? he waxes eloquent on the subject closest to his heart: the Permian and what he knows of its fossil evidence, the record of extinction and renewal. That piece over there – he points to a decaying beam, vertically mounted and lit by pinspots mounted on the ceiling – that piece reminds him of an ecosystem, a volcanic site in the Pacific, where tubeworms, shrimps and all sorts of primitive animals cluster round the black smoke that rises undersea. And the plants there that don't live on light, but chemosynthesize.

You get up, wander about the loft together, its various quarters, both of you not quite processing that in a couple of days, all this will be gone. Along one wall runs huge rugged shelf on which Melinda has propped a series of thick blue, slate rectangles perhaps three feet high by two across – her "The Ten Commandments." Melinda introduces you to the two young women helping her with the sale, Morgan and Sumi. They're roommates, physically different as night and day and each exudes an altogether different kind of integrity. For fifteen minutes, as you make animated conversation, you're convinced this generation might, well, might what? Make a better world? They're smart, but where's their fire? Yet maybe there's something there, latent.

What a strange head you're in. Jazzed and deeply bummed. All knotted up. Time to be on your way. Hug Melinda. She's wearing a form-fitting, knitted brown dress that makes her feel like a soft-wooled animal. The fellow she's been talking with, a bearded Viennese named Hermes, he's got to go too. You retrieve your coats from the rack – his a navy-style pea jacket, but bright teal blue, nearly peacock-colored. Exchange brief pleasantries, happy words about Vienna. He's smiling, seems possessed

of a light spirit. As you head out, feet clomping on the pitched wooden stairs, he shakes his head, as if trying to cast out the image of this place vacant. And soon afterward trashed. To make way for what? You push the door open against the outside air. "These fucking developers," he says. "They should get a fucking life."

Bombora House about to vanish from the scene – washed away by the recurrent lappings of same waves that when they gather up the power can carry off a Penn Station. We've no way to protect our core spaces – those places that, whatever their genesis, evolve into containers of the city-soul. One would think that in achieving a perfection of form they'd become somehow more rooted and enduring. That a collective wisdom would cherish them, rise up to guard their ground. But no. And perhaps that nihilism, that cold indifference even to self-interest, is built into the city-soul as well.

The only way you can bear what's going down is to see it less as obliteration than a diaspora, a spiraling up and outward. Melinda created this long moment here – near on twelve years – relying almost entirely on her own resources. So now it's Kingston, Jamaica that will inherit these energies, and with them the rare gifts that New York had neither the wisdom, nor the base-line intelligence to sustain.

February 6 – Early Afternoon

Gorgeous, spring-like weather. Melinda carries on through the weekend selling off bits of Bombora House. Neither Katie nor Gwen are willing to visit for farewells – it's just too upsetting. So off they head to buy Gwen some badly-needed jeans while you ride down there solo.

In front of Melinda's the sale's spilled out onto the sidewalk. Morgan and Sumi are still in the game. They play tag team, hauling stuff downstairs in company with Edison, a hugely graceful, pony-tailed young man, and attempting to persuade the flocks of folks walking past – a good many tourists – Pastis patsies – meat district maggots – to venture upstairs. Sumi's eyes light up when she sees your bike. Can she go for a ride? Sure, you say, and warn her about the chain that skips on the broken sprockets. Off she goes, round the block. You realize that if she'd asked whether she could throw your bike off a pier, you'd have said "of course." A certain kind of unforced charm. Reminds you of Gwen. Same light touch.

Upstairs, Melinda's in full sales mode. Very smooth and centered, she leads a Japanese fellow around the loft. He's interested in benches, tables, and some of the metal pieces she's made out of industrial cast-offs. A thousand fragments of the world collected here, now poised for takeoff: a panel of an old Cutler mail chute, a jagged section of cast iron perforated with thick glass disks – the kind once used for pavement, three Aboriginal paintings, an Ad Reihardt, a Yoko Ono, the grand piano, near which the Deep Sea Fish, hanging from his cable, still holds sway.

A youngish couple stands at the end of the long table in the main room – the one Gwen's guests sat around at her twelfth birthday party. They turn the heavy pages of "Voussoir." No pricetag. Would Melinda sell it? They close the book, replace the free-form poured silver weight to secure the cowhide flap.

Down at the other end of the table, someone's reading a sheet of white paper that's lying there. The note you gave Melinda last night, from Gwen.

Dear Melinda,

I'm sorry you have to leave, Bombora house made a big impression on us and the world. I could easily say that you being there made it <u>the coolest place in the WORLD!</u> I hope to hear from you as you know we love you so.

Then a heart, a smiley face and

xoxo, Gwen.

P.S! Bombora house is NOT gone, for me. It'll always be there.

It's not going or gone for me!

Sincerely, and her signature.

The Japanese fellow seems fascinated by a steel vessel, pear-shaped, useful as a vase. Perfect for the lily that's in it now. Melinda places it one of the dents on an old workbench, plays with the angle. The man seems pleased but points to the bench and says "Don't have one," meaning, you suppose, a surface with dents. Melinda tells him that you don't need a dent to balance it – a washer, even a little one will do. She scans the room for something that will do the trick. But you can tell she doesn't want to break away. So you do. Near the stairs to the roof you spot a container full of machine parts. Rummage around and find a steel ring a couple of inches in diameter. Return, lay it on

a flat section of the bench. Melinda sets the vase on top of it. Voila. The fellow nods approvingly. He'll buy something by the end of the day. You're pretty sure. Maybe vase, washer, bench and all. You've done your thing, now split. At least into the other room, where Morgan's taking bids on the Aboriginal paintings. You hang out nearby, just marking time. In the course of fifteen minutes, two separate people approach her to ask: *What was this place?*

It begins to get sad for you. You'll be no help to Melinda like this. You'd half thought on your way down that Katie and Gwen were smart to stay away – it was foolish for you to come. What besides grief could you have found here?

Stop by Myers's on the way home to pick up pork and shepherd's pies, and a chocolate Kinder Surprise egg for Gwen. Not that she hasn't outgrown them, but for Auld Lang Syne.

Pedaling up Eighth Avenue, the bleat of a horn on your tail orders *move out of the way!* Where to? You're already hugging the parked cars, closer than you'd like should someone inside one suddenly decide to open a door. Turn to look at the source of the imperative: a light green Mercedes with its sunroof open. As the car whips past, you gesture, both palms off the handlebars, open and out – shout a kind of ersatz Italian *Eh!?* that sounds half angry, half querulous. The driver doesn't react a whit, not even a glance in the mirror. For several blocks you pump harder, imagine catching him at a light and spitting through his window. But it's you that the red light snags at 23rd Street. Mercedes is probably at 34th Street by now. You can only push this bike so fast, and anyway, you were only half trying. So preoccupied, you're lucky to get home in one piece.

Make tea and sit to write. Katie's key in the door. They've scored some pants and shirts for Gwen. Now it's your turn. They make you close your eyes and put out your hands. A beautiful vintage tie, curvaceous purple and blue abstract pattern. Perfect width, not too skinny, not too wide.

• • •

Some sort of weird symbiosis among skyscrapers? After dark, for the last several nights, the uppermost reaches of your two most proximate towers, Met Life and the

Empire State, have been illuminated in a dayglo red so lurid it could serve as the official color of the Hellfire Club. Sure, red and green at Christmas; purple, white and yellow at Easter; blue and white for the Jewish holidays – but what's this about?

• • •

Dinner most excellent by Gwen: meatloaf *mit* asparagus. And for dessert, fruit smoothies.

February 7 – Le G. – Early Morning

No Gaministas here yet, so you zone out and your head cycles through a slideshow of Bombora House images: Isabella Rosselini sitting in one of the green velvet chairs by the big table. Edlin's drawings, homages to what he calls "the dance of evolution and extinction." A woman buys two of them – first time his art's been sold.

On a cord round his neck, Edlin wears a tiny dimetridon, the little fellow with the spiky fin on his back. A Paleozoic creature, pre-dinosaur, to whom, he says, we are closer than to the big lizards who came after. It all has something to do with having one hole in the cheek bone, not two, and the diversity of teeth. *Natura facit saltus.* If you listen to Edlin long enough, maybe you'll learn something about her choreography.

Cold air. Door's open. Florian enters for a coffee. He flew in yesterday from Berlin. Melinda always bills him as Bombora's official documentarian, but he's brought no camera this time. He'd rather witness than record. Will he come back to New York? Yes, of course. But surely not as often.

February 9

Approval yesterday by the Buildings Department of Calatrava's thousand foot tall residential skyscraper: a diagonally offset stack of ten, discreet, suspended, cubical habitations, each four stories high, to be built at 80 South Street, down near the Seaport.

How does newness come into the world? How is it born? So asks Rushdie, in *Satanic Verses*.

Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made?

How does it survive, extreme and dangerous as it is? What compromises, what deals, what betrayals of its secret nature must it make to stave off the wrecking crew, the exterminating angel, the guillotine?

Is birth always a fall?

Do angels have wings? Can men fly?

And in three days, the opening of *The Gates*. Reluctantly the city stretches and cracks apart its iron mien. Sheds character armor to emerge as what beast – fish or fowl or new composite?

'Fly,' Camcha shrieked at Gibreel. 'Start flying, now.' And added without knowing its source, the second command: 'And sing.'

• • •

On NPR this morning, an unapologetically philistine trashing of *The Gates* pegged around an ancient sound bite from then-mayor Koch – his voice, as ever, impregnated with timeless complaint. You don't move fast enough to take down what he said verbatim, but one phrase sticks out – something along the lines of: *seventeen miles of shower curtain hung around the park – you call that art?*

The corny Dickens phrase "the best of times, the worst of times," crunches like an icebreaker through your head at least once a day these past few, so you go to the text itself and find it juicier than remembered. And then too, Book One of *A Tale…* carries the title "Recalled to Life":

…it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

You read on, and it only gets better – and worse. *Thus did the year two thousand and five conduct their Greatness, and myriads of small creatures – the creatures of this chronicle among the rest – along the roads that lay before them.*

Ash Wednesday and the Lunar New Year – year of the rooster, if not the Cock Lane Ghost, converge on one day – rapping out their messages to whomever has ears to hear.

Edlin's Permian swirls through your head. Two hundred fifty million years gone. The moment of Pangaea: one land with no separations possible, and a single great water. Oxygen drought arrives. Vast extinctions, terrafirma and sea, yet life's continuation. Drifting apart.

Much, much later, the uplift of the Panama Isthmus, the same thrust that built Costa Rica's mountain spine, the one you traversed, what was it, near two years gone *mas o menos*? Waters divided by the kissing of continents, a great drying out of Africa. Certain apes find the distances between adjacent trees too wide to swing and descend to ambulate, warily, across the new savannah.

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On February 12, Melinda must vacate Bombora House. On February 12, *The Gates* open. What weather will greet the Saturday? How much longer must you carry these *Notes*? You ask, and the book answers back: Three days. And then you can be done.

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Anne died last weekend – Erik L.'s mother – and it stirred up a lot about Bea. You remember her excitement when *The Gates* was first proposed twenty-five-odd years ago. Never a joiner, for some reason she'd briefly gotten involved with the Municipal Arts Society – attended the meeting at which Christo and Jeanne-Claude made their pitch. You sat in the kitchen while she cooked spaghetti and told you all about it – how much she loved the boldness of the scheme. Nobody there that day seemed to understand its beauty, practically shouted it down. At the time you thought *Gates, shmates*. But now you wish she could walk the tangible path she saw so vividly in her mind back then. And it dawns on you what moved her. *The Gates* are orchestrated, like a symphony. And music was her thing.

February 10 – Le G. – Early Morning

This being the year of the rooster, surely there will be a wake-up call.

Intense solar activity. Is the sun jealous of the moon's new year? How to begin an ending?

Edlin comes into the café, sits down at 5, notices the postcard you're using as a bookmark lying on your table. It's a Martha Cooper photo from 1980 – a shot of an elevated subway train, heavily graffiti'd, with the Bronx Court House behind it. She caught the image just as a full-car "Dondi" rolled past, a single, continuous effusion of color organized around the gigantic letters that spelled his name. The blue paint Dondi used for his background makes the subway's mass go transparent – selectively abolishes the metal and concrete city so it joins seamlessly with the sky glimpsed in the gaps between the buildings beyond.

You'd picked up the card a few weeks back at the publication party for Martha's hip hop book down at the PowerHouse gallery. The place was so packed you almost turned around and took off. But then you waded in, the rap bass shaking the floor, until you found yourself wedged into an even denser crowd at the edge of a circle watching breakdancers in their teens and twenties, along with kids just beyond toddler as they spun, flipped, handstood and otherwise rode the rhythms in moves you thought had been long eclipsed by newer styles. Subway graffiti's gone, but one thread of the culture it was born with continues into a third generation. Surprise, surprise.

And now this morning you find yourself passing through the membrane where the degrees of separation shrink from slim to none. Edlin admires the card, and volunteers that he knew the late artist well, considered himself Dondi's "disciple" – saw him as kind of older brother. For an instant you're taken aback, though it may not read on your face. It's all too weird. Too many improbable convergences. You're getting coincidenced-out. Edlin unsnaps his shirt to show the Dondi graphic on the undershirt beneath. Screened on white and red on black fabric, a playful montage of vehicles: train, bus and bicycle. And free-floating in the ebony sky, like a sun over all that moves below, the spray nozzle.

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Evening light, and with it comes an impulse to revisit a piece you began a month or so after 9/11 and ultimately abandoned. Less an essay than a wild set of associations that sprang, Genie-like, out of the plume that invariably drew your eye to the southern skyline. You ran at the piece from several angles, all of them fruitless. The ideas seemed irreconcilable, unworkable into any coherent form. According to your computer, "Ground Zero, Navel of the World" was "last modified" on October 20, 2003.

> For a couple of weeks in late June and early July 2001, nearly every time I turned on the TV, there was an ad, sponsored by a brand name marketer of blue jeans, wherein several young women's navels lip synched the 1980 Diana Ross disco hit "I'm Coming Out." The owners of these navels, appeared to be sashaying through an urban streetscape resembling Lower Manhattan, and the shots were medium closeups framed top and bottom by the hems of cropped blouses and the waistbands of the models' super low-rise jeans. Now, over two years later, I am pretty sure that a large part of why this ad stuck with me is that its creators used a kind of playful eroticism to pose a question about seeing and believing.
>
> Like most folks who saw the ad, I was cognitively aware that navels do not possess the capacity to sing. And I knew that if navels opened and closed like vocalizing mouths, they did so not out of autonomous will, but via a triumph of digital manipulation. That much was clear. Yet no rational argument can compete with the force of sentiment. Simply put, these navels' claim to selfhood rang true. Again, like many other Americans, in my heart of hearts, I hold fast to the belief that any impulse may be realized if it is felt strongly, and deeply enough. According to the mystical logic of wish fulfillment, there is nothing that can stop a navel from singing if it is really, *really* motivated. And as for "I'm Coming Out, if several such prodigies were to join in chorus, what more inspirational anthem could they sing?
>
> But now comes the Fear part. In the late 1960s, before the ad, the song, or the navels themselves were conceived, an astonishing piece of

architecture was getting built in Lower Manhattan. What the World Trade Center had in common with the navels in the ad was that it similarly confounded reason, albeit not whimsically, but in earnest. In 1970 when the nearly-twin towers achieved their unprecedented immensity, the message they broadcast was doubly clear: *The Global Market is Coming Out.* These buildings represented an order of skyscraping magnitude so off the charts that part of our minds refused to wrap around their actuality. We saw them, yet they were simply too fantastical to be entirely believed. And their abstract style, their blankness times two, made them seem less like material buildings than creations of special effects. And thus they remained, both real and unreal – until, as, and even after, they fell.

Since 9/11, anyone who watches television has seen the towers imploding in slow motion, over and over again, often in an eerie silence, or a voiceover – perhaps to music. So powerful is this distancing effect, when coupled with our instinctive avoidance of psychic overload, that even if one witnessed the catastrophe first hand, it becomes difficult to fully credit the evidence of one's senses. Even now, in the midst of the wars precipitated by their destruction, one watches the WTC collapse as if on an imaginary screen, and wonders when the logo of the advertiser will pop on to tell us the commercial is over.

For months after the towers fell, a small mountain of tangled debris and smoldering dust inhabited the site. Now the foundation lies pristine: a vast concrete omphalos in the oldest part of our city. Is it too much to imagine that this pit has something to say? Could we hear a voice coming from it if we listened?

Back when you began the piece, you desperately hoped that some wisdom would arise from the harrowed ground. That's what it comes down to in the last paragraph. But what you were getting at more broadly seems to be the gap between what's seen and heard and one's common sense. Which preoccupies you still. Over the past few years, you've looked at the photographs of the fire at the Pentagon and its partial collapse maybe a half dozen times. Because you keep hoping to see something

different. And that is because you cannot reconcile the apparent damage to the building with its having been hit by a commercial jet-liner. There's a huge visual disconnect at several levels. Where is the plane's wreckage? Clearly there's a hole in the wall, but where did the 757's wings go? And those huge engines? Very little fire given the amount of fuel the plane carried. You keep adding it up and it doesn't. The books won't balance. No accounting.

For now, move on. Maybe you'll be able to finish the piece some day. When navels fly. And pigs sing.

February 11 – Early Morning

Lincoln's birthday, celebrated – hence alternate-side-of-the-street parking suspended. But he's not born yet. That has to wait for tomorrow.

Lynn Stewart convicted on all five counts of "providing material aid to terrorism." She's looking at twenty years or more. One of her co-defendants faces a similar term, and the other possibly life.

A fake reporter working under a pseudonym and used as a shill in many a White House press conference resigns decrying his persecution by "liberals."

Meanwhile, a white Gulfstream V jet registered to a fictional resident of Oregon, its tail marked N8068V, delivers whomever the grey men select to Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Syria or Uzbekistan to have their fingernails torn out. "Extraordinary rendition" is the official term for these abductions.

You walk Tom up to 23rd Street from Le G. and at the corner he remarks that lately you've been looking "lighter." So you tell him you may be closing in on the end of these notes. Time to let the balloon go. He nods sagely, which seems to affirm that he trusts in the life-cycle of these things. You were, after all, recording a passing moment, however arbitrarily defined. And now nine years and change later this dance finishes, and another begins.

Strange, all these pages you've written, and scarcely a word about night life. Or sports. What kind of New Yorker are you?

You're pedaling home when out of nowhere, something clicks at the level of language that you can't believe you never noticed before. For the past fourteen hundred-odd years Muslims have believed the Ka'aba in Makkah to be the exact

"center of the world." If one took this very literally, how would one regard a modern building in an infidel city that called itself the World Center – never mind the "Trade" in the middle? What would such a name conjure up to you?

No, it can't be. Surely it wasn't that simple.

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Don't think of an elephant. The little elephant on your desk stands next to the terra cotta Buddha Gwen gave you for your birthday, a replica of a medieval compass cum sundial you bought years ago in Madrid and the postage-stamp sized edition of the Universal Rights of Man from Mme. Jaqueline that you're holding for Gwen. The elephant came to live here on this plane of green leather via Tom and Maureen – it's a souvenir of their last sojourn in Cambodia. About an inch and a half high, carved out of a peculiar crystalline-looking, yet soapy stone, its back and sides have been perforated so that one can see the tinier elephant carved within it, facing in the opposite direction, in breech position if it were going to try for a life outside its confines. A little cobweb's grown inside, which you cannot bring yourself to disturb. Nearby, propped against the lamp, a school picture of Gwen at perhaps eight, slipped into an octagonal origami frame she invented, and folded – the whole about three inches across.

To the right of the lamp, there's a row of books across the back of the desk, with several other volumes stacked horizontally on top of them. Resting atop the pile, a pair of heavy cast metal cymbals tethered with a leather thong – a gift from Jessamyn when she graduated Goddard. Up and to the left, propped against some books on a shelf, an ideogram brushed on ricepaper by Stephanie R., a red chop stamped at the lower right. On the back of the matte, she noted that the character signifies "creative power," and the date, 2000.

Pinned to the wall you face when writing, a host of Gwen drawings and above them, a commedia mask, another birthday present, this one from Alane. If you were to stand up from your chair, you'd find yourself eye-to-eye with Voltaire, the way Katie drew him, from a bust by Houdin. On the same wall, lower to the right, hung just above a framed eight by ten of Gwen, aged four, standing proudly amidst a city constructed of wooden blocks, another Tom and Maureen souvenir. This one comes

from Chiapas. Embroidered on piece of plain linen about ten inches square and framed in a red running stitch, a vividly colored graphic: two purple flowers whose stems are rooted in a patch of green labeled FZLN. Sprouting from the flower stems, like leaves or buds, the heads of three masked Zapatistas. A red five-pointed star hangs over the blossoms, and at the left, in yellow capital letters, the motto: *NO MORIRA LA FLOR DE LA PALABRA*. The flower of the word will not die.

Son of a gun, you're done. A day early. Lincoln's birthday celebrated. Emancipation. A form of freedom. Tomorrow, Saturday, enchallah, you and your girls will ride the subway up to Central Park at 8 a.m. to be there when *The Gates* unfurl. You can only imagine. Go online to check the weather prediction. Your browser default page comes up as a riot of newslinks: *Breaking – Pre 9/11 Memo Warned Bush, Rice of Qaeda Threat; Gunmen Shoot 11 Dead at Bakery; No War Crimes Probe for Rumsfeld; 400 Missing After Dam Bursts; Baby Tossed From Moving Car; Man, Pit Bull Saved Floating in Sea. Click to learn more….*

Instead you check Weather Underground's New York City forecast. Saturday's graphic shows a sun smiling from behind a hat and beard of mauve clouds. *A chance of flurries in the morning... then a chance of sprinkles in the afternoon. Highs in the lower 40s. West winds 10 to 15 mph.*

Right now, at the Central Park weather station atop Belvedere Castle, and at all the local airports, conditions are Clear. They say visibility is ten miles. Stand up and see for yourself. Sure enough, down Eighth Avenue and across the swatch of bay, the rough-edged treeline of Staten Island's hills, fully visible to the naked eye. Today's high temperature in the mid-30s. Waxing crescent moon. Air quality "good." What more is there to say?

BRAVE NEW YORK

February 15, 2005 – January 12, 2007

One must have spirit in applying techniques,
Spirit makes the ears and eyes brilliantly real.
No matter that his hand flies like a swallow,
I can sense ants singing like the roar of a dragon and tiger.
—Ba Gua Song 36

Ides of February, 2005

Toward Ba Gua class in the not-quite dawn. Walk east down 27th Street, Fashion Institute students still sleeping in their dorms, nary a light on. Only the jocular banter among delivery men and security guards. Walking briskly on the street, the few remaining printers, printer's devils, East Asian and Subcontinental folks opening up their wholesale storefronts.

Mudstep in a circle for an hour and change, the turns accomplished with *ko bu* and *bai bu* steps: first hooking with the outside foot, then swinging out the inside, then hooking back. Shvitzing like a pig. Afterwards, Tom B. shows the advanced ones all sorts of terrifying moves with swords. You watch a while, then out the door.

Downstairs the neighborhoods alive. Everyone, their brother and sister, on the way to work. Everyone's holding a coffee, a cell or a cigarette, sometimes all three. Some come running.

Walk west. Try to keep mudstepping, knees brushing. Drop your center. Easy in this cold to pull your shoulders up around your ears. Twenty-seventh now alive with student fashionistas.

On the agenda: move the Gray Ghost and sit in it until the parking space goes legal. Noontime until whenever, parent-teacher conferences. Dinner with T. & M. at Shah's. Write in the gaps if any.

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On the radio, BBC world news drones on, an interview with an expert on Islamic fundamentalist something or other, Robin Lustig's questions filled with entirely too much self-satisfied and palpably false bonhomie. Out the window to your left, the superbly detailed brick wall of the Seminary stretches all the way to Tenth, on the right, rows of brownstone townhouses. The whole of it suffused with wan midmorning light.

"But honestly, do you think the Taliban have really established a…?" asks Robin.

The drums, bass and organ intro to the Brian Lehrer show, pops you out of reverie. You'd been dreaming a variation on a scene in a movie, where the first of several canaries, caged in a submersible turns color and drops, and in the way of dreams, you were he, and at the same time, watching.

• • •

Air's warmer on the way home. Sun's making a game try. Lhude sing cuccu.

February 22 – Carvoeiro, Portugal

Escape, canary, spring the cage! Fly to Iberia. Here, on the road that runs besides Colina Branca, doves coo most insistently. A cock crows, several other birds offer varying high twitters. You climb to the turret at the very top of this house and look out over water that's not the Mediterranean – which lies east beyond Gibraltar – but feels close to it, though a cooler blue, in quality of light.

When you drive west along the coast to Lagos you learn of the conquest, in 1415, of Ceuta on the North African coast. Then Madeira in 1419, and a few years later, the Azores.

February 24

In the sleek, Italianate Belissimo Café, vintage photos of Carvoeiro in the early twentieth century when it was a fishing village, long before its discovery by the Brits and Germans, and prior to the hewing out of huge chunks of the western bluff for the vacation quarters to spread upward, leaving orange-ochre scars in the rockface of the V that opens onto the beach.

Beyond, way beyond, on a particularly clear day, one is supposed to be able to glimpse the Barbary coast. You'd like to think you'd seen that other shore, but that dark line on the horizon is likely just the place where sea meets sky.

February 25 – Faro

On the wall near the door of the A Taska restaurant, where you've just eaten the most mind-expanding shrimp and cornmeal chowder possible under the sun, a framed broadsheet, nearly filled with scribblings in a hundred different hands. At the top, in large lettering, it's labeled *Quadro do Bem e Mal Dizer*.

Now your Portuguese is even more tenuous than your Spanish, but this seems to indicate a place in which one is invited to say all things, good and bad. And yes, there's

still room, a little, at the bottom of the sheet and, from a string, a felt tipped pen hanging down.

But what to write? Your thanks to Portugal for showing you in no uncertain terms how Africa, Europe and America connect? That walking the gridded streets of downtown Lisbon, rebuilt after the great earthquake of 1755, you came down with a case of *Candide* flashbacks? Then, off the grid, into the Alfama quarter, its name sliding fricative over the centuries from the Arabic *al-Hamma*, meaning fountain or bath.

And even as you soaked up strains of Fado, came images of the tiny burying grounds in your own city, one of them just east of French Roast on 11th Street and Sixth, the other in your neighborhood, a huge loft building to the left and rear and on the right, a luxury apartment house looming above its tumbled gravestones. To these cemeteries, well north of the old Dutch Wall, were carted, *kan ya makan*, the Portuguese Jews who, driven from Brazil, died once upon a time in Brave New Amsterdam.

But you write none of that. Leave the space blank. Pour it into your book.

February 28

Fly away home to find, thank goodness, the house not on fire. Nor the child alone, 'cause she went with you. Took notes and wrote up the Portuguese voyages of discovery for her social studies class.

Vacation's fine, but now it's culture-lag. 23rd Street crosstown. Eastbound, like those navigators. No matter what they did, the winds kept blowing them toward the coast of Africa. You read a bit of *Beyond Cape Bojador, the Sea of Darkness*, wherein Gomes Eanes de Azurara, a chronicler of those days, records how Prince Henry the Navigator "sent every year two or three ships… because he wanted to find out what kinds of lands existed beyond the Canary Islands… and because, until then, in the memory or in the writings of men, no information existed about the quality of those parts beyond the cape."

And this continued throughout much of the fifteenth century until, fitted out the with pivoting booms to augment windcatching, the caravels made voyages further still down the coast of Africa until, attempting out-tack the winds and round the southern tip, they bumped into… Brazil. And thus, the seekers of slaves religatured in the minds of men, two largish bits of long-fractured Gondwanaland. But this discovery the

Portuguese kept secret twenty years. Or perhaps the mariners on that ship didn't realize what they'd seen.

The bus jolts into motion. A gazillion passengers trying to squeeze on, some past the bottleneck of folks clogging the middle. Down the aisle, precariously, a borderline elderly fellow, avuncular, makes his way toward where you sit at the rear of the bus. When he reaches the seat ahead of you he stops, turns a quarter turn and grabs the handrail above. A teenage girl, very dark skinned, who, like the rest of her buddies has been lunching from a collection of grease-spotted paper bags, half rises from the seat beneath him and offers her seat, which he declines, with thanks.

And keeps the ball of good-fellowship in play by waxing rapturous over the scent of what have got to be the raunchiest French fries in Christendom – "No wonder I'm hungry for lunch, it's almost three" – even as he checks his cellphone. The kids and geezer share a larf. He speed dials. Starts talking to "Sir." It takes you until this to actually focus on him. Clean-shaven, slightly flushed, rounded face, pleasantly mild. He wears a cap with an appliqué sewn on the front – the words Homeland Security Service embroidered around some sort of eagle-ish symbol.

"Just want to let you know, Sir, all our flights were scrubbed due to the snow. Yes, that's right, sir. Yes sir. Going down to One Liberty, sir. OK, just letting you know." He snaps the cellphone closed, takes in a deep breath of fries. The girls smiles, turns toward him and offers up her brightly-colored bag.

• • •

Bush's otherworldy European bubble, case-hardened, entails: One presidential limo, known as "The Beast," nineteen escort vehicles, two hundred secret service agents, fifteen sniffer dogs, half-a-hundred aides, five cooks, countless bottlewashers, and, for a lagniappe, a Blackhawk helicopter to ride shotgun in the sky over the town of Mainz – birthplace of Gutenberg's revolution – which has been entirely emptied of people so that this one weak and insubstantial man may shake hands with his feeble German counterpart in a perfect political vacuum.

• • •

Swine o' the times.

March 3

Walk through Central Park and witness the beginning of the Gates disassembly, the loosening of the nuts holding the fixtures plumb, then the lifting up of the arch and tilting down. Then the unbolting of the crosspiece from the stanchions. The heavy bases scooped up, stacked in threes on forklifts. Sad, but only for a moment.

• • •

I cannot fix my object.
'tis always tottering and reeling by natural giddiness.
I take it as it is at the instant I consider it.
I do not paint its being,
I paint its passage.
Said Montaigne.

• • •

Eulogia, blessings, good words after the fact.
Eulogeo, these same in the moment.

• • •

Need to reclaim the old Russian word *Intelligentsia*. Pare off the acquired connotation of an intellectual elite, and endow it once more with the sense of intelligence as an active social force.

Also require, in order to make it through this frigid day, a steaming cup of hippocras, the spicy medieval wine named for Hippocrates.

• • •

A Sicilian word via Gioia: *s'fuare,* to get something out, off one's chest, out of one's gut.

• • •

They're talking PEPs, those Navy boyz – pulsed energy projectiles – laser bursts of expanding plasma that, fired from more'n a mile off cause excruciating pain. The electromagnetic pulse, see, irritates the nerve cells most unbearably, yet leaves victims "unharmed." PEP's set to go online by '07, according to the researchers at U. Florida, Gainesville, who've been zapping animals like there's no tomorrow.

• • •

BUSH VERGOGNATI! Sign held up at a demo in outside the U.S. consulate in Milan, in response to the fatal shooting, in Baghdad, of an Italian secret service agent, and the wounding of his charge, just-released hostage Giuliana Sgrena, a reporter for *Il Manifesto*.

Imagine! Some of these silly dagoes think we did it on purpose. Why ever would our boys go after a journalist?

March 9

Absolute lack of We-sense.

• • •

What was it about that submarine sonar that made those dolphins beach themselves. Irresistible siren song?

• • •

Studiolos. Curiosity cabinets. The idea was to "reappropriate and reassemble all reality in miniature, to constitute the center of a place from which the prince could symbolically reclaim dominion of the entire natural and artificial world."

So wrote Giuseppe Olmi.

• • •

When did we drop the vestigial possessives: Hudson's River, Murray's Hill?

• • •

Heteroclite, that which leans differently, such as a word irregular in its inflection, or a noun whose declensions are good, but Oh Lord, please don't let them be misunderstood. Also someone or thing who deviates from common rules or forms. Good name for a band: Eros and the Heteroclites.

• • •

Avalo-Kitehvara, a Tibetan deity described as "The all-seeing Lord with eleven heads and one thousand hands." Homeland Security, eat your heart out.

March 11

Like cream curdling the morning coffee, the *Post* headline "City's 'poor' health – Low-$$ women hit hard," beneath which the latest official stats. Black women die from AIDS-related illnesses at seven times the rate of white women, and twice as often from pregnancy complications.

How is that as the brutal asymmetries of the city become evermore extreme, the less they can be reckoned with? Even the most manifest horrors seems somehow incapable of pushing our political will toward different outcomes.

Move the car and while you're waiting for the sweeper to pass down the block, half-listen to the BBC World Service. Did the reporter say that Shanghai has banned

bicycles? All ears now. They've inaugurated a new magnetic levitation train from the airport to the city. 235 mph top speed. Six minute ride.

China, moving like the wind. Still – is it possible? – a country with seven hundred million farming the land.

March 12

Up rises the Isthmus of Panama rises and then a great drying out of Africa. Trees thin out, opening spaces between too far to swing, so certain apes come down and ambulate, warily, to forage on the new savannah. Dangerous opportunity. Some won't stand for it. Others do.

• • •

She, he, it, them I and you-topia.

Ides of March – Afternoon

Cold, but spring's icumen in. Walk east along 21st Street toward Le G. Something high and bright catches your eye. Must be twenty-five feet up, a soccer ball wedged between the forked branches of a naked pear tree. Just like that.

No, not naked. On closer look, beginning buds.

• • •

A detail – how'd you miss it until now? St. Nicholas, the Greek Orthodox church in the foreground on the cover of Don Delillo's *Underground*, was crushed beneath WTC 2. Very small it was. Built in 1916. Did you dream or read about some yearly rite wherein a boy from the parish leaped into the Hudson to retrieve an object the priest had cast in? Too deep in your memory. Too daunting your clip files. Maybe it'll surface. Maybe you'll have a look for it. One day.

March 21

Sprinkled with fascinating jewels, today's paper. "Siem Reap Journal: Cruel Race to Loot the Splendor that Was Angkor" tells of the arrest and conviction, in the 1920s, of André Malraux for stealing sculptures from the Banteay Srei temple near Angkor. Sentenced to 3 years, but never serves time. A few years later, back in Le Hexagon, Malraux is appointed Minister of Culture and head of the urban conservation program.

On a different page, another site, more recently sacrilized – this one a creature of the west, and closer to home. "The most important thing," says Helen Curry, Cass Gilbert's granddaughter, "is that 90 West Street is still standing." And that is because the architect (Gilbert) "designed it to endure."

In this statement is she, perhaps unconsciously inferring that the trade center was designed not to? In actuality, WTC 2 collapsed so nearly straight down that Gilbert's neo-Gothic tower, standing a little way off across Cedar Street got raked by debris, whereas the church, a hundred feet closer, got buried.

Every gargoyle of 90 West has since been restored – all its fantastical detailing. No more an office building though. It's a congregation of condos now.

• • •

Some weird pleasure taken in the clarity of this moment. Wolfowitz guards the IMF henhouse, González declares "no need for a special prosecutor" to investigate torture – it just goes on and on. Never in your lifetime has the cat shredded the bag so thoroughly. And what an animal! Not slouching, but racing full tilt toward Bethlehem. See what a little catnip can do?

• • •

Oh, don't go in that lion's cage, dear mother, dear, tonight,
Them lions is ferocious and may bite!
When they get them angry fits,
They may tear you into bits,
So don't go in that lion's cage tonight.

• • •

When a verb ends in "n," why not eliminate the "in" in written gerund forms and just append a "g"? That way training could tighten up to traing, frightening to frighteng, lightning to lightng, et cetera. Just now, outside the café, cats n' dogs is what it's raing.

• • •

A subway poster exhorts: LIVE YOUR MYTH IN GREECE. On first glance you read: WATCH YOUR MOUTH IN GREECE.

A tall, respectable-looking guy around your age checks out a movie ad a few yards down the platform. He whips out a pen and writes some fast words above John Travolta's head. The train pulls in and as it the doors open he bolts inside. You push your luck long enough to scoot over and see what he's written. *SCIENTOLOGIST ASSHOLE!* Can't help but laugh. You hop aboard just ahead of the closing doors. Try to make eye contact, but graffiti man is stone-faced – retreated to his own world.

• • •

If there is one great collective soul of humankind, does it get stretched thin, compromised even, when so many demand their share of it? Is there any way to prevent its shredding? Or does the fabric naturally grow to accommodate us all?

• • •

Cafés con piernas (legs!) in Santiago, Chile, where patrons drink cappuccino served by women wearing thongs.

• • •

The High Shrill Song, sung in honor of Apollo.

• • •

Zekes and Dadas, the territorial gangs of Kingston. Sometimes they lose their heads, literally. So says Melinda.

March 31

Death of Theresa Schiavo. Like Molly Malone, "she died of a fever, and no one could save her." Beyond the issues of compromised mortality, her beauty drew forth many paeans.

• • •

Seeded throughout Stoppard's *Coast of Utopia*, little nuggets from which you draw hope. As in Bakunin's counter to Hertzen's despair:

"Reaction is only the optical effect of the river running backwards on the tide, while the river runs always to the sea, which is boundless and indivisible."

• • •

April 1

As I walk along the Bois Boolong with an independent air,
You can hear them sigh and wish to die,
You can see them wink the other eye
At the man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo.

• • •

The woman sits on the bench outside Le G. eating a croissant. She pulls off a piece, bites it in half, then feeds the rest to one of her dogs, a big guy, nearly Great

Dane-sized. The next chunk is smaller and half of it goes to dog number two, a tiny, foxy-eared fellow. This system she repeats until the croissant is consumed, whereupon she reaches into the paper bag in her lap, brings forth another croissant and begins the process again. A man passes, walking a terrier which strains to approach the banquet. Without skipping a beat, the woman adds a beat to the sequence and the newcomer stands up on his hind legs to receive a morsel before he is pulled unceremoniously away. The woman's two dogs seem not to have noticed either the terrier's arrival or departure – their focus never strays from the magic show of her hands. Back to A, B, A, B. Your attention's pulled inside the café and when you turn back, the woman and her dogs are gone. So you'll never know how, or if, she distributed the crumbs.

• • •

In a letter from Istanbul, Bronwyn refers to *Mam Naturaliza* – Mother Nature in Turkish – and how weird she's acting. Just the facts, Mam.

April 2

Runs deep and old – this recurring sense that everything and everyone you care about id provisional – that any good you find yourself in the presence of may instantly evaporate or be torn away. This seems the fundamental mode on which you operate. Is it any accident that a fellow with this substratum would be preoccupied by daydreams of Cockaigne? Live in New York while building castles in Spain?

• • •

PIG. Pope is gone.

April 7

Last week a sinkhole opened up at the intersection of Minetta Street and Minetta Lane. Your old stomping grounds, but better not put your feet down too hard. As of today the abyss has engulfed the several police barricades set up around it. And the

hole has widened well beyond the dayglo orange outline someone sprayed on the pavement to designate its perimeter**.**

All porosity down there. Minetta being a stream and spirit wending its way beneath the latest pancake slapped on top.

April 8

Day of the hybrid eclipse.

• • •

Whoever wishes to take over the world
will not succeed.
The world is a sacred vessel
and nothing should be done to it.
Whoever tries to tamper with it
will mar it.
Whoever tries to grab it
will lose it.

So observed Laozi.

• • •

The wine was wrong so we sent back the year.

• • •

Once upon a time, the King of Spain decreed that henceforth, to account for the beneficial effect of sea breezes, cities and towns would be built on a grid set 26° off from the north-south axis. Here and there in the once-new world, the King's plan survives. You remember wondering, once long ago when your plane flew over Los Angeles, why

you saw two distinct street patterns below, adjacent but divided by main roads, one cardinal, the other veering off. Heteroclite.

• • •

The perfection of things depends on each and every one of us becoming a perfect world, so that by all souls being in me and I in all others, and I having the being of all and they – each and every one of them – mine, the entire machinery of the Universe should be linked and embraced…

So said Fray Luis de Léon in *De los nombres de Cristo,* written during his four years in prison. There is a story that upon his return to the University of Salamanca, Fray Luis began his first lecture with: "As we were saying yesterday…"

• • •

Era y non era, jeers and jeers ago, when you were researching the Tower Twins, a friend introduced you to Chiasmus, a creature you had not met before, at least not formally. At the time you had been speculating that these great duple buildings were parallel in ideal only and wrote that: *Somewhere, then, at a great height or depth, our parallel structures must meet to form a cross*.

So when you found that Chiasmus was derived from the Greek *chiasma,* an arrangement of two lines crossed like the letter X, and that Chiasmus himself was said to inhabit the transverse space of crossed lines, you wrote him into the story.

Ultimately Chiasmus didn't make the cut from thesis to book manuscript. You plowed him under because *Divided…* needed to speak plainly. But now, a decade later, you copy and paste these lines into another text born of a different intent, and at a moment where there's nothing to lose:

Chiasmus: Legendary trickster and double-crosser, whose etymological heart, some speculate, may be a chasm. *He is known for spouting rhetorical X-shaped truisms and false equivalencies such as: Truth is Beauty, Beauty Truth, Knowledge is Power, Time is Money, Health is Wealth, or Might is Right. When, in the face of such bold and compelling statements, we grasp at the glimmer of transcendence they promise, we momentarily ascend to look down at the world from insupportable heights. But the price Chiasmus exacts for this sublime moment of*

elevation is the renunciation of our vigilance, the suspension of our wills. In an instant, we realize we have been dazzled by a blinding falsehood, hoodwinked – taken for a ride.

Why the above? Because today, in a book on Unamuno, you read of the belief that by wedding opposites into a single image, as Chiasmus does, one can partially repair the split opened up by the Fall.

Wooeeee, Poppy. Don't look down.

• • •

The dignity of humanity, according to Pico della Mirandola, lies in our protean capacity for change.

• • •

Hypocrite = actor, comedian.

Afternoon. Chase. Nice to 'ave a banker wot shows a bit of tit.

Morabundance.

Rumsfeld, old Uncle Strabismus

• • •

One nation under gϕd, in a dirigible…

April 11

Discovery of a Utopia hither unknown to you: Fiddler's Green. According to Bénet, it's the Elysium of sailors, a land flowing with run and lime juice; the air filled with perpetual music, dancing and plenty of tobacco, something like Dixie Land or Land o' the Leal.

Dixie Land? Look that up too. Could derive from Mason-Dixon, or the Louisiana Dix, the ante-bellum ten spot. Possible too, but weird: Dixie Land as a southern black invention based on the name of an 18th Century slaver from good ol'

Manhattan. So kind was trader Dix purported to be, that his former chattel pined for Dixie's Land back up north.

• • •

My parents time-traveled back to the Warring States Period and all they brought me was this Laozi teeshirt.

• • •

MyOPEC = vision distorted by oil in the eye.

April 18

Waiting for Paul to arrive you hang out in the lounge of the Hilton Club. Thirty-seven floors up, the irresistible view is out the window, but on the wall behind you is hung a plasma TV approximately the size of Manet's *Bar at the Follies Bergère*. At present, CNN monopolizes the pixels. You'd glimpsed the newswoman's face on the way in, noted the little square at the lower right hand corner of the screen – a live cam of the Vatican chimney, just in case a white gust billows from its mouth.

The market's down, she's saying, lowest in whatever. But then the language catches you. "A tsunami of selling." Yes, that's it. Exactly.

• • •

On the train downtown a woman sits down next to you. She looks deeply, anciently Mayan. Converse sneakers, gold hoop earrings. Beautiful features, thickening in the waist. She rubs at her lottery tickets with a penny. Doesn't litter, just files them in her purse.

• • •

Take the A Train:

Aleatoric, pertaining to luck. From Latin *alea*, rolling dice.

Akrasia, ancient Greek word for weakness of will.

Antanaclasis, a pun of repetition, as in: Your argument is sound… all sound. Or, as attributed to Ben Franklin: "In thy youth learn some craft that in thy age thou mayest get a living without craft."

Antimetabole, Greek for opposite, change, variety. In usage, words reversed in successive clauses. "I know what I like and I like what I know." Calling brother Chiasmus.

Aporia, wonder and amazement before the puzzles and paradoxes of it all.

Attelage, hitching up, attaching as to a yoke, coupling. French.

• • •

Thump thump!

What's there?

Enthymeme, an argument in which one or more of the prepositions is suppressed or taken for granted, e.g.: "We cannot trust this man for he has perjured himself in the past." Or as Tom DiMattis your old EMS instructor used to say, "Never assume – it makes an ass of u and an ass of me.

• • •

My mother was a lady,
And yours you will allow,
And you may have a sister,
Who needs protection now.
I've come to this great city,
To find a brother dear
And you wouldn't dare insult me, sir,
If Jack were only here.

April 22 – Metropolitan Museum of Art

Filippo Lippi's *Annunciation*. His colors!

Here's a quote from Luke (1:35): *And the Holy Ghost shall come upon thee and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee*. Which the Florentine Dominican, St. Antonio, interpreted as: *The body of humanity will assume in Mary the incorporeal light of God*.

• • •

Who sees what how? Theophany. What touches whom through the gauziest veil?

• • •

Metonym. These lands belong to the Crown. He spent the evening reading the Bard. She lives for the stage.

Uroboros. The snake consuming its own tail.

Synecdoche. Ten sail for ten ships. Cutthroat for murderer. Boards for stage.

• • •

Let gold be gold.

• • •

Yet, said Meister Eckhart, all corn suggests wheat, all metal suggests gold, all birth suggests human beings.

• • •

While you slept, an epoch howled by. Lhude sing Van Winkle.

April 27

West on the 79th Street crosstown, a man sits. Salt-and-pepper hair, stethoscope earpieces dangling out a hip pocket of his suit jacket, head inclined toward his cellphone: "I'm headed home. I'll walk Oliver."

Oliver's got to be a dog, doesn't he? Doesn't he?!

• • •

Every day wondering: has the great turning come yet? And then: there is no great turning, just little shifts. Bit by bit. Bit by bit, the opening out of that place, part home, part *plein aire*, where the baffled find a bit of clarity and the too certain embrace their atom of doubt.

• • •

Sign in the window of the reopened Le G., so peculiarly hand lettered it takes you a moment to dope out that "Under some management" must mean "Under *same* management."

April 29 – Princeton Museum

"In the doctrine of Marxism, there are one thousand principles and ten thousand guidelines, but in the final analysis, it comes down to just one saying: 'In Revolution there is Justice!'" Slogan on a poster from the Cultural Revolution.

• • •

Hero Peleus falls in love with Thetis, a sea nymph. He seizes her on the beach and keeps his grasp as she transforms into water, fire and a succession of fierce beasts. It's all there on a red clay vase.

• • •

Owed on a Grecian urn. Three more payments and it's yours.

OED on a Grecian urn – how small can you write, Charlie?

• • •

Rubbing from a stone, probably 2nd Century, Easter Han Dynasty. Great action of horsemen and archers on the bottom two thirds while above the fray, literally, Confucius meets Laozi.

May 3

The big whitish streetsweeper JOHNSTON, its name stenciled just beneath the windshield rips down 9th Avenue, wire brooms whirling, water jets spritzing the gutter. Just ahead a Buick, illegally parked at a meter – no, on closer look the Buick has a special handicapped sticker on the windshield. Tomás, one of the Le G. kitchen staff stands outside the café spraying the sidewalk with a hose. The waters meet. Whomever is piloting JOHNSTON this a.m. is in a rare hurry. He, you can see that much – the sun silhouetting him in the cab – hulks over the steering wheel like a long-haul trucker, turns the sweeper sharply, nearly brushes the Buick's bumper, cuts the corner of 21st, heads west. And that's it, the big, noisy machine, like an illusory thing, vanishes.

Today, still thinking of Confucius and Laozi, the sound of its brushes echo *Shu*.

• • •

Cellphone personalities: the furtive, the hurried, the harried, the haunted-hunted, the brash.

• • •

Now we live beyond all possible ages of reason. Or remorse.

May 6

Friday afternoon on the E train platform at Lex. the garbage cans have overflowed like cornucopia. An Asian man bows a stringed instrument held vertically, an aire that begins with a phrase that reminds you of "I saw Mommy kissing Santa Claus," and finishes a bit like "Sounds of Silence." What transpired in between gets lost in the roar of the trains entering on both the downtown and Queens-bound tracks.

You hear a few opening notes of the next song before they're cut off by the *bing bong* of the chime followed hard upon by the closing doors and the rumbling of steel on steel mixed with the howl of tunnel air, outraged over having to move out of the way.

That tune sounded a bit like "Red River Valley." Oh well, it's gone. Across from you sits a morbidly obese man, fast asleep, head down, chin bouncing gently off his chest. Apart from his Timberlands, he's dressed entirely in the green, white and black colors of the Boston Celtics. At 42nd Street, he lifts his head, eyes slitted, to reveal a fastidiously trimmed beard and prognathous jaw. But only for an instant before he falls to nodding again.

Up the stairs at 25th Street to find the St. Columba street fair in full cry. Roast corn on a stick for two bucks. Plenty of butter and salt. Gwen loves this stuff. You're exchanging dollars for kernels when a scuffle breaks out in the crowd and bursts into view: several young fellows hammering on a guy. This is in earnest – something about payback and punishment. Over fast. The thugs blend back into the crowd, mission accomplished. The boy with the flattened nose, surrounded by his helpless mates reels away, pie-eyed with shock. The corn man has not yet received your money, but is already on his way round the counter to offer a wad of napkins to stanch the blood. "My man," he says, "my man." He has to nudge the kid, who finally reads his gesture and accepts the benison. "Put your head back," says one of the girls.

• • •

The dragon sings in celebration. East. Yin.

The tiger roars auspiciously. West. Yan.

While downtown, toward greater ground zero the (S)Lower Manhattan Development Corp(se) slouches on. Forever laying cornerstones, then moving them somewhere and ceremonially dedicating them anew.

On the walls of imaginary buildings, signs that say: NO DANCING.

And yet you step – by step – through it all with only the talking cure for company and a glass of red or beer to smooth the way.

May 12

On Seventh Avenue off 28th Street, a street vendor sells "Port Authority" polo shirts. Made in Vietnam.

May 13

From the café window you watch two huge, gorgeous white horses, Princess and Hero – though you only learn their names on the news later – as they draw a stage coach down Ninth Avenue. Ah, there's the signage on the coach's flank – it's a publicity stunt for a country music diva's new perfume.

Like so many happenings, the apparition vanishes into the city, so you don't see what happens only a few blocks south, when a cab nicks the coach and panics the horses. The both of them bolt, galloping east across 14th Street, past Starbucks, past Gristedes, past Papaya King. Hero is apprehended by cops conducting a counter-terrorism drill who tie him to a lamp post and create a corral of sorts with yellow Crime Scene" tape.

Princess flies on, hangs a ralph on Fifth then another onto 13th Street. Hemmed in by cars she finally halts. "I leaned over the barrier, grabbed the reins and restrained the horse," says Bob Di Giorgio, a cool-headed crane operator from a nearby construction sight. The *Times* also quotes Carla Morreale, who had emerged from the subway en route to work. "You don't expect horses to be charging toward you on the sidewalks of Manhattan."

Return with me now, Carla, to those thrilling days of yesteryear. "A fiery horse with the speed of light, a cloud of dust, and a hearty Hi-Yo, Silver!"

Not gone for good, but spiraling round once more.

• • •

A sewer is not someone who sews.

• • •

Lynndie England, shmingland. It was Bush holding that leash. And Lynndie England.

• • •

Aegina, daughter of the river god Asopus. Kidnapped by Zeus, she is taken to an island which he then names after her. Ox-eyed Hera sent a plague to destroy the inhabitants, but Zeus responded by turning the island's ants into a fierce, hardy race of people, the Myrmidons.

Do people still turn into animals, and vice versa. How many theriomorphs out there?

• • •

How is it that when Frank Sinatra sang "High Hopes" back in the early '60s no one realized that Old Blue Eyes was exhorting people to terrorism? Wasn't the lyric: "Whoops, there goes a million kilowatt dam"?

• • •

What's needed is a whopping great sneeze through the tissue of lies.

May 21

Calling the dream state the Unconscious seems ever more a misnomer. As well as an attempt to negate a parallel consciousness. Or relegate it a notch down in value. Are these modes of awareness really polar, or do they weave together far more than it's comfortable to recognize?

• • •

You can find affirmation under any dark rock.

May 23

Rumbling down the street, a huge garbage truck on whose ribbed side is painted the words FIBRECO DOCUMENT DESTRUCTION SERVICES.

May 26

Pushing 10 p.m. and the only vehicle on the street is a cab parked on the west side of Eighth between 24th and 25th. As you approach, the driver's places a large sheet of corrugated cardboard, an unfolded carton, on top of the subway grating on the sidewalk and proceeds to kneel on it, facing approximately east. By his reckoning Mecca lies thataway, between the Empire State Building and New York Life. The man has removed his shoes. He is very thin.

May 29

Riding down with you in the elevator, James and José. The latter is here on a Sunday in his civvies instead of his maintenance uniform because he's taking care of someone's cat while they're on vacation. The former possesses a phenomenal memory for birthdays, and a capacity to tell the day of the week for any given date back into the infinite past.

Not wanting to be overheard, James leans over discretely. "Many happy returns," he half-whispers, "a day in advance." Thanks, you say, and shake his hand. "Double nickels," he adds, conspiratorially – gives you a wink.

May 30

Another milestone round your neck.

June 4

Banging away at words in the early afternoon. Deep into it. At first you don't process what is going on at all, hear an unaccustomed noise, a loud *peep!* through your open bedroom window. Look up to the ledge above the 21st floor balcony and there's a

bird tugging at something with its beak. Is it trying to pull loose some construction material for a nest? One feather, then several more spin out and gyrate in place amidst the tricky aircurrents of the building's corner. Then you hear a repeat of the sound that alerted you, but which didn't signify the first time. Out come your binoculars from their case on the shelf. It's a hawk, a young one, tearing at another bird, it has to be a pigeon. Very clear now the lines of its Horus body, and, as the beak plucks, the silhouette of the dead pigeon's wing, flapping free.

• • •

Brave New York. Brave New York. An elegy on every page! And twice on Sunday.

O. Henry wrote for the four million, you write for twice that many. But why stop there?

June 5

You know you're getting older, but the fact is that a girl – young woman really – passed by the café in a summer dress with nary a tattoo or piercing (visible), and it filled you with optimism.

See, you are only mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly…

• • •

Cleave ever, says Tennyson, *to the sunnier side of doubt,*
Cling to faith beyond the forms of faith.

Take the h off faith and you get a homophone for fate.

• • •

Hylozoism. Literally wood, matter, material, plus alive, living. The early Greek doctrine that all matter is animated.

June 16

To midtown and the Italian tourist board in Rockefeller Center with the intent of loading up on brochures. But to get past the lobby trolls is no small thing. A special card must be issued by the security desk on which is printed a schematic drawing of the turnstiles and instructions for use:

PLACE BAR CODE 2" ABOVE
RUBY RED GLASS LOCATED
JUST TO THE RIGHT OF GATES

• • •

A helicopter, a Sick-orsky, falls out of the sky and into the Hudson River – its cargo, a brood of bankers. To the rescue, a couple of fishermen and a delivery man from Fresh Direct, who, after making sure all are accounted for, changes his sopping wet uniform for a dry one and drives off to make sure his customers get their food on time.

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The grass is seriously overgrown, yet the scent of new-mown wafts by. You breathe deeper and there it is again. The grass is seriously overgrown. Go figure.

• • •

iPodistan, a very musical country.

June 20

Larry King listened, possibly even took it in. Nodded.

Quoth the Vice President: "The level of activity that we see today from a military standpoint, I think, will clearly decline. I think they're in the last throes, if you will, of the insurgency."

Them throes them throes.

• • •

Docetism, from Greek "to seem." As in the early Christian heresy, carried on in various permutations, that Christ only appeared to have a human body and suffer, and die on the cross.

June 23

Tying up loose ends toward the big trip. Hence phone conversation with Alane, who supplies Gwen with phrases to use should she receive unwelcome attention from Italian boys.

Vergona!

Va-te-ne!

Vai via!

And one, deeply contemptuous, which truthfully, only a native could employ, *Va a Napoli!* Which means, in essence, "go to hell."

July 6

For over an hour, you drink in Raphael's *Deposition*, newly restored. It's taken took two score-odd years, but finally, Raphael has clicked. He'd always inhabited, on your personal totem pole, the notch below da Vinci. No longer. It's all about the relationships, and at the same time, revealing the mode in which every figure, mortal or divine, experiences a reality integral to their being. And this astonishing dynamic of awarenesses, in which the viewer becomes one more witness, is reinforced by the language of each garment's folds, its saturated color, its manifest nature.

July 7

Bombings in London. Underground stations and at least one bus. And you're here, the three of you at Villa Giulia, on line with a trayful of drinks at the caffè. Katie and Gwen head off to find a table while you pay and the middle-aged fellow behind the cash register ensnares you in a lengthy, semi-comprehensible conversation about the

massacre. He knows, just knows, that something like this will happen in Rome and seems to be oddly enjoying the anticipation. Doesn't want to be left out.

You also get the sense he'd hoped to surprise you with bad news, an American being as close to Englishman as he might come today. But you'd already glimpsed the images on the hotel room TV before walking up the staircase round the elevator to the gorgeous breakfast terrace and its panoramic view of the city eternal.

Yesterday, you discovered that if you catch the eye of the barista, and make a gesture signifying "piccolo" with your fingers, he will make you a real espresso. Why then do almost all the other guests cue up for the half-hearted stuff that splooshes from the spigot of the automatic coffee machine?

July 8

Ah, here, exactly, is the square where they burned Giordano Bruno. And this other place is a semi-excavated Roman ruin populated by a thousand and one cats. With notable exceptional moments, this seems a charmless, fundamentally inhumane city. Gwen marvels at the beautiful boys, wonders how they turn into such feral men. Katie flat out hates it, yet she pulls off remarkable drawings: the Coliseum and Tempio Virile.

• • •

Late evening. At a caffè near the hotel, on the Via Vittorio Veneto, a stunningly handsome waiter prepares for and serves Gwen the most sumptuous glass of gelato in Christendom. It's so delicious that you order one to go, to bring to Katie at the hotel. Gwen keeping pace, you speedwalk through the darkened streets. Got to get there before it melts.

Earlier this afternoon and evening in Trastevere, a whole different world from the other side of the river. Suddenly a neighborhood that seems habitable. Like Brooklyn when one has been in Manhattan too long.

By chance, an English-language bookstore. The woman who owns it goes off on an errand and leaves the three of you to mind the shop. Katie notices it on your behalf: a paperback copy of *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and*

Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages. Norman Cohn wrote it. Never heard of him nor his book, but sounds right up your alley, if you weren't in such a funk. After a nearly heroic effort, she convinces you to buy it.

July 10

Palazzo Spada. You've been telling Gwen about this for some time – never seen it yourself, but this is the moment. Along with a handful of visitors, you gaze down the length of a beautifully-proportioned Baroque colonnade. At the far end, its converging lines frame a heroic bronze statue of a warrior. The museum guide, a young woman wearing a semi-slinky black dress, stands at the colonnade's entrance, next to a column that towers over her – twice her height and more. She tells you that the cardinal who owned the land wanted his property to appear larger than it was. So in 1653, he hired Borromini to design this Perspective. Her brief disquisition done, the guide turns on her heel and, as though working a runway, sashays down the length of the colonnade. When she reaches the end, she turns to face you again and stretches up an arm – which touches the top of the capital. The bronze warrior just behind her reveals himself to be the height of a lawn jockey. You can't resist whispering to Gwen who's heard it a thousand times before: "See, art is all about illusion."

Wondrous to see it demonstrated so, the collusion between mathematics and the eye.

July 13

In Orvieto, you pull a Persephone. Leave Katie and Gwen at the surface and journey down a wide spiral stairway hewn through stone to the bottom of a very deep well. It's a double helix, designed so that water-carrying mules and their drivers could descend to the fresh water level and return via a discrete path. *Aqua-autonomia*. No siege-inflicted drought was gonna parch this town.

July 14

Assisi and Gwen's 13.

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Most freaky, outside the town, having seen the chapel where, legend tells it, the cross bent toward St. Francis, you turn on the car radio and KT Tunstall sings:

Well my heart knows me better than I know myself
So I'm gonna let it do all the talking.
I came across a place in the middle of nowhere
With a big black horse and a cherry tree.

Summer's big hit, *le tube de l'été*.

I said no, no, you're not the one for me…

July 15

Urbino, Ducal Palace: *La città ideale*, oil on panel, a narrow horizontal, four times as wide as it is high. Attributed to a painter in the school of Piero. Again, those wonderful converging perspective lines. The perfect city of no people.

July 17 – Toscana – Cane Magre

Eight rosebushes at Carlo's house, evenly spaced and defining the lawn's edge. You walk between two of then, the morning sun already above the treeline and your chest breaks the unseen strand a spider spun during the night.

Barefoot, you practice Ba Gua on the grass, interrupted by Beta, the dog, carrying off in her mouth one of the sandals you left by the chairs at the doorway. After her you go, passing between the two adjacent bushes. Thus breaks another strand which this time clings to your thighs. Retrieve your sandal, then walk *ding shi* circles round the tree. Hear the call to breakfast and rush to heed it, again not seeing a strand which breaks before you registered its pressure. How many times will you rupture what's before you? Three times is too many to claim innocence. Twice, maybe, but once should have been sufficient to alert you.

Sit down at table on the terrace and discover a spider crawling up your calf. Reflex says flick it off, but you resist. Is this the spider, or one of them, whose strands you'd broken? Probably, but hard to know for sure. Nonetheless, only one thing to do.

Coax it onto a finger and walk back to the line of rosebushes. Choose a bush and select a leaf. Leave the spider there. You can't repair what you damaged. Only this creature can. Try to remember next time you pass between the bushes to check for a flash of sunlight that signifies a filament of fiber there.

July 18 – Firenze

It's been out for a whole two days now: *Harry Potter and the Half-blood Prince*. You promised Gwen she'd have it as soon as you reached Florence and found an English-language bookstore. Having located one, you're heading there when you spot another one right across the street. Inside, all anticipation, and there it is – whew, last copy.

Immediately she begins to read, pausing only to mount the Duomo's Campanile and look out over the rooftops toward the Oltrarno. She's immersed in the text, pages turning faster than you thought possible, even as you commune with Pisano's bronze reliefs on the Baptistery doors. Briefly she registers the angel stretching out its hand to grasp the crown of Hope.

The campanile bells toll five. Time to ramble. Walking a few yards ahead of you, a Gypsy woman, very slender. She passes another woman, similarly dressed, crouched on the sidewalk in an attitude of supplication, and you notice the subtlest communication pass between them, nearly imperceptible, nothing as overt as a gesture. Two, perhaps three beats later, when you're nearly parallel with the crouching woman, she rises up and silently follows the other. Day shift's done.

July 19

Raining cats and dogs. Under the impossibly long arched colonnade leading to the Uffizi entrance, you wait in a line hundreds of people long. It's a mixed crowd, mostly European and Asian. Admittance to the museum proceeds at a glacial pace. Your right leg has been cramping and it hurts like bejeezus now. No room to do any real stretches or circle walking without getting soaked, so you content yourself with rotating your ankles. Twenty feet or so down toward the entrance, Gwen finds a bench, squeezes in between some folks and buries herself in *HP*. Two families behind you, a

lanky Spanish lad around Gwen's age wears a light blue teeshirt emblazoned TSUNAMI DEPARTMENT SINCE 1985 WAVE RIDERS.

Not far ahead, a pallid, pretty, obese white girl talks on a cell phone. Her upper arm, its mass exaggerated by flexion, looks sufficient to feed a hungry family for a week. She wears a polo shirt with BANGLADESH writ large across the back in "varsity" style letters. Katie holds your place while you stretch your legs, walk down the line. Another immense woman, whose floral skirt could provide curtains and valences for a country kitchen sports a black polo with the word CUTIE affixed in tiny silver sequins above her left breast.

Walk back to Katie, then further down the queue where a Japanese fellow, say mid-thirties, and of incredibly bland affect, sports a teeshirt that reads: I CHANGE YOUR REGULAR LIFE TO FREE AND DREAM LIFE, FULL OF ENERGY, EXCITING LIFE @ BALENO. Behind him, a tanned Europeanoid woman of perhaps twenty, wearing bracelet-sized silver hoop earrings, bobs rhythmically to the sounds from her iPod. Her poitrine, *formosa* to a degree just sort of extravagant, serves as a billboard for the message, pink sequinned on black: R-I-C-H. She passes an ear bud to a companion in a white stretch top, which proclaims, probably via some process of heat fusion, LUCKY – in California gold rush letters across the chest.

Who is it that conceives and promulgates this strange human-borne lexicon? Do those who labor at making these garments understand what they are stitching or screening or pressing onto virgin fabric? Will all these words set adrift in a great sea of more or less privileged global nomadism one day wash up on some as yet undiscovered shore of meaning? Will they form a bold new text that coheres in some hitherto unimaginable canon? What latent and subtle poetry inheres in these fragments that, in time may move us, even to tears?

You're nearing the entrance now, parallel with Gwen on her bench, eyes riveted to her verso page. The teeshirt of the woman slouching, half asleep, next to her reads: *Southern Canada Animal Reserve 1977*. Silhouette of an elk. Pre-faded brown on blue.

July 20

A strange sensation upon entering Piazza Santa Croce – like a déjà vu – except that, in fact, you have been in this place before. Most likely it was the peculiar,

disconcerting quality of your experience here back in '91 that suspended the Piazza's spatiality in your shadow-mind until just now, unresolved and half real.

Early that morning all those years ago, you sat, writing notes for a story, your back to this very lamp post. Some distraction, who knows what, caused you to look up and spot a young woman wearing a light-colored blouse tucked into a dark, fitted skirt making her way across the square with the aid of a pair of metal crutches, the kind that partly encircle the forearms. In the normal run of things, you'd have taken in her presence and returned to the page, but there was simply no not watching her. Afflicted with some neuromuscular disorder, her motion resembled that of a locomotive puppet – hips thrusting one way, breasts another, hair swinging, whipping really, as though she led a penitent procession or maenad dance.

All this transpired in the sun's bright gaze. For however long it took the young woman to traverse the square, her body's extreme torque and syncopation, all weird and strenuous grace, transfixed you with an erotic charge. No matter that arousal of spectators doubtless lay entirely outside the scope of her intention. Impossible in that moment not to scrutinize the hyperextension of her limbs, delight in the wild yet unvarying vocabulary of her movements, until at last she passed from sight behind a building's edge. Whereupon – goddam – the church bells pealed.

More than once your will has found its pins knocked out from under it by the sheer force of your senses. No pretending otherwise.

• • •

Pass by the pensione you stayed at fifteen years ago, a 14th Century palazzo on the Arno, where you and Katie imagined, for a day or so, that she might have conceived. You'd felt, both of you, a Gwen-like presence hovering close to you there. No, it was not to be. More grief than you'd have expected, having invested little consciously. You hadn't even officially been trying. Gwen waited until December of that year, when you'd returned to New York, to swoop down again and find herself a nest.

• • •

Oltrarno. Chiesa di Santo Spirito. Wherein for the first time you see Counter-Reformation images possessed of real rhetorical power: *Cristo e l'adultera*, painted by Alessandro Allori in 1577. Here too, his *i santi martiri*, a fantastic time-telescoping pastiche of nearly nude bodies, all male, captured at the point of extremis – each visage ecstatic despite, or perhaps because of its singular torment. Martyrdom as rhapsody, wrought as tenderly as its companion piece, the Savior pardoning the fallen woman.

Above, an incredible trompe l'oeil ceiling composed of octagonal coffers with rosettes sprouting from their centers. You could stare up at them all day and all night, and the light would still be coming from the east.

• • •

Climb up to San Minioto. You wander about the church in as close to a state of grace as a materialist gets, Stendahled out by the volumes and materials of this place. Emerging out into the terrace in late afternoon light, you find Gwen by the balustrade, near tears, the book, which she's carried like a breviary, closed in her hands.

"What is it?"

She shakes her head. Then it hits you. Of course, Dumbledore's dead.

"How did you know?" she asks.

"I didn't know. But even in the last book, Rowling was leading up to this – to the point where Harry has to face Voldemort on his own."

July 22

From walled Lucca, toward the Ligurian coast and along it you go: Pisa, Livorno, and Viareggio, where the three of you put your feet in the Mediterranean, Katie and Gwen for the first time. Then La Spezia, and finally by winding degrees into Cinque Terre.

Corniglia. From your window, terraced slopes covered in grapevines vee down to meet the breaking waves. Midway between land and horizon, set against a sea whose blue only this particular atmosphere could conjure, a triangle composed of three small craft, nearly identical at this distance, each rigged with a triangular sail. Despite

their wakes, the boats seem to stand motionless, as if to demonstrate a mystic ratio – some rare geometry inferred by their relation.

July 26

Genoa is a tough town. But more than that, a place where parallel universes occupy adjacent spaces even more radically than in New York. A middle-class-looking mom sits watching her kid run about the square while on the next bench down, a painfully thin woman in tattered clothes, a sad-looking dog lying at her feet, scratches the scabs on her leg.

Relentless waves of cars and scooters roar through the Galleria Garibaldi into the Piazza del Portello then plunge back under the hill into the Galleria Nino Bixio, while a few meters away the parallel street is strangely quiet – closed to all but foot traffic. On Via Maddelena, a storefront devoted to telephone cabins catering to Senegalese calling home stands next to an unabashedly posh artisinal pottery shop. A reeking dumpster sits close by the door of a swank home furnishing boutique. On a wall not far from the sleek new aquarium, a huge and crudely-scrawled graffito: *Che Viva Palestina! NY 9-11.*

The pigeons too are different from their Gotham cousins. Slightly smaller and even scruffier, they simply won't move out of a biped's way. One has to go around them. They peck for crumbs between paving stones, but not eagerly. Most of the time they stand still or walk about with unhurried gaits, self-possessed, heads cocked slightly, staring off into the middle distance, seemingly indifferent to the huge creatures passing so close by, entirely focused on their own interests and society.

It's catching this pigeon attitude. You neglected to take a card or napkin, and have already forgotten the name of the caffè where this morning you had the best – the hands-down best – espresso in Christendom.

July 27

A very thin young Japanese man with hair dyed a kind of dusky red has been stalking you, or you him. You first encountered Amemony, for that turns out to be, phonetically at any rate, his name, on the funicular up to the panorama Rhigi which overlooks the city. Like you, Amemony wandered about taking in the view, but must have caught a later car down or else walked, since you didn't see him on the return trip.

But that evening, there he was, already in your restaurant, alone again and in the midst of eating a sumptuous meal. Another meeting in a place quite off the beaten path. This time you nodded at one another and smiled.

Comes this morning and he chooses the same spot on the platform on the Stazione Principe to wait for the train to Nice. Now you shake hands and introduce yourselves. His English limited, your Japanese nil. From Nice, he travels to Marseille, then to Barcelona, while you head north along the eastern edge of France. But having crossed paths three times in two days, who knows when you'll meet again?

July 29

Morning café in a little bar in Dinge les Bains. Playing on the muted TV, a music video: close-ups of a five-o'clock-shadowed male singer intercut with shots of a lithesome blonde, more naked than not (Shakira?) writhing on her back, belly pulsing concave-convex so fast you almost blink in time to it, all her available skin smeared with a dark, viscous substance resembling crude oil.

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Midday stop in Sisteron. Once upon a time, the little garrison in this fortress on a mountain pass through which the Durance flows might have halted Napoleon's ragged little company on its northward march, post-Elba. But the commander, though he had the tactical upper hand, thought twice and allowed the Emperor to take his right of way.

Cloudburst. In the carpark, your vehicle, and those around it, splashed with mud, as though giants had been playing at mixing muck and flinging it around a giant sandbox. A local explains: This is Saharan sand, Africa sucked up in one place, and set down in another, carried on the back of powerful south wind.

July 30

Dream in which a figure who physically resembles a close friend has set you up to do a very profitable deal in Iran, involving a kind of bin Ladenish character who also resembles Pepé, a wiry, energetic guy you used to know on the Lower East Side. While

in Iran, you decide to back out of the deal, which turns out to be about arms, something you mention to Katie, who is there also. Your friend looks very stricken that you've told her. You make a brave, declaratory statement in front of the shadowy bin Laden-looking fellow who either leaves the scene or you do, whereupon your friend, who's the only person you can (more or less) trust in this alien world, suggests you give up all rights to the deal to avoid being arrested. The implication is that the bin Laden figure needs to be appeased or else he'll pull strings with the officials to make sure you're locked up and the key thrown away. Your buddy also suggests that the jails are pretty appalling. You decide to take his advice and concede, though a nagging in your guts says you might have bluffed it out. Still, there's Gwen to consider, Katie too, and for your part the prospect of incarceration doesn't appeal – though it's not the strongest factor in your dream reason.

It occurs to you that your friend could be an agent of the bL-ish guy and the wider forces he represents. Either way, he seems to have been somehow compromised by what you've done, and fearful too. On the other hand, he may be looking out for what he believes to be your best interests as well.

Back in New York, you invite your aunt Gladys downtown to take her to dinner. When she arrives, walking with some effort and the aid of a cane, you realize that you should have gone uptown to meet her, but she seems cool with the arrangement. You're puzzled as to where to eat. Somehow economics plays a part here. You consider several good burger places, and one over near NYU, close to Pane e cioccolato. In a previous, or succeeding part of the dream, you're with someone who is clearly Bea and you say to her, several times, in variations on the same statement: "You're a good mommy." She appears pleased, but doesn't seem to need the reassurance.

July 31

Odd place Grenoble. Just outside the door to your hotel, a middle-aged woman with brightly-dyed red hair walks two dogs, a black bull hybrid and a shaggy something or other. Her sandals sound a flac-flac on the pavement as the dogs pull her toward you. Black stretch pants, black tee, big white caps across the latter: SEE PARIS DIE.

Unlike most of the French towns and cities you've visited, this one's spread out, the sidewalks and boulevards too wide, as though it collapsed, supine and spread-eagled in awe before the serious mountains that, at a distance, surround it. No apparent center to Grenoble, nor true medieval quarter. Normally one welcomes pedestrian zones, but here there are so many of them it feels like an effort to shunt people into shopping streets so the town won't seem completely deserted.

True, at night the squares and cafés are filled, mostly with young folk. But turn a corner and the streets go quiet, all shuttered shops and no action. Nary a motor bike's buzz to fill the sonic void. Only occasionally, on a wider artery nearby, the low rumble of the tram, well-kept and of recent vintage, but ghostly as it passes, nearly empty.

Surely there must be a substantial population here. But where is it hiding? An awful lot of the city seems to be made up of largish 19th century residential buildings more or less five stories plus ateliers. These structures are colored in varying shades of gray, decorated with a variety of fussy ornamentation. Their sole poetry manifests in slender, stately brick chimneys that emerge from black slate rooves and finish off in multiple round flues. Windows are of good height and fronted by narrow balconies with delicate iron railings. Across the tops of the windows, affixed to the lintels, lacy bands of iron trim painted white or off-white look like stylized curtain valences worn on the outside.

Peculiar too how even in this spacious fountained square, dotted with floral plantings, no pigeons to be seen. Plenty of trees, yet rarely does one hear a bird. Ah, you were wrong. No alarm you could detect, but a flock of pigeons swoops across the square over the fountain. But they scarcely make a noise, all those beating wings. You decide here and now, that Grenoble is a silent movie, overdubbed with a subtle, nearly inaudible soundtrack.

August 1 – Vienne, France

Katie and Gwen sit at the far end of the square, drawing. You station yourself at an outside café table with good sightlines. From your various angles, you all focus on a remarkably well-preserved temple built by the Romans in the 1st century BC. During the Revolution, the Jacobins appropriated the building as their headquarters, worshipping as they did the great goddess Reason.

August 2 – Lyon

Traboules. These are building vestibules that turn into passageways which give onto courtyards, then turn back into passageways and again to vestibules. The traboules trace a path from one house to another, sometimes among several discreet buildings, from one street onto the next.

August 4

Two nights in Dijon. Exquisite center city, cosmopolitan and utterly unto itself, shades gracefully into the surrounding ville. Trams. Bicycles aplenty. Could you live here a year or two? Sure, why not?

In the Musée des Beaux Arts, at the center of a room devoted to 18th century paintings, marble busts and furniture, a contemporary sculpture by a Burgundian artist named Didier Marcel. It's a model, executed in painstaking detail and seemingly to exact scale, of a semi-demolished factory building. Roughly a meter long by half a meter deep, the piece rotates on a motorized table at a speed that seems calculated to impart a sense that all is fugitive. For an instant you focus on a detail, then it's gone. If you move to keep pace with the sculpture's turning, you end up chasing a fragment of it and lose the shape of the whole. Keep still and whatever caught your attention will cycle round again. But in the interim you've moved, or the lighting through the windows has changed – in any case something's subtly different. The trick is to let your eye alight on whatever particularity it chooses: the remnants of a sign clinging to a punched-through wall, torn-out ventilation ducts, electrical conduits hanging down like the branches of a willow. Then let go.

• • •

As always, wherever you walk, you read the walls – surface textures, graffiti, posters and plaques – which is how you discover that Dijon is planning a grand festival, complete with fireworks for the day it was liberated: September 11, 1944.

August 8 – Paris, Le 57

Evening, and rue Pernety continues on past sunset bathed the glow that comes of being eight degrees north of New York. It's just too smoky inside, so the three of you sit at a sidewalk table, order entrecôte and frites. A man, fairly tall and of medium complexion approaches, walking an odd little gray dog. You nod to one another and as he passes your table to enter the café, he wishes you *Guten Appetite*. Ah, he thinks you're German. Too late, he's already inside, but into your head pops the sentence: *Danke schön, mais nous sommes de New York*. That's what you'll say when he comes out. But then you get caught up in your dinner and conversation, and it's only by chance that you turn and spot him, already halfway down the block. You call out *Bonne soirée!* and he turns, walks back toward your table with the strange wee dog trotting beside him.

For ten minutes or so, you banter in bits and pieces of several languages, chiefly about the joys of travel and the fascinating variety of places one may visit on this planet. He says, or you think he says, that he's Mexican and has spent much time in Morocco. But you suspect the equation may be the other way around, or altogether fictitious. He speaks glowingly of Chicago, but you can't tell whether he's lived there, or just loves it as a concept. And he's full of good humor, rolling the *r*'s in *perro* like a proper Castilian. Then off he goes into the night, and truly you've learned nothing about him at all. Other than that he's got a strange energy to him, like some sort of savant.

You order dessert. It has just arrived when you feel a tap on your shoulder. It's the Mexican-Moroccan-Chicagoan, sans his dog this time, and bearing a white plastic bag which he thrusts it into your hands. "For the United States. You take this."

You hesitate and he reads your confusion – reaches down and pulls the bag open to reveal a beautifully crafted replica of a flintlock pistol – the sort one associates with duelists of the 18th century. "Monsieur –" you begin, but you get nothing more out before he reaches into the bag, and cocks the flint. Instinctively, though you know the gun is not real, you shift your leg away from the mouth of the barrel. He pulls the trigger. Click. "For you!" his tone insistent – and he's off down the block. You're literally holding the bag.

Look up and around. Ever since you sat down, these two North African fellows at the bar have been casting speculative glances at your little family, and now they peer intently, trying to figure out what has just gone down. Katie flashes them a smile.

Gwen looks to you for an explanation, but there's nothing you can say. You're laughing – uncontrollably – for the first time in years.

August 9

In the chapel of Saint Benoît-le-Bétourné you come across these words by Villon – aka François de Montcorbier, aka François Des Loges – allegedly written as he awaited hanging:

Frères humains qui après nous vivez
N'ayez les coeurs contre nous endurci…
Fellow humans who live after us
Don't harden your hearts against us…

• • •

At a temporary café set up along Paris Plage, a one-man band croons "You Talk Too Much" in lounge-French. With his right hand he plays a melody on a mini-keyboard while the left presses the buttons of an accordion. His left foot works the high hat and his right, the kick drum. Occasionally he'll leave off the keys and blow a phrase on trumpet or trombone. Strangely, it all works, clean and smooth. A young waiter bearing a tray passes by. His teeshirt reads: HOMEFUCKING IS KILLING PROSTITUTION! Applause for the finish of the tune. The one-man band swings into a "It's Now or Never" in sincere, yet absolutely tongue-in-cheek faux americaine.

• • •

You're standing in front of a building on Rue Valette reading a plaque about Le Tour de Calvin when a considerate fellow opens the door and beckons you inside the courtyard to have a look. There, way up high, is the garret, where Cauvin, the future theologian lived in his student days, overhanging the walls on curved-out timbers. Did Paris change him, confirm his rigidity? What did this city do to Uncle Ho? Here, in 1917, he ran an ad under one of his aliases: "You who wish to have a living

remembrance of your parents, have your photographs retouched at Nguyen Ai Quoc's, 9 Impasse Compoint, Paris 17th District."

August 10

Tea at the Institut du Monde Arabe, then bookstore. Flip open a volume in English on the first Cordoban Caliph wherein you read that 'Abd al-rahman III, who reigned in al-Andalus from 912 to 961 "kept a daily written record for forty-nine years. It revealed, after his death that he had had only fourteen days of happiness. He did not say which ones."

• • •

Encoded into your physical memory but inaccessible now, the sensations of a person with long hair.

• • •

Typeset in white letters across the mirrored glass above the men's toilet at Café les Philosophes: *Que doit-je faire?* (What must I do?) Something to contemplate with one's dick in one's hand. On the mirror over the sink: *Je doute*. (I doubt.) Go on, rap on the metal door, see if anyone's in the women's WC. Empty. Inside it says: *Que m'est-il permis d'espérer?* (What may I allow myself to hope?) Above the sink: *J'ai conscience*. (I have awareness.)

August 12

Katie's big five-oh. Picnic in the Versailles gardens finished with sorbet biologique from a stand set up outside of Marie Antoinette's arcadian fantasy village. Dinner at Le Petit Pointoise, commencing with foie gras with figs. Home to Levent's for birthday cake from Dalloyau served on the blue ceramic plate you bought her in Beaune. Coffee on the little stovetop espresso maker.

August 13

The three of you walk the old elevated line, now the Promenade Plantée, from la Bastille to the park at Reuilly. There, you find a spot in the grass, half sun, half shade, and Katie and Gwen commence to drawing. You, you're that human windmill, shadowed dark on the greensward, warming up to Ba Gua. Single palm changes. Ten of them, walking in a circle. How long have you been practicing these meditations? Just over a year now, barely a beginning. One step in front of the other. First one way round, then the other. But your eyes stay on the center, or at least that's what you try for.

No time or space to really practice all these travel weeks. There'll be hell to pay tomorrow for the way you're pushing it, despite how expansive the movements feel now. *Downward Pressing Palm. Embracing Moon Palm. White Ape Offers Fruit. Touching Heaven and Penetrating Earth.* How long it takes for an image to become concrete. And then it drifts away again.

Last round. *Millstone Pushing Palm*. Also called *Green Dragon*. Or *Looking Through the Tiger's Eye*.

August 16

Finally Amiens. One of those places you've walked through in your mind and now your legs fulfill the connection.

Best restaurant in Christendom: Le Bouchon. But what's wrong with this picture? Only two tables being served the whole evening, one of them yours.

Then back to the cathedral *en seul* for the sound and light show. Katie and Gwen stay at the hotel, too stuffed and knocked out to stagger the extra few blocks. The show's already going when you arrive so you pick your way among the people sitting in the square, trying not to block their views or step on 'em. Ah, here's a vacant patch of paving. Don't know how they do these feats of light, technology can't account for the seamless way the whole façade suffuses – as though it isn't made of stone but rather some substance hovering between stained glass and the clays of Gay Head turned the blue and red of unearthly Jerusalem. And then there are the lights from within pouring out the windows. Cathedral as magic lantern.

August 17 – Beauvais

They just don't got no luck. First, the brand new choir, pushed eight meters higher than Amiens collapses after only a year. That's 1284. Then, in 1573, the steeple – put up just six years before – keels over, on Ascension day no less. Just misses the throng departing after mass. Well, that's a break anyway.

• • •

It's not about Bush. Bush is a stalking horse, if that's the phrase. There are larger forces at work and though the U.S. may seem the dominant player, that is because it's the most visible and overt. China, moving like the wind, doesn't register on our awareness because we're so blind to anything but our own image.

Along with a rue or boulevard Victor Hugo, every town in France has a street named for Jean Moulin. What would the political condition of France be today if Moulin and thousands of others hadn't fought against the Nazis?

Dream the other night, before waking up in Amiens, of New York taken over by bona fide fascisti, clusters of them, replete with armbands and black carbines. Swastika flags on dark streetcorners lit by electric torchlight. Every little cadre seemed to operate as though it was controlled by an invisible central authority – remotely. Without appearing to receive orders they simply knew what to do. Stopped by four or five of them, who demanded your watch – the Swatch Katie bought for you in Switzerland in '86 – and you had to give it up. They would certainly have beaten you with their gun butts, at very least, had you resisted them.

Woke up just at the point where you were making a desperate attempt to talk them into giving it back – knowing that an appeal to its sentimental value would be useless, or worse, and there was only a very limited amount of discussion possible before the rain of blows to be delivered systematically, but without passion, would begin. Hopeless feeling, vying with an impulse to somehow try… they seemed so stupid and closed off, yet if you just managed to find the key…

So here it is, something's always held up before us, a kind of MacGuffin: right to vote, stop the draft, right to say this, do that, right to abortion, stop this war, that war, exchange a particularly vicious figurehead for a less voracious-looking bone grinder.

But what you want to know is how peace gets made. And what peace might feel like? How would it smell?

August 20

Le 57's closed today. You have coffee instead at L'Imprévu a pleasant square. From your table, you have to squint to read the blue enamel sign that tells you where you are: Place Flora Tristan. And below, in smaller letters still: 1803-1844, Femme de lettres, militante féministe. Grandmother, you learn later, of Paul Gaugin and diarist of post-independence Peru.

You sit, sip your café allongé, try to cultivate the art of being. But here as everywhere, part of you is always straining toward some forward place.

August 21

A treasure trove of herb garden in a courtyard off the rue des Mantaux Blancs – who knew? Among the plants, a good number with mytho-magical properties: *Helianthus tuberosus* – known as the Jerusalem artichoke; *Passiflora caerulea*, as in Christ's Passion; *Acanthus mollis*, a wound-healer; *Lonicera caprifolium* to counter nostalgia, and for scent and immunity *Lavandula x hybrida*. Some are, by turns and even minute degrees, poisonous and curative: *Buxus sempervirens*, *Vinca minor, Helleborus foetudus* – handle with care.

August 22

It's not the *I-Ching* before you, only today's *Libération*, just as impenetrable. At what point did you shift your focus away from the outside, passing the touch of your eye evermore over your interior topography? Is it less abrasive in there? A presence enters the space of Le 57 and sits down a couple of tables to your right. An unusual thing – up until now morning customers, apart from you, head for the bar, drink their drinks, pay an leave. You sense this is a woman, doesn't feel threatening, so you don't immediately track her. When you do raise your eyes, you see that she's beautiful, compellingly so, like a fab mod blonde of yesteryear. She's reading a book, head inclined downward. Full-lipped, serious, not grim. You're impatient to get back to not looking. To wait for her to turn a page or take a sip from the water glass with the

Lipton Iced Tea logo that stands next to her coffee cup seems intolerable. Your own coffee cup is imprinted with the LAVAZZA logo, as is the unused packet of sugar nestled in the saucer that, when you turn it over, reads *Express yourself* in minute blue letters. Emblazoned on your water glass, the logo of Virgin lemonade: "The Virgin Experience."

Fast crescendo of taps over the construction noise outside. Small heels, green eyes, wavy brown hair, black skirt, tanned belly, electric blue top – she's gone. Your water glass – drain it. Who's that by the bar? The same woman who sat reading now pays her tab. A chic leather bag hangs off her left shoulder. Black and white, trimmed with piping, it's pushed way out of plumb by a hip whose width seems altogether incommensurable with the face you saw in profile a few short breaths ago. Another universe.

She turns right out the door toward the Pernety Metro stop at the corner of Losserand where they're tearing up the street in preparation for laying down new curbstones and surface. Occasionally, you glimpse a backhoe that almost pirouettes in its labors of scoop and dump, a brash young fellow in the cab, fast and precise with the controls.

The bar's gone quiet for a moment as the smashing sounds continue round the corner. This morning's barista, an Asian woman, maybe mid-twenties, concentrates on the newspaper spread on the counter. For a moment, she seems genuinely troubled by something she's read, but then you see the pen in her hand and her eyes brighten as she fills in the letters on the crossword puzzle. *Don't let me lose you* comes the lyric out of the speaker behind and above. A soul tenor pleading: *Turn it around*.

• • •

At the Hôtel de Ville, an exhibition on the Jews of Paris and their fate under occupation in which you discover that "pletzl," meaning "the little place," was the Yiddish nickname for the Marais.

Out of a display case, a document, typed and dated 26 October, 1943, stares up at you. That it's got something to do with the demolition of a house is as far as your

limited French can go *sans dictionaire*. But it's the letterhead itself, imprinted in the upper left hand corner that you can't break away from:

COMMISSARIAT GENERAL AUX
QUESTIONS JUIVES
- - - - - -
DIRECTION GENERAL DE
L'ARYANISATION ECONOMIQUE
- - - - - -
SECTION V.B.

How many blank sheets of paper did Section V.B. have printed, just like this one, in anticipation of having something to fill in below? Did the printer pause beyond taking a sample closer to the window to check for the correct density and color of the ink?

Someone, in an office, perhaps inside this building, put two or three of these sheets together, interspersed with carbon paper, tapped them into neatness on a desk or blotter and rolled them onto the platen of a typewriter. Someone did this. What kind of weather did Paris have on October 26 that year?

• • •

You shoulda stood in bed. This morning, in an attempt to re-acculturate yourself in advance, you cracked the online *Times*, and learned that Bloomie's just handed Lockheed-Martin a $212 million contract to engineer surveillance systems for the NYC subways.

This evening, as you walk down by Les Halles, the great bell of St-Eustache starts a-booming. A line of Thomas Friedman's you read a couple of days ago fires up on your front burner. "The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist." Once he seemed a sane man, with a finely tuned conscience. Now he's gone mad as the age itself.

August 23 – Early Morning

Awake and contemplate your imminent return to New York. Think about packing. Better not put the model gun into one of the suitcases. Even though it wouldn't be carry-on, you can just see some bright-eyed British Air security guard at Charles de Gaulle spotting the pistol's shape on their x-ray machines and blowing up your bag just to be on the safe side. Not to mention what would happen to you as the bag owner given the bombing massacre in London six weeks ago.

Can't take the thing with you, so what to do? Don't want to leave it in L.'s apartment. That doesn't make sense, only defers the problem. In the shower comes the inspiration – why not mail it to yourself? That's the ticket. On the offchance the post office scans the package and destroys it, you don't lose your books, clothes and souvenirs into the bargain.

At La Poste on rue Pernety you buy a pre-paid envelope and return ten minutes later with the packaged sealed, its contents securely bubble-wrapped. The clerk fills out the customs form, asks what's inside. Your pre-coffee mind balks at the French word for it. You cudgel your brains, then blurt out in English: "a toy."

"Ah," he says, "un jouet."

• • •

Over coffee at Le 57 you attempt with qualified success to decode an article in *Libération* on the future of Gaza after the Israeli pullout. In the midst of which you realize that you're tapping your foot to the rhythm of a familiar song. Out the speaker above your head, Ruben Blades singing "Pedro Navaja" – his sly homage to a Latino Mack the Knife. Behind the bar, the patron washes cups, one eye on the street, his shoulders making subtle figure eights in time to the beat. After "Pedro," another vintage Willie Colón, "Timbalero" – a cut you play off an old cassette back home when you need to blow the dust out of your brainpan. It's a Dionysian tour de force, built around a trombone riff that spins further and further out as the lyrics propel a *timbale* player – who is riding the N-train – all the way to the moon. Holy cow, this is weird, too much synchronicity for your little head: a Korean DJ spinning '70s New York Salsa

in a Montparnasse bar. But yeah, like the song says: *A ride to the moon on a choo-choo train…*

• • •

They're drowning in Romania, Bulgaria, Austria. Lowland Swiss are being swept away on the worst floods in their lengthy recorded history. Drought from Italy to Algeria, and vast fires devour large swaths of Portugal and Spain. One photo shows the town of La Coruña by night, sheathed in the hellacious glow of the approaching flames. In another picture, a man swats at the conflagration with a tree branch. Where are the international armies of relief? Funny, it's been temperate wherever you've traveled this summer, but sweltering in New York. And they say the Atlantic's hotting up more than usual, so the predictions are for a bumper crop of tropical storms back home.

• • •

It's down to plumbing. Guns and plumbing.

• • •

It's a wonderful landscape, the warp and weft of your associations.

• • •

Early evening. Katie's recovering from a stomach bug and Gwen's tucked up with her on the sofa at L.'s rereading *Harry Potter*. So off you ramble on your own and stop for a beer at Le Select. Last night in Paris this go-round. Emigrating by inches. But to where?

Lots of sidewalk traffic – a thousand gestures on ready display – designed for and reveling in the public air. Who can record them all? Every so often you see a face

you almost recognize – a total stranger whose features, for an instant, remind you of a friend's. Come on, you tell yourself, this is Paris – you hardly know anyone here.

It's been raining on and off, but now, pushing eight o'clock, a change in the atmosphere. Above and beyond the rooflines along the Boulevard Montparnasse, a contest between the white-pink clouds and the deepening blue. Paradox of light. Makes you shake your head. The sun's almost down, and suddenly, the sky's got brighter.

August 24

Flight home this afternoon. Gwen breaks her usual pattern of sleeping in and ventures out with you to the boulangerie. She consents to have her picture taken at the foot of the street you've often walked and on which, if you could, you'd live: rue des Thermopyles.

New York City

At some point, you're back at the café. Meyer is there too, your grandfather. Bea's over by the register, talking French with Samantha and Noëlle. Jack could come by if he wanted to – he'd fit right in – but you're not going to hold your breath.

Mark and Bruce sit side by side at Tables 10 and 11, working away at their parallel laptops. In a few minutes Katie will come. When Mark takes off for his class, she'll hang out with Bruce talking food and knitting. Little Isis, Grainne's daughter by Eran, runs nimbly among the tables, beacon eyes fully intent. Mario, between crêpes, steps out from behind the counter and scoops her into his arms. Eric B. pulls up outside on his brown-orange bike. Slings his chain around its frame and the parking meter, but he never actually locks it. You can see Eduardo down the street, approaching at a brisk walk. He looks excited, or is it anxious? Put a postcard between the pages and close the book. It's here.

August 31

Katrina, the too-perfect storm. Material special effects. Or, as the occultists used to call automata: real artificial magic.

Prayer to self: *May grief make us wise*.

September 1

All quiet on the Washington Front.

Says Kathleen Blanco, Governor of Louisiana, on the arrival in New Orleans of National Guard Troops recently returned from Iraq: *They have M-16s and they're locked and loaded. These troops know how to shoot and kill, and they are more than willing to do so, and I expect they will.*

• • •

No one knows how far that Green can span.

And Fannie she Mae, or Mae not.

September 2

It took a while to sneak up on you, given that your focus in the immediate aftermath had been on sounding out your city's vital signs, and your own recuperation, but a year or so after the fact, you sought out all the visual evidence you could find and concluded that whatever hit the Pentagon on 9/11, it probably was not a 757. You realized then, in a kind of watershed, that the signals your body had started sending – in however tentative and fragmentary a fashion – the moment you saw the great gash in tower one and then second tower struck were by no means entirely false alarms. You'd responded to the awfulness of the moment, but something beyond it too. A great evil had been loosed in the land and this evil now manifests in unambiguously clear gestures of destruction. Could you then have imagined how, only four years later, that evil would exponentialize to the point where it could pass for a force of nature, or even, by sheer magnitude – in some folks' beliefs – a god if not God?

It took until the coming and going of the hurricane for you to cohere into an image the fallen portal of the tower twins, and the West dragging the rest of the world through it into the age of reverse miracles, an age in which the Corporate State, for want of a better term, had reduced its function to forcing people to their knees – and then to grinding noses down before the dark power it had always served and worshipped. As

Lake Pontchartrain swept through the Lower Nine-eleven, the mask of Apollo washed away. And behind it…?

• • •

On the front page of the *Times*, an image of a body, waterlogged past human scale, floating near an overpass in New Orleans. For all the liquid surrounding her, from this distance and angle, the drowned woman appears as though in free fall.

• • •

The members of the Cuban legislature rise for a minute of silence.

• • •

Up at the Met, in the Gillman Collection, a curious display. Gelatin silver prints from 1893-94, roughly three by four inches, selected from over four hundred cards made up to identify suspected anarchists. This is the work of a fellow named Alphonse Bertillon who devised a system of body measurements, physical descriptions and photographs for the Paris Prefecture of Police Bureau of Identification. In 1898, Bertillon's system was adopted by the International Conference of Rome for the Society of Defense Against Anarchists, attended by representatives from a score of countries.

Below, in the display case, twenty-seven faces. You spend a great deal of time trying to read these vanished souls: lawyer, dressmaker, auto mechanic, photographer…

• • •

Doubt attends your every keystroke, like a dutiful servant or an eager child. *And then? And then?*

• • •

Like a mutated Joe Hill, George W. Bush appears at your side to urge you on if you think, for a second of flagging:

"It's as if the entire Gulf Coast," he says, "were obliterated by the worst kind of weapon you can imagine." No, George, you say, it can't be. Yet he says the same thing to Associated Press.

• • •

Hands to work, hearts to God, feet to the fire.

• • •

Credo quia absurdum. I believe it because it is absurd. Spake Tertulian of Carthage, *kan ya makan*.

• • •

Blackwater mercenaries just returned from Mesopotamia on guard in front of the Royal St. Charles Hotel. A reporter asks one of them whether New Orleans is as "wild" as Iraq. "Nope," says the man with his M-16 held at the ready, "It's pretty Green Zone here."

• • •

Almost robotically you log onto iTunes, search and download *New Orleans*, the Gary U.S. Bonds version circa nineteen sixty-early-something. You're right, amidst the Dionysian overload of the saxophone, surging back beat, the call and response to Gary's edge-of-orgasmic distortion vocals, the half-remembered lines are in there:

…Come on take a stroll down to Basin Street
And listen to the music with the Dixieland beat.

The magnolia blossoms fills the air.
If you ain't been to heaven, then you ain't been there.
French moss hangin' from a big oak tree,
Down the Mississippi down in New Orleans.
Come on everybody take a trip with me
Down the Mississippi down to New Orleans.
The honey suckle's blooming on the honeysuckle vine
And love is blooming there all the time.
Every Southern Belle is a Mississippi Queen,
Down the Mississippi down in New Orleans.

Sure, it was a great pop tune back then. But who knew one day it would vibrate in your body like a kirtan? Mississippi turns Ganges. Sacred rivers, sacred names. Divided waters one.

September 3

Steeped to your gills in a New York hate of mind.

• • •

Baffled for years over the distinction between putti and cherubim, you look 'em up and discover that the former, also known as *amorini*, are winged infants who accompany Cupid on his missions, while the latter, according to Pseudo-Dionysus the Aeropagite, comprise the second-highest of nine angelic orders. Maimonides's Jewish angelarchy posits ten ranks, wherein the Cherubim occupy the tier second from the bottom. In the OT, they ain't so cute as their images in post-medieval Christian art would suggest. Genesis has them guarding the eastern gate to Eden where they block access to the Tree of Life with flaming swords held high.

September 5

Flummoxed by the Bushies. What are they really after strategically? Do they even know themselves? How is it possible to distinguish between their successes and reversals? Still, one thing's clear. The fascists lost the war, but won the peace.

• • •

Dans la langue Creole on dit: *Au prensip* – in principle. *Mais, au praktik* – in practice – *ce n'est pas le même chose.*

• • •

Will the next really big awful thing to hit us take place out on the Pacific shore? They've done New York, the old Dutch-English, Euro-immigrant city and first stage of New World trade and pluralism. And now, the Afro-Franco-Caribbean city, roots stuck deep in plantation swamp, Louisiana Purchase, westward expansion beyond the Mississippi – our great age of agriculture. New York and New Orleans represented, arguably the most subversive, polyglot cities, each with an utterly distinct culture, altogether idiosyncratic and unto themselves. What remains – assuming one wanted to symbolically erase American history by epochs – would be an urban center on the coast linked to the great Asian future.

Now is that a nutty idea or what? Yet Thomas M. says you have *buen olfacto* – a good nose.

• • •

Immense skywriting stretches in an arc across the Chelsea sky and out over the Hudson River towards Joisey: UNCLE JACK'S STEAKHOUSE. Out of what reality did that come?

September 6 – Le G. – Early Morning

Meet Samantha, latest addition to the Le G. waitstaff, who started working here while you were away visiting her country. This morning, with her hair down, she

nearly stops you in your tracks with an unanticipated jolt of everyday French beauty – the kind possessed by saleclerks there who would aim to be supermodels on these shores. On top of which she wears a navy blue sleeveless dress with yellow and white trim around the neck, armholes and waist which serves to transform her into a vision of the ultimate, idealized Air France stewardess of the '60s. These are the images your mind escapes to these days, in the face of so much horror.

• • •

Superdome, Astrodome, Thunderdome. Has anyone made the connection between NO and Mad Max?

• • •

Bertrand Russell to Anthony Dallardo, Jr., 20 May 1959:

Dear Sir,

Thank you for your letter of May 14. My reason for not writing about Whitehead's philosophy is that I radically disagree with it but have never thought it desirable to emphasize this fact.

Yours sincerely,…

• • •

Walking your way along 23rd Street, a woman wears a teeshirt that says: A RESTRAINING ORDER IS JUST ANOTHER WAY TO SAY "I LOVE YOU."

• • •

Katrina, a Frankensturm. Not the last surely. Nor have we seen the last of the drang.

September 11 – Late Afternoon

A boy, maybe nine or ten, lies on the sand at Jones Beach. Peculiar the way he's turned. You cannot see his face. No one but him lying there, across tracks the garbage truck made when it came through a little while ago, its mechanical arms lifting the wire trashcans and flipping the refuse over the cab and into its hopper.

Posed as he is, the kid looks weirdly like a hit-and-run, though reason says he's just being recalcitrant. Still, you stare a moment at his back to satisfy yourself he's breathing before your gaze travels on. Here comes a guy who looks to be his father. The fellow squeezes a stream of water from a Poland Spring bottle into the boy's face and up he comes, and protesting bitterly, cheek plastered with wet sand.

• • •

Tonight those stupid blue light beams travel up from Battery Park City into the clear sky. Will they do this every year until Kingdom bloody Come?

Odd thought: If Reagan hadn't broken PATCO in 1981, would things have gone differently on the morning of September 11, twenty years later?

• • •

Glance out your window again. A pretty near perfect half moon hangs there as though supported by the light beams.

• • •

Look again before you pull down the shade. Moon's moved away and now you see planes at a lower altitude coming in for their approach to Newark: one, two, then three, passing through the rays.

Only 9:30, but your eyes are dry and raw. And your body is telling you it's got to lie down.

September 12 – a.m.

Clear blue sky and black man-made cloud. Fuji blimp making everybody nervous.

• • •

p.m. What is that goddamn thing still doing up there, circling round, scaring good people shitless.

September 17

Steven Fleisher, a drunken air traffic controller plows his boat into – literally runs over – another pleasure craft near Robert Moses Causeway in the Great South Bay. He kills one twelve-year-old girl, Brianna Leineck, and injures her parents, sister and a friend, two of them critically.

• • •

Whassa matta George, Katrina got your tongue?

• • •

Bush à la Cagney in *White Heat*. What's holding up?

September 19

"The businessmen should come here, to Afghanistan, and build buildings in the plazas…." So said an Afghani-in-the-street interviewed by BBC the day after the election.

• • •

Chemtrails and contrails at sunset. All in all, today's was a seriously man-made sky. Eric B. calls from the Battery to make sure you see it. Lovecraft's *color out of space*. Erik L. calls from up north, on top of a mountain in the Gunks. He does these things,

rides his bike, or hikes – goes out to commune with nature. Sun's just gone down. He'll stay out till moonrise. What did he think of that sunset? *Bizarro, daddyo. Biz-ar-ro.*

All those strange crisscrosses and swatches of chroma that wouldn't quite blend. Too dark to see them now, but you have a sense they're still up there, lurking at the threshold.

September 20

Nearly freezing in here. The woman is large. So is her arm, reaching up to grab the horizontal rail that serves as a handhold for standees in this jampacked subway car. The short sleeve of her knit top slides down to reveal some what's tattooed on her warm brown skin. A design like flames, or sunflower petals. And beneath them in curlicued script *Eden is Burning*.

• • •

South to Alaska. Old Orleans. The spectacle of the all-consuming spectacle consuming itself.

• • •

The dispossessor must always live in terror of those he's dispossessed.

September 24

8:35 a.m. Heavy duty optical migraine turns your visual field into a vibrating crystal palace. Slight nausea, nothing more.

• • •

On the way home. "There's a muddy road ahead," calls out Donaldo of the missing left leg from his wheelchair in the dappled shade of 24th Street.

• • •

Gwen announces that Friday will be Hope Day at school. Everyone's expected to wear something white as a symbol of support for the victims of Katrina. Why white? Better not ask.

• • •

Standing by the Central Park reservoir leaning against the iron fence rungs at the perimeter, you palpably sense the seasons change. Sun, then cloud, then sun again – a wash of orange on the backs of your eyelids. Crunch of runners' soles rolling gravel on the path behind you. And the wind. A strong gust. Subsides, comes another. Plays with the idea of blowing you away. You keep your eyes closed, face toward the sun and in no time at all, the breeze returns, gently now, ruffles the treetops and pushes the water northwest, pretending it never entertained violent thoughts at all.

The sun is warning that it's soon going to pass behind the twin towers of the El Dorado. But you'll start walking west before it does.

• • •

Waiting for Gwen, you sit on the steps of a brownstone on 91st Street, just east of Amsterdam. Residential upstairs, some kind of business on the ground floor. Glance over at the sign next to the entrance. PREP FOR PREP. Hey, sure, from each according to his abilities. To each according to his needs. It's a beautiful day.

Across the street, perched on the gateposts of the playground, a matching pair of concrete owls. Owls? Yeah, sure, didn't you hear? Athena just bought a dozen condos between CPW and West End! She's not planning to live in the neighborhood. But still, things is looking up.

September 29

The Center of the Universe: that's what the billboard says, wrapping round the base of the office tower known as One Times Square. 'Scuse me – they're calling it 1X. Clever these publicators. We had a World Trade Center (too modest), then a Time

Warner "Center of Everything" (too abstruse), but Center of the Universe just nails it shut. And when such a claim is put forth by Newmark Real Estate, let doubters bite their tongues. Any lingering skeptics will genuflect when they read the tagline that follows: The Ball Drops Here.

You wish you were making this up.

• • •

The Great Wall-Mart of China.

• • •

"This Little Bit of the World Belongs to Us" – a song sung by Australian soldiers at Gallipoli where 115,000 soldiers died before the Allies evacuated.

October 7

Conversation with Tom halfway down 23rd Street toward Tenth Avenue. Raining in spits and farts but you can't put up an umbrella because it'll just rip to shreds. So you shelter beneath an awning, the drops driving sideways, west. As you turn to go, you spot a gingko leaf plastered up against the brass awning pole. Funny little brown dots all over its fan rays. Go on, put it between some folded paper. Take it home and when it's dry, stick the leaf between the pages of this book. Almost ended up in the Hudson, didn't you, l'il cousin?

October 12

Glories of Chelsea number MCMDXOXOX: Into the café walks a woman built, as they once said, like a Mack truck, shirt hem riding up over tanned, flesh-dimpled, stretchmarked belly. In white type on red, her tee-billboard reads: *Trust Me I'm a Mother*. First credible public statement you've read in a month o' Sundays.

• • •

Pleroma. Ancient Greek for "fullness." A Gnostic term adopted to signify the divine world, universal soul, developed and divided into a series of eons. Also the realm of pure light, abode of the invisible gods.

And standing together, even in this jumpin' café, the invisible and the visible.

• • •

Dream in which people have to take a Human Equivalency exam.

• • •

The mystic, says Gioia (paraphrasing Joseph Campbell?), *swims in the same water in which the schizophrenic drowns*.

• • •

The fellow who introduced the concept of the Rapture – the notion that certain true believers are whisked away to heaven before the Last Judgment – was a 19th century British evangelist named John Nelson Darby. Darby also preached that the Second Coming would be heralded by a return of the Israelites to the Promised Land, leading some of his theological descendants to interpret the 1967 capture of Jerusalem by the Israelis as a powerful augury of Christ's return.

But the Rapture's roots grow far deeper into the past. Some flagellant millenarians in the middle ages believed that the Old Testament figures Elijah and Enoch were "translated" to heaven without undergoing bodily death.

October 24

Something to look forward to: 12/21/12. In only six years plus a couple of months, the Fifth Sun Cycle of the Mayan Calendar commences. Also called the Great or Long Cycle, each epoch begins with the purported alignment of the earth, sun and center of the Milky Way, and lasts 5,125 years. Sure, why not?

In the meantime, all round the café, the by now unremarkable constellation of vans and trailers full of movie equipment. Another episode of "Law and Order: Special Victims." Who is that fellow on the corner? You've seen him mediated somewhere. Yes, a famous rapper. Ask one of the waitstaff, a young 'un named David. "Oh, that's Ice Tea." Right. "And that's his wife, Cocoa." What a font of knowledge! You hadn't really noticed Cocoa, Ice Tea's face is so compelling, but now you do. She is almost rivetingly white. Blonde hair hangs long down her back. Her black leather jacket's unbuttoned, and from the gap jut twin synthetic forms that show up mortal breasts as paltry things indeed.

Suddenly, an ultra sleek car parked on the south side of 21st Street, starts into behaving very oddly indeed. As though by an exercise of its own will, it opens and shut its doors, hood and trunk, retracts its convertible top, then commences cycling through a lightshow of headlamps flashers and signals, like a mechanical character demonstrating its prowess in a futuristic cartoon. Which is when you become aware of the remote control in Ice Tea's hand. Eventually, all its tricks exhausted, the car winds down and returns to quietude almost circumspectly, the way a caged bird tucks its head under its wing and puts itself to sleep. The crew members who've been watching this display begin to disperse and Ice Tea and Cocoa, hand in hand, walk north on foot, past the café and on up the block. An instant later a gofer comes running after them, headset askew: "Hey Ice – Ice!" Something forgotten.

Time to look away. The drama goes on without your witness.

• • •

Once upon a time in the 8th century, Rabia al-Basri rushed through the streets of Basra. She carried a blazing torch in one hand and a jug of water in the other. Why, my daughter, why?

With the water, I shall extinguish the fires of hell. With the torch, I shall set fire to paradise so that no one worships God from a fear of hell or greed for paradise!

• • •

Military nickname for white phosphorous, Willie Pete.

November 22

A small, tinny carnival comes to town. Ah, it's only the cell phone at the next table over.

• • •

Banlieues convulse across France in the thousandfold light of burning cars. Says Renzo Piano, "If the place is impossible, the community becomes impossible."

• • •

Says the Song Dynasty poet whose name you forgot:

As rain darkens the mountain,
One mistakes a mule for a horse.

• • •

Says the Sufi Wali Muhammad: *Know that God cannot be contemplated independently of a concrete being and that He is more perfectly seen in a human being than in any other and more perfectly in woman than in man.*

December 26

"Honestly, it doesn't feel like a holiday. But for the guys that are conscious, we try to say 'Merry Christmas' to them." So says Maj. Alex Lee, MD, stationed in the U.S. military hospital in Balad, 50 miles north of Baghdad.

• • •

You read of a Sufi pharmacist in Istanbul who kept an extensive library above his shop. He avowed a belief that only by going to "the core of the truth that we have in

common," rather than trusting in the divisive man-made institutions of religion, could there be any hope for the future.

• • •

According to Corbin's interpretation of the beliefs of Ibn 'Arabi, "it is not within the power of man to "explain the tragedy of the human adventure… to explain, in other words, why men in the mass prefer the anonymity of non being, why they reject the (Divine) Name which aspired to find in them a vessel, a compassionate organ.

• • •

The flag is flying 'cross the country,
Me and the band we play the bars,
And Glyn, she points out to the highway,
"The flags always fly highest
where the people buy their cars"…
—Lizzie West, "19 Miles to Baghdad"

• • •

Recrudesce, literally to become raw again.

January 1, 2006

Resolution: Columbus Circle henceforth to be called Colobus circle – a move that requires only the dropping of a consonant. As form follows meaning, the trees of Sensual Park will seed southwest, pushing their canopy past the No Time – Warn Her! Center, and in through its cracked portals to form, one day, an atrium jungle. Jump, me sons and daughters! Let the new world monkeys swing.

And that name, New York City, what's that? York? Hardly new any more. Not Old School, just old. G2G. And what instead? RFP the eight million, no the six plus billion, in serarch of monickers to signify us now. Then plebecite, yo, SVP.

January 10 – West 26th Street – Early Morning

Ba gua class. Tom fields a question about weight distribution, when and whether it should be equal in the legs. In response to which he launches into a short disquisition to the effect that an absolute 50/50 stance has no energy or life to it – this is called being "double weighed" – the least favorable stance in martial arts. He proceeds to demonstrate this most unfortunate posture, stands with his legs rigid and immobile, body pure dead weight.

And then, like a gust of cold air through the loft it hits you: WTC.

• • •

Tall ancient trees, broken banana leaves, sparse bamboo, bony rocks and dying grass – does anybody notice this kind of scenery? Does anybody notice?

– Chen Hongshou

• • •

Six is the new nine.

• • •

How many false dawns?

• • •

Tom B. was on a tear this a.m. So much so that you still remember several of his phrases more or less verbatim.

Fill their face with your hand.

Use the floor to hurt them.

The highest level is when you let them fall into the void where you were.

• • •

"Fellow-creature." Term used by London Ranters in addressing one another circa 1650.

• • •

Nine is the new three.

• • •

Winter and its discontents.

February 1

In the window of the petstore a banner beckons: 12-Piece Value Pak. Look closer at the brightly-colored package. Pig Ears.

• • •

In the coldness of the street, people pushing their lives around as though to a check-out counter.

• • •

Arnolt Bronnen, playwright, born in Austria in 1895 and in the Berlin of the '20s, palled around with Brecht and… Göebbles. Arnolt, Arnolt, ya turned right when ya shoulda hung a Louie.

• • •

In the ad for the diet plan plastered all over this subway car, the After people look completely unlike their predecessor selves. In many cases the transformation has tended toward the grotesque.

• • •

The slippage of everyday minds.

• • •

A wild and shitty day.

• • •

We are the culture of spit on a griddle.

• • •

When and where not to suggest:
Spit on a griddle vs. *Spit on a hot griddle*.

• • •

Your words fall into hollows at the center of the world.

February 17

Death of Ray Barretto at 77. *El Watusi*.

February 21 – Vermont

Between Manchester and Londonderry, the red fingers of the birches.

February 22

The woodstove at John's octagonal house needs constant stoking. You've walked, banked the fire, and now, Gwen reading and Katie knitting, you doze before it.

The spirit of a soldier killed on a battlefield ascends and contemplates the pattern – some in clusters, others isolated – made by the distribution of the dead and wounded. This pattern is invisible from the ground, or even the mountain ridge to the west. From his vantage though, the uniforms of his comrades, are indistinguishable from those of the enemy, as are their rank, and together, the casualties comprise the lineaments of a fast-winging bird. So vivid the image, that he can almost hear the rushing of its feathers.

Every fire is different. Some leap like sprites. But when, behind the glass, this stove really gets going, the flames look like a waterfall of orange, surging up and back. At last – elements in full reverse.

February 25

"…a thing so thunderous, I immediately understood." Said by Daniel Clair, a French turkey farmer upon discovering four hundred dead birds, and others sick in his flock.

• • •

Said John Smith in his *General Historie of Virginia* (1624): *For as Geography without History seemeth a carkasse without motion, so History without Geography wandreth as a vagrant without certaine habitation.*

February 28

Tom B. paraphrases a Ba Gua poem: *If you want to go forward, move the front foot first. If you want to go backward, move the back foot first*.

• • •

If the social fabric were pantyhose, they'd never make it through the prom.

• • •

Kan ya makan there was built in that great city of New York, at the southern edge of Central Park, a stately tower called Essex House. And so it was known by generation upon generation, until one day, a traveler, weary of traveling, stood looking up at its marquee and noticed that it was now called the Jumeirah Essex House – the former word very large indeed, and the latter two quite small. What did this change of name signify, and how had it come to pass? And what meant the beautiful stylized flame that burst from atop the "i" in Jumeirah like a caligraphed stroke from the Holy Qur'an?

The traveler turned to another traveler and said, *Brother, what does this mean?* But his brother shrugged his shoulders, for he knew not. *Sister,* he asked another passerby, *who or what is Jumeirah? Surely this is the palace of some great potentate, perhaps even the dwelling of the Caliph!* But she only shook her head and traveled on. And in truth, no one in that place could help him understand the riddle.

But in the fullness of time, he learned that Jumeirah was a magical potentate indeed – a "hospitality" corporation based in the United Arab Emirates, and that Jumeirah had bought Essex House and made of its forty-two stories a hotel and some one hundred and forty-nine condominiums. And also that Jumeirah owns the Burj (tower) Al Arab in Dubai and a vast pyramid one thousand feet high, the Ryungyong Hotel, in the fabled city of Pyongyang, North Korea.

Ah, thought the traveler at last, *now I know something!* But what did he know? For he lived on the other side of the world, in a city that, though great, was every day shrinking, just as the desert increases grain by grain. And he had never seen the city of Dubai, much less its skyline by night with its myriad skyscrapers – among which are built not just one pair of twin towers, but two!

Yet the traveler had to laugh at how exercised his countrymen had become at the prospect of their ports being owned and run by the corporations of Dubai, when here, right here in the center of the city, Jumeirah had planted its flag and boldly raised it high.

• • •

It's time to fake a stand!

March 2

People felt familiar emotions in unexpected doses, triggered in unanticipated ways and peculiar admixes. A virtual stranger, with a casual remark could evoke a flood of grateful tears or the embrace of a desperate child grown to middle-age. An exclamation overheard could trigger a shouting match or worse. We had arrived at an age where dueling with pistols might be considered a more rational approach to the settling of disputes than many of the muddled brutalities passing for the workings of law.

Why were we crying? We scarcely knew. Howling with laughter? What else was there?

Some citizens extended themselves, or leapt across impossible gulfs, while others stumbled and lay prostrate having tripped over invisible obstacles. Our capacities remained constant in quality, but lost all their former proportion. One woman wore a pasted-on smile while her sister could not make her lips twitch upward at the side for all the pills in Pharmacopeautopia. One man shook a thousand hands a day in absolute sincerity, while his next door neighbor spent the same span in the basement packing shotgun shells. Even in this moment on one square block, a man in a stretch limo inhales powders while another person sneezes, another achieves orgasm and yet another cleans an oven or else receives a black eye.

• • •

Can the tragic dimension be invoked by a man while his father still lives? Or the mother in the case of a woman?

• • •

Yesterday evening at 5:45, a nine-year-old kid was zapped – thankfully not killed – when he stepped on a metal grate crossing Lenox Avenue at West 127th Street. The cause, so they say, is the phenomenon *stray voltage*.

Later, around 8 o'clock, Katie pointed out a really strange sky. Running on a perfect parallel with what you reckoned to be Fifth Avenue, rather than due north/south, a split in the atmosphere. For as far uptown and downtown as you could see from your aerie, on the East Side, thick cloud cover, over the West an absolutely clear sky.

• • •

"Behold, a little cloud like a man's hand is rising out of the sea." This the servant's seventh report to Elijah from the top of Mt. Carmel. And then gathered the rainstorm that soaked Ahab, and washed away the authority of Jezebel's priests.

March 5

At times, usually after you've called co-op security or else the cops, out of sheer psychic and aural self-protection, you've tried to imagine the cries of the upstairs neighbor's child as those of a muezzin or a street vendor.

March 7

Death, yesterday, of Ali Farka Touré at age 65. His nickname, Farka, means donkey. No one, he insisted, rides on his back.

• • •

Returning from the café, you walk past the coffee, bagel and donut kiosk and wave to Abdul. "Haven't seen you for a while," he calls out. You double back, shake hands through the plexiglass portal, tell him that most days you're on you bike and zoom up Eighth Avenue just behind him.

"Was that you on TV the other night," he asks.

"The World Trade Center documentary?"

"Yes, I thought I recognized you."

"Yeah, they taped me for three hours and used forty-five seconds. They were going to release it at the end of September '01 but then the towers came down and they had to recut the whole thing."

"It was a good show. You were good."

The History Channel, Modern Marvels. The gift that keeps on giving.

• • •

West 4th Street subway station. You contemplate, while waiting for the train, the enormous number of ovoid black and dark gray splotches, slightly raised, along the surface of the platform and ask yourself: is it possible that these are what remain of thousands of pieces of discarded bubble gum?

• • •

You know, we could've prevented September 11. Could've skipped it altogether and gone straight from the 10th to the 12th. But we didn't and who's to blame?

• • •

A young woman, Imette St. Guillen, graduate student in the John Jay College criminal justice program was murdered last week, killed allegedly by the bouncer at the last bar she was seen at alive. Today, the *Post* runs the headline: IMETTE'S LAST SCREAM.

Should not whomever came up with this headline be held to account in some way for the awfulness they compound, for the souls they sicken, for the violence they celebrate and falsely reprehend? At least the *Post* has taken Alexander Hamilton's portrait off the masthead and replaced it with an American flag.

March 8

Termagant, Osama bin Laden as a reinvention of. Once, the Crusaders supposed the Saracens to worship a deity whom they themselves created out of whole cloth.

Hence turban'd Termagant starred in a thousand morality plays, his shrieking, combined with long, flowing robes ultimately transforming him into a virago figure. Hamlet though, would have bad actors whipped for "o'erdoing Termagant," by bawling so as to "split the ears of the groundlings." Is Termagant the sound of an airplane, flying over the city, too fast, too low?

• • •

Oil of snakes packaged and sold by the vipers themselves. Thus Rummy pushes Newt's Long War Strategy, proposes "Intelligent Effective Limited Government" that draws on "entrepreneurial public management" – say wha?! – "and modern information systems to modernize the government into a system compatible with the speed, agility, flexibility and efficiency of modern global companies." All this jabberwocky in the service of establishing a "theory and system for winning the Long War with the irreconcilable wing of Islam."

Government, military, intelligence and corporate functions will collapse into an entity known as "Team B." whose mission is to tap the "explosion in scientific knowledge and entrepreneurial talent" to "provide dramatically more effective defense at the same or lower cost." Cost to whom? And who are the brains behind Team B.? Well sho'nuff, a panel of private industry CEOs.

Last but not least: "We need to see dominating the urban battle space as comparable to dominating the air or dominating the sea." Good news for New York and cities everywhere. Learn from the fate of Grozny, Fallujah and Baghdad.

• • •

In Cockney rhyming slang, "Jew" is "five by two." A newer term is "bar code," in reference to the tattoos printed on the arms of the Nazi internees.

• • •

A construction worker is killed by the falling wall of a condo he was building in Brooklyn. Perfunctory luxury, life held cheap.

March 11

Fascinating the lack of a snowball effect to the horrors of the Bush regime – a spooky, otherworldly failure of outrage to compound, as if political life was no longer a series of material acts but so many emanations of ectoplasm.

• • •

There should, at any rate, be nicknames, à la Damon Runyan. And, if possible, they ought to incorporate the subject's own words, like Nicely Nicely. But the idea is to mock, not endear or glorify. For example, the presumed future builder of the Freedom Tower, the man who bought the World Trade Center a few weeks before it came down, might be dubbed Larry "Pull It" Silverstein, a double entendre on his injunction to the fire department on 9/11 minutes before his own 7 WTC collapsed (under even more questionable circumstances than towers One and Two), and his public persona of aggrieved, fowl-like innocence.

• • •

Second anniversary of the Madrid train bombings.

• • •

You woke up thinking – perhaps just having dreamt of it – of an old photo of yourself around age ten in the City & Country schoolyard hitting a softball. When you first saw the picture, not long after it was taken, you recall being taken aback by the forceful movement of the batter with your face. He's caught following through on his swing, twisted round – the ball's already flown out of frame. The image made no sense to you, seemed almost unrecognizable, given how helpless you felt back then. Why did

this picture resurface in your mind today, accompanied by the memory of spectation at your own power, as if it were an alien thing?

• • •

Milosovic dies.

March 12

On the west side of Ninth Avenue at 22nd Street, in front of the "luxury" pile of corporate apartments you once dubbed The Mexico City, a blue brand new Lincoln Continental has been parked all catywumpus with its passenger side front wheel well up on the curb, its bumper about six inches from the base of a streetlamp pole. The steering wheel is locked in place with a Club and a pair of bright orange parking tickets decorate the windshield. All in all the car looks as though it leapt onto the sidewalk and toward the lightpole in an attempt to knock itself senseless, but instead passed out just shy of its goal.

• • •

Up on West 53rd Street, a van with FREEDOM DEMOLITION painted on its flank.

March 14

6:50 a.m. and you're on your way to Ba Gua. On the north side of 27th Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues, a cluster of Asian-owned wholesale stores. True Beauty Trading Inc. and RADIO TOY already have their lights on. Inside people move about, preparing for the day. You make your way round a Sikh wearing a midnight blue turban and a long black coat who fastidiously gathers up bits of cardboard that have strewn themselves in front of the building where later in the day, he may be found working the reception desk. Fresh boxes of merchandise stacked on the sidewalk. Headlights still burning, delivery vans idle in the dawn.

• • •

Searching in the *Encyclopedia of New York City* for references to someone else entirely, you come upon Charles Loring Brace, founder, in 1853, of the Children's Aid Society. But it's not his name you notice first. What jumps out is the title of his book, published in 1872: *The Dangerous Classes of New York and Twenty Years' Work Among Them*.

• • •

Mr. Rat in his tight gray fur runs straight up the middle of the platform of the 28th Street stop of the uptown #1 train. Making his way toward the north end, he passes a fashionably dressed young woman, likely an Fashion Institute of Technology student. You take in her straight-cut blonde hair, a slight acne-pocking on her cheek, and the rest of her garb down to the black boots, so fearsomely pointed that if Mr. Rat had ventured a foot closer, she could've impaled him on her toe.

• • •

On 43rd Street between Sixth and Seventh, a enormous steel framework goes up behind the preserved façade of a 3-story brick building with marble detailing. No sign of what this place was beyond a relief medallion, visible through the scaffolding, of what appears to be a well-sooted Greek myth. Had to have been some sort of theater. You've passed it a hundred times if you've passed it once, probably been inside, but you're damned if you recall a shred of its former identity. Disconcertion 'r' U.

Approaching briskly down the street, a woman more or less your age, nip-waisted business suit, heels spiky enough to make her ankles quaver, a DELL notebook pressed against her bosom like a holy book. A book too large to be a breviary. Must be a gradual.

• • •

When you get home, check your WPA Guidebook. Ah, that's it, the Henry Miller Theater. A different Henry Miller. Who was this one? Only a passing mention of in the *Encyclopedia of NYC* – an impresario of the sort for whom, early in the 20th century, theaters were named.

• • •

Give up on dates.

• • •

Back to the *E* of *NYC*, searching for Nicola Tesla you pause at the heading just above his: *Terrorism*. Your edition, published in 1995, begins with the "Black Tom" explosion of 30 July, 1916 on the eponymous island west of Ellis island that served as the terminal for the Lehigh Valley Railroad. Kaboom went several bargesworth of munitions bound for England and France. Several people died in the blast, later ruled an act of sabotage on the part of the Imperial German government.

The citation proceeds through the 1920 detonation of a dynamite-laden wagon outside Morgan's Bank at Broad and Wall, a massacre you know something about from your research into Lower Manhattan violence for *Divided We Stand*. No one was prosecuted in the 1920 attack, despite numerous arrests and years of investigation, though it's recently been claimed that the author of the blast, in which forty people died and two hundred were wounded, was a certain Italian anarchist named Mario Buda. Who knows, is a story wrong just because it sounds too melodramatic to be true?

But onward with *Encyclopedia*'s idea of terrorism. Flash forward to George Metesky, the "mad bomber" of the late '50s. Next, in the radical '60s, the Weatherman bomb factory accident that killed three and blew up a townhouse on West 11th Street, and a series of explosions at corporate offices. Dutifully mentioned, the fatal bombing of Fraunces Tavern in 1975 by Puerto Rican nationalists and their possible involvement in a bombing at LaGuardia Airport which took eleven lives.

Finally, there's 1993, the explosion in the B-level garage at the WTC, killing five. Surely there been a new edition, doubtless with this entry revised. What, you wonder, does it say?

You don't find what you're looking for on Tesla, but discover instead that in 1889 he built a lab on West Broadway – then Fifth Avenue South and now LaGuardia Place – next door to the house where you grew up. The lab was gone by the time your parents moved into a second story floor-through in the neighboring tenement's rear building. Tesla himself had definitively changed his electromagnetic state seven years before you were born. And even though the building at 540 West Broadway was so old it had no heat or hot water boiler and such wiring as it possessed still ran DC current – you had to use a converter for appliances – nonetheless, one could feel it. Something potent lived in the air.

• • •

Let Δ divide the days.

Δ

Ides of March. Ça roule, baby, ça roule!

• • •

Midday downtown on the #1. I AM LA KALLE: the headline rendered graffiti-style on a subway poster: a portrait of a pretty young Latina, reaching up to tilt the brim of her rakish black mini-fedora, her red blouse strategically half-buttoned, leading the eye downward toward "105.9/92.7 – New York's Official Reggaeton Station."

Populating the car itself, scads of people in white running shoes toting backpacks. En masse, they exit at Chambers Street. From far and wide, they've come to see Our Hole.

• • •

The awning over the storefront bail bondsman at 81 Baxter Street, just behind the Criminal Courts Building, reads: "Freedom Should Be Affordable."

• • •

Evening. Tired. Trudging to the subway home. Along the wall separating the Canal Street sidewalk from the Holland Tunnel exit ramp it's the same wind blows you east as blew you east at nineteen, at forty. You're closing in on fifty-six and the wind hasn't aged a bit.

• • •

Well before 9/11, person or persons unknown folded a $20 in such a way that the image on the green side looks like the tower twins burning. If that's what you want to see. Could be schismatic Popes' staffs blooming at the end of Tannhäuser. Too late for redemption.

Or, more happily, a view of Lucca' fabled Torre Guinnigi, crowned with its spire: a pair of living trees.

• • •

Fifty people killed in the Alps since the season began. Skiing off-piste, they're caught in avalanches. And why? This year's strange, weakly-packed, trickster snow.

• • •

More tality. Less tality.

• • •

Fools planning downtown. Don't they know that The Bathtub, austere and unadorned, is more formally pleasing, proportionally compelling, and doubtless more socially useful, than anything they could hope to build there?

Δ

Lunch with Marithelma at the Korean place on Carmine, then back to her apartment for coffee and a dialogue expanded to include the interjections of her birds. She tells you that she tried to teach the parrot to sing *Guantanamera*, but instead, and most likely with her husband Fabio's subversive influence, the bird clearly chants: "Cuanto se scema!" Which sounds pretty similar, but means, in Italian: *How silly you are!*

Well stimulated on conversation and espresso, you walk uptown toward home, under a row of trees from whose branches, once upon a time, a splash of pigeon dropping got you. Funny, for all the walking around New York you've done, you can only recall getting pigeoned twice – though once in Washington Square park, a bird flew into your head with enough force to knock you sideways a step and furnish you with a wicked headache. Nothing descends from the trees this time, and you're passing the basketball courts and the newsstand on 3rd Street when it hits you that Guantanamera means "the girl from Guantánamo."

• • •

Eighth Avenue just north of 25th Street. Pacing in the narrow confines of a tenement building's doorway, and Asian woman of maybe thirty, her cheeks pale and flaccid, talks into a cellphone, voice sharp with resentment. "I don't get five minutes to myself. I don't get anything."

Next door, in the pharmacy, you shake hands across the counter with Bobby. The immemorial exchange of howya doin's. He owns that he's a little tired today. You pass him your prescription. The radio plays faintly above the chatter of customers and clerks and the kaching of the register totting up the lottery profits. *Good times.* Name

that group. The Silver Convention. No, it was Chic: *These are the good times.* That gliding string section against the over-annunciated lyrics. *Leave your cares behind*.

• • •

Again, your sign-reading dyslexia acts up. No the plaque wasn't placed on the side of this building by the New York Landmines Commission. Not yet.

Δ

The swordsmiths of Damascus used to quench a just-forged blade by running it through the body of a slave. The nitrogen in the living blood, you see, imparted to the steel its special qualities, making Saracen weapons lighter and more durable than the weighty, brittle, European ones. Thus was lost a Second Crusade. Poor Richard.

• • •

On the E train platform at 53rd and Lex, a Korean man bowing a stringed instrument held vertically on his thigh plays what sounds for all the world like an Irish aire. And the beauty is, three blocks away, the pipes are skirling as the lost tribe marches downtown on St. Patrick's Day.

On the train itself, a thickly, almost Talmudically-bearded, heavy-set man stands holding the overhead rail. If you were nearer, the adjective would be looming. He looks a bit like a conga player you used to know, but more resembles the sort of fellow – seen on a thousand TV newsfeeds – who would happily crash a plane into a building. It's a face for Western Man to fear. Except that this bloke's wearing a sweatshirt, with a big white BAR HARBOR printed across the chest, surmounting a pair of crossed oars whose blades, respectively, read: "Est." and "1918." And he's chatting amiably with a half dozen of his intensely suburban-looking pals. One of whom, a young woman, has taken off her green felt floppy-brimmed leprechaun hat and holds it scrunched in her lap. That's it, they're a cell, the lot of 'em! Who's the sleeper, now?

• • •

Sha. Chinese for "sand," the purplish discoloration which appears beneath the skin when a part of the body where the qi has stagnated is vigorously rubbed.

• • •

The raptor of global capitalism circles then swoops down. Beware the commerce claws.

Δ

Head downtown of a Saturday morning. At West 4th Street, what you hear the conductor say is: "Transfer to the up and downtown DNA trains." Shake the dust out your ears, walk downstairs and catch the F one stop southeast.

You've come to this crossroads, Houston and Broadway, to witness the tableau that a fellow you know designed to premiere a new line of Stella McCartney workout clothes.

And it's quite a piece of street theater. Running along the edge of the sidewalk, for the entire eighty-odd foot width of the Addidas store, stands a row of ten transparent plexiglass compartments, just wide and tall enough for the young women inside them to perform a coordinated series of yoga stretches. Which they do most precisely, each wearing a different combination of Stella's more or less revealing duds. The woman at the head of the line initiates a posture, and the others follow suit. Reminds you of a stand of trees reacting in sequence to a gust of wind. It's the same kind of kind of linear ripple effect except it feels choreographed, eroticized – a trick carried out by human dominoes.

As you walk up Broadway from the first booth toward the last, a woman passes in the opposite direction, speaking into a walkie-talkie – something about "the next girls in rotation." Ah, of course. If this show is to continue till noon, there'd have to be more than one platoon of yogistas.

From your very brief exposure to yoga, you recognize the current posture as downward dog. In response to which, a male passerby – gone before you can get a fix on him – caws "Yeah! I like my woman in a cage!" Yet these are not that. Though it's not the first thing one notices, the booths are essentially three sided, there's an open panel at the back of each one. The eye doesn't read this because each booth is so close to the one behind it. Which makes the cage a construction of the viewer. But with a wind blowing south today, the woman in the box furthest north, with nothing to shield her from the gusts, must feel the chill in her bones. She seems fine with it though, has the same zoned-out look as her colleagues. Except for number seven. She's blonde, very graceful and in control. Despite which, her expression is that of a person deeply pissed off.

Just north of the booths, parked next to the curb, a movie shoot-type trailer, the kind that's always blocking the narrow streets of Chelsea. This one has BIG SHOT painted large on its flank. Must be Centcom. Perhaps the guy who invited you down is in there. Should you knock and find out? But what would you say? That in some small, but ineluctable way, he has managed to renew your capacity for horror?

• • •

What to fling into the machine but your tiny self?

• • •

Up to All Souls for a wedding. A plaque on the north wall reads:

WILLIAM LAURENCE SULLIVAN, DD, LDD
November 15, 1872 – October 5, 1935
Associate Minister 1913 – 1916
Minister 1916 – 1922
Scholar, Preacher, Friend of All in Distress
He forsook the Shelter of Authority
in the Perilous Search for Truth

Back at the ranch you Google him and find that WLS was a fascinating guy. Among other things, he was openly gay in deeply unconducive times. His *Letter to His Holiness, Pope Piux X*, written in 1910, addressed the ubiquity of homosexuality in the Catholic Church, and had the distinction of becoming the last book officially prohibited by the Vatican.

In another lifetime, you'll come back and research it all. Connect every dot to every other dot. Write the impossible history of all souls, lower case, across millennia – especially those who've forsaken the shelter of authority….

• • •

In every restaurant, Thai, Austrian, Italian, you can bet someone or everyone on the kitchen staff is Mexican. From what you can tell, half the male population of Puebla (among several other states) sends, every week, half its earnings back home.

• • •

At Dean & DeLuca, you order a coffee and get a sample of chocolate cake as a lagniappe. Give Gwen the last bite. It tastes sweeter.

• • •

If you were writing this in German, would its genre be Nein-Fiction?

Δ

And the little piggies cried: *Wee wee wee the People!* All the way home.

• • •

Spring in the air. But first, spring in a chair. Juan's at the café this a.m. – leaving today after a work stint in LIC. Back to Maria and young Ana Luna, and seven-month-old son Nahuel in Germany. They plan, some time soon, to move to Buenos Aires where Juan was born. They've found a school there they like for Ana Luna. Time time time. Time to turn that map 180º around.

• • •

Ponte dei Pugni, one of two "fighting bridges" in Venice, where contenders won by knocking their opponents into the canal.

Δ

Dawn on the way to Ba Gua, a truck roars past: Eagle Global Logistics.

You haven't seen the SUV with the ME CRAZY license plates for a while now – in fact, you've missed it. But this morning, something draws your eye to a vehicle parked in front of the steel arch of the FIT entrance, a black Nissan Armada. Got to be the same owner – who knows, perhaps they work a night shift in the school – and this the new ride, even more massive than the former one. Different plates too, just slightly: SOY LOCO.

• • •

Stepping in Ba Gua circles, the constant turns remind you of walking the path of the labyrinth in Amiens cathedral. Whoever designed that path made it full of twists and switchbacks. But never a blind alley.

• • •

Yesterday's morning clouds spread like fish scales against the severe clear. This a.m. you ask Dylan if he noticed and he widens his eyes, sits upright: "Yeah," he says, "reptilian sky!"

• • •

E.B.: I can't think of a happy ending.

E.D.: I can't think of an ending. Eights, crazy eights, crazy Yeats. Turning, turning…

From across the room Dylan, who must have supernatural hearing, calls out: "Crazy eights – I used to play that game when I was a kid!" He flashes a smile and a thumbs up.

• • •

Fishing, bait, trapping. All based on trickery. And why then shouldn't we let the gods trick us? It's a tradition!

• • •

Modern Medical Miracles: a catheter designed as a robotic dog. Disposable, of course.

• • •

"Dog handler," Sergeant Santos A. Condona convicted by a military court of abusing a prisoner at Abu Ghraib. When sentenced Condona could be discharged, forfeit his pay and serve as much as three and a half years in prison. But the top dogs owe him something for taking the fall and distracting us from the question of what our army is doing in Iraq in the first place. Since Lynndie England's already claimed the ribbon "Best of Breed," why not award him "Best of Opposite Sex"? The "Best in Show" prize to be announced at some future competition.

• • •

Details. White edge of Le G.'s forest green awning reflecting like waves in the dark glass of the SUV parked outside. License number SFL 85B. Embossed on the plate, in the space between the first three letters and the alpha-numeric, a little black outline of the Garden State.

• • •

Crop circles and solar flares. One could spend a lifetime Googling. Some do.

• • •

Largely misspent day.

Δ

Woman pushes a stroller into Le G. Average-looking for what the neighborhood's becoming. You hardly give a second glance but then notice her extraordinarily turned-down mouth, almost a commedia mask grimace. Surely this expression can't be all mood-based – perhaps there's some underlying, ill-fated configuration of muscle and bone. Almost a disfigurement, made all the worse when she tries to smile at Shannon at the register and the bow merely stretches, and the lips tighten to reveal her teeth. The woman sits down, then lifts the clear plastic canopy and you focus on the baby, dreading, even before you confirm visually, that which you know you will see. And there it is, an infant version of the maternal mouth.

• • •

Wheeling your bike into the elevator, you encounter Charlie. Tall, lanky, old enough to remember and recount Jim Crow days, he's never lost his Mississippi accent. If you could, you'd keep him in conversation all day long just to listen to his upsweeps, dips and glissandos. By now you know what he'll say and your ears prime for it – a slow wash of honey with the "I" sounded as "Ah": *I see you got yo' Cadillac*.

And he always chastises you for not wearing a helmet.

• • •

I am the sister of catastrophe, brother of disaster – or the other way around, just as you wish!

• • •

From your aerie you look down on a tenement where the airshaft at the rear of the building appears as the socket of a dovetail joint. In this moment, you see the rooftops and walls differently, all the architecture takes on a toy-like form. That duct over there could be a tenon, and that window could serve as its mortise. The possibility opens up of all these structures fitted together into a great puzzle. What then would the whole represent?

• • •

The Playpen, one of the oldest and last surviving topless joints near Times Square still features an outline of the Manhattan skyline on its red neon marquee. At the right side, the Empire State Building. To the left, separated by a valley of indeterminate cityscape, the tower twins. Here at Eighth Avenue near 44th Street, an ancient and lesser vaudeville theater was once refitted for the swinging seventies. Now it's a fixture, might as well be in amber, a guardian of the time before.

Δ

Zeitgeist-o-rama: the two main images on the cover of the *Times*. The central square in Minsk, cleared of protestors contesting Belarus's stolen election. It's a vast space, sparsely inhabited by pigeons, a Brezhnevian official building in the background. No San Marco.

Below and to the left separated by a few inches of type, orange flames across the horizon line bloom up into roiling clouds of mauve smoke. In the foreground, several parked SUVs attend a row of identical suburban houses. A brushfire consumes Great Kills park on Staten Island.

Δ

Jenny Haniver, a ray or skate mutilated to look like a wing'd sea creature with a human head. Described by Paré in the late sixteenth century, Jenny Hanivers were created to look like angels, devils, dragons. Possible origin of the name in "Jeune de Antwerp" (called Anvers by the French) and subsequently "cockneyed" by English sailors. Linnaeus debunked one Jenny Haniver, promoted as the Hydra of Hamburg. Threatened with prosecution by the forgers, poor Carolus had to leave town.

Δ

At the café, Shannon, whom you've nicknamed ShineOn for her radiant presence, tells you about her twenty-one uncles and aunts. Says the family is full of "versatile" personalities.

• • •

Does nature itself have ADD?

• • •

His epitaph: "He was anxious. Then he wasn't."

• • •

Is it possible? Apparently so. Must've opened recently – a U.S. Army recruitment center on the second floor of a funky old building on the corner of Sixth

Avenue and 22nd Street. What caught your eye, behind the window, was a life-size cutout of a guy wearing a black beret and a dress uniform with sergeant stripes. Thought at first it was someone's idea of a joke. But then you saw the sign beneath the fire escape. Modest, almost self-effacing, blending into the urban visual noise: white letters and a yellow star on an olive-green background. Official. For real.

Strange place to put a recruitment center – on the border between Chelsea and Flatiron – whose residents and office workers have got to be one of the least likely sources of cannon fodder imaginable. Still, in the surrounding blocks there are plenty of young men working the loading docks and freight elevators. Who knows? Maybe some of them might be persuaded to trade boredom, crappy pay and everyday disrespect for whatever bill of goods this two dimensional soldier is selling.

Δ

The weirdest steelwork ever, a building caught between teetering and catastrophic, torquing collapse. Frank Gehry's latest, an office hive for some Barry Diller media nightmare on the West Side Highway and 18th. The building doesn't seem so much designed as programmed – iterated out of algorithms set up to produce the maximally refracted form possible in a given envelope, shorn of any proportional ratios. Click OK and watch Topsy grow.

You take pictures of the skeleton just as workman begin to attach huge sheets of opaque white cladding. Milky. Glass or something glass-like. Yikes, it's going to look like a gigantic Bizarro World cocoon. Or a fifties chapeau by a woman-hating milliner.

• • •

What's needed is a new poetic form: the can-o. A more upbeat version of the canto. One could also sing an oh-good, just as well as an aubade. By evening, knock us hard enough and we turn.

• • •

The online *Times* avers that today's total solar eclipse will be visible "across a wide swath of the world's poorest countries" from Brazil to Mongolia. It cuts these words in the second iteration of the article, which is accompanied by a photo of two Beirut schoolgirls in khimars staring up in wonderment through protective solar shades that lend their faces, paradoxically, the look of Saint-Tropez starlets.

Not content with being the Paper of Record, the *Times* assumes the role of Paper of Reason, noting that "superstition accompanied [the eclipse's] path, as it has for generations. One Indian paper advised pregnant women not to go outside… to avoid having a blind baby or one with a cleft lip. Food cooked before the eclipse should be thrown out afterward because it will be impure, and those who are holding a knife or ax… will cut themselves…. In Turkey's earthquake-prone Tokat province, residents set up tents outside, despite assurances from scientists that there was no evidence of any link between eclipses and tremors…. In August, 1999, an earthquake in northwest Turkey killed some 17,000 people just 6 days after a solar eclipse." Lastly, "the eclipse was expected to move on to Mongolia where it will fade out with the sunset."

Ah, the language of it. Granted the eclipse, which is a phenomenon of perception – the creature of a particular set of vantage points – could be said to "move." And doubtless those viewing it from Mongolia will perceive its fading. But, O Great and Wise Ones, could it truly happen that the sun will set?

• • •

The city's life hangs on two evermore tenuous threads: Water Tunnels 1 & 2. Best keep our fingers crossed they finish #3 sooner than later.

• • •

Early afternoon at the 34th Street and Seventh Avenue IRT stop: a steel drum player hammers out a lilting, enharmonic version of Hava Nagila.

Δ

Negligent = a diaphanous nightie worn by men of quality.

• • •

Everywhere you ramble these days, no matter what part of town, you see the same truck. Party Supplies – the emblem, a giant pink cartoon hippo painted on the side. Kismet, or are you being stalked?

• • •

Darwin exhibition at the Museum of Natural History. "Ideally adapted" is how he described the Falkland Island Steamer Duck.

Can't come here without a visit to the African People's exhibit, a long-standing favorite of Gwen's. Ituri Forest pygmies, and North African Berbers – she'd spent hours when she was little, drinking in every detail of these dioramas. Before you go, check to make sure the Leopard Man is still crouching on the branch near the ceiling, ready to pounce. Then swing through the Asian People's hall, and some of your own touchstones: the amazing tableau of an Easter Siberian Yakut shaman performing a healing ceremony on a stricken woman, the delirium in her eyes heightened by the glow of simulated firelight. One might miss, if one did not look closely, a strange detail: the shaman has a chain looped round one ankle, the end of it held by an assistant who kneels off to the side in the shadows. This way the healer will stay grounded as he travels to the plane of the demons to drive them from the victim's body.

A obligatory stop too among the costumes. To see, in particular, the jaw-dropping teal green purdah draped on a manikin set against the background of a street scene labeled "Kabul, 20th Century." Every time it blows your mind – even more so now that you've a host of new associations for Kabul – the serenity of the pose, the ghostlike quality such absolute curtaining of the figure imparts, and not least, the extraordinary rigor of design and fineness of the tailoring. And this display long predates the Taliban.

On your way out, you spot a curious something you never noticed before among a case full of articles made by the Pathans of the Khyber Pass. It's a tapered cylinder

piece of dark blue fabric, embroidered with distinctly Western ornamentation. Can't decode what it is, so you read the display card. Ah. "Woman's hair snood made from British officer's sleeve." Sure, makes all the sense in the world. A trophy, yes, but useful too. Waste not, want not.

• • •

Sixth Avenue north of 42nd Street. Durst's National Debt Clock faces a dilemma. Currently it's logged $8.3 someodd trillion. Within two years it will likely want to kick over to $10 trillion – a figure for which there are insufficient digits. Can't add another column 'cause, the sign has already maxed out the finite width of the wall its installed on. One could, of course, have a new display made with smaller digits and more of 'em in anticipation of exponentially greater debt to come. Or keep the columns the same size and – hey, Doug, you're a savvy developer – just find a wider wall. Better yet, fuggedaboudit.

Δ

Samantha, whose fans at Le G. have turned legion, asks some regulars to help celebrate her birthday in a subterranean Japanese bierstube in the East Village, just down the block from the apartment you and Bea lived in for a year or so back in the early '60s, before heaven's gate opened and you were ushered into a brand new apartment in Penn South. Her invitation finishes with a line that's pure Samantha: *Qui m'aime, vienne!*

• • •

According to Liang Zhen Pu, via the manual his student Li Zi Ming wrote, the study of Ba Gua strategy allows one to become "As stable as Mt. Taishan." Elsewhere, he advises that to be "effective in the attack art" one must "move like the wind and stand as if nailed in place."

• • •

In the wake of Katrina, New Orleans Terius "Juvenile" Gray's mansion was engulfed by Lake Pontchartrain. In "Get Ya Hustle On," one of the tracks on his new album *Reality Check*, he raps:

Everybody needs a check from FEMA
So he can go and score him some coca-i-na.

Δ

April Fool's Day. Epitaph for an Empire: They extracted the resources, but missed the hidden treasure.

• • •

But quite serenely –
as the sun draws a billion
tons of water each day
unseen into the sky
there to appear
as beautiful clouds
which in turn raining down
maintain life on earth –
by similar indirect cultivation
a great quality came to America.

So wrote Bucky Fuller in his *Untitled Epic Poem on the History of Industrialization*.

• • •

Betimes to Newark. Headline of an ad in the PATH train: "We Deliver China to Japan, Jerseys to New York and Paychecks to Parsippany." Below which, in slightly smaller letters: "The Port of New York and New Jersey brings the world to your door."

At the bottom of the poster, a photo of a fully-loaded container ship plying the high seas and the web address of the ad's sponsor: DeliveringProsperity.com. And beneath, in miniscule type: New York Shipping Association.

But really, do we deliver all that? Jerseys to New York, sure – more like teeshirts though, manufactured in another country. How much china bound for Japan actually flows through New York's port? And Paychecks to Parsippany? That must refer to the port's economic benefits, which according to the ad copy "provides 239,000 jobs in the region." But how does one define "provide" and "region"? Given that the port "handled more than $115 billion in cargo in 2005," the number of jobs claimed doesn't seem all that impressive. True, $115 yards is a lot of jackola, but what was the value, in relative terms, of the cargo handled in 1995, 1985, or 1955? Time to open all the books, private and public world round. Let's see what flows out of 'em.

• • •

Sideways is the new down.

Δ

"The Bush administration sees Iraq as an unsinkable aircraft carrier for its troops and bases for years to come." So says Joseph Gerson, a historian of American military bases, as quoted by *The Independent*.

The article continues with words from Zoltan Grossman, a geographer: "After every U.S. military intervention since 1990, the Pentagon has left behind clusters of new bases in areas where it never before had a foothold. The new string of bases stretch from Kosovo and adjacent Balkan states, to Iraq and other Persian Gulf states, into Afghanistan and other Central Asian States… the only two obstacles to a geographically contiguous U.S. sphere of influence are Iran and Syria."

Adam Price, the Progressive Party MP for Carnathen East in Wales, gets the last word. "Certainly the mood music has been all about withdrawal of troops. Now we are beginning to see the glimmers of the real policy."

• • •

Along the west side of Ninth Avenue in the lower 20s, signs taped to meters warning that cars parked there after 5 p.m. will be towed., And why? The trailers are icumen in. Wondrous the title of the movie: "Train Wreck."

• • •

Everywhere you go, the parrot on your shoulder squawks: "Pieces of crap, pieces of crap!"

• • •

Is there such a thing as Auto-Schadenfreude, where one takes a perverse pleasure in one's own undoing – cackles with secret appreciation at the chickens coming home to roost?

• • •

Home where the heart is.

Drilling outside from some construction site sounds, for an instant, like a sharper version of your black cat purring. Similar enough to make you turn to see if Tibble is in the room behind you. No, it's a jackammer, maybe a couple of blocks uptown, the acoustics made crazy in the heavy spring damp.

• • •

Practice, say the Ba Gua masters, *as if you were fighting. Fight as if you were practicing. Combat as if moving through tall grass*.

• • •

Ride down the river, past the Gansevoort Peninsula, a landfill build into the Hudson in the 19th Century and, for many years, site of a Department of Sanitation incinerator. In April 2002, the DOS demolished the furnace's iconic duple smokestacks. First twin towers you registered, trade center icons avant la lettre. The building had been converted into a garage for sanitation trucks years before. But back in June, 1956 – you'd have been just over six years old – the FDA burned several tons of confiscated publications there, including books by Wilhelm Reich. More of Reich's books went up in smoke that August, and still more in 1960.

Though the DOS still maintains a facility there, Gansevoort Peninsula is technically part of the Hudson River Park Trust, whose prospectus describes it as the future "home to such amenities as a rocky shoreline beach, a play lawn and recreational boating areas." Will WR and his conflagrated books rate a plaque at the footprint of the vanished twin smokestacks?

• • •

Prussians beware! Hippies take care! Yesterday, a woman at the café wore jeans with what looked like Iron Crosses appliquéd to the back pockets. Leaving, she slung on a jean jacket embroidered with myriad tiny flowers.

• • •

One glance at the paper belies the phony order of the street. Consciously or not, the world's insurging.

• • •

It is hard to advance on the enemy in a true fight. But all is possible with vigorous power in eyes that are bright.

– Ba Gua masters via Li Zi Ming

• • •

I am not yet the real crow but only a swallow… the real one is still flying in the sky…

So says Pugachev, a rebel against Tsarina Katerina in Stoppard's *Coast of Utopia*, III.

Δ

10:45 a.m. Yellow-gray sky. Buildings downtown obscured. Weirdest weather – *ever*.

11:15 a.m. Absurdly large snowflakes, a blizzard of 'em, like lint from a Brobdignagian dryer.

• • •

In certain texts on Ba Gua, the *dantian* is said to be the residence of *primal qi*, or *yuan qi*, the energy each person receives from their parents.

• • •

Ye mammothe hath a hump'd head, a hump'd head hath he. And had he not a hump'ed head, no mammothe would he be.

• • •

Imaginary factory sign: Knudson Bolts.

• • •

"September 11 wasn't the Zapruder film, it was the Zapruder film festival." Thus actor Charlie Sheen weighs in as a 9/11 skeptic. "Show us," he's quoted by PrisonPlanet.com on the Pentagon attack, "how this particular plane pulled off these maneuvers. 270º turn at 500 mph, descending 7000 feet in 2.5 minutes, skimming across treetops the last 500 meters."

• • •

Once upon a time in the 18th Century, Lt. Col. George Washington commanded a militia that massacred a number of French troops – some accounts call them members of a "diplomatic party." Whatever the case, their leader, Joseph Coulon De Villiers de Jumonville was wounded in the engagement, then brained, literally, by Washington's ally, the Seneca "half king" Tanaghrisson.

"I heard the bullets whistle and, believe me, there is something charming in the sound," said young Washington of the battle later known as Jumonville Glen, which opened the French and Indian War.

• • •

"My first attempt to sing," says Oliver "Tuku" Mtukuduzi, guitarist and chanteur extraordinaire, "was my birth cry."

Δ

10:30 a.m. Singly on cellphones, or in couples as they rip down the street, the whole of Chelsea sounds like it has come down with Tourette's.

• • •

1:30-ish. As you pass by on your bicycle, soaked from the predicted rain, from inside his coffee, bagel and donut kiosk, Abdul flashes you a peace sign.

• • •

No peace, noplace. Just as you fled to Tampa, sick as a dog after 9/11 only to find yourself shacked up a stone's throw from Centcom, it turns out that the idyllic cottage in the Cotswolds – the one you borrowed from Katie's cousin Simon, and where you spent a happy week back in summer '04 – is practically within spitting distance of the big USAF base in Fairford from which the big B2s and their cousins rain hell onto Afghanistan and Iraq from miles above. Yes, and Cheltenham's next door too: GCHQ, old man.

• • •

5:30 p.m. Busy Friday foot traffic on Broadway and 73rd. Among the pedestrians wends a beautiful pigeon, white mostly, with a multiplicity of gray dapplings. It's – her? – legs colored a robust purple-red. Bird flu, shmird flu, this one's in the pink.

• • •

Roxy Music in your head:
Dancing city
Now you're talking
But where's your soul?

Δ

How do you dismantle not just a political state, but a whole set of acquired expectations, habits and shared assumptions? How to carve up a corpse before it's quite cold? Is Bush doing a good job with that? Did Clinton? Will the next one?

The role of the president, to whom evermore power is granted or ceded, becomes that of a CEO presiding over the cannibalization of a no-longer profitable corporation.

Or worse, crashing the corporation in order to sell off its bits. What passes as the Bush Doctrine may well not be the Bush agenda, consciously or otherwise. The former may be reprehensible, but the latter is bloody well nihilist.

Stafford Beer – witness his exclamation point – said it exuberantly, even euphorically: "The purpose of a system is what it does!"

• • •

Gray afternoon cold spring breath. It comes to you unbidden that when you were very small, your father had a nickname for you: "Boo-bah." Along the walk to your front door, the hedge leaves brilliant green.

• • •

Chicago typewriter: that's what they used to call a Tommy gun in the Roaring '20s. Did they develop a style manual to go with it? Was it's use part of the curriculum incorporated into the Chicago School?

• • •

Interior energy of the earth, in play with what's outside. What's the mood and state of the solar capacitor at on any given day?

Δ

Somehow, flattened to the brand new macadam surface of the rightmost lane of Eighth Avenue, just shy of 23rd Street, the halved skins of myriad oranges – got to be a hundred of 'em. Were they once in a bag, now vanished in the wind, that fell off a lorry? Did they drop by accident or design? So many bright demi-suns pancaked by a gazillion tires into a chromatically stunning ellipse.

Too late to stop. Now, since you don't want to ride over them, do you bike around to the right and into the traffic rushing past, or swing left, too close for comfort

to the door zone of the parked cars. Glance back over right shoulder, stop pedaling while cab wooshes by, then swerve behind and into the slipstream – take advantage of the displaced air.

• • •

Seeing is bereaving.

• • •

Everything in its propped-up place.

• • •

You'd think it would be safe to go to the New School of a Sunday afternoon and hear the Guaneri String Quartet, but from the opening notes of the Haydn, it's clear that something's gone awry. The second violin and cello seem more or less in tune with one another, but the first violin is sharp, plus his intonation's way off. And the viola, while smooth in his playing, sounds flat. The cellist, a substantially-built fellow, has the expressive, mobile face of a British character actor and you find yourself looking to him for clues to the fate of this particular universe.

On the heels Haydn, the quartet swing into the *allegro agitato e appassionato* movement of a 1926 piece in A-minor by Ernö Dohnányi – truly the end of our strife-torn world enacted in strings. Parts of the *andante religioso con variazioni* manage a kind of harmonic majesty despite the off-tunings, but by the start of the *vivace giosco* – giddyap! – it is revealed that these three movements are like strangers sharing a compartment in a trainwreck.

You and K., for Gwen wisely chose to be elsewhere, leave at intermission, foregoing the Mendelssohn F-minor, Op. 80. Who knows what you missed, maybe they tuned? It's a very ancient crowd you fall in with, making your way toward daylight. Fifteen years from today – no, less – this hall will be empty.

• • •

We've got a lot of carrion luggage.

• • •

There's something about an octopus in a uniform.

• • •

Pythonides, a well-swelled philosopher.

• • •

Villepin climbs down the tree. The French government, if one can use such a word, rescinds its First Employment Contract after massive labor and student strikes.

On these shores, by the hundreds of thousands, millions even, pro-immigration marchers take to the streets to block Resolution 4437 and assert the value of their presences. A news photo of a rally in Tyler, TX, shows a young woman holding a placard high. Painted on it side by side: the Stars and Stripes and the flag of Los Estados Unidos de Mexico. Her slogan reads (en Ingles, por favor): JUSTICE and DIGNITY for EVERYONE.

Closer to home, downtown at City Hall, Chung-Wa Hong, director of the New York Immigration Coalition spoke to a cheering crowd of the world's people: Korean, Hmong, Senegalese, Salvadorian, Chinese, Guyanese – name it we got it. "We are inseparable, indivisible and impossible to take out of America. We are New Yorkers!"

• • •

Insurge, insurge! That's the order of the day. Even to the highest heights. Will Nepal stay a dictatorship for long?

• • •

Burlesqoni (sic) tries to fix it.

• • •

Caravans bring the selected displaced back to New Orleans to vote for mayor. Somewhere in all of this, goddess rising.

• • •

The 9/11 story buried. But eventually, bones will tell.

• • •

South to Alaska.

• • •

The Pentagon PR spider spins a "long war." It's a long way to Tipperary.

• • •

I and thou. Naw, eye on Dow. Pull up the rope. But why bother? Ships a'going down.

Δ

Rhetoric precedes action like dusk betokens the night. Under "Top Story" on your default web page: *White House Blasts Iran's Nuclear Milestone*.

• • •

Urban blues:
I went down to Lego Town
Way on down to Lego Town
Lord, when you build a city out of Legos
It's so easy to knock down.

• • •

Not a hiccup in subway or bus service as Roger Toussaint, the union's non-leader is sentenced to jail for ten days.

• • •

For eons now you've followed the precepts of the great Sufi skeptic/mystic Ibn So.

Δ

Passover and out.

• • •

"Donald is the people's billionaire!" This a pull quote on a Learning Annex catalogue from a "student" who attended Trump's "course" at the Greatest Wealth Expo on Earth, in Lost Angeles.

• • •

So much out of the past floods your head these days. This morning, an image of your grandfather Meyer crumbling bacon into the eggs he was scrambling for your breakfast while singing "A Little Bit off the Top." Later you learned that there are two

versions of the ditty, one, a Cockney song about an insatiable dinner guest who's got designs on the whole of his host's pork roast. The other's naughtier and refers to circumcision. At five or six though, you thought "a little bit off the top" had to do with a haircut. Maybe because Meyer hummed most of the lyrics and only sang words to the chorus.

Δ

The greenest spring ever.

• • •

Via landbridge and/or boat: that extraordinary combination of Chinese and Viking that somehow yielded the features of those boys and girls named Sioux.

• • •

Strike's planned for Mayday. The idea is that immigrant workers will take the day not so much off, as for their own purposes. "We are one people. Change is coming whether you like it or not, and we're going to stick together and not allow anyone to manipulate us." Brave words from Councilman Charles Baron de Brooklyn. How real is any of this? Megacoverage of the "immigrant rights" movement. But class politics dare not speak its name.

• • •

Great music on the Lex platform at Union Square. Drum ensemble plus saxophone – Samba time.

• • •

"A man is called a microcosme because he may by his conceptions and words containe within him the representatives of what in the whole world is comprehended." In 1652, so said Sir Thomas Urquart in *The Jewel.*

• • •

A Chihuahua in Timberlands doth not a gray wolf make.

• • •

A rich sojourn at the Met. At the exhibit on Tibetan armor, you learn of the Five Qualities of Enjoyment – represented by a mirror, a lute, incense, fruit and silk.

On the front plate of a saddle, a pair of snow lions holds a tray bearing Seven Precious Jewels: books, coral, king's earrings, queen's earrings, rhino horn, elephant tusks, pearls. Another depicts a pair of creatures, half bird, half human – the *kinnara* or *shang-shang*. And dragons.

On to Egypt. An early myth explains the sun's setting and rise as the cyclical loss and recovery of Horus's eye.

A physician's manual circa 1600 B.C. deals with forty-eight different wounds to the head and body. It posits a kind of triage system: *1) An ailment I will handle. 2) An ailment I will fight. 3) An ailment for which nothing is done.*

Δ

Verbatim from a press conference with Donald Rumsfeld:

Reporter: Are you satisfied with the state of planning for Iran options now?

Rumsfeld: I am never satisfied.

No followup question on what the Defense Secretary thinks of the Rolling Stones.

Δ

Easter. New York is split. Not like a chicken without a head, but severed at the waist. Legs and hips running one way, trunk and head floating without an anchor. Lord, lord. This is the place to be sick today.

• • •

Subjects in Search of an Object – the pick hits of two weeksworth of junk email headers:

Grady Morgan. His coda crossbow. Right sharecrop ghent. Considering that software vendor. Gclean nno hellenistic. Susan Purcell. Humidify. Of sheep been run over battlements? Have animals been bludgeoned to. That drudge in canal. Cemetery jaywalker. Nitroglycerine not horsehair. Top-heavy. Parquet wide-eyed. End dayton adjudge. The compleat anisotropy. Ingrid impromptu. A praseodymium our. Only veal not graph. Little bacilli it's sharp. The primary sleight. Minnie the tulip. Baleful imp. However sustain in ecstasy. Taken tremulous the spill. Ursula was left thinking about Birkin He piqued her attracted her maybe. Fields, small and covered with young, bushy maize-plants skirted the. "Turkeys care nothing about you," he retorted, "It is nothing to them. Rapidlyo. Of silence so delay. Deceased to be known whether they work…

Δ

Folks are so used to things not mattering, that when – suddenly – they do: OMG! Followed hard upon by: G2G!

• • •

Herald Square: 34th Street at the crossroads of Sixth Avenue and Broadway. Here's where to find Minerva and her bell ringers, a bronze statue ensemble – one of the city's few mechanical sculptures – mounted on and surmounted by a granite monument to the James Gordon Bennetts, senior and Jr., who, *kan ya makan*, published the *New York Herald*. The bell ringers, more or less life sized, are dressed like old time foundry workers, are supposed to ring the hours, half and quarter too, pivoting round their

jointed waists and seeming to strike the enormous bell with their sledge hammers. Not really, though, because the actual chime mechanism is hidden within the granite pedestal and covered by a screen.

But today the clockwork's busted, so five p.m. passes with no pigeons scattering in alarm at the fearsome clangs, nor returning in the echoes to perch in the superstructure's niche, on green oxidized shoulders and arms, or, as you've sometimes seen them do, balance on the head of the bronze owl that serves as a finial atop Minerva's massive helmet. How long has the mechanism been out of order? It's been years since you were here exactly on the hour. Will the goddesses servants be restored to working order, or does one take this as a sign that wisdom's fled for good?

James Gordon Bennett Jr. fled New York alright alright. To Europe in the wake of a first-class Gilded Age scandal. Seems he showed up inebriated to a party at his fiancée's mansion and, in full view of the foregathered four hundred, strode up to the marble mantelpiece, hauled out his column inches, and relieved himself into the roaring fire. By 1918, when Jr. died, he'd long since returned to the helm of the *Herald,* and his name had passed into Cockney slang as the equivalent of *OMG, didja see that?!*

Your darling Gwenny arrives while you're sitting at a rickety wrought wire table in the little triangle of Herald Square Park musing on all of this and watching your fellow Gothamites smoke, drink from Starbucks cups and shmooze on cellphones. Downtown you walk together through the enormous press of pedestrians on Sixth Avenue. At the corner of 33rd Street, you spot a young woman, maybe sixteen, beyond average tall, wearing an outsized button on her cropped jacket. Only visible for an instant in the rush, you make out the words: *Darkskin Girlz Rule*.

Δ

a.m. E train uptown. A lot of guys who look a little like Dick Cheney. A couple whose faces reflect a soupçon of Vladimir Putin. Interminable escalator at Lexington Avenue. Loudspeaker crackles overhead. Here comes that announcement about cops making random searches of backpacks, but no, instead the voice booms: Ladies and gentlemen – due to a malfunctioning (pronounced "moll-functioning") signal, we are currently experiencing delays on B as in bonobo trains. Also on C as in chimp trains, G

as in gibbon, H as in howler, O as in orangutan, P as in purple-ass baboon, and S as in spider monkey trains. All other service is running normally.

• • •

"I fear O! I fear the waight of his mind has over come him! What will be the consequence?" William Clark, speaking in 1809, of Meriwether Lewis, who killed himself soon afterward.

• • •

Park Avenue will eventually be renamed Park Avenue in honor of some worthy Korean entrepreneur.

• • •

Waterboarding is not the same as surfboarding or water skiing. All three involve water, and boards in some form, plus the risk of drowning. But in the former, there is no surf, and no matter how skillful you are, there is no way to stand up and hang ten.

• • •

Also sprach Zapruder.

Δ

The narrative embrace.

• • •

No power, no point. Yesterday, and into this a.m., the Roosevelt Island tram seized up, leaving two cars stranded, dangling a couple of hundred feet and change

above the East River. Efforts to hand crank the cables proved unavailing. Hours passed before the sixty-eight riders, many of them children, were plucked one by one into a "diesel-powered bucket" and reunited, ultimately, with terra firma.

I left my heart in… hey, it's not just San Francisco *where little cable cars climb halfway to the stars…*

• • •

You used to make it a point to not walk under scaffolding, but this is no longer practical. Doubtful anyone's done a census, but they're ubiquitous – one or more to any given block, sometimes running parallel on both sides of a street, their conditions ranging through myriad states from reasonably trustworthy-looking to fuggedaboudit.

These days, if you cross the street to avoid one scaffold, you're likely to end up under another one. And risk, in the meantime, getting hit by a driver too preoccupied by their cellphone conversation to see you. So it only makes sense to zigzag if a scaffold appears likely to collapse, or you actually hear stuff falling from overhead. Usually then, it's through you go.

Not every time you end up beneath one, but often enough, you find yourself regretting not having started up a scaffolding business when you were a young fella. Even then it was obvious there'd be exponential future demand. Assemble it bam, bam, bam. Then, every day it stays up, kaching, kaching – the gift that keeps on giving. You'd have retired by now, a millionaire for sure. And used some of the dough to buy a publishing company. Renamed it Hardhat Brace.

• • •

Talk about looking down both barrels of a potentially disastrous strike. No, not the transit workers. Nor the firemen, cops or sanitation workers. Not nurses or teachers. Rather the brothers of Local 32-BJ. Unthinkable, a lacunae of white gloves and whistles, the packages and undelivered drycleaning piling up in posh lobbies. Who'll go a-hunting cabs in the rain and guide New York's neediest safely to the edges of their canopies? What will happen to 10021 and its ilk if doormen take a hike?

• • •

Write in the unconditional tense.

• • •

Surely one form of underground energy we can readily tap is the thermal power of so many righteous departed souls spinning in their graves.

Δ

Back in February a heavy snow fell and the newsmedia pronounced it New York's deepest ever at 26.9 inches. A lot of snow did fall, and very quickly too, but nowhere, in the aftermath, did you encounter a single person from any part of the city who had actually seen what looked like that much snow on the ground, even in Central Park, where the figure was recorded. Yet despite their observations to the contrary, most folks you talked with spoke of the record snowfall as an accepted truth.

Perhaps somewhere in the metropolitan area, 26.9 inches did fall. Or else someone stuck a stick diagonally into the highest drift they could find and made that the count official measurement. In any case it wasn't long before the notion that we'd been visited by deepest ever turned into a kind of white wallpaper of the mind, a cheaply acquired superlative moment we must have yearned for, or been too exhausted to question – a near-universal, collusive, self-deluding hoax. But hell, where's the harm in adding a foot or so of invisible snow to what was, undeniably, a real-life blizzard?

• • •

Some of the great snow of '06 lingered in the cold days that followed. Cars like yours that didn't have to move, just sat under their blankets. When alternate-side-of-the-street parking was reinstated, city snowplows made a great ridge of slush down the center of West 21st Street, between Ninth and Tenth where the Gray Ghost lives. The

plowing was a good idea in principle. Why not let the tires of passing cars squoosh the slush into a yet more liquid state and then, eventually, into the gutters it would flow. But it also happened, a few minutes after you found a parking space and pulled into it, that a FedEx truck skidded on the slippery stuff, the driver lost control and slammed into the rear end of the your car – something you did not see, but felt for sure.

As it happened, Tom was sitting in the passenger seat next to you and you'd just said the word "concrete," in reference to a narrative quality he'd added in revising his novel. Then whamo. Out you both got in a hurry certain, at least on your part, that the old Taurus had to be totaled, yet it wasn't. For all the noise of impact and incredible jolt, the only obvious consequence was a cracked rear bumper. Happily, Tom was OK – both of your headrests up, hence no whiplash.

When you got home, you called Kelly, with whom you had an appointment next day, and asked her to bring you some hit pills, Chinese herbal boluses which help balance out the aftersymptoms of a physical shock. Next day, you gave some to Tom with and injunction that he take them daily for a week. Maybe he did, more likely he didn't. They're an acquired taste for sure. Like eating a little compressed nugget of swamp. But they do the trick.

A few days later when you tried to start the car, the key turned and nada. You noticed then that you'd left headlight switch on. Of course you checked all the lights after the accident, but must have been more shook up than you realized because you'd forgotten to turn them off. Must be a drained battery, you thought. Not so. No amount of attempted jump-starting or charging would do the trick. The engine turned over, but wouldn't catch. Stumped, you stared through the windshield, and it came to you that you hadn't smelled gas, howevermuch you pumped the pedal. Could it be? Who knew? Turned out that this model Taurus was designed with the fuel pump in the gas tank and the whack from the truck had knocked it senseless.

What does this have to do with anything? Apart from the fact that a couple of guys on a crew renovating a townhouse near where you were parked spent a lot of time trying to help, and were most generous with their efforts until you realized the car needed to be towed to Brownfeld's shop, why write this at all, particularly now, two months later? What was it about this moment stuck with you firmly enough to jot it down out here in Montauk before picking the keys up off the table and driving the

same Gray Ghost a half mile down the road to the fish shack for dinner with Katie and Gwen?

Is it the quiet out here this past couple of days in Teddy and Ladan's cottage that broke the weave of the city blanket enough to let this burr through? True, you did pass by Brownfeld's yesterday to pay him some money you owed him before leaving town for the tip of Long Island. Maybe it's simple stuff. When you go away – vacate – perhaps some other element of mind steps in to have its say.

Δ

Forget who it was told you recently – BJ or some other reliable informant – that after 9/11 the destruction of the World Trade Center was referred to in Nepal, and certain other places, as "The Big Bomb."

Δ

It's early. Possibly your ears deceived you. Was the lyric of the song over the café speakers actually "you can't see tits on the radio?" No, this must be for, or of, your ears only.

Still…

• • •

Chairman Hu flips Bush the bird in DC and homes in on Chairman Gates in that more vital capitol, the one called Seattle but which more rightfully ought to be renamed Washington AC.

• • •

A movie ad projects from above a garage doorway on West 21st Street. The image is of a bigass RV teetering, half-impaled atop a jagged, acute-angled mountain peak. The latest Robin Williams vehicle. Headline: "On a family vacation, no one can

hear you scream."

Eastward, about eight floors up, a cloud of dark gray smoke belches out into the open air. Fire? Armageddon? Soon the smog dissipates and as you change your line of sight, the chimney comes into view and you realize it was just the fumes from a dirty furnace starting up. But here, on this gray day, bravely trying to lighten, without a soul visible on the block, you look down to find not your own shadow – there isn't one – but in order to visually connect with your feet. Keep walking to the melody: *Everyone's gone to the moon*.

• • •

Into the medical lab's generic waiting room come a pair of middle-aged fellows. The more vital-looking of the two assists his companion, who has the enervated affect of a chronic heart patient, to a chair in which he slumps. Amazing this guy. One foot in the grave, the other on a banana peel and still he gestures imperiously toward the magazines and commands: "Gimme a Forbes."

• • •

T'other day, bin Laden, in a tape released by Al Jazeera, said that Americans were the enemy, not our leadership per se. Strange twist that. As a child of the Cold War, you remember, even at times of really jacked-up rhetoric, that the Soviets were careful to paint Americans as, at bottom, innocents held in thrall to their capitalist paymasters. The leadership were the bad guys, not the mass of people. That was the general sentiment on both sides of the Iron Curtain as you recall it. From where we sat, the Russians were a bit crude, and very drab, misled by their dictators – a species of lesser European – but not fundamentally evil. The role of demonic body politic was reserved for China, North Korea and later Vietnam, as it once had been projected onto Japan. And Germany, albeit much more selectively, given kinship through the Brits.

But yeah, you'll cop to bin Laden's formulation – though it seems increasingly likely that he's is nothing but a fake beard and turban that transform a range of faces and physiques into a serviceable archetype. Whoever said it is right. The evil extends

way beyond Bush. It's down to we the people.

• • •

Stumbling through the internet in search of some recondite pearl of information you come upon the Tailhook glossary of aviator slang. Best entry: *My fun meter is pegged*. Means that, whatever it is, you're really not enjoying it any more.

• • •

According to a 17th Century Baptist account, a certain Ranter, Mrs. Paul Wayt, professed to doubt that the Virgin Mary or Jesus Christ had been actual persons. Something told her it wasn't so. "She knew it was truth according to the history, but not according to the mystery."

• • •

You wait for Gwen while, behind a red curtain that separates the space into two dancefloors, she takes her weekly ballroom class. Over the speakers comes a tricked-up version of another song Meyer used to sing: "After the Ball is Over."

• • •

Wouldn't it be fun to look into the relationship between "turbid *qi*" and Deadly Orgone, or DOR-clouds? To arrive, eventually, at a pan-cultural theory of energy? If one had several more lifetimes.

• • •

Johann Valentine Andreae, instigator of Rosicrucianism, compares the world to an amphitheater in which no one is seen in their true light. 1618. For three hundred and fiftyish years the *Narrenschiff* of the West sails on until it founders on the rocky

shores of the 1960s. There, Debord, describes the *Society of the Spectacle* as "the sun which never sets over the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire surface of the world and bathes endlessly in its own glory.… In a world which *really is topsy-turvy*, the true is a moment of the false."

• • •

Lubridium. Latin for a plaything or trivial game. *Lubridia ventis*: the plaything of the winds.

• • •

Accept no miracles!

Δ

34th Street and Madison. Morning. Next to you, waiting for the WALK sign, stands a natty young fellow, carrot tanned and chewing gum. He wears shades, an acid green shirt and black pants, white pin-striped. He blows a bubble and the substance that balloons out of his mouth matches the color of his shirt. Wow. The light changes and he's off ahead of you. So you get to see the shoulder bag slung across his back. A Prussian blue Manhattan Portage, like Gwen's. Then you notice the mediocre square-toed brown shoes. Between these two, the look is ruined.

• • •

Title for a children's book to be written in one of those future lives: *The Little Windmill That Flew Away*.

• • •

Press opening for the new Renzo Piano-fied Morgan Library and Museum. On the red-brown paneled benefactor's wall, among scores of other names, Sunny Crawford von Bulow. Bequests by the comatose – what wonderful things are possible in the world of the invisible hand!

You perch on the second floor balcony, twenty feet or so above the heads of the seated crowd. The Morgan's director, working manfully to flex his lockjaw, introduces il architetto, who steps to the podium. You've got to say Piano has a great vibe, seems modest and reserved, though between his accent and the boom of the speakers, you can't understand a word he says. From this vantage, you can take in the whole unifying structure. It's a gorgeous space, offices included, simple and mostly naturally lighted, elegantly proportioned. Where things start feeling oppressive is in the gallery itself. Well laid out, evenly lit, but the room feels gray and dead, the ceiling too low. But strangely, the manuscripts appear concrete and alive within their cases.

What a light, calligraphic hand Schumann had. Then there's Pound in 1912, whacking away in black and red ink at printer's proofs of his translation of Guido Cavalcanti's Sonnets and Ballate. Next, a twelve-foot-long scroll, perhaps four inches wide, of a Poe manuscript, "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains," circa 1844.

On a notesheet from The Mayfair Hotel in Berkeley Square London, WI, writ just below the coat of arms – a trio of lions, each standing on three legs and waving a forepaw – a ballpoint pen beginning: "It ain't me." Then a line break and "It ain't me babe it ain't me you're looking for." And it goes on from there, though most of what follows never made the cut. 1963, they say, or 1964. Why didn't they just call Dylan up and ask him? Maybe they did.

Written in Dumfries, in January 1795, in a bold, slightly running-downhill hand, a letter containing song verses from Robert Burns to a musicologist and editor who replied that the opening lines were "obscurely worded" and the suggesting that the song ought to begin with the second stanza. Burns held his ground and the first verse stayed. Thus "A Man's a Man for a' That" came down as its author intended, to be sung countless times, yea even at the inaugural meeting of the Scottish Parliament, two hundred years later.

By now you're getting overwhelmed. Dylan Thomas's crab-handed "Lament":

When I was a windy boy and a bit

And the black spit of the chapel fold…

And in the upper right corner of the page:

bite	*but*
bat	*beak*
boat	*bait*
bought	*boot*
bleat	
bright	

Wilde is here too, a 1894 typescript with revisions for *An Ideal Husband*. Who knew he typed? No, he didn't. Sent the manuscript out to a certain Mrs. Marshall's Type Writing service.

Mrs. C.: What are you going to do with that silly document of mine?

Lord G.: With the last dying speech and confession of the beautiful Mrs. Cheveley? I am going to use it.

That's it. You're outahere. One more little scrap. Galileo's notes on the satellites of Jupiter, that found their way into his *Starry Messenger* in 1610. Hard, hard, hard to recant what you've observed.

Almost gone. A diagonal walk across the atrium, now cleared of chairs, and into the east room of Morgan's old library. On a mission, scanning the book spines behind their glassed-in, brass-grilled cages. In the shelves, there it is, bound in blue: *Food for the Young*, published in London by Darton & Co. in 1823.

Shanksmare then, down Mad. then a jog over to Fifth. Pass a deli, Au bon goût. Caveat emptor: if you don't watch your goût, you might get gout. Senses overloaded, you walk straight past the next peripheral stimulation before marshalling the will to turn back to take in the ribbons, thousands of them, yellow and blue. They hang from the iron railing of the Marble Collegiate Church. Now and again animated by the breeze, each ribbon bears a name tag with the rank and age of the soldier at the date of her or his death. You glance at the section of fence running along 29th Street, half again as long as the one fronting Fifth Avenue. That's saturated too. They've run out of

space, but not out of war. Have to start doubling up. At the corner, a placard makes reference to the "over 30,000 Iraqis who have lost their lives" to military action in the three years since the war began. "We pray for the day that war is no longer an option."

Onward. A couple, man and woman, heading your way. She's riding a motorized wheelchair-cum-scooter. He walks alongside, holding one of her hands while she steers with the other. Heartwarming their affection, but visually amazing too. The man is normally proportioned from the waist up, but his legs are severely truncated and slightly bowed. Which, in the scheme of things, makes him the perfect height for their handclasp.

Almost home. Down 27th Street and past the Radio Wave building where Nicola Tesla once lived. On the ground floor, a handful of storefront businesses, mostly wholesalers. But one of the shops, the Broadway Wireless Center, offers cell phones and "accessories" retail. Is Nicola out there somewhere laughing, or what? Flanking the building's main entrance, twin terra cotta reliefs, the earth and sea. Blossoms above, conjoined porpoises below.

• • •

Yesterday, after walking with a considerable entourage across the Brooklyn Bridge to Manhattan, Roger Toussaint, the TWU's leader reported for ten days in the Tombs. Far away in Old Virginnie, Zacarias Moussaoui, the presumptive twentieth hijacker – an odd description, considering he was in jail on 9/11 – had his fate placed in the hands of a jury several generations devolved from anything Henry Louis Mencken, the Sage of Balitimore, America's Nietzsche, author of the infamous "Bathtub Hoax," could have imagined. Moussaoui, for his part, seems convinced that he will be released and flow to London on a 747. In his shoes, why not hold out for a reinstitution of transatlantic Concorde service. Why not shoot the moon. Go supersonic.

It is worth noting that Judge Leonie Brinkma denied the jury's request to be furnished with a dictionary on the grounds that it would amount to adding new evidence. And she warned them against any online searches for definitions.

• • •

Death of Jane Jacobs.

Δ

Gordon bloody Bennett! That's it, you've seen everything. This morning in French Roast on Sixth and 11th, a tall, slender fellow walked in who not only resembled but seemed to *channel* Natty Bumppo himself. Long, fringed, apparently deerskin coat, moccasins, judicious feathers, longer than shoulder-length hair, all the accoutrements of the Pathfinder. Lord, where did go from there?

• • •

The opposable thumb is overrated. One certainly doesn't need it to operate a keyboard and mouse.

• • •

As Charon said when he delivered the two hundred pound prostitute to the other shore, "That's a tough ho to row."

• • •

Possible epitaph: In one era and out the other.

Δ

The young woman walks into the sea, her right forearm encased in a cast and held above her head. In your dream, you felt the root of her moving. Waves slap against her thighs, belly, chest. When the waves retreat she advances until she stands exactly where she wants to be. Waves roll in and she rises in the swell. You witnessed

this at Jones Beach nearly three years ago, but the image recurs, awake and asleep, every now and again.

This morning, as you write this, it's exactly six o'clock. The sun chooses its targets, falls full measure on the north faces of the Chase building, Silverstein's new WTC7 and a World Financial Center tower. Further to the east, beyond and above the roof garden of the Chelsea Hotel, several blocks as the crow flies, the upper window of an anonymous red brick building appear to be exploding in copper light. By the time this ink of that last sentence is dry, the glow has dimmed to barely noticeable and the hottest things on the skyline are three flashing beacons atop a tower downtown and, seen through a gap, another that must be very far away, in Brooklyn.

Downstairs, the fresh macadam surface of Eighth Avenue, newly perforated with white lines. Furthest toward the curbs, a parking lane. Four traffic lanes and bordering the westernmost, a narrow strip designated for bikes. That's a laugh. Try to ride along one of those. Hardly dawn yet and already there are two vehicles between here and 23rd Street, one a cop car, parked in the bike lane and blocking it. On the other hand, no cyclists abroad yet. We shall see. See what the day has to show.

• • •

More and more Katrina emerges as a preemptive strike against African America – Africa in America – in the present and coming civil war. Who knows on what level the message has been received?

But here's a good, if bitter larf: on *Sippiana Hericane*, Dr. John's post-Katrina suite, his accompanying musicians are collectively called "The Lower 9/11 Band."

• • •

Fragments from a *New York Post*:

"Sounds fishy, but it's true. A 3-foot gulf sturgeon jumped into a boat on the Suwanee River in Bell, Fla., and hit a woman in the face…

"It's meant to deodorize, not terrorize – but Norwegian officials have barred the sale of L'Oréal perfume from all duty-free shops at the Oslo airport. The perfume,

Flowerbomb, comes in a bottle shaped like a hand grenade and officials fear that extremists might be tempted to use it to scare passengers…"

• • •

The hidden hand is waving goodbye.

• • •

We've double crossed the Rubicon.

• • •

Hey now (hey now)
Hey now (hey now)
Iko iko un day
Jockomo feeno ah na nay
Jocomo feeno nay

My marraine see your parrain
Sitting by the bayou
My marraine to your parrain
Gonna fix your *signifier*.

• • •

Thirteen years since the Golden Venture, bound from Kenya to New York ran aground three hundred years off Rockaway carrying nearly three hundred Chinese refugees on the transatlantic leg of their circuitous voyage from Fujian. Ten drowned, the rest spent four years in federal detention. About a hundred later deported. Now thirty have applied for legal status.

• • •

Said Jane Jacobs in *The Death and Life*… "There is a quality even meaner than outright ugliness or disorder and this meaner quality is the dishonest mask of pretended order, achieved by ignoring or suppressing the real order that is struggling to exist and be served."

And as of today, they're officially building at the WTC site, nearly two years after the silver*stein*, er, cornerstone, was laid. "Hoy, vamos a construir La Torre de Liberdad," quoth Guv Pataki to Univision Channel 41. Whatever may or may not be built there, some us will always remember it best as the Freedom Hole.

• • •

In the decade or so years the Rite Aid drugstore has squatted at the northeast corner of 24th Street and Eighth like an unwelcome sentinel of suburban blight, its red illuminated signs have never worked properly. Tonight one face reads Rite Ai, and the other simply Aid.

Δ

Swim back to where you came from through the tall grass.

• • •

You can tell it's toxic because all the rats are eating it up.

• • •

Mass suicide seems to be as close as we can get to a collective act. *The Da Vinci Code* coming to a theater near you. And yours. Smell of hype like death in the air.

The other day on the way up to meet with Paul on the 37th floor of the Hilton slab in midtown, you shortcut from the street to the elevator bank through a restaurant

called NY Marketplace. A nausea gripped you at the smell of the so-called food, and it redoubled walking down the upstairs hallway to Paul's suite past room cleaning carts oozing scents made less for hygiene than charnel coverup. Oy, oy, oy, can this be it – the sum of all plausible worlds?

• • •

Where were you when the levee breached?

Δ

This is what dumbocracy looks like. Yes, Bush is stupid. But first we had to be. Yes, he is arrogant and needy, but we got there first. He has the least freedom or autonomy of all, being just the tip of the drillbit of our great machine.

• • •

"The 101st has no history. But it has a rendezvous with destiny." Thus spake Maj. Gen. William C. Lee on August 19th, 1942 to the troops of his new airborne division. The "no history" tag comes onscreen just after a scream from a cartoon eagle unleashes a swarm of Apache helicopters that fly toward the viewer's face.

This is the intro to *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, the official rock video of the 101st's mission in Iraq underpinned by the massive percussion and reedy vocals of Phil Collins's "In the Air Tonight (Oh Lord)." Did he give permission? Who's to say? Fast cuts of military prep – pushups to polishing shell tips to takeoff, then the commander's voiceover, scratchy as though over a field radio: "Skydogs, skydogs, this is Eagle 6: The 101st's next rendezvous with destiny is north to Baghdad. Opord Desert Eagle II is now in effect. Godspeed. Air Assault. Out."

All hell breaks loose, faster cuts. Grainy men targeted from above in brackets, torn to smithereens along with the flimsy stuff they hide behind, trucks, houses. "Are you ready for a good time?" screams some metal rocker. Right, you've heard this before, how could you forget? AC/DC. On to "Carmina Burana," under visuals of

sickly green nightfighting. Next, disconcertingly, Blind Faith's "Can't Find My Way Home," wistful Winwood vocals and all. Worst of all, the shots of Iraqis receiving handouts, tanking up at the gas station under the watchful eye of a soldier, babies cradled in full camo arms.

Then a general addresses the troops, tells them that the reason the Iraqis are so grateful is because "their days of being raped and murdered are coming to an end." The finale: the men and women of the 101st mourning for fallen comrades. What sounds like a field recording of soldiers singing "Amazing Grace," fast fading to a lone bagpipe. This plays over a black screen, where, instead of the credits, the names of the division dead parade in white. Last words, full screen:

The soldiers of the
101st Airborne Division
(Air Assault) are
honored to have given
the people of Iraq the
greatest gift…

Crossfade to:

…their freedom.

• • •

"It is important at this point to state that there is no one definite principle available *a priori* and enabling a classification suitable for every purpose to be made….

The necessity of introducing some classification and the caprice attaching to it is most striking…in history (where) he necessity continually arises of making distinctions which are seen on closer consideration to be fluid and inadequate."

So wrote Max Planck in his *Philosophy of Physics*. A lucid moment, back in '36.

• • •

Desert niggers, sand niggers, desert niggers – who are we?

• • •

On an expedition upstate with Katie and her fellow mushroom enthusiasts, you found four morels in the same abandoned orchard where you totally struck out last year. The trick, such as it is, is to get down low – it's a focal length exercise. And home in on trees in just the right state of semi-decay. Now that you know what you're looking for and how to look for it, there'll be no more morel vacillation in future, no siree.

Δ

Yesterday, the town of St-Denis – home to the first great high Gothic cathedral, in which traditionally the Kings and Queens of France lay interred – inaugurated a new street: Rue Mumia Abu-Jamal. Thus, however symbolically, do Black Panthers come to inhabit this immigrant banlieue, located just on the other side of the Périphérique, if not the tracks, from Paris.

• • •

As the hermet crab said to the barnacle: *location, location, location*.

• • •

Locution, locution, locution.

• • •

Ipseity is the spice of life. And Katie's sautéed morels on toast ain't so bad neither. Worth the scrambling in the brambles for sure.

Δ

Mayday. A fantastic tsunami of greed sweeps around the globe. People by the hundreds of millions cling to their straw bales even as these are wrenched away.

But in New York…

• • •

Questions for a different day: *Daddy, mommy, why isn't the sky blue?*

• • •

5 p.m. You arrive with Gwen at her ballroom dance class. Usually when you wait for her, you sit facing the dancefloor. Though you can't see her group – the young 'uns gather behind a red velvet curtain – the adults students, as well as the advanced and pro dance partners practicing routines are fun to watch when you pull your nose out of your book.

This time though, you take a chair that faces the opposite way, toward the high windows facing south. Late afternoon sun sparks silver-white off the bubbles of two choppers – police? – strategically placed like pinned, buzzing insects, seemingly aligned on a north by northeast axis. The closest one seems to hang over a spot you'd guess is 29th Street and Fifth Avenue. The further one is positioned roughly above Union Square where the big immigration rights rally kicked off an hour ago.

Other choppers ply an east-west course between the two fixed ones, lending dynamic motion to the sky-cross. The air itself, its hue blunted by a daysworth of chem and contrails is about as blue as an afternoon gets in these parts.

Big media plays up the immigrant rights eruption like it's the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade and 9/11 all in one. Anything to keep the atoms from connecting their dots. Here, there and everywhere, you're reminded of the ancient thirty-six tactics, grouped into four stratagems loosely translated as Deception, Confrontation, Opportunism, Retrenchment. This one falls squarely into the first group: "Stage a false show of sight and sound."

You switch your chair round to face the accustomed way, wave and say hi to an *abuela* you've come to recognize – an elegant, silver-haired woman who occupies a fraction of her time waiting for her granddaughter by blazing through the *Daily News* crossword puzzle.

Out of the elevator, walking with the aid of a tubular aluminum cane, comes another grandmotherly sort. You've seen her here before too. Age has rounded her in all directions, but her face retains the chiseled, high-cheekboned look you associate with Tina Turner, upward even to her spike-teased hair. All in denim today, save for her white sneakers and teeshirt. Her jacket's open just enough for you to read: LORD, Hide Me in Your Tabernacle.

Gwen and class parade out across the dancefloor in pairs. The gentlemen and ladies thank one another formally, and whamo!, class dismissed. Downstairs, zigzagging southwest, block by block toward pizza, you dodge what first you think is an outsized fly, then in quick succession, two more airborne anomalies. Angle your vision up and see that these are black, oval curls of ash, scores of 'em, descending. "Yeech!" says Gwen. To her it looks like something out of an *anime* come real. And then quick as they clustered, the ashes thin to nothing more.

There was, midday – apparently – a huge fire over toward the river. You heard the sirens, then saw upwards of a dozen trucks and a couple of chief's cars zooming west across 23rd Street. But there was nothing on the news at noon, nor now online, as it gets on to 8:30 p.m. Will the fire stay a mystery? Maybe the story reveals itself tomorrow, or the day after, or later still. Return to the news. The black flood of greed: Chevron's up by fifty percent last quarter.

• • •

8:36 and sirens again. But this is an ambulance heading up Eighth and turning east on 23rd. The sound fades in to the hiss, counterpointed by honks, that swells at times into a low roar, then a gradual diminuendo, that makes it possible to hear now and again, noises in the other rooms of your own apartment.

And now you'll do something you don't often do. At the end of this sentence, you'll raise your pen off the paper and sit very still.

• • •

Tom calls. He lives in London Terrace, aka The Mother Ship, over toward Tenth. Aha, he knows. Fire first misreported as being in his building. Then, somewhere else. Turned out to be a rooftop fire, tar and all sorts of crap, atop a tenement on the northwest corner of Ninth and 24th – the one with the terrific restaurant, Grand Sichuan International on the ground floor. Yes, and as you recall, a battalion of cellphone relays ranged round the perimeter of the building's roof like sentinels, or fortress crenellation from outer space.

Is it possible? Black ash might've blown high up, then drifted down hours later. You'll ride by the building tomorrow morning after Ba Gua and assess the damage. Jeeze, and from here it seemed the whole of Chelsea Piers must have been burning down. Mayday!

Δ

No obvious signs of a fire from where you sit, pedaling down Ninth on your bike. Restaurant gate's pulled down. Which doesn't mean much at this early hour. Scan without stopping or slackening your pace – sideways up, then back over your shoulder. No change from the last time you noticed: right-angled rows of gray metal electronic boxes still hold the rooftop's strategic perimeter. One thing odd: a rope and pulley scaffold hangs from the cornice, unmanned, off-angled.

In front of Le G., the already gray sky is darkened by smoke from a huge blaze in Greenpoint – more than this you don't yet know. You watch the unending flow of vehicles down Ninth Avenue. A MTA Homeless Outreach van, empty but for the driver and his companion, but plenty of room in back to strap 'em in once they've been collected and make sure no one gets lost on the way to the shelter. Close behind, a big brown truck whose flank reads Miracle Relocations in bold white letters. Now comes the smaller Ciao Bella truck alive with color, a logo a bit like a licking tongue, presumably packed with highly profitable containers of flavored ice water.

Shoot the breeze with Eric B. Truck spotting. Unwilling to move off this spot on the levee, the weather neither cool nor warm – no feeling precisely – except the lyric comes into your head: *Waiting for the Robert E. Lee*.

Biking home, the stuff of a very disturbing dream from last night returns. An authoritative, paternal fellow you speak with only on the phone, but whose features are clear in your mind, inveigles you into working for the CIA. Katie's also in the room conversing with a thin, tall, gray-haired and sharp-featured man with the result that you can't make out what your controller on the other end of the line is saying. You've been assigned to Prague, a much more glamorous Prague than the one in RL, so this constitutes a plum gig – news that will delight Katie when you tell her. Unless you blow it. You gesture to her not to talk so loudly. Jeez, doesn't she understand what's at stake?

The visuals of the dream get fuzzy, but you begin to feel ill, realizing you've been corrupted, that you slid effortlessly into working against all your own principles. And the wonder it is that even your suave controller didn't have to use your radical past as leverage-cum-blackmail – somehow you passed through the revolving door with nary a hitch to find yourself, definitively, nauseously, on the other side.

Lord lord lord. Lord love a duck. Ah yes, and the big Mayday surprise, south of the border: Evo Morales nationalizes Bolivia's natural gas industry. Does that mean we're moving from national socialism to natural socialism? If so, what a gas!

• • •

Five-ish. Down Eighth Avenue, through Chelsea and into the village, The prevailing winds bring a steady scent of those seven – seven! – burning warehouses in Greenpoint. Not the same smell, but its pungency resonates with that four and a half-year-old September surprise. Along the way, at around 15th Street, a big guy in a leather jacket, walking too loose, too cool, pauses to spit, but spits on hisself. Stoned.

Δ

Dream in which you're riding home on a flat rear tire. Hence, on your way to the café in RL, you notice, with a bit of a start, that you're rolling round the corner of Ninth and 25th very smoothly, no kathunk, kathunk. Ah now, looking back over your shoulder more carefully this time, you can see the toasted, half-melted transponders along the roof at the back of the Grand Sichuan building.

When, awake. you get to the café, Mark and Bruce tell you about the blaze, how somehow with all the water that must've been cascading down, and the presence of a host of fire trucks, the restaurant stayed open and filled with customers throughout.

Δ

A fig leaf of the imagination.

Δ

42nd Street uptown IND. Friday p.m. Rush hour. A thin black man with sharp features and no legs barrels down the wheelchair ramp negotiating the ninety degree corners with incredible alacrity. Wotta technique. Much faster descent than most folks taking the stairs even two at a clip. Near where the ramp meets the platform, a slender fellow, Asian, bows a stringed instrument about fourteen inches tall that he holds vertically resting on his thigh: *Ave Maria*.

Out and up at 59th Street. Set a short spell in the newly renovated uber-fountained Columbus Circle. To the south, beneath black mesh and scaffolding, they've peeled off the –was it marble? – cladding of the old Hunting Hartford Building. Down to the bare concrete shell. What next? Peer up at the knife edges of the Time-Warner towers. How many billions live up there? A work scaffold suspended on pulleys from a gantry atop the south tower sways slightly toward and away from the glass facing. What next?

Wonderful how the fountains nearly drown out the chopper hanging over CPW at about 63rd Street. And the gushing water mutes the traffic noise too. Damn near perfect half moon across the park about thirty degrees up the blue skydome from the spire of the Pierre.

Head west on 58th. Half of the folks on this street are pulling some kind of wheeled valise – baggage of a thousand shapes and sizes. You flash on a memory of a young Asian woman who walked into Le G. yesterday afternoon. Built like a BSH she was, tight jean'd and a black tank top, low cut, with a big white-lettered message across the front: *Fuck you fucking you fuck* or something to that effect if not verbatim since you didn't give enough of a fuck to memorize it.

In front of John Jay College of Criminal Justice on Tenth Avenue you wait for Gary to come out of his office. You'll walk over to MoMA together and catch the Edvard Munch show. Gary's a member – already been to see the Munch several times, but this is your last chance since it closes right quick. The plan is thus: Gary lends you Maki's card and you just put your thumb over her name when the admissions guard scans the barcode. And who's to say you're not Maki anyway?

An empty plastic bag sweeps north along the sidewalk motivated by the fetid breeze. Half-crumpled, its – you almost said "his" – movement generates a faint, consistent hiss.

Δ

Li Zi Ming, the author of your book on Ba Gua, asserts that Qian (yang) heaven, and Kun (yin) earth, can alternate. "The real meaning of true and false," says Li, "can change at any time. The anterior hand is true and the posterior hand is false, or vice versa. One hand alone can also be divided into true and false, the two legs can be divided into true and false, the upper and lower parts of the body can be divided into true and false, and all the directions can be divided into true and false."

• • •

Ibn 'Arabi: association between Imagination, Breath, and the increasing transparency of the veiled.

The "'effusion of being' that is the 'sigh of compassion' flows through the things of the world like the waters of a river and is unceasingly renewed."

• • •

A very poor country this, rich in crappy signifiers.

Δ

It's a thin line between ideology and delusion and some of us have slipped over.

• • •

TMT = too many tatts.

• • •

Up to Van Cortlandt Park and off the paved path to wander the two main trails and myriad smaller diversions in between. First north following the old Croton Aqueduct, then across the top of the golf course and down the old Penn Central railroad bed. At times, the decomposing ties intrude onto the path, but mostly they're covered in new growth. Occasionally, a metal plate, half-visible amidst the shoots. You dislodge one, along with the bent, pitted spike that once held it firm against the now rotten, yielding wood. Nominally, the two of you were on a morel-hunting expedition, on the lookout for distressed elms around whose roots the prized fungi are reputed to grow. But many of the Van Cortlandt elms appear, thankfully, in rude health, and you find the dead or ailing ones surrounded by mustard garlic, an anti-fungal, not to mention copious insurgencies of poison ivy. Ah well. No morels, no cry.

On the subway downtown, the most stylish person you've seen in years – in fact, to call her stylish damns with faint praise. Five three, say, slightly-built, Japanese, about twenty, she wears a black knit hat, despite the mild temp, emblazoned with grinning white skulls and a long, horizontally striped long knit top. All those clues and it's a beat or two before you get it: She's doing "pirate." Every so often, she takes a pull from a dome-topped plastic cup, its yellow straw three times thicker than the usual sort. Café something or other printed on the cup and the greenish mixture she draws in

seemed laced with blueberries. Aha. A blueberry-friendly straw. Though straight-faced, in some peculiar way she seems to be laughing with every molecule of her being. Would that Gwen were along for the ride to see this full-blooded *anime* princess, entirely unto herself.

• • •

La old grammaire ain't what she used to be.

• • •

First use of napalm in combat. American aerial bombardment of the German stronghold in the citadel of St-Malo, August, 1944.

• • •

Are devices divisive?

Δ

What exactly did happen in 1984?

• • •

Rearranging icebergs in the North Atlantic.

• • •

On NPR radio this a.m., a clip of Arlen Spector disapproving of Bush's nominee for head of the CIA. Spector's voice is redolent with a combined corruption and self-importance – qualities as telltale to the ear, as unmistakable in their own way, as the raspy imprint of cigarettes and booze. Traces of a life lived, truthful beyond words.

In commenting on the downing, in Basra, of a British military helicopter and the subsequent "unrest" on the streets, the BBC's Andrew North observed a "dramatic change in attitude." Is he correct? Did the celebratory outburst that followed the chopper's crash, which killed all those aboard, signify a shift in attitude, or did it more accurately represent a pot of sentiment from which the lid had been momentarily removed?

• • •

They used to say "You are," or such-and-such is, "driving me to distraction." What does one say now, in a state of more or less permanent distraction, when all forces are mobilized toward evermore refracted mindstates?

Afternoon. On the downtown IRT local you sit. A woman stands in front of you, grasping the overhead rail with both hands. With each sway of the train, a swath of her belly floats toward and away from the tip of your nose. The belly, per se, is fine. It's the package you find offputting. Her hair has been waved, Medusa-style, and processed into an odd shade that oscillates between rose gold and burnt umber. A hardness to her face, lips outlined much darker than the gloss tone. What you can readily see of her teeshirt reads:

ANYTIME
ANYPLACE
ANYWHERE

The fourth and presumably concluding line of this message lies hidden by the narrowing v of her cropped jacket, but you content yourself with not knowing the full text, rather shift your eyes, to the degree possible around her to focus on the poster for HSBC, "the world's local bank" across the aisle.

The graphics consist of a mosaic of fifty or so little headshots supposed, apparently, to represent the city's multifarious population. Each face is superimposed with an adjective: Grand, Dumb, Wicked, Bright, Huge, Ecstatic, Rotten, Gross, Alluring – each word purporting to answer the question posed by the headline: *New York Is?*

So many adjectives, eight million maybe, each distilled to an epithet: Hot, Tense, Quiet, Dull, Rude, Lacking, Greedy, Sublime, Cruel…

Yes, and why not Dopey, Sleepy, Grumpy into the bargain? High ho!

• • •

Just ahead of the G-8, Cheney attacks the Russians – noise to distract from his mad grabbing of Caspian Sea resources, not to forget Iran. The Kremlin issues no rebuttal, apart from describing his words as "completely incomprehensible."

Rotten, Wicked, Lacking, Greedy, Cruel…

Δ

Back then, at the end of the Movement, delivering film reels on your bicycle, you were Mercury. And that's really what you've always done. Is anything your own, or is your whole being caught up in facilitating communication among the squabbling gods?

• • •

Fascinating, the day we realized that the images in those caves weren't painted, but extruded from the rock itself.

• • •

Headline – top story – in the online *Times*: "Iranian's Letter to Bush Emerges." As though describing a document written in invisible ink and held up to the light. But these words are not free, their luminescence has been sponsored. So what's powering that bulb, the one that allows us to read Ahmadinejad's words? Click on the headline and the story comes up. And next to it, an advertisement, far more visually compelling than the picayune text that takes up the righthand third of the web page

"HOLY COW!" *Can it happen here?* This headline and its subordinate colored white against a graphic, sepia-toned, of the New York skyline being sliced diagonally

across by a massive tornado – its funnel reaching way higher into the darkened sky than the silhouetted spire of the Empire State building. From upper right to lower left the twister swirls – all of Chelsea and the Flatiron district engulfed in a cloud of debris. "Mega Disasters. Series Premiere, May 9th." And below this – somewhere at bedrock level were this depiction a cutaway – the chiseled gold-on-red Roman capital H logo of the History Channel.

Ah, but then there's Ahmadinejad's letter itself – the first direct communication from an Iranian political leader to an American President since 1979. Its content is extraordinary too. And it brings home, all in all, that there is a great difference between people willing to die themselves and people willing to have other people die for them.

• • •

Belo Horizante, Beautiful Horizon. With 2.3 million souls, it's the fourth largest city in Brazil, capital of the state of Minas Gerias. Often called "Beagá," from the sounds of its initials in Portuguese, it was founded by a prospector in 1751 and built on the site of a village, Curral d'el Rey, Corral of the King. Interesting demographic: the majority of Beagá's inhabitants are female – a hundred and seventy-five thousand more women then men. And then there's the illusion of Ruao do Amendoim, Peanut Street, a sloping road where parked cars appear to roll uphill, defying gravity.

Δ

Early a.m. Back to chill, overcast early spring. Recent shifts in the wind direction were, it seems, in vane.

• • •

Late a.m. Flatiron. A young whitefella, carrot-tanned, slacks, blue button-down, into his cellphone: "He makes one phone call and I lose the apartment because I'm not supposed to…"

• • •

Why do you suddenly notice them more: bands of young adults, kids really, in mini-tribes, affiliated with one another but seemingly disaffected from the street, like they're tourists. But they're not.

Globalize that. Where *do* they live? What stuff do their roots tap into, or are they airborne plants? To some extent, they look like peddlers, carrying all manner of things. But these are their possessions, they live within a nimbus of signifying object. What ever will they produce?

• • •

Early p.m. As you pass, the door of Dunkin' Donuts on Eighth Avenue opens and out staggers a man with olive skin drawn tight over his facial bones. Black tattoos of skulls ring his neck, like a thick collar. That's all you can handle. Turn away.

• • •

In ancient Egypt, a "heart scarab," depicting a dung beetle, was used extensively in funerary rites. Often cut from green stone, and placed on the chest, the scarab insured that the heart would not bear witness against the deceased at judgment in the Afterlife.

Believing dung beetles to be exclusively male creatures who reproduced by burying their semen in a dung ball, the Egyptians associated them with Khepri, "he who has come into being," an embodiment of the sun, who created himself out of nothing. Thus Khepri rolls the solar ball over the horizon at dawn and across the sky until nightfall. He carries it through the other world to be renewed at break of day.

The ceiling on the tomb of Ramses VI – who reigned around three thousand years ago, and was buried near Tutankhamen in the Valley of Kings – shows the sun being swallowed by Nuit, goddess of the night, and re-emerging from her womb as Khepri.

• • •

Le G. At night, after hours, the chairs start dancing and get so excited, they jump on the tabletops by themselves. But next morning, someone has to coax them down, because really, they're afraid of heights.

If you get there at eight, and the staff's still setting up the place, you lend a hand. Funny though how Marnie, alone among that crew, and otherwise so open of affect, looks daggers at you if you offer to help.

Δ

What a wild world. Here are the sheep, masses of us, shorn and shivering. And the shearers give us a bit of our own fluff, enough for a sad kind of Gogolian overcoat, and we the sheeple melt with gratitude, gambol about proudly displaying our riches. Is there for honest nakedness? Who will stand up on their hind legs for it? Are sheep fierce in their dreams? And whom do we count, jumping over what, when sleep eludes us?

• • •

New drawings for a Forest City Ratner project, Atlantic Yards, in Brooklyn, a vast complex with sixteen enormous highrises designed by Gehry. These plans differ slightly from the drawings Gehry "leaked" last year, the ones that stunned local residents with their sheer, stupendous scale. Nor is the current version necessarily representative of the way the final project will look, says FCR. Yet this is the old game again. The doctor proposes taking the leg off at the hip and ultimately the patient is grateful only to be losing the limb at mid-thigh.

And what, what the hell does the name Forest City Ratner mean? What forest? A forest of City?

• • •

Proposal for a new soapless opera to be called *As the World Turns Upside Down*. Instead of soap, body wash.

• • •

In your rear view mirror, a Sikh in brown pants, beige jacket and a fiery red turban quicksteps across Ninth Avenue as the light turns in favor of the advancing cars. In his right hand, he holds a takeout cup filled with, well, if you had to guess, tea.

10:30 a.m. You're legal. Roll up the windows, affix The Club to the steering wheel, pat the Gray Ghost on the dashboard, grab your backpack, lock the doors and splitsville!

• • •

Taken to task by Dick Cheney for his differing interpretation of "democracy," Vladimir Putin, Tsar of all the Russias, rejoinders: "Comrade wolf knows whom to eat, he eats without listening, and he's clearly not going to listen to anyone."

Change the national bird to the bald wolf.

• • •

Ishkabibble!

Δ

What did Delaware, boys,
What did Delaware?
She wore her brand New Jersey…

Late a.m. Escalator down at Penn to the New Jersey Transit tracks and the train to Princeton Junction. Off toward your annual perambulation-conversation with Cousin Jane. Down a gray womblike tunnel with caulk oozed out between some of the

joints. Always freaky on an escalator when the handrail moves faster than the stairs and you have to adjust your grip since you can't walk down – there's someone immobile ahead – and it's too narrow to go round him. When you left for the subterranean world, the Dow was way down for the second day running and the Euro aimed to hit $1.30 this coming weekend. April might be the cruelest month, but May, well May could mean anything.

In the train car everyone surrounding you, literally everyone, is talking on a cell phone or else staring at the device in their palm, waiting. Except the fellow in the seat in front of you whose property keeps making its way into your purview. First a packet of his gum arrives, somehow over the top of his seat back. Then a magazine slithers to your feet, drawn by gravity through the crack between the vertical and horizontal elements of his seat. You've only just retrieved and returned his 'zine when, as if on cue, his cell phone goes off. If you possessed a cell phone, you'd have to take up smoking as an accompaniment, and on the street, in those places plastered with signs depicting a cigarette in a red circle with a red bar across it, refine the art of talking while chewing gum. The young woman in the seat behind you has this down pat. Just before ringing off, she threatens her interlocutor: "I'll see you soon!"

A twinge in your ears as the tunnel changes pressure on the drums, then whamo, out like a shot into the marshes – parallel with the highway – flying above disused railbeds turned to impromptu canals in last night's downpour, and there's the peeling once-white water tower like a golfball atop its tee: SECAUCUS. Here a Hasid gets off and you watch him in silhouette, his beard smoke-like against the gray sky, hat pushed back with the air of a gunslinger ambling down the platform. Wouldn't it be great if there were a mountain chain called the Secaucases? Then the people who lived here – does anyone? – could be, would be known as Secaucasians.

Moving again. Out the windows to your left, the lizard skeleton of the Pulaski skyway spanning the mighty Hackensack. Out to your right, cranes operate amidst mountains of refuse. Wotta dump! And it is here, not far north at any rate, that your Darton progenitors transplanted themselves from Olde England. Jane might know the dates more accurately, but it's not impossible that they, the grandparents, Alice and Arthur, arrived approximately a hundred years ago. This could even be to the anniversary. Sure, why not?

Suddenly, Newark. A Hess station flies past. Regular gas for only $1.92. And a Poster: Booker for Mayor. C'est vrai. He's already won. Whitewashed warehouse, its upper reaches emblazoned Father & Son Moving & Storage in Civil War-poster lettering. Though that name applies to you and Jack, it never got painted on the side of a building. Much less the side of a van, which makes you think his big move to Rutland, VT in the winter of '65 and your umpteenth trip north together on the Taconic Parkway, the VW bus loaded with stuff from his 12th Street apartment. Around midnight in the midst of a blizzard, you watched as the left front wheel spun off into the ditch and an instant later, the van gently nosed down on your side and came to a stop. Not much gas left in the tank, and for twenty, maybe twenty-five minutes, the two of you sat there in the whiteout, growing colder and contemplating the point at which you'd have to start burning the furniture. Ah, but then came headlamps, and a Good Samaritan drove you to a motel.

Blue gaps among the gray, white-edged clouds. Fence topped in ribbon wire whizzing past. Late capitalist pastoral. Motorman's making up for lost time. Trees and limbs down in profusion. If anyone ever owned a car, it's rusting here. *E-lizabeth!* Fat magic marker letters on a bench back: LAKEWOOD BORIQUA DE CORAZON. New, light gray apartment blocks, nearly finished, wires hanging out, still unfixtured. Homes for the future to be sick in. Dumpsters beyond numbering. An awning quaintly stuck above the door of an industrial building maybe three blocks long: AMERI-VAC. Sure, why not? *Linden!* As opposed to Unter den… Hard to tell if those downed trees way back there were Lindens.

On the platform, drunk, a man with effusive face corpuscles takes a long slug of Colt 45. He sports a once-fly leather jacket, sits cross-legged. The catbird seat. Philosophy. He notices you noticing him. Nods, then smiles. Back in the city, you're ponying up the big bucks to hang onto your teeth. He's given up on that. Less resistance. With an upraised can, he toasts you.

Two stories up the trestle runs through Rahway. You look down on an intersection, the white painted pedestrian crossings designated by pattern that's a stylized brick walkway. On the outskirts, some of the dumpsters stand expectantly on their rollers, more or less straight up. Others keeled on their sides.

Parallel to the highway again. By your reckoning, you're clipping along fifteen mph faster than the black Denali out there that must be doing sixty plus on the good clean, lightly-trafficked blacktop. Metro Park and a lot of folks get off. Glimpse of a poster: two hands held like those of a loving couple. "Our Community Bank," reads the tag line. Indus American Bank, in Iselin. What a lot, what a lot of the world you do not know. *Next stop Metuchen!* Across the skydome, a higher ratio of blue to white. A few gray clouds hang in for dramatic effect. Tiny, tiny up there, a bird.

Edison! If you had the power, you'd rename it Tesla. Or at least give the name to a brother town. Woods now screen the houses from the tracks. Over a river and into New Brunswick. Jeez, from here, the church, park, a row of peaked brick buildings – it's almost America. Then zoom, past a medical complex – Robert Wood Johnson something – of staggering proportions, all done up in brick tones of disposable new urbanism. Ah, train halts inexplicably. Gravel, rust, blighted trees struggling. A rail siding. Low well-kept building: Dephi Automotive Systems. GM. Vanished pensions. Whirlpool eats Maytag and spits out dryer fuzz. Forward motion. WOW! shrieks the next bright strip mall sign: Work Out World – Feel Great!

The woman in the seat behind you gets a cell call. She has a sore throat you hear her say, but since you can't see her, your mind takes the ball and runs with it. She sounds almost unbearably sultry. "Thanks," she says. "Perfect." Then, "Bye-bye." You try to harmonize your breath with hers, separated by three feet of air plus a seat back. Fences now, white ones, horses – and a gravel road straight along the rail line. Through the scrim of trees, a macmansion's on the rise, raw joists and roof frame. The clouds haven't so much dispersed as gravitated into larger clusters. Sky's polarized. Through the upper branches and the haze of leaves you can see wide swaths of blue. Delphi. Yes, Delphi brake parts. Long ago, before Alice and Arthur booked passage to these shores, Delphi was a place where vapors came up through the ground and a woman, drunk on their wisdom, told the fates of empires.

Past the Good Friends Chinese Restaurant, the train comes to a halt. You think about getting up on the pretext of looking at the sign in order to check out the gravel-voiced woman behind you. But then you hear *Princeton Junction!* This is it. She's wearing a blue short-sleeved top. Thin. Pony tail. Sharpish features. That's it. That's all.

Walk diagonal to the track and down a flight of stairs, onto the Dinky that rides you into Princeton. Lightning through the manicured burbs. Ahoy. Five minutes or less to Cousin Jane. George Washington schlepped here. Even fit a battle close by. But far as we know, he never made it to Delphi.

• • •

On the way home, you sit facing backward. Oblique, out the window, the trees pour past. Liquid.

Δ

More Atlantic Yards nonsense in the *Times*. Front page photo of a scale model for twenty two-acres turned over to Forest City Ratner. Now it hits you that Brooklyn was a great world city sans a skyline. Steeples were its main vertical element – its urban profile seemed closer to Greater London than Manhattan. The Williamsburg Savings Bank tower didn't really count. Always felt less like a corporate ego thing than a public gnomon. Pride took a different form in Brooklyn than in some other cities, which, in part, made it a creature unto itself. Then came Metro Tech in the early '90s and the Slope got slippery. And now this. What a shame. Backed by the Empire State Development Corporation – a real gang of pirates – the project will invoke eminent domain to dislodge holdout property owners. Then leveling and sixteen high-rises, bam bam ba-lam. A Forest of city grows in Brooklyn. Would that the crash comes first.

• • •

Buzzy from coffee, Le G. conversation and generalized anxiety, you conflate the headlines of two adjacent fliers on the bulletin board in your lobby. One is for a food co-op, the other advertises a concert against the war. Synapses snapping, unable to hold any ball of words for long, you read: Chelsea Vegetables for Peace.

• • •

Heavy duty stuff. Resonating bigger now than when Jane told you yesterday: the news her husband has been offered a shot at Alito's old job heading the Third Circuit Appeals Court. Accordingly, he tripped down to DC, accompanied by Jane. But the Darton edge runs strong in her and she refused to shake the presidential hand, much less set foot in the White House. Will her spousal non-compliance militate against her husband's selection? No simple life.

Δ

Expedition to Shue Swamp and Bayville on the Sound. Along Glen Cove Road, a good crop of winecap mushrooms sprouting in the woodchips by a newly landscaped mini-macmansion. Victor spotted 'em while you were driving, doing a good forty-five. He's king of the foragers. Leah's quite accomplished too. Their eight-year-old, Maya. can recognize any number of edible plants.

At the swamp, plenty of ramp and mustard garlic. Also jewelweed for curing or balming all manner of stings. Gwen heard the train whistle and, along with Katie, the three of you scrambled up the embankment, laid five pennies on the tracks, then backed off a little down the slope. The train slowed as it came closer, sounded the horn again – the engineer must've spotted you bending over the rail. Might've thought: What's he doing? But then there's a young girl with him and a non-threatening gal who's probably his wife, and they're all waving hi… and so the LIRR Oyster Bay train rumbled on through, the diesel's first set of wheels passing over Abe Lincoln and succeeding ones making the coins dance up and off the rails and into the gravel, leaving copper imprints of the Lincoln Memorial on the track. Watch out, don't grab the pennies up too quick – they're piping hot from friction. Squashed to knife-edged irregular ellipses. Some of them flew a foot or so but you find all five scattered in the gravel of the railbed. And a sixth – slightly oxidized. Must be one of your old ones from how many years, how many visits ago? Half-sliding down the embankment you spot find a pitted old spike that'll serve as a paper weight given a coat of satin polyurethane.

With the found penny, there's enough for your whole company. You hand Leah her penny, the Memorial smooshed almost beyond recognition, but distorted now into a kind of classical perspective. "Looks like the Parthenon," she says, and she's right. As you walk on, round the swamp, she tells you a bit of what she remembers from forty something years back when she went on holiday with her parents to the Black Sea – visited the Danube delta. Of course – makes all the sense it the world. But in your imagination the Danube never had a delta until now.

Drive out to the beach, where Victor discovers a whole line of sea rocket growing just above the high tide ridge and a small clump of radish leaves. Near the playground, under some trees, poor man's pepper. Hail Victor! You'll feast on winecaps and – bring on the garlic – a host of sautéed greens tonight.

Δ

Mon. a.m. New England flooded out in a general way. Rain here this morning too, at times torrential. You move the Gray Ghost from 25th Street to 21st Street near Le G. so it's legal until Thursday. When you cut the engine, you notice two maple seed key pods pushed to the left and right margins of the windshield by the wiper blades. Stuck there by adhesion for now, it'll take a day's drying out to dislodge them. And then, who knows where they'll blow, whirling like little Da Vinci choppers. Already you've transported them a third of a mile from where they fell.

Recalled the taste of the winecaps Katie sautéed in vermouth last night. Didn't cook the greens, just tore them up and added to the salad. Sea Rocket was the big hit. Rain drumming on your tin roof and safety glass windshield – two distinct sounds. The tree up ahead to the right looks like a honey locust in its adolescence. Its lower branches have taken a beating from truck tops, but its middle and upper reaches seem to be faring well. Tough life being a street tree in Manhattan, even poshest Chelsea.

Crane your head round and you'll see that the tree just behind you, a couple of stories tall, camo bark like a sycamore, looks sick as a dog, despite or perhaps because of the abundant, gaily-colored plantings at its base. To judge by its unhappy complement of ragged, perforated leaves it is a sycamore, but its leaves are so distorted by whatever depredation that at first they look rounded like a tulip poplar's. No leaves

at all on the distal twigs. Stupidly you hope that the rain does it some good. Don't know much about trees, but your common sense tells you lack of water isn't the problem.

You were hasty turning pages and the paper's thin. Between one thing and another, you skipped a spread in your book. Leave it blank or go back? Question's already answered, even now, you're filling in the blanks. Fog on the windscreen, but no mistaking the bop of his walk – here comes Tom.

• • •

As the day progresses, a mixed bag. Queasy, heavy of heart and constricted of throat, generally sickish, yet part of you feels like tap dancing. Waking thoughts semi-delirious. Into your head pops: Aren't You Glad You Use Dial? Don't You Wish Everybody Did?

Δ

End of rush hour #1 toward the periodontist. Train car full of jocund folks in sports and business wear. What they got to laugh about?

Daily News headline flashes by: BUSH TO SECURE BORDER. Right. And, of course, there's only one border that's insecure to the point of newsworthy. Change for the #7. Asian guy, could be Korean or Chinese, sits across from you. White MTA hard hat in his lap. Stenciled to its side: Think Safety.

Up the stairs at Fifth Avenue. On the mezzanine, a pair of newsdealers, both women, wave folded tabloids in the faces of the softly lowing herd before and around you. The vendor directly in your path looks Latina, but her accent's from where? "Gill morning, lady. Gill morning, gentleman." She fans a copy of the *News* toward you, swinging it down like the arm of a toll gate. Whatever look you shoot her must be your E-Z pass, because she raises the bar and trades you a half-smile in exchange for an incremental softening of your demeanor.

It's been raining cats and dogs. Along the front of the Library, under the gaze of the guardian lions, a score of men in bright red windbreakers kneel chopping with their

spades at the muddy soil and planting to beat the band, liberal muck clinging to the valleys of their workboot soles. Massively red against the green backdrop, a flatbed truck loaded with plants sits parked on the sidewalk surrounded by orange traffic cones. Skillfully painted on the truck cab's door: FRANK BULFAMENTE & SONS, NEW ROCHELLE, NY.

Cross Fifth on the diagonal. Beneath a scaffold, plastered to waterlogged plywood hoardings, multiple posters for Neil Young's new album: *Living With War*. Are there only two modes of living? One's children as victims, or raise them to be murderers of other people's children who've done them no wrong?

• • •

Downstairs post-periodontist, after a sound probing, having heard the bad news about your deep pockets. Outside the entryway, a huge, white Denali, no one inside, its lights flashing like a squadcar on meth. Across the street, a Metropolitan Lumber Co. truck is parked, making a delivery. Painted on the truck's flank, an anthropomorphized claw hammer, and his companion, a length of four by four. Both wear rueful grins and wave spindly arms in greeting. On their "feet," identical pairs of bulbous shoes. Spookily, the four by four resembles, grain and all, a caricature of trade center tower.

You're still reeling from sticker shock. The periodontist wants $1850 – *per quadrant!* – for trimming down your middle-aged gums, giving them what he calls "a manicure." Sure, why not? In a world where hammers smile, why shouldn't gums have cuticles and dentists charge whatever they can get for their labor. The guy's a pro. clearly, knows his stuff. Comes recommended by the sainted Dr. Cooper. But jeez, his whole office stinks of greed.

Got to let this roll around in your mind a bit, particularly the warning "if you do nothing," that you might develop endocarditis, for which you're at more than average risk, given a funky mitral valve. But fuck it, at those prices, you're going to have to count on your immune system to get you through. Up the umbrella and out from under the awning. As you pass the Denali, its alarm starts to shriek.

• • •

From the look of it on the TV news, half of New England is washing away. Will the tides float it back to Olde England? You've taken refuge from the deluge at a Burger King on 41st Street. On the counter in front of you , a little stand-up promo card for the Whoperettes – the word spelled out in marquee lights – its central image a woman in Ziegfieldesque drag, whose costume, apart from a silky two-piece tap ensemble, white heels and gloves, consists of draped onion rings, several of which, clustered together, form a kind of domical chapeau. Downstage left – if the card were a theatre – another chorus girl in elbow-length gloves wears a skirt that is literally a grilled burger. She's flanked by a hoofer draped in half-melted slices of American cheese. To her right, yet a fourth chorine high kicks – but what food is she wearing? Bright red, marbled and inchoate in shape – it can't be bacon. Actually, on close inspection, it resembles extremely ravaged muscle tissue. Could that be what a heart valve looks like when it's owner has consumed the other three Whoperettes? Eros and Thanatos, together again at Burger King!

• • •

Almost home. Rain's abated to a drizzle. Down comes your brolly. "Let the other guy yawn at the meeting," says the headline of the ad above the subway entrance that – what was it, four years ago? – got plowed down by an SUV. Nice ad. Goes with getting your nails done by someone a little poorer than you who came from the other side of the world for your cuticles only. Nail salons, eyebrow threading, drugstores and bizarre Chelsea Boy apparel – that's local retail in a nutshell.

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Black as the day is long. We walked toward the mountains across a vast field of white puppies. See, that's the language that pops into your head, even wide awake – ever more hallucinogenic.

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Two days and then the *Da Vinci Code* comes to a theater near yo. Closest they can get these days to a saturation ad campaign – as big or bigger than Kong was. A worried Amélie and lumpy Forest Gump stare out from a thousand billboards 'n' posters crowned with the exhortation: "Be Part of the Phenomenon." Can one not?

After the 19th, will it become obligatory to conclude any casual exchange with "Have an Opus Dei"? *Ixnay, ixnay!*

Δ

Mid-a.m. On the corner of 24th and Eighth, a few feet away from Abdul's coffee cart, a middle-aged, paunchy guy stands transfixed, riveted to the spot by a prolonged series of violent, wrenching sneezes. A black Lincoln Towncar has pulled up by the stand and the driver, himself gray haired and heavy-set, calls out "God bless you!" through the rolled-down window each time the fellow on the sidewalk sneezes. The tenor of the blesser's voice oddly matches the sneezer's preceding *hachoo!*

This goes on long enough to develop into a kind of call and response between impromptu compatriots – a near rhyme cycle that one suspects might go on forever. At last the sneezer recovers himself sufficiently to continue on his way, offering a sniffled "Thank you" to his well-wisher who responds with a final benison before opening his door, stepping out and queuing up before Abdul's cart. You don't wait to find out if the limo driver is a jelly donut or French cruller man, but you'd bet good money he takes his coffee light and sweet.

• • •

Against this tricky, ugly, green-yellow gray sky, the gilded dome and spire atop the lantern crown of the New York Life building appears as magical as a pineapple from the heavenly Jerusalem. Fifteen stories below, a third of the way to the ground, the clock says 10:28. Brother, you're running late. Brother can you spare the time?

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2:00 p.m. You'd entered this building an hour ago in near deluge, now exit out through the same door into a shocking burst of sun. Rows of puckered billboards on the plywood hoardings drying out. White numerals against solid black: *6 + 6 + 06* and beneath the numerals the legend: *Now You've Been Warned*.

Hmmm. Numerology is big these days. Every man a Kabbalist. Signifiers abound. Let's see: 9 plus 11 equals 20. Add 01 and that equals 21 which divides into 3 x 7, the sum of which is 10. Not very dramatic. On the other hand, if you add the 2 from 2001, you get the famed and dreaded 23. Whooooo! Spooky. Surely the *Avinciday Odekay* which opens *Oodaytay* will answer it all.

• • •

On the cover of *El Times*, a big pic of General Hayden, nominee to head the mother of all spy rings. Taken from Hayden's left side, the shot frames a background of the Senate committee room jammed to the gills with press photographers. The general's olive drab uniform is covered with an astonishing panoply of fruit salad and scrambled eggs, given which, the headline poses a timeless *Times* classic of cognitive dissonance: "CIA Choice Says He's Independent of the Pentagon."

Hayden's been caught in motion, his hands slightly blurred, half raised before him, like he's trying to use the gesture to emphasize the headline's point. But so huge is the non sequitur between the image and the words above it that you break out laughing drawing a raised eyebrow from Marnie behind the counter. Surely your eyes are not the only ones that draw in an implied set of wires leading from the general's wrists to a puppeteer judiciously cropped out above.

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Life in the preemptive lane.

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Wild weather. First a front cuts across the bay, then up the center of Manhattan. You can see a host of camera flashes popping on the observation deck of the Empire State even as its superstructure becomes engulfed in gray mist, a towering white cloud in the background. Deluge again. *Sturm und Drang*. Pressure change. Bottles, nail brush and pumice blow off your bathroom windowsill. You hear them kathunk, bang and rattle into the tub.

Check online. The Wunderground weather map makes the storm look pretty localized, but there are bits of green signifying light precipitation strewn across Pennsylvania. A cluster of rain pixels over the type for Allentown makes it read Alientown. 15:04 EDT.

• • •

You do not call Cousin Jane to tell her how your conversation last week about her husband's possible ascent – !? – to the head of the 3rd Circuit triggered memories – ah, that's a slip since you hadn't been born yet – well, if not memories than flashes of historical outsight – into the Wannsee Conference in '42 where Reinhard Heydrich called together Germany's senior jurists and civil servants in a beautiful old lakeside villa near Berlin to have them devise a legal and organizational framework for the annihilation of Europe's eleven million Jews.

Before it became a matter of requisitioning cattle cars, adjusting timetables and track switching, mass murder must first be set in motion on little wheels of law. Ahead of everything else, clearing the rails like a thousand tiny cow-catchers, the protocols advance. Before the weight can come down, protections must be lifted.

• • •

The second recorded South China Sea "supertyphoon" – Category 4 – named Chanchu ("Pearl" in Cantonese) made two landfalls in the Philippines, then hit eastern Guangdong.

Newsflash. Lightning flash. This to the south as you write – arching across the sky out of Jersey, seemingly into Lower Manhattan. Now rain again as the skies to the

west lighten oddly and those over Brooklyn grow pink. Fuckin' A. This whole day has been like a big Tesla experiment combined with a Reich cloud-busting festival gone devilishly awry. Energy, energy, where does it want to go?

Silverstein's 7WTC nearly invisible against a background identical in texture and hue. You really can't see the building, just know it's there. Sure it is. Another lightning bolt, this one the traditional tree-rooted kind over the WFC. Now over Wall Street. And closer, atop the Chelsea Hotel, just a few hundred feet away as the crane flies, chimneytops covered in lush ivy and rooftrees like Babylon's gardens come home alive, even downstairs, along Eighth Avenue between 24th and 25th, the greenest sycamore canopy you've ever known.

But yes, Guangdong. And Chanchu, which might've gone Cat. 5 and veered toward Hong Kong, but instead struck Shantou at 45mph and moved northeast into Fujian weakening some, then switching direction again, out to sea, presumably to wind itself down. Along the way, Chanchu killed forty one in the Philippines, twenty one in the PRC. Chinese sailors rescued sixty Vietnamese fisherman, but twenty-eight drowned and another hundred and fifty are missing, somewhere at sea.

• • •

If the Senate finds the U.S.-Mexico border vexing, they should check out the Durand Line. The "line drawn on water," bridged by the Khyber Pass. Good luck to all who hold their borders dear. This is the age of breach and insurge. Just like, minus the levee, that big lake ends up in your back yard. And front yard.

Oh what'll it take to keep those Pashtuns south of the Rio Grande?

Δ

Trip by the café. Packed inside. Stand on the corner and talk with Tom, Gary, Eric as long as you can. Sick as a dog. Let it all go. Drink water only. Back home to bed as if poleaxes.

Δ

a.m. It's going to be what it is. Shaky on your pins. Manhattan as a monstrous reanimated corpse.

• • •

Clubs clubs clubs. Everybody's talkin'. Of course the Bush twins need someplace to dance, preferably on ruins. But if not Fallujah, why not Bungalow 8, just a jog north and west from your own tranquil aerie? Practically in the river, B8 at 515 West 27th Street is la boîte préféré, where Jenna, Babs and their Texas posse coma-tatus go to get crunk or die. So hey, it's not La Pont d'Avignon, but that was never wide enough for one Hummer to pass another, coming or going.

A dead body found at Seventh and 19th early Sunday, though where exactly the young fellow was beaten to death remains a matter of conjecture. Tom relates this news as the two of you talk, him on his way to Le G. for iced mocha and you hanging out on a stoop waiting for the car to go legal. Tom gets the skinny from all the local supers, a legacy from the old days when he used to walk Lucy around the neighborhood before the arthritis confined her to a narrow ambit of 23rd Street.

For a minute you imagine the pair of you as minor Runyan characters, speculating on where the next floating crap game will be held. The kids from Baruch Middle School performed *Guys and Dolls* the other night, so the tunes are still present in your head and you come close to breaking into song: "Call it hell, call it heaven, it's a probable twelve to seven that the guy was just done in by club thugs."

Gwen, despite her gifts for music and drama, worked behind the scenes. You glimpsed her occasionally during blackouts, a slight, strong figure, darting this way and that, moving sets and props about.

Δ

A derelict squats, back against the wall at the northeast edge of FIT, smoking and coughing. His coughs sound like sobs.

On the phone with Wolfgang yesterday, he said something about the

atmospheric pressure being unusually high the day you got sick. Amazing what different folks pay attention to, what we use to signify.

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BLD: Big Liminal Day.

Δ

Is it all the same to the clam? You've eaten clams to whom things made a difference. Another question: Is it all the same to you?

Katie makes a date for the three of you to go out with Mark and Bruce to Deli Masters in early June. Farthest Queens. At the intersection of Pastrami and Utopia.

• • •

CHELSEA CARNAGE screameth the *Post*. You knew no good was up to itself last night when the choppers with their laser-bright spotlights swept round the neighborhood skies like an occupation army of techno-vultures. 'Course you had it wrong – assumed the helicopters came courtesy of a drug killing in the Fulton or Elliot houses. Instead it's "Crazed Bouncer Blasts Lounge Club Patrons." If the front page is to be even minimally believed, said bouncer opened up on some disgruntled patrons with a 9mm. Killed one on the spot, wounded several others, one of whom is "fighting for his life" at St. V.'s.

The house specialty at the club, Opus 22, is purportedly the Opus Bellini, a combination of white peach purée and champagne. And for a lagniappe, a hot lead chaser. 22nd and Eleventh. Have to ride by there one time to see what kind of face Opus 22 puts up to the world.

• • •

Did transitional seasons used to be this windy when you were coming up in the

big city? T'other day they tested out new handling techniques for an inflatable veteran of many a Thanksgiving parade. Every now and again, those gusts have been taking America's most beloved icons precipitously into lampposts sending the parts thereof raining onto spectators with various unhappy results. You've noticed the tendency for several years now, but lately those passing weather conversations invariably turn to wind. Some kind post-Katrina thing? "Many New Yorkers," according to the *Times*, are affeared of the hurricane season to come. There's no disaster can match the ones in the mind. Once you're convinced the other shoe's gonna drop, it could be any size, color or style. All god's chillun got shoes.

Δ

Reps. and Senate, both in their separate ways and means, caught *immigrante delicto* – committing offenses against those whose only crime is wanting to work here.

A huge four-prop Air Force cargo plane skimmed the West Chelsea rooftops this a.m. around 9:15, flying pretty close to due south. An airlift to some hitherto unknown and stricken population in Lower Manhattan, Staten Island or Brooklyn? A few minutes later as you were buying bananas from Kesban, more near-deafening turbine shrieks. You looked overhead but couldn't locate the source. Like last Friday night, when, walking to pick up Gwen from a rehearsal, the reports from fireworks out of eyeshot on the Jersey waterfront caused Chelsea strollers, even those in the Flatiron and Gramercy to turn first this way, then that, to see the source of the invisible barrage.

Sebastian Smith, an eyewitness to the Chechen war, tells of a Sufi Zikr ceremony, where men dance circles within circles, and a Russian bomber screams low overhead, buzzing their village. "Yet no one even looks up. The whooping grows louder."

• • •

The No-stick Gospels.

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Walking home, trying, however ephemerally, to fit your piece into the gouged-out mosaic, it strikes you funny what you saw on the staircase at the Grand Street subway stop yesterday: a wide Asian woman, d'un certain age, wearing a bright red teeshirt imprinted in gold letters: CALL ME WHEN YOU GET A LIFE.

• • •

Down to Bowling Green to see Michael K. at his office in the old Standard Oil building at 26 Broadway. Something amusing in the idea of the Modern Library Association having its digs in what was once the corporate HQ the country's first billion dollar corporation. There, high up in the lobby, John D.'s name, cut in marble. Outside again, as you walk toward Chinatown, there's a moment when, if you stop and turn back, you get a sightline on the structure's step-pyramid tower, and surrounding the central lantern, a quartet of blazing urns – symbolic beacons to guide those arriving by sea – rendered in motionless stone.

• • •

On Mott, just north of Grand Street, a gut renovation of an old tenement building rising over a storefront hair salon. On the second floor above the scaffolding, two guys work with chisels and hammers to knock out the bricks of a newly built section about shoulder high. Ah, plans have changed. Instead of four windows across, there are to be two wider bays, so this separation must go. At first it looks like the men are painstakingly trying to preserve the bricks by inserting their chisels into the mortar between them, tapping and levering the brick up. But then one fellow hammers hard against a whole row of bricks to loosen them. Before long, the job is down to thigh level, and with every hammerstrike, the unsupported section shakes. They could, theoretically, drop the whole section over on its side and bust it up lying down. Wait and see what happens. Scan the street. The sounds of hammering stop. You look up to see the men sitting in the embrasures, taking a break – one drinking from a bottle of mineral water. Move on.

All over Little Italy, and in other parts of the city too, one sees molded fiberglass

pizza men standing outside storefronts – the paisano equivalent of cigar store Indians. Often they hold a menu in one hand and sign a thumbs-up with the other. An eye wink too, beneath a toque keeling raffishly to one side. But New York streets are not just about fast food, they're fast pedestrian lanes – folks move like stock cars and often carry hard and heavy objects. Consequently, the pizza guys get pretty dinged up in the course of their lifetimes. The one you just passed, at the corner of Broom was missing most of his outthrust hand, nor was the wound neat – torn threads of fiberglass protrude, waving in the breeze.

Suddenly tired, you pause to contemplate the world and sit down on a standpipe. But you didn't pick a fortuitous spot since not six feet away, a dark blue van from CC rentals pulls up half on the sidewalk, half off, and sits there idling. The silver lining amidst the cloud of exhaust it generates is the knockout young blonde at the wheel. Jeeze lady, you're gassin' me! Time to leave anyway.

Pass by a – what is it, Queen Anne-style? – brick building at Mulberry and Houston. Look upward to the corner plinth from which a gilded Puck spreads his mischief to the street below. Bea used to work in there once, before you were born, maybe sixty years ago when she was a secretary and SoHo wasn't born yet either, this area of downtown was just an industrial agglomeration with ill-defined borders. What floor was her office on? Superior Printing Inks. The plant itself was over near the river, a block from where you and Katie once lived on West 12th just west of Greenwich, not far from the Gansevoort furnace where Reich's books went 451 Fahrenheit. What ink were they printed on? Odds are, Superior.

Find a number 6 subway stop and move on uptown. Across the packed car, a young man talking with a soft-voiced woman, neither of whom can you see. His voice rises above the rumble redolent with contempt: "Tha's stoopid!"

Escalator up at 42nd Street. On the landing just below street level you pass a line of about two zillion people filling out forms, hopeful of finding employment at Cipriani's. Ah, this must be the kitchen entrance. How many of these folks are "legal"?

Cross on a diagonal past the Grand Hyatt. Underneath its glossy skin, lurks the bone structure of the old Hotel Commodore (Vanderbilt) where once, thirty-eight years ago, you got busted trying to crash a Hubert Humphrey campaign luncheon disguised (fairly credibly) as a Young Democrat. The action you and your fellow Crazies were

planning would've featured nude radicals in Uncle Sam masks and flying paper airplanes that unfolded into leaflets headlined "Stop the War on Vietnam Now!" Your little cohort had been set up though, infiltrated from within. So down the stairs from the ballroom you were trundled, handcuffed and frogmarched along with several of your mates, out the grand entrance, into the paddy wagon and thence to midtown south for booking. But that's a memory for, and of, another time.

Δ

You've traveled through every state in the emotional union – some more'n once. On the cusp of your 56th, a previously unimaginable thought: your life has been a strange success.

• • •

Over to the Frying Pan with Uwe to scope it out as a potential site for one of his performances. A spritz of rain earlier and now just a fine, white afternoon mist permeating the city like a salt glaze. Everything sticks to everything – your fingertip to the button that presumably gets the traffic light to change on the West Side Highway so the chickens can cross to the other side. Never believed that button was anything more than psychological – more likely the whole system's on an automatic timer.

Empire State building shrouded in bright fog. Hindenberg, schmindenberg – oy, the humidity.

Δ

Tricks tricks everywhere. The slate easel on the sidewalk outside the café advertises MUSHROOM SOUP. Some slippage of mind's eye causes you to read the first word as HIROSHIMA. You sit on the wicker bench, where someone's tied a dog up that doesn't mind being petterd and play a silly game: try to imagine the number of people slain by American air power since, say, 1944 – the year we began dropping bombs in earnest. Would one count the Germans napalmed in St-Malo? The Japanese

soldiers incinerated in Okinawa? No, best keep the criterion narrow: civilian deaths from bombs.

You start adding what you know of Dresden, Hamburg, Hiroshima, Tokyo, Nagasaki, Hanoi, Hue, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Mekong Delta, Cambodia, Panama, Iraq in '91, Afghanistan, Iraq again. It's dizzying, beyond belief. And now this latest massacre in Haditha claws its way out of the bag. This was not remote, not a high altitude mishap – nothing collateral about this damage. The killing was done by boots on the ground.

Gotta move on. The exhaust from the café's air conditioner, mounted above the door, is blowing your way. Downright infernal. The dog doesn't seem to mind.

• • •

7 p.m. Out and across the avenue to Kyung's to buy a beer for dinner. Katie's made watercress soup and there's leftover "speedy lasagne" from last night with which a St. Pauli goes well. Remind yourself to get the mail, it's Saturday – Memorial Day weekend. Traffic sparse and lazy, apart from an ambulance that takes the corner of 25th blooping like an electronic chicken and heads west. Bunch o' junk in the mailbox except a new bank card and an letter from the publishers of *Divided*…. Not a royalty check. So what could they possibly have to communicate? You're alone in the elevator, so you open it. Inside, a handwritten note on a small sheet of paper folded in half:

Dear Mr. Darton,

I have read and re-read 'Divided We Stand.' It is prophetic. Is the follow-up in progress?

Sincerely,

(Mrs.) Ann D'Angelo.

Not a youthful hand, but firmly articulated capitals, the rest of the letters clinging to their former strength of purpose. At the top right of the note, an address in Howard Beach.

Wow. You cant say it to Mrs. D'Angelo, but loud in your head: Alright! Fuckin'

A! You wrote it for eight million. Now one of them has written back.

• • •

Some day, maybe you'll elaborate on the idea that drama is natural selection as applied to narrative – narrative being, lord help you – the DNA of culture. Four adults sitting around a dinner table. Out of all that talk, maybe one phrase, a fragment of a story, maybe an intonation sticks in the kid's mind. She takes it in, weaves it, perhaps unconsciously, into her language fabric. She'll use it, or something like it, somewhere, sometime, giving it a shot at survival for another day, another conversation.

What is it that will have caught her ear, cause her to pluck this particularity out of all that verbal wash? Your chips are on one quality: drama. Some kind of intended, or unwitting tension that torques up into a culmination and release.

Δ

Another May 30th. Many happy returns, Monsieur Self.

56 = 7 cycles of 8 revolutions round the sun or vice versa. Ça roule toward 8 x 8. Infinity times infinity stood on end. Crazy.

Still got some of your hair and most of your teeth.

• • •

8:35 p.m. Contrail bored through a high, diaphanous cloud. Lovely forms in the tealing sky, but something morbid, forensic about it too, as if the plane is a bullet and the cloud living flesh.

• • •

Hadith, collected words and deeds attributed to Mohammed. Haditha, a town in Al Anbar province, Iraq, where a massacre of civilians by U.S. Marines took place on November 19, 2005.

Inquiries will no doubt follow, but the central questions won't be asked – not how did these (few) Marines miscarry their "code," rather what is the chain of relationships that caused them to be there in the first place?

Δ

6:55 p.m. Eighth Avenue is a parking lot, all the way downtown and north as far as the eye can see. Has been for at least an hour. Could be something wrong in the Lincoln tunnel? Up comes the thought as, through the almost lyrical ambience of carhorns, you wake up from a nap. Naw, comes the other side of the dialogue, the city's just busted.

A siren shrills above the brass section, like a soprano's obbligato. Wotta cliché. A police car, it turns out, trying to change lanes, forge ahead through the impossible sea of metal. When did police cars go to that pitch, or have we really reached the point where each machine possesses an autonomous organ of expression. Ah, surely we'll have chords of horns now, organ-like – surges of 'em.

Δ

Seal singes it and it's true: *We're never gonna survive unless we get a little bit crazy*. But all around you, dropping like flies in hallways, elevators, living rooms, your little corner of the café, not to mention la kalle out there, the thump of psychic casualties. This is worse somehow, if on a quieter level, than you remember the self-destruction, the nihilistic ripping apart of former solidarities, friendships even, in the aftermath of the Movement. Now, our own mindbodies turn into so many self-insurgent IEDs. And just how woo woo are you, boo boo? Occasionally you imagine that something beside Gaia is fucking with the weather. Freak clouds, freaky Helios, a supercell holding steady over Central Park and it's bone dry a few blocks away on Madison.

Out your window you see the impossible fronts, sometimes slicing across the bay, not quite north south, but following the avenue grid. The writing's not on the wall no more, it's in the sky, if only you could read it. Lord, can I get a codex?

Δ

At Ba Gua early this a.m. your job is to spend a good ten minutes getting shoved around by two mos' substantial boyz. The idea of the exercise is to feel which side the most force is coming from and use your footwork to spin away from the thrust, rather than get pushed straight back and up, off your root. You're to take no more than one step backward, then turn – let them chase you. Try not to get cornered. Make your steps tactical. If, as you step quickly round in response to their pushing, you allow the centrifugal force raise your arms, there's a good chance you'd catch one of them with a chop, backed up by all the force of a rooted whirling body. Objectively scary, you want to make yourself bigger on top, stiffen up, resist. But these guys are too massive for that. You've got to drop the breathing, let the waist stay loose.

OK, now it's your turn to tag team with Stephen and push Marshall around. Pretty rigorous shit. Marshall's deft in his turns, presents his side to give you less surface. Plus he's powerfully-built, an experienced martial artist. But he anticipates the strike, spins even before you shove, which could be bad for him with a partner of equal or greater body mass and skill.

Some time during the play, Stephen – who's got a couple of inches on you in height, and maybe twenty pounds of solid muscle into the bargain becomes acutely aware of an old shoulder injury. Who'd have thunk it to look at him, the way he moves and carries himself? So severe is his distress that Tom breaks away from instructing another group to do a laying on of hands, or more accurately, a major adjustment.

It's evening now, almost twelve hours on, and you feel fine. Nary a sore muscle anywhere. What a strange demonstration cum epiphany. Footwork, bro, the fine line between using the energy coming at you to spin out of harm's way, or resisting it and landing up on your ass.

Another atmosphere blew in a half hour or so ago. Now it's clear above the streets of the Upper West Side where you're heading to pick up Gwen from Penny's. A breeze, steady from the east. Curbside, outside a café, a honey locust, fully-leafed, its branches wrapped in tiny golden lights. All colors vivid. Every shape, even the funky brownstone steps of the building stoops look intended that way, as though some master programmer cut them with a laser.

Here comes a fire truck full blast, goddam, down 83rd. Yes, and a double take as it flashed by, for mounted to the front grill, a chrome-plated bas relief of a tyrannosaurus rex head in profile, huge, almost lifesize. On the engine's cab door, some kind of 9/11 motif complete with twin tower silhouettes. KEEP BACK 200 FEET says the sign on the truck's rear end, and beneath that SEMPER FI. Sure, not a problem. Give these guys their space. *Dance of the fossils.* [6/6]

Δ

Another day of deluge and a cloudcover so low the city feels socked in. All the towers disappeared. Human scale enforced by atmospherics. Under the overhang of the block of shops between 24th and 23rd, a homeless fellow, black. He's asleep, or appears to be, half standing up, hinged over at the waist, arms folded atop the mushroom cap of his worldly goods sprouting from a grocery cart. Taut-skinned face, high cheekbones, salt and pepper beard pretty much like yours. Absolutely tranquil eyelids.

• • •

5:15 p.m. Still raining. And mist, fine like smoke or HVAC evaporation, blowing in a steady stream past your east window down Eighth.

5:33. Now the mist looks like the vertical folds of a curtain, drawn endlessly aside.

• • •

On an imaginary menu: Eel with special powers.

• • •

Among your friends an amazing rash – rash!? – of back problems. A micro-epidemic. Is it them, their spines gone individually awry, or a symptom of some esoteric, more global change in gravity? Too much invisible heavy lifting going on?

• • •

So strangely numb is the mass consciousness that the stocks could've crashed, California split off and sunk into the sea, all manner of catastrophe struck and there'd hardly be a ripple of genuine attention paid. This is what happens when the coins of a billion souls and more all turn to stone. Or is it styrofoam? Floating floating, schweben in der luft. It's a long way down a very deep well.

Δ

An awful man murdered by awful means. Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi along with a woman and child and four other occupants of his non-safe house killed by two 500lb bombs, delivered pretty much down his chimney – the house located north of Baghdad in Hibhib, a Sunni neighborhood deemed too dangerous for American troops to risk setting boots in. And why arrest the man when this display of long-distance terminating force proves much more useful? But useful to whom? For what? "Surgical justice" were the words another presumably human being crafted for the President to utter.

Through the twisted alleyways of the official Pentagon news conference, an immense, framed portrait of Al-Zarqawi's framed head was paraded like an icon cum trophy. His eyes peacefully shut, the master terrorist looks strangely, unmistakably like Jesus, if he'd lived long enough to look middle-aged.

• • •

6:30 p.m. Gwen's piano recital. Or rather a recital given by Gwen's piano teacher's students. A roomful of expectant parents, relatives and friends flanked by

highly polished pianos. West 58th Street. Spitting distance from Petrosian's caviar, the Europa Café, Carnegie Hall, and Patelson's Music House round the back.

Genteel. In one corner of the room, an orchid sprouts from a planter shaped in the form of a vertical, stylized horn of plenty. Of thirteen performers, Gwen will play twelfth. Two Schumann *Kinderscenen* and a Chopin mazurska. For now, the horrifying images on Fox News fade to gray. The Bushes of the world should get down on their knees and thank whatever god they pray to for the likes of Ludwig van. Without beauty to soothe us, we'd have torn them limb from limb eons ago.

Δ

On the #1 subway platform at 23rd Street, a poster so jampacked with incoherently designed type it takes several minutes of staring at it to figure out exactly what it's advertising. Turns out to be a program called V-Day which is, apparently, two weeksworth of events around the issue of violence against women. There's a photographic image too, next to the impenetrable blocks of type. It's a forearm and hand of a young woman of indeterminate race, smooth skinned, held vertically. Her forth and fifth fingers wrap around a pink apple – pink?! – held aloft as a symbol of New York? – while her index and middle finger form a V-sign. Dominating the typographic field, words in boldface gothic caps: UNTIL THE VIOLENCE STOPS: NYC.

You feel silly for wanting this piece of communication to have some integrity. Even if it made sense to distinguish violence committed against women from violence as a whole, wouldn't it be loverly if the poster's slogan wasn't gibberish? Apart from the names of a few luminary participants: Dave Eggers, Howard Zinn, Marisa Tome, the smaller type resists any sort of visual parsing. So you look more closely at the arm which looks distinctly unreal, like it's modeled of resin. And the apple, well, it's pink and altogether artificial or worse yet, transgenic. What sorts of un or semi-conscious messages are running wild here?

In your day as a designer, less than a generation ago, a photo of a "real" arm holding a "real" apple would have lent the ad some political cred. An image as obviously cooked up as this one would have undermined the message. But today one

has to ask, what is effective for whom? Traditionally too, type was laid out to be legible in proportion to its importance in the overall design. Now the prevailing ethos is *every graphic element for itself and God against all*.

Pasted up just to the right of this poster, a different one carries its own set of "issues." Foregrounded against a dark and presumably sinister background, a portrait of a pretty young blonde, framed to show a bit of cleavage. Nearly obscured behind her, a dark haired, plainer woman's face hovers in the tenebrous middle ground. Stacked up like a verse, down the poster's right side, these lines:

Descended from witches.

Cursed with power.

Only she can fight fate.

Beneath which, in larger type HEX – the E backwards. And smaller, below: Thursdays at 10 pm. BBC America.

Fucking bizarre this pairing of posters – though it has to be random, don't it? And the twin tabloids, the *News* and *Post* this morning, playing catchup with the TV showing full front page Zarqawi death heads.

It's taken almost all morning for you to imagine how wondrous it is, not that Zarqawi was killed remotely via a combination of tipoff and technology, but that so conveniently intact a head was found inside a house pulverized by a thousand pounds of high explosives. Now that's surgical! Or again, like the young woman's arm, something from Madame Toussaud's house of effigies.

Yesterday, the *Times* captioned the ubiquitous deathshead picture as "the body of Zarqawi." Since when, even in the era of gray journalism, does a head qualify as a body? But these are little speed bumps. Just call the road smooth. Pay no attention to the rattling of your teeth

• • •

A "No Dumping" sign posted above a row of garbage cans on Mosco street threatens not only a $1.500 (sic) fine, but that violators will be "caused with bad luck."

As opposed to "cursed with power," like the gal in the HEX poster.

Δ

"A big hole, sir," was how Sgt. Maj. Garm Rimpley, aged 46, of Penrose, CO, described the bomb crater forty feet in diameter and nearly as deep. Sgt. Rimpley arrived on the scene an hour and a half after the birth of said crater. Thus he did not see the brick house, surrounded by a palm grove, in which Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi was purportedly hiding.

Noting that "concrete blocks, walls, a fence, tin cans, palm trees, a washing machine: everything at the Hibhib scene was shredded or blown to pieces," the *Times* declared it "puzzling… given the destruction and condition of the other bodies, how Mr. Zarqawi's head and upper body – shown on televisions across the world – could have remained largely intact." Scattered amidst the ruins, the reporter noted "a rose-patterned dress, a pair of women's underwear, a leopard-print nightgown, a child's shoe."

As you read this story on your laptop, the righthand third of the screen suddenly animated, filled up with a surge of upward-billowing blue-gray smoke. Could this be, you thought for an instant, an actual video of the "taking out" of the infamous beheader? What incredible resolution and such a steady camera! But then the roiling clouds parted and faded to solid blue, and the type came up: KRAKATOA: VOLCANO OF DESTRUCTION. TOMORROW, JUNE 11, 9 PM E/P ON THE DISCOVERY CHANNEL.

• • •

Freaky and wonderful yesterday as you walked up Pearl Street with Michael K., him praising *Orogene* to the stars when there, on the sidewalk beneath the Brooklyn Bridge entrance ramp, you spotted a tangle of something golden, picked it up, and found yourself holding a wreath of gilt-sprayed fabric laurel leaves wound to wire. Who knows, a theater prop? Immaculate, no schmutz, though the ground around where it lay was filthy.

The thing must've fallen, but from where? Into your backpack it went. A golden moment. Why do you think of this now? Golden light, far whiter than the crown

flashing hot off the windows of the giant garment center building on Seventh between 25th and 26th. Hard to know what time is on these long, suspended pre-solstice evenings. Must be getting on toward sunset. Stark peaked shadows of rooftop water tanks against the brown red brick of the interceding lower buildings. Intensifying gold, so brilliant that the afterimage burns white-green pinholes in your page as you write this.

Look back at the light reflecting off the windows. No, its unbelievable – a first in all these years you've witnessed sunsets from this vantage – but there it is: a golden cross, four floors high, nine windows wide. That's it, pop. Now you've seen everything. Close your eyes. All you see against the black of your inner lids is a flashing hot spot, flares, like crooked arms angling off it. Now it looks more like a scarab. Shrinks and fades. Check your building. The cross has refracted, No, reformed a few stories lower down into a perfect arch. Inverted U.

Off beyond and to the left, a cloud passes behind the peak of a tall residential tower on Sixth. Another first. A building with a word balloon. But the wind is fast and the cloud blows south before you can fill it in, and you look back toward the golden arch which turns, in the instant, to a shamrock, then a kind of protean nugget, sinking like the sun itself, invisible, hidden behind a host of towers 180º out in the opposite sky.

Now the gold has split into a cardinal four, like the indentations on a the face of a die. Down to two windows now, more copper than gold, and a siren wails and fade. The light disperses across the lower floors, wipes slowly from left to right. A breeze in the west window. Close your book before it's gone.

Δ

The feelings of mountains and streams, grasses and trees, are not far from those of humans, and it is wrong to think of them as nonsentient. That a stream should dry up in times of disorder is an ordinary, natural reaction.

So said Liu Zheng seven hundred-odd years back.

• • •

Lack of tension. Intention.

• • •

Conservation of will.

• • •

Ba Gua moves:
Shepherd leads the way
Sparrow hawk dives through the forest
Horse shakes the bell

Δ

Here's an odd question: What about opening up a channel under the Battery Park City landfill and letting the Bathtub fill up with water according to the action of the tides? Might the lateral pressure of the water act to keep the slurry walls from caving inward? How long would it take for the organic life of the Hudson to claim a place in this trapezoidal pond, that, from a bird's eye view looks a bit like an awkwardly angled O. Could there be fishing and rowboating on Lake Zero? And for those who cannot do without a representation of the "footprints," why not two islands, square ones where the towers once stood, left inviolate except for saw grass, sunning turtles and nesting gulls. What do you say, ye planners, ye dreamers and schemers great and small? Could the trade center at last make peace with the harbor's ebb and flow?

Δ

Back this past Monday, the Poetry Walk, across the Brooklyn Bridge. High cumulus over Manhattan and Jersey with what looked like parallel strings of mozzarella running perpendicular. Weirder and weirder these skies. Either they are

being seriously and systematically tampered-with, or else Gaia herself has flipped the script on us. Or both.

Sure, there are always anomalies. Freaky snows, freaky flares. You remember cabdriving one June night back in the late seventies and how the temperature plunged so deep you got out of the car at Bedford and Carmine just in time to start shivering in your teeshirt and felt the first hailstones on your head and shoulders before diving back in. Your cab was "light" so you pulled over and turned off the engine and listened, eyes closed, to the 3 a.m. rattle that no one not awake and experiencing it would really quite believe.

But now, every day brings an anomaly. Often several. The only thing consistent is anomaly. Even, now, though it's not so dramatic as a tropical depression that goes where no hurricane has gone before, you look out your window and see at least four distinctly different types of clouds in the placid near-twilight, as though the sky was rummaging through its wardrobe and couldn't figure out what to wear. Hence a bit of this, a bit of that. Is Liu Zheng right or is it the other way around? Are we adapting our moods to the atmosphere? Or is it a reciprocal thing, a dialogue where no one speaking really listens, or cares about whether the conversation makes sense.

Weird too how the real estate value of tenement-high buildings, especially at intersections – buildings that at five or so stories look like an ancient dwarf race among the blank Aryan towers – has increased with the proliferation of cellphones. Because, ironically, their rooves are at just the right height. Thus, around the perimeters of these former tar beaches, the wireless relay transponders line up. Cranes routinely lower them down, to stand just behind the elaborate pressed-tin cornices manufactured in an age attempting to gild every visual space with a populux surface. So odd, the transponders look in that context, unapologetically functional sentinels sending off who knows what frequencies hither and yon, all so that Jane can speed dial Jim and say "I'm here at 24th Street" (when really she's on 23rd) and it'll be just like there's two tin cans and a string between them.

A workmen's scaffold hangs on its pulleyed ropes from the water tower of the big beige building on 23rd Street and Eighth. The evening feels suspended as if its shift is done and it's reluctant to go home. Even the beacons downtown seem reticent about flashing. No, this is too much: On either side of Silverstein's slab you see a ghost tower

of the WTC. No, they're not there, you know they aren't – but you can't not see them either. Really, it's just sky, with some pastel purplish horizontal clouds. But the sky looks fake. A tacky backdrop. You know it's a trick. The trick is always one jump ahead, almost winking at you: *See, if you were just a little faster you could catch me out.* Look again. No ghosts anymore. Just sky.

To the west, where the sun glows copper on the windows, above the buildings, the clouds behave like imps again. There's one that looks like a sombrero made of ice floes with a hole shot through its crown. Above which, the finest, most tenuous slices of pink-white prosciutto. Is this a mockery. Or is the mockery within us and we can't see around it? What would Lovecraft say?

Katie calls from the living room: "I've never seen clouds like this before. Oh, wow!" If this is a new code of actuality, will you some day learn to read it? Will these disfigured forms, given time, assume a beauty, or at any rate an order, that you can't fathom now? Or maybe what will drop away is your need for it to matter.

Silver now, a subtle glaze over all the buildings. And here it is: 8:31 according to certain bedroom clocks. Ides of June. It be.

• • •

Of course New York City isn't the world. But there's a terrible vibe here despite the fact that lots of individuals are decent to one another, respectful, considerate, courteous. Never have you had the sense that so much of humanity is headed down the wrong path – rather multiple paths, all misguided. And so little will or incentive to imagine a way to steer another way. So intractable, murky, beyond anyone's ken or control: the sense of "we" so insubstantial.

Δ

Hanging vertically and in full view of passersby through the window of Pita Pan, the Coptic Egyptian-owned falafel restaurant on Eighth between 23rd and 24th, a slightly dingy American flag, the star quadrant at the upper left. Its grayed colors are no mystery since old glory came to live here almost five years ago, soon after 9/11.

Beneath the flag, in fact obscuring its bottom few inches, a counter for stacking used trays with a garbage receptacle built in underneath.

Six feet or so to the left of the flag, over the second booth, a framed picture, a familiar icon of ancient Egypt, with two large pyramids in the background. The caption reads: "The Sphinx Seen from the Front."

Δ

Reacting to the "judicial murders" of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927, Joseph Roth referred to America, meaning the U.S., as "the land of unlimited inhumanity."

Δ

Solstice. One sign of our particular mode of fascism is the incremental, but ultimately catastrophic failure of the imagination. Evidence of this failure can be seen everywhere – in art, politics, writing, architecture – a hundred thousand manifestations. And it affects so-called progressives as much as those on the right, though their social reactions assume different forms. Overall, public and individual minds are torn between foggy delusions and extreme literalism.

Δ

Jessamyn lives up in the country, and she knows from the elements. You write her about what's outside the window:

"Just took a picture of the sky looking east. Weird to the max. I haven't seen a 'normal' pattern of clouds over New York for months, if not longer. The shapes appear less like weather as we know (knew?) it and more resemble a series of hairdos or confections dreamed up by a schizophrenic. Creative, sure, but utterly incoherent. Or perhaps the shade of Philip Johnson has sprung from Dis and talked Zeus into letting him design the sky."

Δ

Amazing how we Americans retain our innocence in the face of our manifest obscenity. How do we manage it? And what a lot of energy it must take.

• • •

Begin summer peregrinations in Maine. You'll be at Bea G.'s house in West Brooksville later today. Through the windows of Moody's diner, the dense, almost sequin-like leaves of a poplar stand shimmer in the wind. A sustained burst of immense, silent applause.

Δ

Do business with men when the wind is in the northwest. Said *Poor Richard*.

Δ

"People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster." Said James Baldwin.

Δ

Talking with Gwen this morning about your radical days – when you were a bolder fellow. Realizing that your game has become in some ways stronger, yet an evermore internal one. Have a baby and they've got you by the short hairs. You look both ways before crossing the street, pick your battles and turn politically risk-averse in a hurry. Sure, it makes sense. When you're raising a child, the last thing you want is to do time, get killed or disappeared. But she'll be fourteen in no time at all. Not quite adult, but pretty nearly formed. Not a kid any more. So you'll get back your nightlife. And maybe a wider field of agency in other ways too.

Δ

According to David Bowker, a State Department Deputy Attorney, the idea of the prison at Guantánamo Bay as it's presently used, is to "find the legal equivalent of outer space." This, Bowker says, was the phase use by a member of the Bush administration "working group" charged with inventing a "lawless universe" for detainees in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

• • •

What are senses for but to be deceived?

Δ

Coup de boule: Zizou flattens Materazzi in Berlin. The butt heard round the world. A gesture of almost supernatural elegance. Witnessed on the telly over a posh waterfront bar in Castine, ME.

Castine / Castellane – wil ever the twain meet?

Δ

"(My) soldiers (are) strange anomalies of the crooked development of this country. There are no longer proletarians, miserable or exploited. There's a third thing growing out there, cultivated in mud, schooled in illiteracy, qualified in prisons, like an alien monster hidden in the cracks in the city.

The combination of poverty and technology, modern weapons and the internet, has created shit with chips, with megabytes. My commanders are a mutation of the species; they're a fungus grown on a huge filthy mistake." So says Marcola, imprisoned CEO of the *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (First Capital Command/PCC) gang in São Paulo.

Δ

Gradually, almost imperceptibly, despite a host of traumas that seemed almost perfunctory, the world slid into a different mode. Perfectly solid material objects passed through one another where once their intersection might have occasioned catastrophic results. Conversely, vast structures were jolted, pulverized even, by forces so undetectable that one was tempted to question the evidence of the senses.

6:30-ish. Flight's been delayed. But you're on the runway now, revving turbines. Invisible winged horses pulling your chariot up into the sky. Next stop, la belle France.

Δ

Afternoon, first day. When it reaches Place de Clichy, the bus has to make a detour, the route's blocked by a demonstration, so you disembark. On the island at the center of the intersection, flags by the dozen, Palestinian and Lebanese. Hard to tell how many people gathered, but the tone is loud and vociferous. On the sidestreets, hundreds of gendarmes, shins armored in black plastic, like football strikers playing for the State in the insurgency World Cup. White fellas all, short-haired young hunks. Standing, bavarding casually on the sidewalks next to their midnight blue vans.

Back at home after dinner at Le Philosophe, you pick up a tenuous signal on your laptop, sufficient to slowly load the *NYT* front page. Headline comes up before pictures: "U.S. Rushes Precision-Guided Bombs to Israel."

• • •

Saturday night and the patrons of the Cameroonian restaurant downstairs overflow into the street. Intermittently it wakes and lulls you – the whole neighborhood a rolling boil of sound after such a sweltering day. A baby's cry, men's voices – one hard as a hammer, another whose interjections remind you of the call of a bird. Bass cranked, a passing car.

Katie can't sleep, bails out of the pullout sofa to crash in Gwen's room which faces the back courtyard instead of the street. Half-awake all night – just as well

considering what you might dream: images of the new front opening up in this awful war wherein the West has nothing to win but its own self-annihilation.

Δ

Day of rest, mostly. Walk round the Jardin du Luxembourg. Dinner in the Marais. Return to the apartment late evening. Crane over the window railing holding your iBook in hopes of catching a signal. Nothing off to the left hand side, try the right. Quelle surprise! So far off across the city it looks like a battery-lit souvenir, there's le Tour Eiffel. You put the computer down, hop onto the window sill and stand there, gazing at the beacon as it languidly sweeps the sky. Suddenly, the whole of the structure begins to sparkle like a vast pantomime of fireflies. Right – the midnight show. The light play goes on for ten minutes, and then, whamo, it's over and instead of a sequinned gown, the tower reverts to its bones – a matrix of black ironwork suffused with a pallid orange glow. The searchlight's back too – the shimmering intensity had stolen its thunder. No watch on so you count pulses. Thirty-two for the beam to swing fully around. Or by another measure, every seven breaths.

• • •

Sunday night, so the racket from Le Doyen downstairs seems subdued when set against last night's uproar. You'd been near delirious with fatigue, alternately sinking and rising on cacophonic waves, only dimly aware of particular currents in the ocean of noise. Now though, wide awake and looking down into the street four flights below, you find you can explain the former enigma and even identify some of its authors. Every few minutes, a man steps out of the restaurant to engage in a cellphone conversation that would likely be impossible given the din inside. The speech characteristics of each man varies, but there seems to be a general consensus among them that, apart from discretionary emphasis, *forte* is a virtue in its own right.

And then another sort of dialogue comes into play each time one of the habitués heads home, for the owner accompanies him out onto the sidewalk and thus begins an exchange of well-wishing calls and responses at a volume that grows in proportion to

the lengthening distance between M. le Patron and the departing one, and only ceases when the latter turns the corner onto rue Guy Môquet and disappears from view.

It's an open question too how a bistrot that seems, looking in from the doorway, to have quite a small interior, is able accommodate so many solidly-built fellows. One puzzle solved, but still, mysteries, mysteries.

Δ

Really, it's a 24/7 deal. So great is the amplification of sound on this street that when the garbage truck makes its pass in the early a.m. you hear the whole neighborhood being engulfed: houses, cars and human souls. But the visuals are anti-climactic, just two green-suited men rolling out refuse bins and inverting them into the hopper.

Return to bed and recover an uneasy doze, the dawn's first crisis having past, when suddenly the whole cacophony begins to build again. Back to the window. Aha, a second garbage truck! Which is how you discover that there are two distinct orders of refuse handled by entirely different crews: green-topped general bins and recyclable containers with yellow lids. Now if, just if, you were to come back as a refuse bin, which sort would you most likely be?

• • •

"Pasting feathers together, hoping for a duck," is how an anonymous Colonel assigned to the Coalition Provisional Authority in put it in his "end-of-tour report on post-war planning and the reconstruction of civil order." This nugget in Thomas E. Ricks's book *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*.

Though there's really no comparing Iraq and Vietnam, the book title makes you flash on an old association. Way back when he was a Parisian, Ho Chi Minh ("He Who Enlightens") ran a photo studio somewhere in this arrondisement. Look it up in your digital notes and there it is, the ad he placed under one of his aliases in a local paper: "You who wish to have a living remembrance of your parents, have your photographs retouched at Nguyen Ai Quoc's, 9 Impasse Compoint, Paris 17th District."

Out comes your little book of maps. No, it's not far, just a couple of blocks east off Guy Môquet. Once upon a time, before PhotoShop. And in between these two moments, Guy Môquet lived until he didn't, shot by the Gestapo at the age of 17.

Δ

Ubiquitous posters for the Musée du quai Branly: *Là ou les cultures dialoguent*. Ah, a museum where cultures cross-communicate. Sounds great, but t'aint so.

It turns out to be a wonderful, utterly unbalanced collection of art and artifacts from parts of the world that can be described as the non-West – each discretely packaged. That said, what Nouvel has contrived is not a series of galleries, rather a long structurally indeterminate space that loops back on itself giving the visitor the sense of being digested by a worm. Except for the display cases themselves and their contents, everywhere shoddy workmanship and offputting materials. No snack bar, nor even water fountains. The café is separate, located at some remove from the exhibition building and featuring almost laughably high prices. For all the drama in the presentation of artifacts, no sense of connection between the objects on view and the ongoing narrative of human production and use. Hence your experience overall is of having been subjected to a thoroughgoing misanthropology at the level of design.

But there is one area where the fundamental heartless of the place turns truly anti-human, and this is a vast glassed-in cylinder, several stories tall – a structure within a structure – containing thousands of musical instruments from Andean flutes to West African lutes and Indonesian drums. The instruments are placed on black metallic industrial shelves – these in seemingly endless, dimly-lit rows. This charnelhouse, you learn, is a research collection, inaccessible to the general public. As you circumambulate the cylinder, every so often, a tiny speaker overhead will pipe out an example of the sounds the instruments within are capable of producing. But the effect is a bit like visiting a zoo in which all the animals live in suspended animation and videos demonstrate the monkey's swing and the tiger's roar. Trapped within the glass, the living souls of the instruments seem broken in spirit. Captive too, however invisibly, some aspect of the people who made these objects and brought forth sounds

from them, as well as those for whom their music served as a source of energy, movement and meaning.

• • •

Israelis drop white phosphorus on southern Lebanon.

Δ

The wonder of a suggestion is that it does not necessarily trigger predictable associations. One may watch actors kiss onscreen and may feel moved to embrace the person sitting next to us, but the sight of a plane in flight could stimulate anything from terror, to a desire to be borne aloft, to transform or transplant ourselves. And seeing a bird fly toward its nest may evoke a feeling of homesickness, or simply remind one to stop by the store and pick up some eggs. A sail, out near the horizon – does that tug us back toward the familiar, or draw us outward in search of the not-yet-known?

You sit in the Cour Marly sketching an action-packed marble sculpture of Neptune stabbing, quite forcefully, an equine-headed sea monster with his trident. A young American woman, mid-to-late teens, passes by, asks her companion with what seems genuine bewilderment: "Why is he killing his horse?"

Change vantage points. This time draw Neptune and his victim from the back. Several members of an affable family, apparently from Belfast, squeeze onto the bench you've been sitting on and quite unconsciously crowd you off the end. Their conversation sounds desultory. It hardly registers until Mum says: "Let's go – we've had enough culture. Time for some retail therapy."

Neptune in your pad, you wander while Gwen and Katie labor on at sketching their respective statues. Find yourself in Islam where a thousand year old Iranian plate virtually leaps out of the case at you, a gorgeous inscription around its edge. "Science," it reads, "your taste is bitter in the beginning, but at the end, more sweet than honey." In the center, a black dot which, on closer inspection, resembles a yin-yang.

Δ

Traveling light without your beard trimmer means shaving with a razor approximately every ten days, or when the growth gets too bushy. Relatively cool the breeze on the second morning after the storm broke la canicule. So the skin on your face stings, newly scraped and shy about going forth naked in the world. At your best, you imagine that, sans barbe, you somewhat resemble David's self-portrait at the Louvre. At your worst, the look is of a semi-feral rabbit.

See, everything changes. You used, on every previous trip, to rush out early, find a congenial café and write to greet the day. This time, for five days running, you've made coffee in the apartment, then ventured out to buy croissants, bread and cheese. On your return, after rousing Gwen and eating breakfast, the three of you organized yourselves and headed off together.

This morning you make coffee, but don't drink it. Instead you aim yourself at a café you've noticed on Clichy, but end up, after some wandering at a smaller one, Le Zinc, at the corner of Des Moines and Lemercier just across from the covered Marchée des Batignolles.

Some of the meandering that brought you here led toward the rail yard and the tracks that go to St-Lazare. But before that, you walked along a private street, Cité des Fleures, just parallel and west of rue Gauthey. It's a long block, closed to cars, and unusual for Paris since all the houses are set back behind gated gardens. Down the sidewalk came a fluffy tomcat of exceptional coloration. Clearly possessed of his own agenda, he paused for a moment of contact with the two-legged creature who squatted down to stroke him. When you straightened up, you noticed the plaque on the masonry gatepost in front of you. It was in the house half-hidden by trees, just beyond this wall, that the Maquis ran their forged document operation until they were discovered in May, 1944. "Executée sur place Colette Heilbronner…", then a list of several names: "morts en deportation…".

It was only a half hour or so ago that you scratched the cat's ruff, but now you can't remember the his colors – rather sense them as a Joseph's coat of fur.

Δ

Why is it that sometimes everything feels difficult? You skirmish with things and they fight, or bite, back. The leg sticks to pavement so you nearly upend the table sitting down in your chair. The cellophane wrapper won't come off the biscuit that supplements your coffee. You take a sip from the water glass and l'addition beneath it blows away, whereas on other mornings, a bit of dampness usually adheres it to the surface.

It's six summers now in a row you've traveled here. Unthinkable seven years ago. As unthinkable as the towers falling the fortnight after you returned from the first trip in '01. It's a funkier Paris now, or rather the funkiness has expanded its hold, though most folks still cultivate a *propre* bearing in public. But that's undermined by generally uglier, more globalized clothing. More frequently you see women and men alike wearing shapeless pants with too many pockets – pockets superfluous for even a bushwhacking expedition – or else pre-distressed jeans that look like a souvenir of one's days on the chain gang.

But the peaches still sing out as you pass the fruiterer – their promise invariably kept in the biting. And lo, the public toilet kiosks have multiplied. And above each hangs the happy sign: "Accès Gratuit."

Ah, just there in the gutter, a pigeon is beak-wrestling with a peanut shell. He pecks, gets his beak stuck, then flips the encumbrance away. He's persistent though and for every twenty pecks, a reward: a bit of nut skin! Now the pigeon approaches and you lay your supplementary biscuit before him. You'd bet on it and you're right – the pigeon has less trouble getting off the cellophane wrapper than you did.

Δ

On the shuttle bus at Charles de Gaulle, the driver's seat manifests the strangest hydraulics in Christendom. Any bump or dip in the road, however slight, sends the driver bobbing up and down like a noddy toy. Disconcerting too how absolutely free of distinct qualities he seems. You only notice him because of he's in thrall to a seat with neurasthenic suspension and it strikes you forcefully, straddling your luggage to keep it from toppling over, how powerful is the mechanism that placed this man in these circumstances – what a, well, awesome, social armature positions us wherever we sit or

stand. So much energy constrains mitigates against any autonomous act of will, except those we expend in small, often self-destructive exercises that both add up and reduce to the shrunken freedoms we conserve to ourselves.

Noddies of the world awake! We're not in Toyland any more.

• • •

Antibes. Ninety-two steps, up the narrow stairs to Benedetta and Carlo's place. It can't be called a pied à terre because those steps wind up so high up that when you emerge you're practically in the stratosphere.

Benedetta told you that, on their last stay there, an albatross couple had taken roost on the rooftop and were zealously guarding their young. Therefore it would be necessary to buy some fish at the marché with which to gain admission to the terrace. But when you step outside, you find the albatrosses and their young have departed. All that remains of their presences is detritus on the tile floor: feathers, a few splats of guano, bits of prehistoric-looking fish cartilage. For a moment, you feel disappointed, but then oddly happy that they'd found this place to nest, and then, their young successfully launched, moved on. And now you look around to where nothing, nothing blocks your view of the harbor, the Vauban fort and Nice across the bay. Mountains – could those be Maritime Alps? – looming to the west.

Δ

Midday. You return from the beach to find that a freak gust of wind has blown the big blue umbrella you'd set up clean off the terrace, ripped the shaft free of its heavy concrete base which it dragged several feet to the balustrade. Some bits of the frame and fabric landed in the street – thankfully no one hurt. Most of the debris fell onto the terrace of the apartment below. You and Katie reassemble the ruined thing as best you can, unbending some of the aluminum struts, though one is mangled beyond repair. Somehow the image of this bombardment you unwittingly precipitated from the sky resonates with the bombs raining on Lebanon, and fast as anything, in the brilliant sun of your much-loved Mediterranean, you arrive on the brink of despair.

Δ

Stop for lunch in Les Issambres. It's a beautifully designed restaurant overlooking a rocky, sheltered beach. The clientele, by and large, almost comically nouveau riche. Below, on a terrace, a blonde woman, topless, propped up on her chaise longue. Though her body is wizened, her astonishingly smooth, perfectly hemispherical breasts seem to belong to an entirely different person, or to no one at all – perhaps they exist as an autonomous dyadic organism.

Powerful the effects of Brother Helios over time. In Antibes two days ago, an elderly woman wearing shorts and a sleeveless top passed by the café where you sat over morning coffee. Years of sun worship combined the with the natural settling of her body had produced skin that resembled hide, or else gnarled, burnished wood. Or a desiccated topography scored by ancient streambeds. For an instant, you had the sense you were watching a movie in which a remarkable humanoid had been created via special effects. Your grilled crevettes arrive, and a fingerbowl filled with water and a slice of lemon. Dig in.

Well filled, you contemplate the water in the cove, stunningly gorgeous. While Katie takes care of the bill, you walk to the car, parked some ways down the road tight up against a hedge, with full intent to grab the backpack in which you'd packed the towels and head back for *la plage*. Wow, what's this? – the back seat's filled with resplendent crystals And there are your packs, askew and rifled. It takes you a beat to register that someone's shattered and you wuz robbed. Coughdrops, aspirin and Tums strewn amidst the vitreous debris. Whomever did it wanted drugs badly, to the exclusion of nearly all else. Apart from a few American dollars, nothing's missing, not your computer, nor Katie's camera. Bloody lucky. But Jesus, what a maroon! How is it that a little dose of posh surroundings and Mediterranean atmospherics tricked you into jettisoning a lifetime of street smarts. Why the hell didn't you take the backpacks inside? Or at least lock them in the trunk? Seduced you were, disconcerted even, by this idyllic spot.

A conversation with the local Gendarmerie ensues to no effect. Correct in manner, they remain utterly disengaged. And what, really, could they do? You'd have

imagined some sort of Clouseau-like attempt at searching for the perps, or at least a report, perhaps in triplicate, or but this sort of incident, involving a rented car and no appreciable theft, does not rise to the level of catalyzing action.

Katie borrows a broom and dustpan from the restaurant and you sweep up the glass as best you can, pick the smaller bits out of the seat seams by hand. Backtrack two hours along an impossibly crowded road to St-Raphael to consult with the local Avis, but they have no replacement for your car so onward you journey, naturally air-conditioned. Let's see what happens when you reach Marseille.

Δ

Windy as hell it was way up on the lofty balustrade of Nôtre Dame de la Garde – the city and port of Marseille spread before you. The wicked gust that claimed the umbrella in Antibes turns out to have been, no more no less, than the opening volley of Le Mistral.

Δ

Finally you've arrived within striking distance of La Cité Radieuse. But it takes a certain amount of faith to imagine this legendary place exists at all – somewhere, unmarked, in the suburbs of Marseille, along the Boulevard Michelet. Did you overshoot it somehow? No, its there – through a scrim of tall trees – the unmistakable grid: raw concrete mullions separate alternating squares of red, yellow and blue. Two passes before you find the spot to turn in. Eye of the needle. You'd felt blasé about it until this morning, but now your knees are a bit rubbery. Loads of space in the parking lot so you leave Katie and Gwen eating croissants in the car, the Dixie Chicks's *Long Way Round* wafting through the half-opened windows. Lovely this Citroën Picasso – good CD player too – which you exchanged in Hyères for the Renault Laguna with the trashed window.

Corbusier's building is vast, perched on its concrete V-stilts, and it's crumbling. All around on scaffolds, a small army of men labor at repairing it as best they may. Your shock at finding the cité actually inhabited makes you realize that your mind has placed it into the category of Ancient Monument – a twice-real place, like the

Parthenon. As you walk in the surrounding park you encounter people indistinguishable from those who populate any other reasonably prosperous banlieue. Over time and generations, residents have particularized their once-identical terraces with awnings and plantings of diverse sorts.

Slowly you circumambulate modernism's Ka'aba. Yes, it feels like a sacred site. The living embodiment of a culture's dream life. Unlike the Hajj pilgrims, you are a solitary and reluctant worshipper. But no longer in doubt about one thing. The power of this place goes way past the ego of any one man, even Le Corbusier's.

Onward to Arles. Back in Marseille tonight just after sunset, they'll be showing King Kong: *La originale – un projection gratuit en plein aire* – in the heart of the old immigrant quarter, la Place du Refuge.

Δ

Arles – a town where, according to M. Barrès, "rien n'est vulgaire." So… Place de la République, Sunday, early a.m.. Pretty deserted. A bench. Sound of squeaky wheels. A Japanese family pulling its luggage. Soon their modest noise is swallowed up by the Ancienne Rue des Gantiers and forward in the mix comes the splash of water. Across the square, the fountain: Four cardinal bronze Hercules heads – to all appearances identical – each spouting water from his mouth. Each crowned with a Nemian lion cap – skull and skin. The beast's paws hang down over Hercules's ears, the texture of the fur blending with his beards.

These heroes do not appear happy. Rather resigned. Almost crosseyed with fatigue or some other distress which begs the question whether the water they disgorge stands for emesis. And then too, a prominent sign warns: *Eau non potable*. Above the quadruplet Hercules's, on each corner of the plinth, perches a very robust and self-satisfied looking bronze lion. Abundantly maned, paws resting serenely on the stone, the lions serve to anchor an obelisk, two stories tall or more, which is thought to have stood as the centerpiece of the long-buried Roman Circus. "See," the lions seem to say, "It's just a fable. We're not dead after all."

Caught up in the mute drama of the fountain, you didn't notice her arrival, but a Gypsy wearing a figured headscarf, blue jacket and purple skirt has set herself up on

the top step below the now-opened side-aisle door of St. Trophime. She's hunched into herself, legs drawn up against the stone step. Despite her bright colors, she projects a living embodiment of discomfort.

Her scarf ripples in the wind and you glimpse her tanned face in profile. Now she turns her head and following the sweep of her eyes across the square your gaze falls on the fountain's other creature – a metal swan's head dripping water from its beak. Its neck curved like a crook, the swan is positioned near where the stone basin bows out to create a favored bathing spot for pigeons and thirst-slaker for the occasional dog.

To your left, the door of the Hôtel de Ville stands open. You've been inside and seen the vaulted ceiling of the rez-de-chaussée. It's a masterpiece. No wonder apprentice masons once traveled impossible distances to study it.

Back to the Gypsy, immobile. Until the both of you turn toward the sound of a garbage truck passing up the far end of the square. She flattens her back against the doorframe, and for a moment, her body transfigures into relaxation, then, as though torqued by a spring, curls back in upon itself.

Before you sat down, you circumambulated the square, noting the streetsigns whose names give evidence of the city's old penitent orders: The black manteaux, purple, red, gray, blue, white. There must have been many. This self-gnarling woman seems a sister spirit to those who needed so badly to be redeemed.

And the faces of the living women of Arles are exceptional – a range of individually modulated characteristics exist within a coherent set of variables: Olive-peach skin and pointed chins. Large eyes, almond shaped. This is how you imagine women looked in ancient Crete.

Distinct too, the Arles bread – about ten inches long, pretty thick around, whole grain and sprinkled with poppy seeds. Its colors range from off-white through darkest rust to nearly black. All taste delicious. Some of the best bread under the sun, slathered with butter.

The clock on the tower of the Hôtel de Ville reads five to nine. Not long before whomever's going to mass walks up the steps and past the Gypsy, either giving her alms or not, as their disposition allows. You remember, back in '86, how a Gypsy with a baby glued to her breast stood in front of you as you left a cambio in Florence. You made to go around her, but she reached out and lightly touched your elbow – the same

arm you'd injured twenty-odd years before, slipping on ice and cracking it on the subway steps at Rector Street. After the Gypsy's touch, your elbow tingled for weeks. Ah, the sound of church bells. A girl, maybe five, runs full tilt across the square. She's with a sister, half a head taller. Both in red dresses, pink sneakers. Up onto the edge of the fountain they jump, their arms held out like tightrope walkers. On the way here, you passed a street, slightly uphill, an alley really, whose name struck you but which now you can't quite remember. Something on the order of "Street of the Recuperation of Man."

Δ

Arrival in Tarascon. On the same road, and probably not far from your hotel, Van Gogh painted a horse-drawn coach, Tarascon Diligence. Officially, the painting was made in Arles, but you don't buy it. The street in the picture is still recognizable as this one, as much for the angle and quality of the light as the look of the houses behind the coach. Plus the color and sense of sky. The more you stand in the spots he did, the more you come to appreciate Van Gogh as a realist.

So – this town being its home, what do we know about La Tarasque? That it – she? – was an amphibious creature. Head of a lion, dragon body. In a cave along the banks of the Rhône is where La Tarasque took shelter, occasionally venturing out to devour, apparently without preference, local children and cattle. It might very well try to gobble an adult too, if she or he tried to cross the river.

When St. Martha arrived on the coast at Saintes-Marie-de-la-Mer, she heard tales of La Tarasque's reign of terror, and immediately came to the rescue. Martha confronted the beast with her most potent weapon: a cross – the sight of which instantly tamed the monster, which suffered itself to be captured and afterward led about on a silken cord.

This was the legend, initiated or elaborated by King René, a bad military strategist but a successful host and patron of fables. The King, best know today for commissioning the illuminated and less-than-pious *Book of Love*, staged elaborate festivities still held at the end of June featuring a model of the famous beast. Each year,

La Tarasque is hauled through the streets by a half dozen rough-hewn fellows. Each year, the town celebrates a reenactment of its scourge's subjugation.

• • •

What do we know about the Mistral? That it can make one mad. That it blows in cycles of three days.

• • •

Here be three Davids in one mess
Prisoners are we in distress.
By the French we was caught
And to this prison we was brought.

This scratched in stone, low down on a wall in King René's château.

Δ

Up early and rambling about en seulle to sniff out the really good bread and croissants. There's a boulangerie just down the street from your hotel, but you suspect with a little luck you'll find one that's better on the other side of town. Passing beneath an ancient stone-columned arcade, you notice a shop whose windows are covered with brown paper. But the door's been left ajar. Peek inside. A couple of workmen. And La Tarasque! So that's where they keep her.

• • •

Le Pont du Gard is the most visually spectacular section of the Roman aqueduct that once supplied fresh water to the city of Nîmes at a rate of forty-four million gallons per diem. Over the course of its thirty mile run from the Uzès springs, the stone conduit descended a mere seventeen meters. Here, spanning the Gard valley, the water channel ran along the top of a massive bridge – three levels of rigorously geometric

stone arches built by a thousand workers when Christ was nineteen. Some of the blocks are tremendous, five tons and more. Well into the modern era, journeyman masons traveled from far and wide to study this wonder.

While Katie and Gwen find a shaded spot and begin their paintings, you climb a multitude of steps, purchase a ticket and wait for the guide to lead your group across. At the outset, walking single file, there's a grand view over the parapet. From sixteen stories above the river, you take in a near panorama of the surrounding countryside and glimpse, in the river below, folks piloting kayaks and brash young fellows leaping into the water from the rocks along the bank.

But now you have to duck you head and proceed crouched over beneath a ceiling of stone slabs into a darkness that becomes more absolute with every step. Only rarely does a crack between stones permit a narrow band of light to fall across your path. Are you the only person making the journey solo? Just ahead, a group of several Germans, and behind, an extended Japanese family. Both parties talk volubly among themselves and when they both speak at once, their voices reverberate off the tunnel's surfaces in an impossible jumble of sound. *This is it*, you think, *we're all marching toward hell together*. *You've been tricked: that's actually the Styx below. This gentle slope downward doesn't lead to Nîmes at all. And the seemingly bland young fellow leading your little company, why he's Charon in disguise!*

With every step these morbid thoughts, no less painful for being ridiculous, compound into an acute sensation of distress at being separated from Katie and Gwen. Is this something like what Persephone felt? Will your girls eventually figure out that, all unwittingly, you bought a one-way ticket that irrevocably wrenched you apart from them? Rebelling against this absurd sense of dread your mind throws up a more felicitous image. This is not a parade of lost souls, rather one river traversing another, a procession of living water vessels crossing a free-flowing stream? Suddenly, a burst of happy exclamations from the Japanese – they've seen the light at the end of the tunnel.

You emerge blinking, scan the bank for Katie and Gwen and easily pick them out, sitting on the low stone wall where you left them, pads on their laps, looking upward toward the Pont but not at you – you're far too small to distinguish at this range, especially with the sun behind you. Conscious now of the rays beating down, you descend.

In your absence, Katie and Gwen have made good progress, already laying on watercolor over pencil sketches. But you never do underdrawings, just work fast, aiming for a sense of the moment, rather than precise draftsmanship. You're almost done splashing your paints into a colorful semblance of gold-ochre arches when a Mistral gust shears along the river, threatens to tear the leaves from your pad. Sand hits your skin like numberless pinpricks. Your little water pot and bulldog clip fly off the wall, send you scrambling to retrieve them. Bathers on the limestone rocks attempt to beat away the clinging dust. Impossible task. Into the Gard they plunge. Clean as babes again. Hallelujah!

Δ

Late dinner at Le Soleil, a bistrot in the town of Beaucaire across the river from Tarascon. The whole day spent in Avignon, and something in the experience made you giddy – a sensation you've just compounded by drinking an iced tumbler of 51 and beginning a refill. So when your waitress stands by the table awaiting your order, you find that her bejeweled navel ornament revolves in your gaze like Ezekiel's wheel – way in the middle of the air. Near heroically, you wrench your eyes upward to meet hers and request moules marinière and a 1664.

About midway through the meal, to judge by the proliferation of empty shells, you pause for a moment. The beer has not improved your clear-headedness. Into the pot you stare to discover, amidst the protean forms of the still-to-be-eaten mussels, a perfect miniature of the ninth circle of Dis. You laugh aloud – to your ears a kind of bark. Katie and Gwen, preoccupied with their own dinners, glance over at you, mildly concerned. But what to say? That you've just had an epiphany? The hellish blue-black mussel pit into which you're staring has its perfect obverse – which you saw today: the ghost-white walls of the Avignon Popes's fortress.

You smile and shake your head and the three of you recommence eating.

This afternoon, the three of you walked out on the Pont d'Avignon and, with Gwen participating most reluctantly – given her fourteen-year-old's aversion to any sort of public display – improvised a dance *tous en rond*. It didn't seem to assuage her that no one paid your little spectacle any mind. As you ambled back toward shore, a tall

man walked nearby, holding his daughter's hand. She couldn't have been more than three, round features, golden curls, unselfconsciously belting out the lyrics to the song she already knew by heart.

• • •

Provençal child heroes: Bénézet – after whose vision was built Le Pont d'Avignon. Jean de l'Ours, brought up by a bear. At twelve, he forged an iron staff and traversed the countryside killing dragons. Married a princess formerly in thrall to one of 'em.

Then there's Guillhem l'Orphelin who possessed a white hen whose feathers he would stroke whereupon both of them became invisible. Guillhem heard tell of an evil baron who had imprisoned a king and his daughter. Armed with his hen, he set off to free them, and, having bested the baron, wed the princess.

Δ

Tarascon: the Souleiado fabric museum. Myriad woodcarved print blocks, gaily dressed dummies and 18th century Santons. Among the artifacts of vanished Provence, a silkscreened poster advertising the June 1926 Grand Fêtes d'Arles.

The poster depicts two young women seen from behind, nearly in silhouette. Both wear traditional clothes, modest, yet unambiguously feminine. Before the women spreads a broad field striated with rows of grapevines and punctuated by tall cypresses and a single, gnarled olive tree. One of the women stands. Though you cannot see her eyes, you are certain she's focused across the field on the distant town, Arles. The other woman sits on a large stone, her shawl draping behind her. She gazes at something out of frame to the left. Rarely have you seen an image so imbued with mystique, and the qualities of a suspended moment. You look for the artist's name at the lower right and find it: Leo Lélee. Later you learn he's the originator the local Art Deco style.

All simplicity this composition, and tremendously effective at guiding the viewer's eye toward the tantalizing vision of the city on the horizon. In the instant you wonder: Was Joseph Roth in Arles that summer? And if so, might he have seen this

poster – even passed these very women on the street? And then it strikes you that it's possible, wildly unlikely, but possible, that these elegant yet down-to-earth poster-girls may still, fourscore years after their swift embrace by the image, remain alive within the walls of that fantastic city.

Did *you* pass them on the street? How would you have known? However will you know?

Δ

Clip a squib out of today's *Libération* and paste it into your book. Under the heading *Un chiffre* (a statistic), comes the information that *30% des Américains ont oublié l'année du 11 septembre* – thirty percent of Americans have forgotten what year September 11 happened. Some displace it to 1999 or 2000, others to 2002 or even later. Ninety-five percent, however, remember exactly where they were on nine one one.

Hint: Year of the snake.

Δ

Welcome to the land of delirium. Yesterday while dozing in your hotel, mid-afternoon, as the Mistral, almost imperceptibly, and obediently after nine days – three cycles of three – tapered off into a caressing breeze, you floated over several kinds of topographies: green and rippled, semi-arid *garrigue* and a fantastical version of Tarascon itself, a series of white façades at obtuse angles.

You were aware, but in a referred way, as though heavily tranquilized, of being in great torment, completely freaked out about the horrors of Lebanon, unable too to see a way forward in your own life, the road narrowing, and on either side an ugly plunge toward madness. Yet you lay there in a nearly transparent surround of physical comfort. And woke to find that Gwen had drawn a picture of you, a delicate rendering: knees slightly flexed, hands drawn up alongside your face, your expression at once pained and tranquil.

There is something extraordinary about Gwen's life drawing. The line is hesitant, the shading stylized, but there's an undeniable credibility to the whole – a

sense of "this is what I see," that augurs for her future mastery of the form. Katie too took advantage of your strife-repose by sketching your lower legs and feet – a tour de force of close observation.

These days, if you allow your eyes to unfocus, an everyday object will take on a mythic life, or turn to some animal form. Even now, finishing dinner in the hotel restaurant, having imbibed 25cl of Cotière de Nîmes rouge, you foolhardedly order a mousse au chocolat. Foolhardy since you're already pleasantly full. It's delicious though and you scrape as much as you can out of bottom of your glass dish, whereupon the residual stripes of chocolate become a lattice work of iron and you find yourself staring upward into Le Tour Eiffel's superstructure from between its legs. "No we're never going to survive," sings Seal, "unless we get a little crazy."

• • •

So symmetrical the fountain that the mallard ducks turned white in appreciation. No, not really. But the Temple of Diana, a Roman ruin in the Jardin la Fontaine at Nîmes, is without doubt the most companionable collection of stones you've ever seen. What's fallen has fallen. The rest keeps its peace, the goddess's hunt long over. All old friends – the collapsed and the standing. What remains of the original structure is an arch, a large central vault and a warren of smaller ones. Despite its attribution to Diana, no one really knows why this structure was built here.

Truly though, the fountain for which the garden is named domesticates a force of nature. It results from sticking pipes down into just the right spot: the ancient spring worshipped by the Celts – a karstic resurgence of rain water infiltrating the limestone garrigues to the northwest.

Five thirty. Under the umbrellas of a café, a convocation of five elderly women, aged roughly seventy to ninety-something. They greet one another with kisses and laughter. The eldest holds her glass of ice cream aloft as though it is a cup of nectar. Their collective beauty is of an exponential order. It's a fine line between madness and enchantment. Could it be that like the small gray dog one of them owns – Jimmy they call him – rapturously scenting the air next to the adjacent table, you've crossed over?

The Jardin is large and multi-tiered, its heights conquered by balustraded stairways that give onto paths and a steeper rock cut escalade around a water fall. The whole of it designed with great delicacy by an 18th century military engineer. Such peace here on the northwestern rim of the Mediterranean. A girl, comely, dark-haired, maybe sixteen, walks beneath the Aleppo pines and cypresses together with a couple that are undoubtedly her parents. On the girl's black teeshirt: ALGERIE, spelled out in silver sequins.

Δ

Northward ho, by rail from Nîmes to Bourges. A few miles south of Lyons, the tracks follow the course of a stream. Through the window you spot some folks taking their midday repast at a table in a wooded glen. One of the picnickers, a solidly-built fellow in a white shirt, raises his glass of wine and toasts your train as it roars by. Silly perhaps, but you take the gesture to heart and for a little while at least, your mood improves. See, France welcomes you. How come you can't feel at home in your own skin?

Δ

By rail again, between Bourges and Tours, you write your final two postcards, your pen hand making palsied skitters in the swaying train car. Lick the stamps and put them in place. Nothing more to do than let momentum carry you. Bascule, man. Total bascule.

• • •

St. Martin's summer. You'd an idea of what it meant, but never knew the legend. When the saint's body was ferried up the Loire from Candes to Tours, all along the route, leaves sprouted along the branches of bare winter trees, plants bloomed, birds broke into song, and the whole landscape turned verdant.

• • •

One of Katie's turns of phrase, coined recently, keeps resounding in your head. You don't remember what prompted her remark, but she deemed some instance of bad or mediocre taste "a crime against the senses."

Δ

Mt.-Saint-Michel Abbey. Finally, approaching this icon of a thousand postcards and picturebooks, this hyper-touristed, once impregnable, heroically engineered and putatively sacred space, the architecture speaks to you, emphatically affirms *Yes, you solved the riddle*. Suddenly unravels the knot of Disneyland, the intractable tangle you've been picking at all these years. Here on the coast of Brittany rises up before you the living prototype for Sleeping Beauty's castle in Anaheim and its myriad subsequent knock-offs – all of which evoke the Heavenly Jerusalem, or rather its wish-fulfillment in secular form. It's a rush, however ephemeral, to penetrate the core of a modern myth – a spell cast upon millions of somnambulists, not by an evil queen, but by their own false innocence.

• • •

We did the math, but got our sums wrong. Added when we ought to have multiplied, subtracted when we should have divided. And, now there is no accounting for us. No mechanism of balance. Only a reckoning, that will come in its own sweet, or bitter time.

Δ

Sunday early, just before boarding the train St-Malo à Paris, you scan the headlines in the station's news kiosk. The British police, quoth the *Weekly Telegraph*, are simultaneously investigating "70 Terrorist Plots." Ah, such are the triumphs of a civil service ungoverned by any baseline reason. A phobic hall of mirrors in which it is only

possible to glimpse refracted selves and numberless shadows of the Other. Fear. Gone viral.

• • •

Hôtel du Quai Voltaire. The three of you squeeze yourselves, valises and backpacks into tiny Roux Combaluzier elevator. You press the button for the troisième étage and as the door slides shut and the car begins its ascent, home it comes full measure: You've been returning to this place, as often as possible, since you were first in Paris with Bea and Aunt Gladys in the summer of '65. Forty-one years ago. When you were – Jesus is it possible? – fifteen. One year older than Gwen is now.

In those days, there were two floating swimming pools on the Seine, both moored on the rive droit, and visible from the window you'll be looking through as soon as the key turns in the lock and you walk across the room – the room where Bea and Gladys slept – to part the curtain. You tried the yellow piscine first and next day, the smaller, funkier one painted bright red, which you found more congenial. Not least because the sound system, really just loudspeakers on poles at the corners, played a never ending mix of French Ye Ye and Anglo-American pop.

Lying on your towel one afternoon, lulled by the sun, the music mediated by splashing in the pool and the occasional cymbal crash of a diver, you fell into a semi-doze. What caused your eyes to open suddenly, who knows? But while you'd been napping a woman had stretched out nearby, dark-haired and thin, black nothing of a swimsuit, hands clasped behind her head. Nothing in your past, not even ankle bracelets worn by the Italian girls at the Leroy Street pool had prepared you for unshaved armpits, flags of liberty unfurled on the barricade – *tout chaud* – and without an instant to spare you rolled over on your stomach and stayed there until, by psychic will alone you managed to redirect your bloodflow to body parts less responsive to vascular pressure than the one attempting to leverage your hips off the deck.

Meantime, Old Man Helios shone on and you turned your head, forearms folded beneath your cheek, and closed your eyes again. Attempted to be cool. No one whose judgment mattered could reach you here. Gladys and Bea, before you parted, said something about spending the afternoon at a parfumerie. And Jack, safely stateside,

making someone's life hell, no doubt, but not yours, not now, and just then the speakers came alive with a gravel-paved baseline: duh duh duh-duh-duh… *I – Can't – Get – No* – duh-duh-duh-duh – *Satisfaction*…

Overcast today. The Louvre's still on the opposite bank. Piscines are gone. The whole embankment's Paris Plage now. Groovy's gone global. Gladys was scattered off Barnegat in 1979. Bea's container still sits wrapped in its brown box on an upper shelf in the living room. Up in Vermont, Jack carries on after a fashion, who knows how sentient?

Gwen stands next to you, gazing out the window too. Apart from the gray sky, the view northeast, of Pont du Carousel over the Seine toward the Louvre, looks damn near the same as the one you painted from the adjacent room two score years ago plus one. Today, the watercolor hangs on Gwen's wall near the door to her closet – in your other city. Something's different though. In your memory, the ochre walls of the Louvre were plainly visible beneath the gray roofline, but now they're hidden, obscured behind a scrim of trees.

It's only when you take the elevator downstairs again, the three of you ready to launch yourselves into the city, that the key turns and the deadbolt slides free. You could see the Louvre back 1965 because those trees hadn't yet been planted. Who knows when they came on the scene? Doesn't matter. What counts is that once there, they dug in their roots and grew.

Δ

Taxi will take you to the airport in an hour, thence back to NYC. Summer peregrinations end sitting, en famille, on a bench on the Quai Voltaire. Three of the best sandwiches in Christendom being munched, bought from the tiny shop on rue des Saints Pères.

As at Moody's diner, seven weeks ago in Maine, a breeze sends the tiny leaves on the poplars fluttering, turning like thousands of green then green-gray pinwheels. Crazy, isn't it, to imagine that this city has contrived a gesture to cheer you on your journey home?

Δ

Headed for Le G., pre-coffee, so you're not quite on the qui vive. Shanksmare, crossing 23rd Street, you spot a green placard fastened to a lightpole which reads, in huge white letters: MONEY. And below that, in smaller type: FOR ATTORNEY GENERAL. Holy cow, that's a first – at least they're saying what's what. But as you pass the pole you see that its convexity has warped the placard, obscuring two crucial letters. Darn. MALONEY FOR ATTORNEY GENERAL. Had you going there for a minute though.

Δ

Saturday. You promised Gwen you'd take her to lunch at New Green Bo, her favorite dumpling house on Pell Street. Still early for lunch, but when you pull open the door you see at a glance that the restaurant's already bustling. Catch the patronne's eye. She recognizes you and flashes the most expedient of smiles, scans the back of the room, then issues her imperative.

Lord, isn't English a wonder! What other language can distill to verbal shorthand and still be readily understood? And even in reduction gain in nuance? Four words is all it takes to step the game along: "Last table ready go!" Her gesture toward the back of the room seems an afterthought, superfluous.

Δ

In case some visiting Martian or future archaeologist wants to make sense of the New Orleans Cross – the hieroglyph spraypainted on the wall next to the front doors of thousands of flooded-out homes – here's the code: The first diagonal means that a search and/or rescue team went inside. On leaving, they completed the X and used the resulting quadrants for various categories of information. First, reading clockwise from the left, the team identified itself in abbreviated form, say, MO-1 for Missouri Task Force One. In the top quadrant the date of their visit. To the right, possible hazards for

those following: rats, gas leaks, etc. The bottom quad records the number of bodies found within.

Δ

Stephen N. at the café, fresh from Greece with news of the outrage there over the Israeli actions in Lebanon. How do you turn Christians of all stripes, plus Hindus, Buddhists, myriad other believers and even some Jews into Islamic radicals? Keep dropping those cluster bombs and wait.

Mario's hair has gone gray, almost completely in the space of a few months. You realize this when you shake hands on the street in front of Le G. before puts on his work bandana and goes inside. No you don't know why his hair turned, but rightly or wrongly you associate it with the tasks he's recently been charged with beside running the kitchen. Frequently these days, you don't see him behind the counter, but rather sitting at a back table laboring over the account books and sorting through gazillions of receipts. That'll do it to anyone.

• • •

First article of a yet to be written compact:
We renounce all fear-based systems of authority.

• • •

WE ARE ALL HEZBOLLAH NOW. A sign carried by a demonstrator in London. At the time it hardly registered. Where'd you see it? On some TV screen in one of August's myriad hotel rooms.

Δ

The dome's down off the basketball courts. Tomorrow's the day they've set for demolition. Once it was the head building of a pier, and today, sitting out here on the

Frying Pan, its surface rolling with the Hudson's swells, you can see the flaking-off letters clearly across its top, white against a graying black band: …MARINE & AVIATION… BALTIMORE & OHIO RAILROAD….

Is it possible that this moored barge, that once carried freight cars across the river to the railhead in Jersey, that for a decade has served as a jetty of common land, just technically offshore, with a salvaged lightship (for which the barge is named) hawsered along side it, this lily pad for water taxis, party boats, launch site for kayakers, will close tonight? The plan is that the Frying Pan will relocate north four blocks to a slot on 26th Street alongside a spanking new recreational pier. In the spring they say, but who knows? At the pleasure of the state. The state wearing the friendly guise of the Hudson River Parks Trust, an entity totally immune to public accountability.

Another Rubicon crossed for the city, another blind step away from the good. Another improvised, people-friendly space foreclosed. The authorities cannot tolerate these refuges of autonomy and local control, these bits of the city that folks use for purposes they themselves evolve – islands in a great sea of control – those rare enclaves of unsecured safety, self-regulating teachers of freedom, of collective authority.

What will folks think tomorrow, September 11, and on the days thereafter? When they cross Eleventh Avenue and wend their way here, they'll find – what? A guard post presiding over a chain link fence topped with ribbon wire and beyond that their once-familiar, taken-for-granted hangout, desolate of animal life, save for the gulls and rats.

• • •

New definition of the noun "park." Henceforth it means any open space, nominally grassed, shrubbed and treed, and bordered by high-rises you can't afford to live in.

Δ

That day. a.m. Cool and dry on this Chelsea corner. Cumulous clouds heading west on a roll, not quite a mile up. Condensation, evaporation, condensation – turning the wheel.

• • •

"God alone knows the number of the slain." So says the Mozarabic Chronicle referring to the slaughter of Christians by Umayyads at the Battle of the River Garonne in 732.

A few months later the Franks, led by Charles Martel vanquished the Muslim armies at Tours. When you visited Tours this past summer, you learned how deeply the city's narrative has organized itself around this legendary victory.

Five years ago today – if contemporary chronicles are to be believed – the co-religious descendents of the warriors vanquished at Tours commandeered four airplanes and used them to strike considerably further west than Abdul Rahman Al Ghafiqi, the defeated Umayyad general, could ever have dreamed.

• • •

Eric B. and Erik L. call. The tribe, the tribe. A pentagon of years gone in an eyeblink.

10 p.m. Katie home finally from class. Those dreadful blue lights downtown. No matter. Ba Gua class tomorrow early, but still you stay up past midnight just to usher the cycle out, hand the day its coat and hat. It'll come knocking again next year. But for now, all quiet on the 9/11 front.

Δ

There's an odd bit of fictionalizing in *Unbuilding*, David McCauley's 1980 picture book about the methods one would use to disassemble the Empire State Building. The issue of the icon's deconstruction arises because a certain Saudi prince, Ali Smith, majority shareholder in the Greater Riyadh Institute of Petroleum, aka GRIP, wants the

Empire State building as a trophy to be displayed the Arabian desert. Predictable outrage greets his proposal, at least initially. But when Ali Smith sweetens the pot by offering free oil for the city's cabs and busses, resistance begins to waver.

"One desperate but clever preservationist," McCauley writes, "suggested that the twin towers of the World Trade Center be offered instead – both for the price of the Empire State. In declining the offer Ali suggested that he would be willing to consider pulling them down as a goodwill gesture. With this final show of generosity, all resistance crumbled…".

The unbuilding is then carried out by the "renowned New York firm of Krunchit and Sons."

• • •

Back like a boomerang it comes. Richard Perle – a one man pre-justification for any future Holocausts – referred, in some organ of opinion you read recently, to the recent carnage in Lebanon as a "kerfuffle." White phosphorous bombs. Over a million cluster "bomblets" of which half remain unexploded.

• • •

December 2001 and Dick Cheney says: "It's pretty well confirmed that (Mohammed) Atta did go to Prague and he did meet with a senior official of the Iraqi intelligence service… last April. Prague. Sure. Right. And they met in *The Castle*.

Δ

Detroiter Mike Thomas collects dead bodies for the city morgue. He earns $14 per corpse, which factors out to roughly $14,000 per year. A vernacular sociologist, he's observed certain patterns of mortality in his subjects. "White people, kill themselves, Thomas says. "Black people kill each other. Chinese people don't die."

Δ

Interest rates up? Soon we'll see, because… *Today's the day the Feddy-bears have their picnic.*

Δ

The oil of empathy. Down to 60 Centre Street with Katie to renew her attorney ID. Pass through security, then follow the signs to Room 116: "OFFICE FOR THE SELF-REPRESENTED."

Katie fills out her forms then, since there's already a customer in front of the clerk's window you wait behind the strip of yellow tape stuck to the floor for queuing purposes. You can't hear what the they're talking about, but just as it seems they've concluded their business, the clerk's voice cuts above the room noise. "Thanks for your help," he says, flashing the departing customer a cordial smile. What an odd place to discover – deep in this bureaucratic warren – that while you weren't paying attention, the world turned upside down.

• • •

At the top of 110 Centre Street, the massive criminal courts building known as The Tombs, narrow vertical elements finish in a stylized scroll. Never registered these details before: Ionic capitals so abstracted as to be nearly unreadable. Or are they meant to symbolize Egyptian lotuses?

• • •

City Center, Midtown. In the streets everywhere, weak-eyed overbuilt men, armored women hard enough to bounce a quarter off.

Δ

Ding dong, bin Laden's dead? In Pakistan. Since late August, of typhoid report the Saudis via French intelligence. Your inner John Wayne, an aspect of yourself you rarely see, leaps to the fore. *That'll be the day*. Save your bells.

Δ

Look – over there! A drunk walking steady as she goes. And there – a teetotaler reeling like a sailor.

Δ

Slim and pretty the young traffic cop. She looks fine in blue and she knows it, runs her silver pick through her hair, all the while using the driver's side mirror, big as a soup tureen, of the illegally-parked black Ford Expedition to check out her reflection. Her partner, a fellow maybe your age, with fewer reasons to consult the looking glass, and likely not so much hair beneath his cap, writes out the ticket.

It's 10:25. Maybe you should've told driver of the Expedition not to jump the gun. A posh lady, likely from out of town, she parked in front of you at 10:10 then took off down the block. Normally, you'd have made the effort to warn her that she might get a ticket unless she stays in the car until 10:30 when it's legal – even a couple of minutes after, 'cause one never knows when the cops'll come by. But something stopped you from intervening. SUV hatred? Bridge and tunnel contempt? Class hostility? Chronic misanthropy coming to the fore, like an attack of malaria? A reluctance to risk being dismissed, even by someone you don't know from Eve? A weird misplaced revenge on people known and unknown who didn't extend a kindness to help you? Or was it something in her manner?

Spinning your wheels, going nowhere. Fact is you didn't say anything and that's that. Suppose you'd called out, *'Scuse me*…. She'd have either listened to you or not. If she had, you'd never have gotten to see this: the young cop finishes repinning her hair and clearly pleased with the result, positions her blue cap at a jaunty tilt. Her partner slides the orange ticket under the windshield wiper. Sixty-five bucks. That'd be a real bite for you. Who know what it'll mean to the owner of the Expedition?

• • •

The day is beautiful. The people aren't. No, that's not accurate. The sky is blue, but the atmosphere's creepy.

Δ

Mel has an early gig today, so when she and Jack come by the café, you volunteer to walk him to school. As you near the entrance, two familiar-looking little girls – third graders maybe – wave and you almost wave back thinking for half a second that they are Gwen's classmates, but then you turn and see they were waving at someone behind you. Tricks of the mind, tricks of the mind. It's been six years since Gwen was Jack's age. On your way back to Le G., past the playground young voices sound a half mocking chant. Can't make out what they're saying. Sounds like: "You're eternal, you're eternal."

• • •

Advice to young Hitler: don't putsch your luck.

• • •

The infernal flame burns above the tomb of the unknown war criminal.

Δ

Yesterday the Senate approved the new Pentagon budget – nearly half a trillion dollars, of which seventy million is earmarked for the further destruction of Iraq. It's taken you until this morning to write this down because some infantile part of yourself hoped it was a nightmare. The worst of it was the margin of the vote itself: one hundred to zero.

• • •

Creepy feeling in the soul these last two days. Hopefully passing.

• • •

Eating squid pro crow.

Δ

Chest hurts. Bone deep. Like something or someone hit you hard. Perhaps a long time ago.

Δ

You want to move slowly, if possible not at all. Let nothing disrupt your mourning. But your grief is marooned in time. Marnie uses multi-colored chalks to mark up the day's specials on the hinged slate menu boards outside the café. She squats to write, then stands, steps back to check out her work. She's drawn a little car at the top and the words Le Grainne Café frame it, urge it on with swirling descenders. There goes the cartoon vehicle on its lined and dotted path – that's the way, that's the way. Onward, ever on.

Δ

The shoulder bags hanging in the shopwidows of the wholesale import district are immense pendulous things that look oddly like bagpipes, minus the pipes. Great synthetic bladders with ridiculous detailing.

A passing cab's illuminated rooftop display is plastered with a picture of an outsized Snickers bar. But where you'd expect to read the brand name, whomever designed the ad has slugged in the word HUNGERECTOMY. The cab zooms by so

that's all you see. No time to figure out whether this is an actual Snickers ad campaign that's hit a new and desperate low, or some other emanation from the dark side. Yuck either way. The surgical excision of hunger. Gross, as Gwen would say.

Δ

Postcard to self: Am scattered. And logical.

• • •

The Morgan Library has an exhibition on Bob Dylan's life and work from 1955 to 1965. Pick up the headphones and hear a live recording, solo acoustic guitar, of "Black Cross (Hezekiah Jones)."

"But you don't understand," said the white man's preacher,
"You don't believe in nothin'!"
"Oh yes, I do," ses Hezekiah,
"I believe that a man ought to be indebted to his neighbors
Not for the reward of Heaven or fear of hellfire."

"But you don't understand," said the white man's preacher,
"There's a lot of good ways for a man to be wicked…"

Then they hung Hezekiah Jones high as a pigeon.
White folks around there said, "Well… he had it comin'
'Cause the son-of-a-bitch never had no religion!"

Writ by Joseph S. Newman and published in a collection of poems, *It Could be Verse*.

• • •

Magenta dawn, then to blue. But whatever its beginnings, by midday most days, the sky's gone hazy white.

Δ

Rafiqui's Halal Halal Chicken & Lamb on the northeast corner of 31st Street and Broadway. Busy spot this cheerfully painted takeout food stand on wheels serving rice platters, combo rice platters, salad platters. Every weekday day, rain or shine – Rafiqui's arrives at seven a.m., feeds the people, then vanishes when the workday ends. Provisional as any other of the little resources we've come to rely upon. But maybe more enduring than a lot of restaurants that have to pay the landlord every month.

One block north on Broadway, at this first crossroads of Korea Town, a highrise rears up – forty stories if you had to guess. Facing downtown, the enormous sign affixed to the marble façade consists exclusively of Korean letters. On the Broadway side, beneath the same words is written Woori American Bank in slightly smaller type.

If you were an even a partly American bank, you'd be wooried too. But just how American is the Woori Bank? Off down the street to meet Gwen, jaunty as you can make your gait and singing: "It takes a wooried man to sing a wooried song… I'm worried now, but I won't be wooried long…." Out of nowhere, a vicious gust tries to blow whatever's not nailed down to Kingdom Come. All things provisional in provisional city.

• • •

Early this a.m., a pair of seagulls swooped north along Ninth Avenue, then dove abruptly down, nearly into the paths of oncoming cars. They flapped like mad and gained enough altitude to put themselves out of harm's way. Disturbing spectacle. The animals appeared desperate. What possible goodie lying on the tarmac would be worth such an extraordinary risk? You looked up after them and suddenly, without conscious intention, found your body shifting into a Ba Gua posture – felt your waist turn left, arms spiral up and around in the gesture they call *lone goose leaves the flock*.

• • •

Gwen neologism: "Uncovery."

• • •

Are any of those VBIED's (Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Devices) that cause so many American casualties rolling along the highways of Iraq on tires made in Acronym, OH?

And since when have acronyms gone mild? In news stories you've read, the military has begun to refer to roadside bombs as EFP's, for Explosively Formed Penetrators. Having been formed by explosions, what then do the penetrators do? Sit around waiting for something to penetrate? What purpose is served by tying the subject-object relationship in a knot, and attempting to neutralize the presence of human actors from the physics of warfare?

At some point will IED – which implies the presence of human subjects and objects at every level – get dropped from the lexicon altogether? As the carnage mounts, does it become necessary to evolve an evermore abstract language of destruction?

• • •

The online *New York Times* appoints itself the official house organ of Bizarro World – that nightmarish place in which meaning fractures along incommensurable angles, and its shards reflect back on themselves as a thousandfold madness. Two headlines on the same front page, one right after the other: "Anti-U.S. Attack Videos Spread on Web." Cited as chief culprit among the purveyors of these clips, whose bad taste borders on treasonous is YouTube, the online video archive. But then in the next headline: "Google in Talks to Acquire YouTube for $1.6 Billion."

The bylines are for two different reporters. But maybe it's worth checking to see if their names are anagrams. It'd be comforting if there were a DaVinci code behind all

this. A real Conspiracy with a capital C. But probably there's nothing to decipher, no hidden agenda – just simple anomie, doing its out-of-the-body, mindless thing.

Δ

a.m. Does it really take a crew of seven, no eight, not counting the stunt driver, plus all those cops to clear the way ahead, to film a taxicab swerving down Ninth Avenue? Take after take. Why not use a clip from one of the other myriad times that essentially the same scene has been shot? Silly question. God abides in the details, you Philistine. Every chase scene possesses subtleties, singularities even, that distinguish it from all others. No matter how perfunctory the concept behind the movie, the surface, must have its own, ever so slightly customized texture. The narcissism of small differences, as Papa Freud put it.

And here you sit, outside Le G., watching nothing happen, over and over again in the tepid slate gray air. The rattan bench isn't exactly comfortable, and there's your orange bicycle, leaning against that pole, almost beckoning you to ride it home. But you're too inert to imagine getting up. Between Iraq and a hard place.

Δ

Ah, the *Times*, the *Times*. Leading Sunday's Book Review: "Cormack McCarthy's new novel imagines the end of the civilized world."

Wow, wotta concept! But it'll never happen. Just the wild machinations of some fiction writer, pulling our chain.

But wait – this just in: *Warning Shots Fired Along Tense Korean Border*. Uh-oh. *SEOUL, South Korea (AP) – Gunfire rang out Saturday along the heavily armed no man's land separating the divided Koreas, as regional tensions mounted in anticipation of communist North Korea's plan to test its first atomic bomb.*

South Korean soldiers fired about 40 shots as a warning after five North Korean soldiers crossed a boundary in the Demilitarized Zone separating the two country's forces, South Korean military officials said.

It was unclear whether the North Korean advance was intended as a provocation, or was

rather an attempt to go fishing at a nearby stream, an official at South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said on condition of anonymity, citing official policy.

Four of the North Koreans were unarmed and the fifth carried a rifle, the official said. No one was hurt, and the North Koreans retreated.

• • •

Not every day a contemporary painting blows your doors off: Wang Dongling's immense brushwork on paper at the Met, circa 1995. Raw power. Deep nuance. A hundred thousand tones of white and black. Reminds you of a Franz Klein in some respects, and a wildly rendered ideogram form in others, yet the image feels utterly unto itself.

Δ

Up at the Morgan, looking over some venerable manuscripts and prints in search of a beautiful moment you come upon a passage Leopold Mozart wrote about his son's piano concerto in C Major, K-476.

"Indeed the new concerto is astonishingly difficult… several passages do not harmonize unless one hears all the instruments together…".

Δ

Something went boom over there in North Korea. Strong enough to rattle the seismometers. But whether it was an A-bomb or just the mass detonation of the late John Gotti's July 4th fireworks arsenal – confiscated by Giuliani back in '95 and unaccounted for ever since – well, who can say?

• • •

This a.m., to the café, Alan brings his newly-purchased copy of *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation*. Check out the front, then read the back cover. Seem to be a

sincere attempt on the part of two comic book artists to faithfully translate the Terrorism Commission's text into broadly accessible pictorial form along the lines of the Classics Illustrated series you loved as a kid. Flip through. Here's a full page close-up of Rummy in tones of gray, like a face hewn from Mt. Rushmore. A medium shot of wild-eyed Mohammad Atta, hands raised and clawing the air in the iconic gesture of the timeless fanatic.

BLAMM! A plane hits the Pentagon. RRUMBLE! The first tower falls. Your laughter erupts hard and unbidden. Alan looks worried, as though he fears you've lost your mind. *Don't you see how absurd this is?* you nearly blurt, but instead hold your tongue. Roy. Roy! C'mere boy – you gotta see this.

Δ

Ah Bartleby, ah Rashomon. Yesterday afternoon around three thirty, some saw a plane, others a helicopter, but whatever species of aircraft, it plowed into the north side of a high-rise residential tower on 72nd off York near the East River. A fireball, then wreckage cascading onto the street.

Though all the news reports agreed on the location, the building was reported in the *Times, Post, Daily News* and myriad TV broadcasts as being variously 40, 42, 50 and 52 stories tall. And depending on one's source, the plane hit any number of floors between twenty and forty-something.

Whatever its true height or the exact point of impact, the Belaire, a collection of two hundred condominiums, was immediately overshadowed by a tower of ambiguity far taller than any developer could ever claim air rights to.

Different trajectories and a whole range of behaviors were attributed to the aircraft. Some saw it "sputtering" and "trying to avoid the building," while others described it hooking round as though to "deliberately" strike the north face.

The sound of the impact could constitute an entire glossary of onomatopoeia. One person heard a loud crack, another a sound like "a hundred fender-benders." A dozen people offered varying interpretations of the sound of falling glass hitting the sidewalk. Nor was the uncertainty about particular aspects of the event confined to consistent, if divergent, narratives. A woman interviewed soon after the crash qualified

her story even as she told it: "It seemed like the chopper was pointed downward, but I could be proven wrong…"

Then too, for hours after the fire was put out, several TV channels broadcast images of a raging conflagration: flames pouring from shattered windows, smoke swirling into the sky, while on the ground firefighters and policemen shooed bystanders away from the scene. Amidst all the visual distraction, one could easily fail to register the tiny letters at the bottom of the screen: "Earlier Today."

A reporter for Channel 11 news seemed to have found an almost DaVinci Code-like significance in the notion that the black scorch marks on the face of the building resemble a giant "S."

In the intervening rotation of the earth, the media cobbled together a few solid points of narrative unanimity: t'was a plane they say, a single-engine Cirrus, purportedly a high-performance aircraft. The pilot, a former NY Yankees pitcher, died in the crash, along with his flight instructor. No other fatalities were reported nor, miraculously, any injuries, though one eyewitness claimed, just before the accident, to have seen a body fall out of the plane and into East River. Icarus?

• • •

He visto cosas claras que no son verdad, wrote Antonio Machado kan ya makan. I have seen things clearly that are not true. Oh, but the tentacles of imagination are long.

Δ

Google meet Breughel. Breughel meet Google. Inbox, outbox, shitbox. Google takes over three floors of the former Port Authority building. *Chelsea Now* claims that's three hundred thousand square feet, which scarcely seems possible, but may well be given that the building takes up an entire city block. "Good night!" as Bea used to say when something wowed her. How many zeroes and ones do you suppose can fit into a space that size?

Six blocks north on 22nd Street and Eighth, the Allerton Hotel is due to be transformed into condominiums. Oh the ghosts. "Hotel's Stay is Over," says the

selfsame local paper above a snapshot-sized photo of the Allerton's marquee, beneath which, a woman, her head wrapped in a do-rag emerges onto the street. "…Long considered a neighborhood blight…" quoth the caption.

Ah, just what scribal journalism excels at: highly questionable sentiment served up as common knowledge. Does whomever wrote that line have the slightest idea how long tropes like "neighborhood blight" have been used to remove protection from people's habitations – to move folks one step toward displacement – by setting their dwellings apart, quarantined by language, from the healthy ones. How numbingly repetitive that phrase has become, pressed into service so many times to construct a specious Us, the long considering pillars of the community who now stand in judgment on the expendable Them, the blighted ones. The evil of banality, reliable as a Timex in the (often secret) service of fear and greed.

You figured it was all over for the Allerton when a year or so ago its annex on the south side of 23rd Street between Eighth and Ninth was emptied of residents, gutted, then knocked down more or less brick by brick by an eternally dust-coated crew of men with hammers. Primitive stuff. It took forever to achieve a field of rubble, but the old gray building's daylight now.

How long before you read "Penn South Co-ops, Long Undervalued, Sell for a Cool Five Billion"? Good night! Or just "Shoot me," as Bruce would say.

It's hitting you now, blow for blow. You don't recall exactly, but this must've been the season, or close to it, when Jack threw you and your mother out. You and Bea lived for a little while in a hotel, the Brittany, on Broadway and 11th Street. Converted to apartments years ago. If they're not condos by now, you'll eat Grace Church.

What hurts isn't so much the loss of the home you grew up in per se. It's that your father built all these useful, often beautiful things: lamps out of galvanized pipes and joints, and chairs, sofas, coal bins, your bedframe, a magnificent arch of cubical shelves that gave your six by six bedroom amazing storage capacity, even your nightlight with a sheet of tin he let you cut with shears tacked on to shield the glare. Then he blew it all away.

What a tough thing it is to stay rooted, feet planted, when all around bodies are heading underground and spirits spiraling outasite. Some you never met but would've

liked to. Pontecorvo for instance. Died yesterday. *Battle of Algiers. Qeimada,* Burn. He was Jewish, the obituary says. Things you never knew. But then, of course.

Δ

a.m. On the table in Dr. Worell's examining room, a can of HurriCaine, no joke. A brand of topical anesthetic spray.

• • •

p.m. On the downtown B-as-in-boy train, a kid maybe sixteen, half sprawled in a stylistic hip torpor. He wears a gray hooded sweatshirt. Slip-on black sneakers too. Imprinted in on the fabric where the tongues would be, high-contrast images you immediately recognize as Che Guevara in his classic high-contrast Viva La Revolucion pose. Except that the heads beneath the red berets are bright white skulls.

Is something being uttered here? A message to interpret? Or just more babel that's forgotten why it tried to reach the moon?

What was it Dalí said in his manifesto eighty-odd years ago? Something like: WE DENOUNCE the absolute lack of youth of our youth…

Δ

The Alpha-bidder beats back some other major piggies – Apollo, Vornado, Lehman Brothers, Related Companies – to dive nose-first into the trough and scarf up all hundred and ten buildings of Stuy-town and Peter Cooper Village. A tenant's syndicate also loses out, coming in a yard shy of the highest offer: $5.4 billion.

That's the story, Jerry. Speyer beware.

Δ

"All is possible," says Fuentes, "but all is in doubt."

• • •

"It is better," says the anonymous author of letters from the symposion, "to be fucked in Athens than beaten in Sparta." Or so the young slave learns.

• • •

Surely you'll find something for Alane and Clive's newborn here. This *BuyBuyBABY* superstore sells everything from "germ-free humidifiers" to "singing pianos" to "discovery" balls and interactive potty seats. And they've got a killer tagline, prominently displayed: *The complete solution from birth.* You read this, then laugh, laugh again, like bitter coffee repeating. What exactly is the spread between *complete* and *final*? Is this some copywriter's sick joke, or another unwitting micro-manifestation of Br'er Friedrich's Eternal Return?

• • •

Tom C.'s pal Gerry Geller died last night. Seventy years plus a month or so old. Pneumonia, then a heart attack. Of which he'd had several before.

Tomorrow he'd have been sentenced for his part in a bank robbery back in '71, for which he never got caught. In his years on the lam he worked mostly as a short-order cook, and most recently domiciled at the last remaining flophouse on the Bowery. A year or so ago, he turned himself in order to get medical care. Things looked good for his sentencing – it was unlikely he'd have had to go in.

Gerry was Jewish, from Brooklyn. A copious reader, autodidact. When he surfaced, Maureen saw a news item about him and nudged Tom into making contact. After which it was only a matter of time until Gerry realized he had found the person to hold his story – his legacy. The bonds of friendship grew quickly. Maureen had gone so far as to wrangle a reservation for the three them to celebrate, post-sentencing, at Rao's.

Tom figured he'd have to write the book as fiction, felt a certain urgency in getting it out quickly while Gerry was around. Now the field opens up. The subject's

gone, and with him, a host of narrative and personal constraints. The story's free to come out any way it wants to go.

• • •

Snatch of cellphonia heard en passant: "She finally figured a way to get out of boot camp." This from a youngish fellow. Hard to say more, it being dusk.

Δ

Head upstate to visit ex-sister-in law Donna and her daughter, niece Laura, near Schenectady. It's a cliché, but as you drive the along the top of the Palisades, you feel your insides soaking up the fall colors as though there's been a drought. If you were a dog, you'd jump out the car window and romp in the leaves.

Δ

Late morning and afternoon spent at the sheep and wool festival in Rhinebeck. An animal event at heart, organized around sheep of diverse breeds: Leisters, Rambouillets, Oxfords, Merinos, not to mention a fair sampling of goats, llamas, alpacas and rabbits.

Katie's weaver friend buys three huge bags of fleece to spin and dye. You've dug your hands into the dense, greasy backs of the living wool-carriers, caressed a hundred rovings and as many yarns. Like a surge from beneath the layering of yesterdays leaf hues, the stimulations nearly overwhelm you. Though it's been a temperate day, you arrive back home feeling windburned, sick to the stomach, yet weirdly energized. Katie reviews the caller ID before you listen to the answering machine and says there's a message from cousin Jane. Now you really feel ill. Can't be good news and it's not. In her even therapist's voice, slightly roughened by the intervening technology, you hear Jane say that Cousin Robert died Friday night. Fortunately, she was with him.

Two months only since the onset of symptoms, or at least symptoms painful enough to prompt him to seek a diagnosis. He was one of the working class Brit-type Dartons who live by the credo: don't go to the doc unless it's falling off. The cancer they found was inoperable, but they offered him chemotherapy. It didn't shrink any masses, but made him sick as a dog. No real pain management until his last day, when, unable to walk or hold anything down, he was admitted to the hospital.

There are lean and chunky Dartons and when younger, Robert had, like his father Arthur, your father Jack and you, tended toward the former build. A decade older than you, more or less, and separated by family seismics, you couldn't have spent more than a total of forty hours with Robert over the course of both your lives. But particularly in recent years, as you'd come to know and get closer to Jane, you'd felt a connection to her slightly older brother, the one she swore saved her life and sanity.

Robert was among the handful of Dartons who showed up when Michael, Danny and Marsha's son, was Bar Mitzvah'd in Queens, late in 2001. You sat next to one another and, waiting for the ceremony to get under way, asked about his teaching. He was, as always, fired up about his students. Invariably spoke of the latest crop as the best. Working on a new book? He asked. Your reply cut short by the emergence on stage of Michael and his rabbi.

A few minutes later, during a Hebrew passage neither of you could understand, Robert nudged you and leaned over. "One favor," he asked.

"What's that?"

"Don't write about my house."

Δ

Bits of people, including some long bones – not so dry – discovered in hidden pockets of ground zero, both in a manhole and, as the *Times* puts it "in underground areas that apparently were overlooked during earlier excavations." It seems that last Thursday, Phoenix Contractors, a firm hired by the city to clean sludge from drains under the corner of West and Vesey Streets made the initial finds that touched off a wider search for additional troves of remains.

Bloomie and his minions cluck in sympathetic bureaucratese. But, says hizzoner, the construction beat goes on. World Trade Center Families for Proper Burial want work to stop. Their members speak a more urgent and primal tongue. CNN quotes a woman whose brother died in the towers on September 11: "I'm a mom, I've got a 2-year-old, and I've a 4-year-old, and their bones, and their teeth, and their hair, and their skin, and their eyeballs are all precious to me. You couldn't put a price on that. And as human beings, we should not put a price on it."

• • •

You say Osama and I say Obama. Let's call the whole thing off.

• • •

A crane blocks 25th Street at the corner of Eighth. Onto the roof of a low-rise building housing a nail salon on the ground floor, another massive piece of telecom equipment descends from a cable, as though from heaven. That roof is already a thicket of electronic units, bouncing who knows what waves where. Just next door, workmen are gutting the ground floor of another old tenement. Some with masks, some without, none with hardhats, the procession of laborers drags out plastic bagsful of masonry, punctured and leaking, then sling them, one after the other, into the curbside dumpster and return for more. The only light inside the demo area comes from the punched-out windows at the building's front and rear. Primitive divestiture.

Full frontal page one of the Gray Lady. On the left side, Ford Motor reports $6 billion in losses. On the right, the stock market's brave erection: 12,111 at the closing bell. To say nothing of Baghdad. Nothing.

Δ

Speak in suspended sentences. The world will last longer.

• • •

Khimars, head scarves, silky things. In Europe, the political class draws lines in the sand and builds walls with them. Yet as All-hallow-even and Day of the Dead draw nearer, the veil gets thinner. More chimerical.

• • •

On the subway, Old Bear dozes, almost falls sideways. Then she rights herself for an instant, eyes open, without precisely waking up. Got to curl up soon for the winter. Hibernation times icumen in.

Δ

Nearly six score years ago, in the days before a Mickey D had sprouted on every other corner, New York played host to more live cows than you could shake a stick at. How do you know? Because last night, from far away Byzantium, a friend emailed you a paper she'd come across on a list-serve written by a Latin American scholar, Laurie Anne Lomas: "Imperialism, Modernization, and the Commodification of Identity in José Marti's 'Great Cattle Exposition.'"

You've read several pieces from Martí's New York exile – they've gone straight to your internal ur-text file – but never came across this one before. What Lomas has translated of this opus is just astonishing: it's a work full of rage, bottled up and foaming, tinctured with mythical, almost mystical associations. At times, Martí's imagery approaches, then holds back at the threshold of the hallucinogenic, as though before a barbed-wire fence. A quality which echoes the actuality of the moment then unfolding in the once-wild west. For by the time of the Exposition, deer and antelope played ever less upon the range, and the days of free-roaming cattle were nearly over.

In his notes, Martí imagined himself as a bull, trapped in the U.S. (Department of Agriculture?!) slaughterhouse. Still he believed it necessary to study "the means and tendencies of the nation so as to evade them, despite their force, as one evades a mortal blow." As for his life in New York City, "Everything, at least for several years of my

life… ties me to this cup of poison." According to Lomas, "The only place [Martí] can craft language, practice his politics and make a living is inside the monster's entrails."

Thus, Martí betook himself to Madison Square Garden – which, in 1887, stood in close proximity to the park also named for the monster's fourth president – to report upon the Great Cattle Exposition. He toured the hall, making respectful note of the stolid, milk-machine-like Holsteins before homing in on Eurotas, a prize Jersey cow. Possessed by her splendor, he waxed erotic, offered up a paean to "the loose jointing of her hinds, so that the udder's delicate nipples can play freely." To Martí's eye, she seemed "suspended negligently on her clean bed of sawdust, a preoccupied damsel who dispassionately awaits the gallant hour."

What taurine prince could possibly make a worthy match for such a magnificent creature? "Suddenly, the music stops: the edges of the corral become crowded: applause resounds: now they will parade the triumphant bull, the beautiful bull of [New] Jersey, 'Pedro.' It may be childish, but corralled on all sides by the English language, it was a pleasure that this winner might be called 'Pedro!'"

But then Martí delves deeper, and older. For "as the foamy milk spills with the sound of the song into the containers, and as they close the doors of the fair, 'Pedro' passes from one side of the circus to the other, followed by a crowd of stableboys: the shadow makes him gigantic; the group drags on the ground the stick that guides him: the youths, from one side to the other, move without speaking, with a pride in accompanying him: all the Jersey cows lift their heads in the last light. With his black body covered with sacred roses, Apis descended with no less pomp when the priest brought him down to the river amidst chanting and incense, as the moon set over the pallid lotus."

Still whirling from Martí's prose, you look up the Apis legend and learn that in certain tellings, Apis's mother was an incarnation of Ptah, Egypt's primordial mound, also known as "the opener of the mouth," who called the world into being, having dreamt creation in his heart. His father, it is said, was a moonbeam. And to think, all this happened, and more, layer upon layer, once upon a time in New York.

• • •

Midafternoon. Tom's invited you down to Gerry's memorial in the dayroom of the flop at 197 Bowery, where for lo these many years Gerry was known as George. Change trains, staircase to the lower level of the West 4th Street stop. Rebounding around the station, a no-nonsense female voice made harsh by the crappy PA. Not once, but twice: "Conductor Thomas, please report to the tower."

• • •

Whew, Chrysler only lost $1.5 billion.

• • •

Funny thing you'd heard years ago came up again in conversation. Apocryphal, but hey. Zhou Enlai to Kissinger: "It's much too early to tell the result of the French Revolution."

Δ

Anything is plausable.

• • •

"Good Americans, when they die, go to Paris." So said Oliver Wendell Holmes or Thomas Gold Appleton circa 1858. Lord, you hope they're right and that the description fits you. Long as it's not Paris circa 2006.

Δ

Fall back. You make a partnership with the onrushing dark. Around five, take out your binoculars, open the bedroom window wide, change into a turtleneck – the wind is cold – put Paolo Conte on the speakers and gaze out at your city. The things you see, the book of changes. A barge moored down in the bay. Wow, that's a huge

crane, its angled cantilever higher than the top of 7WTC, now that you see it close up. It's been idle today, Sunday. Weekdays, there must be some action in the Hole.

Move your focus east. Visible between taller structures, you glimpse a shape unto itself, first imprinted in your eye as a child: one of the silvery "funnels" atop the Washington Square Village "ocean liners." Each liner possessed two funnels – though they weren't really smokestacks, just water towers wrapped in rippled metal cladding to disguise their mundane natures. Nor were the structures they rested upon ships, but instead a pair of vast, parallel NYU faculty housing blocks built to resemble, superficially, Le Corbusier's Ville Radieuse. Back in the late '50s you watched these twin behemoths getting built from your stoop just across West Broadway and at the time they reminded you, as they still do, of the Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth moored side by side.

This evening, from your window, you can't be certain which ocean liner this funnel belongs to. It takes a bit of figuring, but eventually you logic out that given your sightline, what you're seeing is the west funnel of the northernmost liner. But the liner is blocked from view by other buildings, so at this distance, the funnel looks more like a little house from outer space trying to appear inconspicuous in a surround of overbearing terrestrial forms.

Sun's fading fast. Near halfmoon over One Fifth Avenue. Sweep across to the great flank of the Port Authority building. Without trying, your binoculars pick out de stijl-like blocks of color popping out of a white swath of wall on the fourth or fifth floor. Got to be. Yes, there's the logo, or the last bit of it, two feet high at least, visible through the windows: a blue "g," green "l," red "e" against a brilliant white background. Clever idea – this way employees won't forget where they are. Banks of desks in the foreground. Lights on, but no one home by the looks of it. Even Google must rest sometimes.

• • •

This morning, after breakfast, you installed Gwen's spacious, capacious new desk. Baltic birch, cut to size by Tony C. After which you sanded, stained it deep red – Gwen's choice to go with her just-painted Rosy Blush (Benjamin Moore) walls. Endless

coats of poly with sandings in between. Shlepped home by mom and dad, corners carefully swathed in bubble wrap. "Platinum" legs screwed on. Sliding panel mounted underneath for keyboard and graphics tablet. The desk's owner proclaims it "sexy," even allows you to take a picture of her working away on a new drawing. How much better does it get than that?

Δ

Dry as a bone out today. Yet as you cycle café-ward, every breath feels like green water, thick with salt. Gulping down the air of madness.

You and Tom do your damndest to buck eachother up in the face of a host of erosions. "And it's so awful out there," he says, meaning perhaps Oaxaca *con* jackboots, but he's got to go uptown and it's time for you to move the car, thinking as you wave à bientôt that today, right now, all states have gone rogue. Rogue as any terroristic cell or organism. The difference inheres in the deadly fiction of sovereignty within political boundaries. As was said of the Prussians once: an army with a country, or something like that. Now its clear as day that states don't just want a monopoly on violence, they want an exclusive on nihilism too. Can I get a witness?

Here comes Marnie, long-limbed, hair up under a tweed cap, her affect maximally perky. If this was a diner, she'd shoot pots of regular and decaf from each hip. You *bavarde* for a few moments and she spins round to go prepare your café allongé. You almost asked her for un café l'étranger, the bitter brew that wakes one up infallibly.

The first Marine went over the top. Parlez vous?

• • •

Your girls both out late. All alone. The only thing that will save you from madness tonight is to play Amadou et Miriam – *le couple aveugle de Mali* – as loud as the little speakers sitting on your desk will allow. You'll cop to it. You turn to, even grasp desperately at what's beautiful, powerful, in visual art, music, writing, reading, not

because you love it in some abstract sense, but because it's never yet failed to catch you, offer you a moment of traction on the slippery slope.

J'ai au Manhattan fast-food Dakar Sénégal cinéma le Paris
Ascenseur pour le ghetto
Il est minuit à Tokyo
Il est cinq heures au Mali
Quelle heure est-il au Paradis?

…It's midnight in Tokyo
Five a.m in Mali
What time is it in Paradise?

Δ

Stories off the rack. Prêt-à-porter. What looks good on me at the party tonight gets returned tomorrow.

Veil feels more diaphanous than ever. Less substantial than gauze. Souls reaching across. No divide.

• • •

NYU releases a study on why so many kids in the South Bronx get hospitalized for asthma. Part of the story: the Cross Bronx, Major Deegan, Bruckner and Sheridan expressways, and the Bronx River Parkway all run through or around the South Bronx. One-fifth, más o menos, of students in the area, from pre-K to through 8th grade attend schools located within 500 feet, or about two blocks, of major highways. Thank Moses, Robert, for the gift that keeps on giving. But, of course, being a New York situation, there's more.

• • •

The sleeping dragon is awakened by thunder.

• • •

Out of the tar pit of memory it comes. 1967 – the Gamble and Huff tune that was a big hit the Soul Survivors:

On the expressway to your heart
The expressway's not the best way
At five o'clock it's much too crowded.
Much too crowded, so crowded…

That's the tune a million boom boxes ought to play the day anyone thinks of rehabilitating Robert Moses.

Δ

A (h)opening.

• • •

Beyond the imagination of any absurdist: The Pentagon issues an "Index of Civil Conflict" for Iraq – a colored graphic that shows the situation shifting along a spectrum from the blue of Peace to the red of Chaos. Who else but Americans could dream up metrics like this? Social catastrophe as a mood ring.

The *Times* for its part, weighs in by describing the military commanders' state of mind with the tiredest, silliest trope in the West: *growing concern*.

Bad eggs all, in one basket.

Δ

Suggestion: rename that other party the Demo-cats.

• • •

You're perched high on the stoop of a brownstone on 22nd, keeping your eye on the gray ghost, waiting for her parking spot to turn legal. Sun's come out though the step is still damp. Pull out Li Zi Ming's Ba Gua manual. On each rereading, more to take in:

Moving left and right, the variations are endless.

Discern the false and true of the situation.

No matter how great his force, as he attacks I evade by turning and revolving to get close to his side.

The Qi of the upper and lower cannot separate from the center.

Strike without palm or fist being seen.

Move away like water and advance like wind.

Of the thirty-six stratagems, evasion is the best plan,

strike no pose, hold no posture, leave no opening.

An unassuming fellow in navy blue workman's clothes ambles past. There's a logo printed in white on the back of his jacket: Ultimate Power Corp. Piercing the lettering on a sharp diagonal, a lightning bolt.

• • •

Until someone proves otherwise it looks like this: Alyssa Peterson, aged 27, an Arabic-speaking Army specialist from Flagstaff, AZ, of Mormon conviction, couldn't handle torturing prisoners in Iraq. On September 15, 2003, she died from a "non-hostile weapons discharge" – her service rifle – apparently in her own hands. The note she left contained the ironic comment that her suicide prevention training had taught her how to kill herself.

Δ

For ten hours yesterday and into this morning, a six hundred-pound bull,

escaped from a slaughterhouse, roamed the streets of Newark. Eventually, an animal control officer, originally from South Africa, but perhaps reincarnating an ancient Cretan, corralled him in the parking lot of a tool and die shop. Lasso, then tranquilizer injection. See, it's that simple. "He was a little wild," said Denton Infield, patting the bull's flank. "But he's asleep, now."

• • •

Israeli troops open fire on women serving as human shields before a Gaza mosque. See, it's that simple. At least two dead. Who know how many wounded.

• • •

Last Tuesday, Ramiro Jara, a 25 year-old Ecuadorian construction worker fell fifteen stories from an apparently faulty scaffold near Union Square. In the wake of his death, Bloomie's convened a task force to "improve safety and governmental oversight" of scaffolding citywide.

The *Times* cites an OSHA finding that "Hispanic workers who do not speak English are more likely to be involved in fatal construction accidents than workers who do." In light of which, the Buildings Department plans to send inspectors out to fan across the length and breadth of Gotham carrying cards with Spanish translations of phrases like "you will not be terminated for reporting an injury." Yes, certainly, that will bring a world of change.

• • •

On billboards and posters, amidst a collaged skyline, a bottle of Dasani (a Coca Cola company) water stands tall, beaded with condensation. The slogan too is tailored for the local market: *The City That Makes Your Mouth Water*.

But how, O best beloveds, to slake ye spirituall drought?

• • •

Happy as a bird, free as a clam.

• • •

Fascinating word *angrez*. Derives from Urdu, Persian and maybe French. Literally, it means "Englishman." Eventually it came, for Indian Muslims, pre-partition, to stand for arbitrary colonial power.

Δ

Wake up wondering: How much essence of Afghani poppy ends up flowing down catheters into the veins of wounded American soldiers?

• • •

This evening and for several sunsets past: la fête des nuages.

Δ

Early p.m. Pattern of the clouds over Greenwich Village something like the shell of a pallid tortoise, flattened bits of pieced-together pie dough, or the stonework on the outside walls of diners in the suburbs. The grouting of this vapor mosaic is the blue sky beyond.

Δ

Ah, the wondrous imagistic usages of "political" as a modifier. As in, "The Democrats are just playing political football with that issue." Time out, someone's moving the goalposts. Or better yet: "Senator so-in-so is fighting for his political life…" There stands the knight on the field of honor, disarmed but for a busted sword, his shield hewn to smithereens. Drama drama drama. The metaphor's the message.

Δ

I like slippers gold
I like oysters cold
and my garden of mixed flowers
and the sky full of towers
and traffic in the streets
and Maillard's sweets
and Bendel's clothes
and Nat Lewis hose…

A partial list of Florine Stettheimer's avowed favorite things, circa 1930.

• • •

And, if the Democrats gain house or houses? Will we not still be a rogue empire, incapable of signing international accords unless they're about making someone else poorer? Alone with Somalia, we refuse to accede to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Nor to the Kyoto Protocols, the Land Mines Convention, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, nor the Rome Treaty establishing an international criminal court, nor the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which would compromise our prerogative to execute children.

Sure, at some level your outrage is all about Jack, who cultivated his own delusory sovereignty – made up his own rules of disengagement. With a father like that, how could you feel sanguine within the bosom of *Patrie*? Still there's the thing itself – stuffed to bursting with it's own great isolation and unawareness.

• • •

Intrepid stuck in the mud. Built in 1943, the carrier served in the Pacific during WWII, and also the Korea and Vietnam wars. The Intrepid Four were, far as you know,

the first Navy men to go awol – in Sweden was it? – in protest against that latter war.

In 1981, with Reagan busy reclaiming imperialism as the true national pastime, the Intrepid – bound for the scrapyard – was bought by a real estate developer. Since then, she has served as a floating museum of American militarism, moored next to a Hudson River pier in the high west forties, her flight deck bristling with evermore advanced – is that the word? – flying weapons of destruction.

Slated for a $60 million renovation at a Bayonne shipyard, the tugs came to tow her, but that deep, suctionny, estuary mud clung fast to the ship's four massive screws, and won. What to do, what to do? Oh baby.

• • •

Dancing city
Now you're talking
But where's your soul?

So crooned Bryan Ferry to a gliding Roxy Music backbeat kan ya makan.

Δ

Another keeper headline on the print edition of the *Times*. In banner type, about as large as *AMERICA UNDER ATTACK*, their September 10th gift to posterity, the rag o' record declares: *DEMOCRATS TAKE THE HOUSE*.

• • •

Rummy gone.

• • •

So exhausted by the week though it's only halfway done, you get through your first late afternoon conversation of the season with Wolfgang on tea and adrenaline

alone. At one point, he uses the words "hopeless non-perspectives."

Hours later the phrase still plays in your memory, shorn of its historical moment. The phrase feels very now.

Δ

Online *NYT*'s top story: *All Eyes Turn to Virginia Senate Race* where "Democrat Has Slight Edge in Decisive Contest" for a slim majority in the upper house. All eyes? Every last one of 'em?

The *Daily News* front page presents a whole 'nother take. Full page pic of Bush opening what looks like the Oval Office door for Rummy. The President's hand rests upon the ex-defense secretary's back. Is this a gesture of consolation or parting shove? R.'s face cannot be seen at all, but we do get a glimpse of the side of W.'s head – not enough to read his expression. Ergo, the perfect set-up for the cartoon thought balloon which has been drawn over the prez's head surrounding the words: "Don't let the door hit you on the way out."

Perhaps this bold stroke of the *News* echoes some subtle shift in the political barometer, because it definitively trumps the *Post*, which can only muster the same image, in colors more subdued, above a less-than-knockout banner: *RUMS FELLED*.

Ah, 'merica. Where headlines roll, so that its political criminals need never fear a chill at their necks.

• • •

Lots of immediate social life. Invitations, places to go. Your three Germans: Wolfgang, Tobias and Uwe either in or soon coming to town – top notch conversationalists all. Distractions from the appalling state of your career. Patches of solid footing on the mud-slicked slope into Slough of D.

• • •

Once, when Michael Hill mentioned *Free City*, he accidentally called it *New City*.

Gioia's slip was *Falling City*, which led you most fluidly, to *Falling Silly*. That's a book you ought to write.

• • •

Bea would've been 97. L'chaim to you, mom.

• • •

Hang on, Pecos Bill, ride that cyclone.

Δ

You dream the end of this book. Something to do with flying. Cousin Jane said her brother liked birds. Must've come from that.

• • •

Swimming through uncertain times. Flying with pigs. For the pigs shall inherit the earth.

• • •

At Le G., Dylan tells you that a week ago, on November 3rd, a large comet gave us a near miss and hit the sun. No wonder we been bugging out.

• • •

The lights are on but the times get darker. Or is it just your eyes?

• • •

It is said that once upon a time, the Polynesians, months before they set out on a long voyage, prepared themselves by drinking each day, a bit more sea water until their bodies adapted and it became their source of hydration. Is it so?

• • •

DEMOCRATS TAKE SENATE. Such palpable relief: in the air, at the café, in Gioia's voice on the telephone. *DEMOCRATS TAKE SENATE*: today's banner in the hardcopy *Times*. Yesterday, they ran a front and center photo of three middle-aged white guys in suits and ties having just descended the capitol steps: Harry Reid in the center, his right hand clenched in victory, flanked by Dick Durbin and New York State's own Chuck Schumer, a man who never met a military appropriations bill he didn't say yea to. Chuck has definitely eaten a canary – there's practically a feather peeking out from between his lips. Similarly Hilary, smiling a secret smile of power, on the cover of *New York* magazine beneath the rubric: "Now the Real Race Begins." Are you the last inconsolable soul on earth? The last nauseated one?

DEMOCRATS TAKE SENATE. A sea change. Seismic. Kosmic. Tipping point. Now the whole nation will find its conscience, and cease making cluster bombs for a living. We'll put St. Louis, Detroit, Buffalo, Youngstown and the Crescent City to work beating Apache helicopter rotors into plowshares with which to Save Darfur. Now, henceforth, we'll stop murdering other folks' children and our own. And no more torture! Waterboarding's off, surf's up. The endless summer. Goodbye to renditions extraordinary or otherwise. No more orange boiler suits, buckets over heads, hoods and dogleashes. All three hundred million of us will sponsor one another in a massive twelve step program for addicts of Texas Tea. *DEMOCRATS TAKE SENATE*. Surely Kingdom has Come.

It always sounded funny in your ears, how Christian prayers would close with "Amen." The way it resonated in the church, if you were from Mars, you might've though they were saying "I'm in."

• • •

BBC, AP, ChinaNews.com – where was it you read that Bechtel is bailing in Iraq? Eighty-five of their stooges killed since victory. Having grabbed all the easy money they've hit the point of diminishing returns. Rats run down the hawsers before the ship sinks. Funny thing too, Bechtel's Boston debacle, the Big Dig. Supposed to be a tunnel, but it's an improvised waterpark cum house of horrors, with big slabs falling from the ceiling onto passing cars, their tires slick with unstoppable leaks. Sand and water. Waves of grains. No bottom too deep. Falling through sand, you can walk the plank, but never hear the splash.

• • •

Brice Marden visited you in a dream last night, not Joe Hill. Or maybe another aspect of Joe Hill. Recalled now in the writing, it feels as though the Cold Mountain paintings, which you saw with Mark S. at MoMA two days ago, served as a backdrop. Marden said something very affirming, not about you or your work directly, but about the process itself. You can't recall his words, but they had the weight of truthfulness to them. Like his paintings, Marden didn't seem concerned with your presence. Just delivered up what he had to say. As though you were the guest in your own dream.

• • •

The light quality in the city today is, as they might say in Mass., wicked beautiful. Every shadow mild – a treasure trove of toned-down details. And the highlights, apart from the occasional white hot flash off a truck windshield, not harsh, but beneficent. The sun's fingers gentle again. At least in this little acre, merciful.

• • •

Imagine finishing this book and being done with it. Putting it to bed. Hibernation round the corner. Longer and longer the slant of sun. Imagine you wrote something that didn't need anything but itself to exist. Itself and the breath of God. Stable as Mt. Taishan. Ceaseless movement like the Hudson and the East.

Δ

What was to have been a Darton cousins' gathering down at Jane's house mutated by force of circumstance into an afternoon-ling Robert remembrance. He'd been a high school history teacher in South Jersey for the whole of his professional life. An avowed and public Marxist. On the videotape of the memorial held at his school, you heard encomiums from generations of students that made those in *To Sir With Love* seem tepid indeed. Innumerable variations on the same theme: "If it weren't for Mr. Darton, I'd have never…".

Jane said that in the hospital on his last day, Robert had been too weak to fill out the admission forms, so she filled in the answers for him: Name, address, d/o/b, social security number, etc. But when it came to "Religion," she had to ask him and he immediately replied "None." Then paused a moment and said, "And all."

Δ

Indigenous peoples worldwide at extreme risk for Type 2 Diabetes. In recent past, exponential changes in nutrition and physical activities. Epidemic proportions.

• • •

Two underwater turbines being installed in the East River to provide power to a supermarket on Roosevelt Island.

Δ

The last middle class person is escorted to the gates of Gotham and pointed toward the road. Hit it. Follow in the footsteps of the working souls.

• • •

The book of skells.

• • •

The chevrons, v-shaped landforms. Sedimental deposits, they point toward asteroid impacts in the seabed, give evidence of the great tsunamis that built them there, grain by grain, but as swiftly as rushing water may do.

Δ

One by one, the idealizations, like so many Army Chinooks, lose their rotors, crash and burn. Somewhere amidst the metal, ruined body in the desert. A sand worm, first of many, crawls up his ass.

• • •

The currency known as the Euro is crumbling, literally. Sulfate residues from methamphetamine snorting mix with human palmsweat to form sulfuric acid. It's only paper after all. Ain't no gold. The European Parliament should vote to allow fragments of these bills to be used in exchange. Valid down to a sixteenth of the original. Call 'em Tinas.

• • •

Chaos is the new order.

• • •

666 Desdemona, an asteroid native to the Main Belt.

Δ

A new word comes by, introduces itself: *Enthymesis*. Signifies the act of meditating, conceiving, imagining, projecting, ardently desiring.

• • •

Pick up the Intrepid and float it in the WTC bathtub. People would pay to see that. Yes, and Koons could create an immense chrome-plated duck to bob beside it.

• • •

Your parking space goes legal and walking round the car to lock up, you step into an enormous pile of dogshit – one you noticed earlier and made a mental note to avoid. Swish the sole of your shoe in a puddle and do your darndest to scrape the poop off on the sidewalk edge. Still, these New Balances have deep treads. Best leave your shoes on some newspaper outside the door when you get home, let 'em dry out, then bang them on the lip of the refuse chute to dislodge what's dried. No. Bad idea. Someone stealing them from the hallway. Put the shoes on a spread of old *Times* inside your door. Pssst some lemon spray in the general vicinity and follow the rest of Plan A.

• • •

Milton Friedman dies. Wicked witch of the Midwest. Chicago anyway. Ding dong.

• • •

Early evening in the vast entrance hall of the Met. You and Katie have arranged to meet friends here for dinner and for once you're early. A young woman walks by arm in arm with her young man. "I'm open to multiple types of cuisine," she says. And off they go.

Δ

Gotta move the car. Flip on the radio. Immediate recognition and revulsion. That unmistakable Bushian intonation, half smirk, half whine: "Well, that's what happens when you make hard decisions." Click. Silence, but for genial complaints from the belts of the '91 Taurus. *You'll never get to heaven in an old Ford car | 'Cause an old Ford car won't go that far…*

Park in at a meter close to the corner in front of the café. Feed in four quarters in and resume your coffee and conversation inside. The hour spent, up you get to move her to a Monday/Thursday spot and wait it out till she's legal. Turn the key turns and nada, not even the engine oil light goes red. Check fuses. Seem OK. Back inside Le G. where you marshal the collective's energy to push the Gray Ghost around the corner and onto 21st Street while you try to steer without power steering and brake with hardly any brakes at all. Double park for now, since the sweeper ain't been through yet. Damn.

Didja open the hood? asks Paul. Dumbkoff, that's it. Walnut sized lumps of corrosion on both battery terminals – on top of which the connectors are smoking. Brother, you were just not made to have a car.

Here comes Julio to the rescue tottering under the weight of his spare battery. He wants to lend it to you until you can get another. But wait, he says, try brushing off the terminals first. And the beauty is, when you clean off the worst of the corrosion and roughen up the leads, vrrrroom, up she rises, like a charm. And right on time. Down the block comes JOHNSTON, lights flashing, brushes awhirl, water streams jetting into the gutterside. Run Julio's battery back to his van. *¡Gracias!* Run back. Hop in the driver's seat and swerve the Ghost across into the slipstream just behind JOHNSTON as it rumbles past. It's a ballet mechanique, a whole procession of cars falling in behind and ahead of you, everyone intent on claiming their anticipated spot!

Up and down the street a host of minor adjustments, back and forth until forty-odd cars line up in reasonable order, neither too much nor too little space between them. Once again, the strange ritual of alternate side of the street, successfully performed. Somewhere the god of parking dozes, propitiated. And for a whole week too, until next Monday, 'cause Thursday is Thanksgiving.

10:30. Clock says the Ghost is down by law. Up and down the block, folks lock

up and take off. "Don't forget to put oléo on the terminals," calls Julio. "For sure," you say. Not satisfied you've truly heeded him, he doubles back, makes you pop the hood and as you hold it open, he pulls out the dipstick and drizzles oil around and over the battery connections.

Hood down. Thanksgiving wishes exchanged. He gives you a sage nod. "Put oléo," he says.

Δ

Forget melting icepacks. This makes a sea change look like a tempest in a teapot. A *real* tipping point. Scientists have discovered that the earth is actually turning faster. If present trends continue, in the near future, the world could flip upside down.

Asymmetry brought us to this pass, and now the Wobblies have gone global.

• • •

Wherever you look, hither and yon, socialism shaking off its rags.

• • •

Mid-a.m. Uptown to meet Katie for your twenty-sixth anniversary breakfast at Nice Matin. On the subway sitting next to you, John of the number one train. "Sir, do you have a metrocard you could spare? I don't wan to jump over any turnstiles, I'm too old for jail." On his way to apply for a super job on 135th Street, though by experience he's a landscape and garden man. Hails from East Hampton. You'd bet your metrocard he's part Shinnecock. As if on autopilot, you take out the seven bucks in your pocket and press them into his hand. He sets his takeout coffee cup on the floor and reaches into his bag. Pulls out a brand new leather wallet, still in its wrapper, which he presents you in exchange. "Keep it," you say. "It might fill up." Which gets a laugh out of him. 66th Street. Bing bong. Into the midst of your conversation bursts an à capella gospel trio. Down the aisle they come, popping fingers to tight harmonies: *Pharaoh's army got drowneded – in the Red Sea! – Oh, Mary don't you moan.*

• • •

Eggs benedict. You never order eggs benedict. Commune with Yuppie New York, a thousand generations of hollandaise sauce gone under the bridge.

• • •

The rich of ages past were just premature billionaires, now that wealth's as common as air…

• • •

At Fairway, incredible crush of shoppers. And it's not even officially pre-Thanksgiving yet. Katie reports overhearing one manager-type saying to another: "If you can see your feet, there's something wrong."

Δ

Outside Le G., J. notices Tom's spanking new leather jacket and strokes it's sleeve. "Newness," he purrs. "I'll tell you where it's from." With his fingers, J. makes a fold in the upper arm then leans in and, for a long moment, buries his nose in the scent. "Morocco," he pronounces, straightening up. "They cure it in pigeon dung."

Tom nods, "I'd heard that," he says, to all appearances straight-faced. It's only your attunement, gained over the years, to the nuances of Tom's expression and language that cues you into the mix of bemusement and contempt that's likely playing in his head.

You've come out of the café sans coat to walk him to the corner and have a private word. Suddenly you're freezing. Time to head back inside.

Yes, the globe's turning faster and folks' handholds are slipping as they try to hang on in the evermore powerful centrifugal whirl. Gravity gets weaker by the hour. But today – if it is today – a Cosmonaut will leave the airlock of the International Space

Station and, in zero gravity, whack a golf ball round the world. And round and round. Eventually, so the theory goes, the ball will disintegrate in the earth's atmosphere.

What, one might ask, is the scientific value of this experiment? Well, none. But the club is made from a special Russian alloy – space age as it were – and the manufacturers hope that, seeded by the stunt's publicity, some astronomical bucks rain down and turn their course grass green.

Though unlikely, it is, however, possible that the Cosmonaut – who purportedly played some ice hockey in his yout' but has never swung an iron before in any sort of gravity, or absence of it – could slice and punch a hole in the space station and… well, let's not go there.

Fore! Warn'd.

• • •

Far below, back on earth, there is a city rebirthing on what were once marshlands where the Neva disembogues into the Gulf of Finland. Peter the Great, who conscripted half a million serfs to build it – it took that many 'cause they kept dying off – dedicated this great new metropolis to his patron saint. One revolution later, and for nearly threescore and ten years afterward, it was known, officially, as Leningrad. But even if that's what folks called it, the place remained, at least in some part of the mind, Petrograd.

Now, there's nothing to do but change with the times again, add an L and try to get used to Petrolgrad. And watch, on the industrial bank of the river, how Gazprom's skyscrapers rise – whether of Nouvel's design or Libeskind's, or Rem's, or someone else's. From their summits, not long hence, one will be able to gaze down and across the river onto the pickayune spires of Smolny Cathedral. With the certainty of a high pressure atmosphere moving in on a lazy low, Russia's "window on the west" transforms itself into Neva Neva Land.

• • •

: - o

Everyone still talks about how badly they was shocked…

Δ

Biking down Ninth, a good sightline on the new Gehry building. The science of building, irrespective of proportion.

• • •

A chorus of slaves, compliant ones, not rebellious or anything so uncool as that, tripping over one another to let the authorities know they pose not threat:

"*I'm* not Spartacus!"

"No, me neither."

"Hey, boss, it wuzn't me."

"Maybe that other guy, but me, I'm not Spartacus."

"Uh-uh. No way!"

• • •

Tom says, in response to your mentioning some hopeful sign "Well, there's grass in the river." Don't know what the phrase means actually, but it sounds like an image you can use. Weave something with. He and M. are, in any case, headed further upriver than you our anyone else you know has been thusfar. Leaving tomorrow. After a change of planes in Paris, it's on to Hanoi, thence to Cambodia. Tonlé Sap, which is sometimes a lake, sometimes a river, sometimes a flood. Empties into the Mekong delta after its serpent journey from the highland through Phnom Penh to the sea.

• • •

Alternative Kipling lines:
Tear up the white man's curtain.
Drink up the white man's bourbon.
Stare up the white man's burqa…

Δ

Like a dream images, the question resurfaces, whenever a news story, or some other reference calls JFK's assassination to mind – or MLK's or RFK's. Invariably you set off on an associative course that loops back through the clouded circumstances of Olaf Palme's death, yea, even to McKinley, then forward to Saddam Hussein's unfound WMD's and the Great Anthrax Fear.

Your question does not so much concern "who done it?" – in a way just imagining that there was a *they* behind Czolgosz, Princip, Oswald, McVeigh, Atta et all imparts a certain bracing quality, if not precisely comfort. What puzzles you is why, in handling cases of collective trauma, the Authorities – even in assigning blame to a putative culprit – have so often seeded kernels of doubt, some of which have grown into extravagant blossoms of alternative theory and speculation? Why, in short, have these situations been dealt with in a manner that has rendered the reports issued by official investigations either incomplete or in some way unsatisfactory to all but the most naïve or frightened people? What purpose is served by creating accounts so lacking in accountability? For creating, in essence, the sense of a cover-up?

Just for argument's sake, say some element, rogue or not, of the CIA killed JFK and/or RFK. Why didn't they cover their tracks more effectually? Arrogance? Stupidity? Weren't there stories that might have better supported the forensic evidence – bullet trajectories and the like – than the official explanations? Leaping ahead to the near-present, if a garden variety police department possesses the capability to plant evidence – drugs, for example, on a known drug dealer who just happens to be clean the day he's busted – then is it really believable that the Bush administration couldn't "find" some plutonium or smallpox or anthrax, or weapons-grade something-or-other in an Iraqi bunker and run out trumpeting "Eureka!"?

This doubt gap, in its many iterations, is a deep mystery far as you can see.

Cutting to the heart of the matter, given all the resources the government has available to support their narrative of 9/11, why hasn't the public been bombarded with a plethora of movies clearly depicting Flight 77 plowing into the Pentagon? Wouldn't that at least give one firm side to the bubble of doubt surrounding the official accounts of the day? Could not the Bushies have handled their own behavior on and around 9/11 in a way that aroused far less suspicion? Getting all those Saudis out of the country, for example, could have been done much more discretely. It might have even remained a secret.

What's troubled you of late is the notion that perhaps cultivating doubt and suspicion is a major strategy in the game of political power. So much pulverization of the trade towers materials and the planes that hit them, yet from the ruins springs the mastermind's passport in pristine condition! Wouldn't one want to singe it around the edges if the idea was to get folks to buy that part of the story? Which leads you to ask if, beyond arousing doubts, the idea is to leave enough wiggle room for our minds to formulate, then repudiate them in a strange internal dialogue:

"Our government would never engineer, or collude in, the mass murder of its own citizens, would it?"

"Naw, they're our Protectors, they'd never do that!"

Then, sotto voce: "Well, anything's possible."

After which, at an even deeper, barely acknowledged level, "Well I might if I were them."

Given the disquieting, even nauseating trend of such a progression, won't most folks turn and flee toward the official story, however specious? Who among us really wants to contemplate the unmediated horrors of the Ninth Circle? Especially when there's a less distressing option available? That some bad Others did it, not our assumed Protectors. But what happens if we pull back time and time again? Not just from a disturbing narrative, but from our own common sense?

Impossible, granted, to construct, out of the materials of any of these traumas, an account of events that would satisfy most people, or even our own ambivalent selves. But the fact is that we never really get the opportunity to engage the evidence firsthand. Our role is limited to interpreting competing narratives: the official story with all its lacunae, versus an even more fearful unresolved tale in which the only certain thing is

that our trust had been betrayed.

What happens, over time, when some part of us comes to suspect that those in authority are operating in their own interests, quite exclusive of ours? And what results, in instance after instance, when we cannot create or embrace a reliable account of what has befallen us? Do not cracks of open up in our integrity that ultimately yield great vaults of fear?

In truth, however mystifying these terrors and killings may seem, they give evidence, however obscured by smoke and mirrors, not of some great and universal power, but of the wills and actions of other men and women, motivated by power lust or fear, or some combination of the two. Is it possible then that the dread Ninth Circle, wherein Ugolino perpetually devours the skull of the man who forced him to eat his children, resides as a breach, a fear-chasm, within our selves, grown vast with our collusion? Could this chasm, multiplied many millionfold, describe an evolving and ever more unbalanced social architecture of fear?

Narrative: no resolution. Accounting: no balance. JFK, RFK, MLK, WTC as proximal targets. The social mind as ultimate target, accessed through the individual. Fear makes a person and a people stupid. OK, maybe that's not what's happening. But it sure as hell feels as though we're all bound up in a great collective dance of Phobos. Will the mania play itself out, until like so many Copellias, we fall and rise no more? Who can say? Not u, Boo-Boo, not u.

• • •

p.m. Moon over city south. A long white fingernail clip. Met Life's peak daubed orange red orange. Red and green for the Empire State? What's it all mean? Is there a signifier in the house?

Δ

"The phenomenon…" quoth the *Times*, "is known in police parlance as 'contagious shooting' – gunfire that spreads among officers who believe that they, or their colleagues, are facing a threat…"

In truth, the gunfire does not spread among officers since they are, presumably, not shooting at one another, but were rather, in this case, firing at Sean Bell, a young black man, a few hours shy of bridegroom, father of an infant daughter, who lived, and died, in Queens.

The Paper of Reason wanes on: "To the layman, and to the loved ones of those that who were shot, 50 shots seems a startlingly high number, especially since the men were found to be unarmed." Seems. Seams. Stuffing leaking out.

• • •

Tell me, where is fancy bred,
In the heart or in the head?
How begot, how nourished?
Reply, reply.
It is engend'red in the eyes,
With gazing fed; and fancy dies
In the cradle, where it lies.
Let us all ring fancy's knell.
I'll begin it – Ding, dong, bell.
All. *Ding, dong, bell.*
—Willie the Shakes, *Merchant of Venice*

• • •

An elegy on every page.

• • •

Brave New York, pick your casket. Lead. But where's Portia?

• • •

O hell! What have we here?
A carrion Death, within whose empty eye
There is written a scroll! I'll read the writing.

'All that glitters is not gold –
Often you have heard that told.
Many a man his life hath sold
But my outside to behold.
Gilded tombs do worms infold.
Had you been as wise as bold,
Young in limbs, in judgment old,
Your answer had not been inscroll'd
Fare you well; your suit is cold.'

Cold indeed, and labor lost.

• • •

Once upon a time when you were little, your father asked a riddle: "O tell me where is fancy bread? And you, too young to guess at it, didn't answer.

"At Cushmans!" he would say. And you'd laugh with him, not because you understood the punchline, but because you understood it was the punchline.

• • •

As your uncle Mike used to say, "If frogs had wings, their asses wouldn't bounce. Comedy. How low can it go?

• • •

A billion Bridewells. Debtors' prisons of the mind.

• • •

The prophet describes things as they are and everybody thinks this has something to do with the future.

• • •

4:18 p.m. There may have been others that faded, parallel or diagonal or across, but three chem or contrails you can clearly see in the deepening, near-full moon dusk. They run not north south but lengthwise along the Manhattan grid. You're on Seventh and 22nd, but reckoning from this angle you'd place these overhead lacings respectively above Fifth, Third and First avenues. Just a guess. Walk on home, the old Lennon tune encouraging your stride:

Everybody's smoking and no one's getting high
Everybody's flying and never touch the sky
There's UFOs over New York and I ain't too surprised
Nobody told me there'd be days like these…

Δ

Keep your hips under you.

• • •

Her father owned a steel business – she confused it as a child with "steal." He fabricated – fabricated!? – some of the steel used in the WTC. As a ten-year-old she visited the site, rode up and down in Tower One's construction elevator – felt bone deep the chill of its monstrosity.

• • •

We have nothing to fear but fear itself.

Have nothing but fear.
Have nothing / fear
Nothing
Zero
Zero ground

Δ

I was a free man in Paris
I felt unfettered and alive
There was nobody calling me up for favors
And no one's future to decide
You know I'd go back there tomorrow
But for the work I've taken on…

• • •

This morning, amidst swirling images of Jew-hating football goons, the thuggishness, beatings, shootings, coercion of all stripes, into your head drifts the name Raymond Losserand. Go figure.

During the two summers you stayed at Levent's apartment on rue de l'Ouest, you'd walk one street over to Avenue Losserand to catch the Metro. The Franc Prix supermarket was on Losserand, the news kiosk, the fruit and cheese stores, the best pain biologique in Christendom, the Monoprix, the cyber café and a terrific trompe l'oeil mural – the side of a building transformed into an outsized bookcase. And just off Losserand, your local café-bistro, Le 57. You took a snapshot of Gwen, the day you left Paris for the U.S. in 2005 – at the corner of rue des Thermopyles and Losserand.

In the intervening year and a half, Levent's moved back to Turkey. Someone else lives in his apartment now. Montparnasse has evaporated as your second center of gravity. So why now, this morning, do you key in Raymond Losserand, whose avenue you walked without a thought to who he was, and hit return?

What would have been different on those other mornings, buying *Libération* or

some peaches, or a bread, had you know he was a Communist, a commander in the Resistance, whose métier was organizing small armed groups. And that, along with several other comrades, Losserand was shot by the Gestapo in the Mont Valérien prison, former stronghold of the Communards, on October 21, 1942, aged 39.

Δ

Nobody knows the comedy I've seen.

• • •

Worlds are being born, flourishing and wicking out without your being remotely aware…

• • •

Is there a geometry of fear, or is fear non-dimensional, abstract – an algebra?

• • •

Road Runner knows he's groundless, yet operates outside of fear. Coyote looks down midway across, realizes he's running on thin air, freezes, drops like a stone. From the far side of the chasm: *beep-beep!*

• • •

21st Street. Cars pass over the still-steaming macadam patch, their tires picking up the liquid tar edging like chewing on so many bootheels. Low comedy. Pocket steamroller to and fro. They did a lousy job, Nico & Co., from Brooklyn, but they did it fast. In no time at all, the energy was unblocked, the street free of backed-up honking cars.

• • •

Was it, at least in part, out of sympathetic frustration at the incapacity of their military brethren to stem the insurgency in Iraq that a squad of New York's Finest unloaded fifty bullets into a recalcitrant vehicle filled with helpless, hapless Others? Sounds like the sort of "accident" of war that might take place on the Baghdad airport road or at a checkpoint when a car doesn't slow down fast enough and the guys in the occupation army get spooked.

• • •

Bigger giants, that's what's needed. And stolider, denser dwarves. Flags of aggression. Low comedy.

• • •

What went wrong in Iraq? some folks sitting around your café table ask. What can you say? *Nothing. Nothing went wrong.* You say nothing.

• • •

On the corner near Kesban's stand, you're slipping the handles of a plastic bagful of grapes and bananas onto your bike handlebars when you hear a slurry voice, directed, perhaps, at you. A black fellow, solidly-built, mid-twenties if you had to guess, looking not quite in your direction. He repeats his phrase and after a half beat you grasp the meaning. "You owe me a pair of pants." He makes an indefinite palm up gesture, as though reaching out for alms, then points to a rip in the leg of his jeans, a straight-cut, right-angle flap about two inches by two. Holds out his palm again.

• • •

Five, six years ago you used to read Euripides 'cause he wouldn't put sugar on the circumstances. Now Aristophanes seems the accurate one. Even Rabelais doesn't

approach this level of open grotesquerie. Low comedy, minus the satire. Falling down pants. Hairy bums.

Δ

Does a primal hatred – revulsion – for water underflow, undertow, the actions of our culture? Race memories of the great floods? Naturally we reviled the destructive wave – tsunami – proximal cause of suffering and displacement. The culprit, supposedly, was an asteroid, but nobody blames the sky, no one points the finger at the atmosphere as the culprit who failed to burn it up. Then sploosh, hated water everywhere and not a drop to drink. Renunciation in the grief of our loss, millennia ago, of our oceanic selves in our displacement to land.

With the settling of human culture comes an increase in our combustion of whatever is available for burning, particularly as we spread to colder latitudes, first going at what's on the surface then digging ever deeper, displacing us evermore readily in explosion-driven machines. What – an unconscious attempt to dry out a water planet? Or just a disconnection with water-nature. Who knows? And what of our great massacre of sea animals, including those most like ourselves?

Now, with all this burning, the air turns metallic. Will this not stop until the melting ice meets a substance part metal, part gas, no longer capable of sustaining rain? A cliché about salt tears: "Turn off the waterworks," the private dick snaps at the weeping tomato. But we can't dry it all up. Not with all the cars and nukes in the world. Only Brother Sun's powerful enough for that. What then? But what, what before that moment?

• • •

Early p.m. Temperature headed for the high sixties. Unseasonable. Unreasonable. No one knows weather… to strip or bundle up?

• • •

Multi we may be, but not a one of us omni.

• • •

Less than six weeks since the sale of Stuytown-Peter Cooper and now Starrett City, forty-six buildings, six thousand apartments filled with fourteen thousand people stands on the block. Same auctioneers as the Speyer deal: CB Richard Ellis.

Starrett was built in the sixties roughly on the Penn South/Co-op City architectural model, but economically it took the form of a Mitchell-Lama-subsidized rental development, rather than a capped-equity co-op.

A collection of gardened superblocks in Brooklyn, Starrett *is* the gorgeous mosaic. One of the safest, most felicitous urban environments in the world. These are the great fires – different in nature, yet just as pernicious as those that, kan ya makan, scorched the South Bronx and Bushwick. But this time the arson is a kind of fast-burning greed-driven incineration that leaves the buildings in place – habitable for a higher-priced population. Speculation, sucking in all the oxygen of the city's atmosphere – some engulfed sooner than others, but eventually, consuming all.

Echoing, perhaps unconsciously, the warspeak of the Vietnam-era policy wonks, Michael McKee of the Starrett Tenants Political Action Committee puts it nicely: "The big complexes are falling like dominoes."

• • •

Dimly you are aware that you've never felt better.

• • •

I'm a road runner, baby,
Can't stay in one place too long,
I'm a road runner baby,
You might look at me and I'll be gone…

• • •

When you were five, your birthday party was to be held at school, at the end of the day, in a smallish room – filled with kid-sized tables and chairs, and an upright piano – adjacent to the rooftop playground.

As the appointed hour drew closer, you sat the top of the slide, looking out over Greenwich Village, and suddenly felt very anxious about what was delaying your mother. So you slid down, scrambled across the white pebblestones, hopped over the green-painted wood barrier onto the terracotta tiles, made your way through the doorway to the stairwell and peered down five flights. Something moving down there. Then into view came Bea's hand on the banister, next her beret, and soon the white box with your cake inside. Great relief at the sight of her growing evermore proximate. But in the succeeding instant, an empty sense of dread too, void as the stairwell, since somehow you knew, without having the language for it, that you had parted from your last moment of unmediated happiness.

This came to you fifty years, six months and a day from the event, at approximately the same hour of the afternoon, as you lay in Kelly's office having an acupuncture treatment for your knee and a wacky SI joint. Needling sends you into a trance every time. But it's never rolled out a whole fabric of the past like this. Without as much fanfare as on May 30, Bea used to celebrate your half-year birthday. Which maybe makes this memory a day late if it was trying to get through. Just a moment ago, when Kelly stuck a needle into the side of your knee, and electric spasm shot down to your big toe. "Holy cow, what's that?"

Nonchalant her reply, "Channel being unblocked."

Δ

The mystery knows more than you do.

• • •

"Symbolism of compliance," a phrase coined by Morstein Marx, a high-ranking

bureaucrat in the administration of the city-state of Hamburg before 1933. It's about how we show we're not dangerous. Like tying yellow ribbons round the old oak trees. Even if we don't have a loved one "serving" in Iraq.

Δ

Yes, it's true. The fellow doing the imbecilic job of parking his silver Windstar LX in right in front of the gray ghost has a sticker plastered to his bumper that says "New York Terrorist Hunting Permit – No. 91101." Looks official, but or course, it has to be a novelty item.

The sticker has a yellow background over which an orange silhouette of a pistol has been superimposed, as though it's the shape of NY State. You get out into the cold to read the fine print and scope out the driver. Nondescript-looking white guy. Short beard, thinning hair, dark clothes – a weightier, more suburbanized version of you. The small type across the top of the sticker reads: "Special Issue – Resident – Lifetime License." Then, at the bottom: "Gun Owner – No Bag Limit."

The way you know you are not a bodhisattva is that you feel a great, cold impulse to kill this man. Warring impulses: would it be more pleasurable to make him kneel on the sidewalk before shooting him in the head, or simply blow him and his car to Kingdom Come with an IED? Good thing you don't own a gun and know nothing about making bombs. Best not to have the technology, or skills to complete that circuit.

You edge perilously close to acting out the way you once used to when all your buttons got pressed at once – rapping on his tinted window hard and yelling "Hey turkey, do you think you are?" If he didn't respond fast enough, you might make a good faith attempt to tear off his mirror.

But then, quick as it flared up, your hatred's gone and you just feel chilled. And here comes Tamatha, with a take out coffee cup in her hand, her long brown cashmere coat open to the east wind. Pecks on both cheeks. On her way to teach a Montessori class for moms and their infants. You're completely short circuited now. Back into the Taurus. Wait it out. Read Ibn 'Arabi. When you look up, it's 10:37 and the asshole's gone.

• • •

"I was just standing at the back of the car, shooting backward as we headed into the city [Saigon]. The car was going voom, voom, voom as we drove over the boots, like a boat going over waves. I was just happy. Happy. It was fun driving over the boots, bumping up and down." So recalled Duong Thanh Phong, a Vietnamese combat photographer, interviewed in April, 2000.

And who built the road beneath those cast-off boots? The French – the better to get around their conquered land.

• • •

It's late when you get the mail. Late enough for the unintendedly surrealistic value of two letters to take effect on this evening of a nearly full moon hanging over the spire of the Empire State. Full enough for rock and roll. Clear as crystal the air. Letter one is from the Central Park Conservancy, the organization that, under Giuliani's privatization rampage, took over management of the park. The envelope tantalizes: Your Complimentary Tickets are Enclosed. Zip goes your letter opener. Out slide two tickets to… Central Park. Say what? It takes you a beat to grasp that they're serious, sort of. "Admit One," say the tickets to "New York's Premier Attraction." Scan the letter. "We've enclosed two free tickets to Central Park to Make a Point.

"Simply put, the Park remains free and open for New Yorkers to enjoy in all its splendor because of contributions by people like you to the Conservancy. Without the generosity of caring New Yorkers, it wouldn't be the park you've come to know and love.

"Did you know – today, private contributions provide more than 85% of Central Park's annual $25 million operating budget…?"

Hmmm. A public park supported almost entirely by private donations. Twenty-five million!? Ah, they did it to make a point they didn't actually say. It's a shakedown. *Give us money or else we'll put up gates and charge admission.*

The letter waxes on about what you'll get for your annual $35 membership. At the other end of the charitable scale, you could, for only a thou, become a "Belvedere

Knight." Thank you, Douglas Blonsky, President & Central Park Administrator for a very entertaining five minutes, and now, into the circular file you go.

Letter number two comes printed on official New York State Senate stationary. It's from Thomas K. Duane, your man representing the 29th District.

"Dear Mr. Darton:

It's a fact of life that in the world today, we face a number of potential threats, both natural and human-made. While it is important for us not to let these threats guide our daily lives, we must make sure that we are prepared to deal with them should they occur – both as individuals and communities." That's pretty shaky English, not to mention logic, but apart from that, spit it out Tom, what are you trying to say?

"With this in mind, over the past several months, I have held a series of Emergency Preparedness Forums across the district" with "speakers from the New York City Office of Emergency Management, local police precincts, hospitals…"

Some few paragraphs later, come the forum's "general advice" on how to be ready "if a disaster strikes."

"• Designate an out-of-state contact that family and friends can use to keep in touch, in case New York phone circuits are busy.

"• Ensure that all members of your household have a copy of your household disaster plan."

Jeez, seems like Tom's making a good faith effort to scare the piss out of us. To bad – you already pissed at the office.

"• Have in your home at least three gallons of bottled water per person (one gallon per person, per day, for three days); non-perishable ready-to-eat canned foods; a manual can opener; …unscented bleach (to sterilize water); a whistle; a phone that doesn't rely on electricity…

"• Have an easily-accessible, easy-to-carry "Go Bag" with copies of your important documents; an extra set of keys; cash and credit cards…

"• If you have a pet…"

Yeah, you've got two cats. But Tom, you're not suggesting – surely you're not implying – that if the ready-to-eat canned foods you stockpiled give out, that Vovo or Tibble might end up in the…

"…prepare an animal carrier with food, water, a first aid kit, litter trays, feeding dishes, extra harnesses and leashes. For more recommendations, visit www.aspca.org.…"

Phew! Tom concludes by hoping you will tune in to see the televised emergency preparedness forum being cablecast in a couple of weeks, and/or check the Office of Emergency Management website. "As always, please feel free to contact my office about this, or any other matter of concern."

Other matters of concern…. Well, what concerns you most, reading this letter, is something Tom's office doubtless couldn't tell you: whether he knows something about what's coming down the pike you don't.

• • •

Martin said to his man, fie, man, fie
Martin said to his man, who's the fool, now
Martin said to his man, fill thou the cup and I the can
Thou hast well drunken man, who's the fool now

I saw the man in the moon, fie, man, fie
I saw the man in the moon, who's the fool, now
I saw the man in the moon, clouting of St. Peter's shoon
Thou hast well drunken, man, who's the fool, now

I saw the goose ring the hog, fie, man, fie
I saw the goose ring the hog, who's the fool, now
I saw the goose ring the hog, saw the snail bite the dog
Thou hast well drunken, man, who's the fool, now

• • •

Later, before going to bed, you think of an item to add to Tom's survivalist gameplan: "If you're a writer, back up all your files to CD and send them to a trusted friend in some other part of the world." Like New Mexico. Or Turkey. Or New Orleans.

Δ

Biking west along 25th, the wind so frigid that your tears freeze before they can crest your lower eyelids. If you had felt well enough to be here an hour and change ago, you'd have looked behind you and seen the "solstice" sunrise – the twice yearly phenomenon wherein the Manhattan street grid – canted, so they say, 29ish degrees east of due north – lines up with old uncle Solaris as he wrenches himself free of Queens. Visible with Druidic regularity down nearly every east-west block from 14th Street up to where it all goes haywire above one-five-five. Next opportunity is when the revolution swings Ms. earth into position again on 1/8/07. Don't miss that one.

• • •

Grid dates from 1811, long after Stuyvesant and his garrison cleared out. Still, it's a kind of Dutch angle, not to be confused with uncle.

• • •

Three tugs led by the Christine M. McAllister succeed, on the second try, at pulling the Intrepid aircraft carrier free of its muddy berth at Pier 86. Towed with her stern forward, the behemoth, her flight deck bristling with airborne deadlies, starts the slow five mile voyage downriver to Bayonne and drydock.

Much dredging by the U.S. Navy preceded this morning's operation. Interesting, 'cause the Intrepid's a private museum now. So who's picking up the tab for dislodging

her? Ah, who cares. Don't be a stick-in-the-mud!

• • •

Where has Oregon, boys,
Where has Oregon?
If you want Alaska,
(I'll-ask-a) where she's gone.

• • •

Proposal for a brawl you could incite at the café: the historic – epochmaking – merger of Judaism and Islam. Both Abramic people of the book, sharing the same Sabbath and similar dietary laws. Why not? Interpretations of law and community disputes to be presided over by Arabbis, collectively known as a Moses/Muhammad Arrabinate. Or MoMu for short.

• • •

On the first day, rocks refused to be picked up.
On the second day, water flowed uphill.
On the third day, dust would not settle.
On the fourth day, dogs climbed trees.
On the fifth day, a belt of one hundred moons appeared.
On the sixth day, trees inverted, showing their roots to heaven.
On the seventh…

• • •

The other day at Le G., you encountered Bob, a well put-together fellow of middle years who often breakfasts there with his brother on Sundays. The three of you have, at times, found proximity, and with it, occasion to chat. You'd lent them a copy of

the Designer/Builder issue containing an excerpt of *Notes…*, the one that chronicles the immediate aftermath of 9/11 and about which, today, Bob has many things to say.

Among his adjectives, the word "moving." But more honey to your ears, "lucid" and "capacious." He speaks of the narrative having helped him process the trauma – of it speaking to his own experience as a New Yorker. "I boosted your sales too," Bob says. "Bought a copy of *Divided…* for my brother for Christmas." Holy cow. You exit into the frigid city on a tide of clement air, imagining how thrilled Katie will be when you get home and recount this.

Δ

Early a.m. You're making the bed, pulling up the cover over the pillows when over the NPR airwaves comes a dialogue between Steve Insky and a female reporter whose name you don't catch. Questioned by Steve about the congressional Iraq Study Group Report, due out today, she praises the "caliber" of the men on the panel, but adds that the report will be bound to disappoint many people, because it contains no "magic bullet." Where do they get these people?

• • •

Bright midmorning. Hanging front and center in the window of Skyline Books on 18th Street between Fifth and Sixth, a falling-apart poster.

GANAR LA GUERRA

¡MENOS PALABRAS VANAS!

Beneath this bold lettering, a socialist-realist image of four trench-coated soldiers rushing forward – from right to left – wielding drawn pistols and carbines tipped with bayonets. The soldiers charge beneath rippling banners emblazoned with the hammer and sickle, a red star set in a white circle against a red field, the letters CNT and FL – is the latter acronym cropped off by the border. On closer inspection, each soldier color-coordinates with one of the banners. ¿Quien sabe? You weren't even close to born when the war ended nor have you studied it enough to know the finer points of who was whom.

At the center top of the poster, an elaborate symbol has been printed, too small to decode from your enforced distance, but surrounded by legible words: JUNTA DELGADA DE DEFENSE DE MADRID – DELEGACION DE PROPAGANDA Y PRENSA. To the left, a stylized signature:

P A R R I L A

X X X V I

The dot over the "I" in Parrilla is outsized, giving it the look of a rising sun. At the left bottom border of the poster: SINDICATO PROFESSIONALES BELLAS ARTES U.C.T. On the right: RIVADENEYRA C.O. MADRID

Strange coincidence to come upon this image five minutes after parting from your breakfast companions, Eduardo and Tómas, the first a Madrieno, the latter a devout hispanophile. Off you all went, by different routes, toward your mid-morning obligations. And you, you were the only one to take this street, in response to an internal voice that urged, albeit gently: "no, not north. Head west first."

When you do turn north, it's onto Sixth. You've been looking at the steelwork for months, but now, there it is: atop the Hugh O'Neil building they've installed the golden cladding for the first of two ovoid, spike-topped domes – replicas of the original Ottoman-ish towers that must've dazzled the eye back in the days of the Great Emporium, when it was built as a block-long department store – one pearl in the string of posh establishments that made up Ladies Mile. Now the banners cry out LUXURY CONDOS CONDOS CONDOS. Alive, Alive-O.

Though the building's titular owner is a certain Elad Properties, your nose tells you that these domes herald the symbolic arrival of a new Sultinate. You try to clear your mind, but the sense of the uncanny won't disperse. Instead, as you step into the cave-like darkness beneath the scaffolding, Lennon's lyrics possess your head:

Nobody told me there'd be days like these
Nobody told me there'd be days like these
Strange days indeed
– most peculiar mama…

He may be dead. But who's to say he can't be a boon companion to lead you in a marching song?

• • •

There are whole aspects to people, even close friends, that you never come to know because you don't get drunk with them.

• • •

Napping while awake, you dream that you possess a vast collection of crystal paperweights. One to which you're particularly drawn encases a violet within.

• • •

A wrecking ball keeps swinging, smashes down the wall you carefully built five minutes ago. But your masons work quickly, and being a gross thing and moving without much intelligence, the ball does not entirely obliterate what it encounters. The rubble itself begins to raise the level of the ground, create a mound, destabilizes over time the wrecking machine.

The assaultive force possesses only has one speed: full ahead. Whereas your masons are subtle folk who learn from past experience. The ball still punches holes but doesn't topple the wall's upper reaches. In its old age, the ball may have to content itself with making windows. See, the masons are already combing the debris, gathering together the most usable stones. So far, whatever the distress to the materials, their proportions are unerring.

• • •

Ah, but you are a man who walks about singing with ghosts.

Which triggers the realization that somewhere, among your moribund computer files, lies a book proposal you drafted back in 2000 – the year zero. Only a few years gone by, yet that period seems altogether removed in perception, consigned, along with so much else to the parallel universe known as Before 9/11.

Originally you'd intended the proposal for Jason Epstein. For a year or so, thanks to the good offices of your then-agent, His Eminence had been courting you, albeit in a desultory way. He wasn't interested in publishing *Divided*…, that was clear from get-go. His idea, and one you seriously considered, was that you write another kind of New York book – one you suspected he wanted to write himself but wouldn't – a paean to an infinitely resurgent city borne along on tides of immigrant energy.

However much you tried to get with his program, it just wasn't in you to write such a book, despite the tantalizing prospect of an advance that would have stemmed your financial anxieties for at least a couple of years. Instead, and to some degree as an attempted compromise, you cobbled together a proposal for a book you actually could imagine yourself writing. Several times you nearly showed it to him, but then *Divided* found its publisher and you took on its deep and seemingly interminable revision – one that in retrospect you're awfully glad you accomplished.

Nonetheless, into the Misc. Writing file the proposal went, and remained, unrestive – until two clicks ago. No, that's not precisely true. Not long after *Divided* came out you did submit the book idea to the New York Public Library's Scholars and Writers program. Their council of sachems declined to fund it. Brief and intense disappointment. But then the world, and you moved on.

> *Comes Around:* a weaving historical material within a fabric of fiction and fable, initiated by a chance encounter between two New Yorkers, one living and the other, though dead, still very present.
>
> Together, they make a spiraling, transverse journey through four hundred years of New York life, encountering a host of actual and invented people: workers of all sorts, artists and artisans, political reformers, parvenus, oligarchs and criminals. Linking the immediacy of these individual encounters to the story of the city as a still-unfolding collective organism, *Comes Around* intends to evoke a sense of "once upon a time in New York," experienced as an eternal now.
>
> When the book opens we are sitting on a bench in Prospect Park with Marina, a South Asian woman in her mid-twenties. It's early autumn but warm enough for the transitional breezes to start her ruminating on life in her

adoptive city. The only member of her family living in the States, Marina has blended in with seeming ease ever since arriving five years before to earn a graduate degree in telecommunications. Lately though, she has found herself falling prey to uncharacteristic bouts of anxiety and confusion. Tensions at the dot com startup where she works are running high in the shadow of potential downsizings, and the once free-floating atmosphere has grown petty and factional. "I need a little distance," she thinks. "I'm glad I took the morning to get centered."

Surveying the expanse of still-lush open parkland, then spots a black man approaching down the path. He's about forty. Dressed like a worker. She lowers her eyes and wills him to walk by. He stops directly in front of her and asks for a cigarette. Marina says she doesn't smoke, which amuses the man so much he starts to cough and can't seem to stop.

She almost reaches into her bag to give him some of her bottled water, but thinks the better of it.

When he stops coughing he asks "Mind if I sit down?"

Marina nods. She's got her cell phone, and in any case this guy doesn't look to be in very good shape.

They sit in silence a while. Then he says:

"I've been looking for you."

Oh boy, she thinks, *he's crazy*.

But the man isn't crazy – he's on a mission. He turns toward her.

"I'm Willie," he says, extending his hand. "Willie Turks."

It's a large hand, especially compared to hers.

"Marina." She hesitates a beat, but takes his hand. The palm is very cool and dry.

"Marina. Mucho gusto. Funny, you don't look Spanish. Com'está, Marina?"

"Muy bien, y usted?" Marina says, proud, for some reason, of being able to use the bits of Spanish she's picked at her local bodega. *This is a New York moment,* she thinks, *this is what happens in this city. Two people with nothing in common start a conversation and then—*

Marina is right – this is a New York moment. But her interlocutor is peculiar in several respects. For one thing, he is not, strictly speaking, there. He is a manifestation of one of the city's countless ghosts. Eighteen years before, Willie Turks was a subway maintenance worker who one night came up from underground for a coffee break and found himself in the seriously wrong place and time. One day after Gemini turned to Cancer in 1982, Willie was attacked and murdered by a mob of white men on Avenue X, in Gravesend, not far, as the crow flies, from where he and Marina sit talking now.

In the years since his death Willie has come to understand the city in ways no living person can. And he has chosen Marina, out of thousands, to introduce to many of its souls, corporeal and otherwise; fictional and actual; anonymous and legendary – some who lived here a lifetime, and some who passed quickly through. Together, they will encounter:

- Lily Bart (fictional heroine of Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth*)
- José Martí (prolific writer, New York sojourner and liberator of Cuba)
- Sarah Bradley Cox Oort, (Front Street property owner, member of the Trinity Church congregation, consort and later wife of Capt. William Kidd)
- Othmar Ammann (Swiss-born bridge engineer)
- Dandy John Dolan (leader, circa 1870, of the infamous Whyos gang)
- Dorothy Day (founder of the Catholic Worker)
- Nicola Tesla (Croatian immigrant, physicist and electrical engineer, chief advocate of alternating current)
- Mohammed Basry (ex-Colonel in the Egyptian Air Force, planning to return to his family in Alexandria after one more year selling fruits and vegetables on a busy streetcorner in Chelsea)
- Frank Jennings (founder/editor of *Saturday Review* and one of the city's last great Jewish Irishmen)
- Mary Burton (Indentured servant to tavern owner John Hughson, and chief informer in the Great Slave Plot of 1741)

• Ruth Vogel (Oklahoma native who moved to the big city in the 1930's and married Alfred, a garment workers' union organizer and playwright)

• Julia de Burgos (Puerto Rican poet)

• Fitz-Green Halleck (19th century literary hack and Knickerbocker wit)

• Abdel Abouhalima (former taxi driver and convicted World Trade Center bomber)

• Vito Marcantonio (legendary Congressman and populist political boss)

• JP Morgan (bewailing his inability to materialize and save the Nation – again)

• Harry Houdini (Hungarian rabbi's son from Brooklyn who slipped his chains and escaped from a box sunk in the East River)

• Margaret Chambers (born in Guyana and working as a nanny to seven year-old twins)

And many others.

Comes Around charts the city's incessant reinvention of itself – its resilience in the face of recurrent crises, its counterposing forces of tribalism and inclusiveness and the ever-shifting fortunes of its oligarchs, arrivistes, and everyday people.

Imagined as a multiply-voiced cultural dialogue with the collective soul of New York City, *Comes Around* freely appropriates, albeit with a very different intent, the guided-tour-in-a-spiral form of Dante's *Inferno,* as well as the political-literary strategies used by Eduardo Galeano in *Memories of Fire,* his epic history of Latin America.

Now there's a road not taken. What were you thinking? Yet it shows to go you how far you've come and near you've gone. To and from.

Δ

Jack's birthday, he's 87 today, December 7th, a day that will live, for you, in fame and infamy alike. Why then does a song your mother used to sing when you were small enough to be easily picked up and held, suddenly pop into your head?

My grandfather's clock
Was too large for the shelf,
So it stood ninety years on the floor;
It was taller by half
Than the old man himself,
Though it weighed not a pennyweight more.
It was bought on the morn
Of the day that he was born,
And was always his treasure and pride;
But it stopped short
Never to go again,
When the old man died.

Then she'd sing the chorus, as deep as her smoker's voice could go, her inflection subtly cueing you to the absurdity hidden within the lyric's portentions of tragedy.

Ninety years without slumbering,
Tick, tock, tick, tock,
His life seconds numbering,
Tick, tock, tick, tock,
It stopped short
Never to go again,
When the old man died.

Only now, Wikipedia-ing, do you learn out that "My Grandfather's Clock" was written in 1876 by Henry Clay Work, who also authored "Marching Through Georgia" – among other British-style brass band classics as well as the sentimental ballads, "Come Home, Father," and "The Ship That Never Returned."

When you'd grown a bit older, say seven, your father – who'd once been a habitué of the Lion's Den, The Cedar Tavern and the White Horse, all hipster spots – began concentrating his attention on the Dugout, a literal dive just down West Broadway and round the corner on Bleecker. At least once, when you couldn't sleep, unsure as to what sort of mood he'd be in when he came home, you imagined pre-empting the moment. You'd walk to the Dugout, down the stairs and through the door. Barefoot, in your pajamas and carrying your teddy bear beneath your arm, you'd stand beside his barstool and sing – both to publicly shame him, and compel his return.

Father, dear father, come home with me now!
The clock in the steeple strikes one;
You said you were coming right home from the shop,
As soon as your day's work was done.
Our fire has gone out our house is all dark
And mother's been watching since tea…

Somewhere you'd heard the tune and lyrics to that one too. And realized, even at the time, that conjuring up this earnest, Victorian image of yourself playing child guardian to your errant dad, allowed you to feel a bit less obliterated. It also made you want to laugh.

• • •

The Tsar has been deposed! Don't cry Anastasia, don't cry.

• • •

Gates is confirm'd as Sec'y of Defense. Capitol Hill gives a CIA of relief. A different sort of exhale perhaps among the Nicaraguan thirty-somethings – children in the mid-80s – who owe their missing body parts to Gate's "intelligence work" in their countryside.

Call it Truth, call it Reason,

It's a probable act of treason
That the goon who is doing it is some pol – some pol!

95 to 2, the vote came down, those calling "yea" including the junior Senator from Illinois and great hope of the liberal magical thinkers, Barak H. Obama. But the fact is, he's obaminable, as awful in his own way as Hilary C.

Denial is a long river indeed, replete with many a cataract and muddy delta at the mouth. In the mind.

• • •

Describe. Describe a path.

Δ

Noonish. Trip down to Bowling Green to Michael K.'s office to meet him for lunch. Get out at the south end of the Rector Street stop. Just a few blocks behind you, unseen since you never turn to establish a sightline, the spectacle of deconstruction workers taking down the Deutsche Bank building. Little by little. Because the structure remains toxic even after all that cleaning – what was the figure, $70 millionsworth? It's a year's project at least – a painstakingly slow sequel to the quick and dirty demolition work just across Liberty street that left the Deutche building ruined yet standing.

First to go will be its glass windows and the metal column covers from the top four floors. Crews will still be looking, so officials say, for bits of people deposited there five plus years ago. Next in the disassembly order, the steel and concrete skeleton of those upper floors. Incrementally, parts of the building and the fragments of tower and airplane wreckage that landed inside it, all laced with asbestos, lead, mercury and you name it poisons will start a journey somewhere, all wrapped, it is promised, nicely in plastic. Where, oh where does all this finally rest? Who will receive this vast trove of contaminated stuff? Someone must know, but they ain't publicly telling.

Meanwhile, walking toward Broadway you decide that whatever's been let loose into the air from the building's disassembly, the only thing to do is breathe. Clear as crystal the skydome above. Too cold for condensation.

• • •

Back home. Nearly five. Out come the binoculars on a gorgeously embered southern twilight.

The left half of the façade of the Deutsche Bank building is still visible behind the new WTC 7. Weird beyond weird, amidst all the lit-up downtown office towers, to see its hulk completely blacked out save for a swooping zigzag of worklights that shine gaily from the top of the structure down to the lower floors. Certainly you can't be the only one who immediately registers this shape as the stylized outline of a Christmas tree – the left half of one at any rate. Whether intended as an effect, or fortuitously random, the illumination imparts a light and lyrical touch to this, the world's tallest superfund site. Except it isn't a superfund site.

Change your view. Look east. A flash popping in a 26th Street loft. Some photographer at work or play.

Lights flicker from the opposite loft
In this room the heat pipes just cough
The country music station plays soft
But there's nothing, really nothing to turn off…

Δ

In New York City, in the spas and salons, storefront fingernail joints and yea even beneath the canopies of street fairs, how many thousands of Asian work at kneading the knotted muscles of stressed-out Oxos into some semblance of relaxation? "Don't worry that your civilization is down the tubes," the palm root of their every hand seems to say. "It's our day now," chorus the fingers, "but we'll soothe away, for

now, for a price, all your tensions, all your fears, however buried, of that hard, hard landing to come."

• • •

Return home from an amazing performance of *Ragtime* at LaGuardia to scan the round midnight front page of the online *Times*. They've outdone themselves. On the righthand side of the page – separated from the gaggle of confused articles about Iraq by an eerie photo of the space shuttle taking off by night, its trail of light arching above the still harbor of Daytona Beach – there's a teaser blurb for a travel feature: "Luxury Destination of the Year. In Zambia, you can watch hippos from the comfort of your own sunken tub."

• • •

How did Wiscon-sin, boys?
She stole a New-brass-key,
Too bad that Arkan-saw, boys,
And so did Tenna-see.
It made poor Flori-die, boys,
It made poor Flori-die, you see,
She died in Missouri, boys,
She died in Missouri!

• • •

Era of misguided missiles.

• • •

Preserve me from false discriminations.

• • •

Prep school. Perp school. What a difference, or not so much…

• • •

Funny thing to think of, those days early in the seventies when, still shell-shocked from the implosion of the movement, you fell in with a crew of young people at work who seemed relatively unscathed by what you'd imagined to be the generalized traumas of the time. They were talented, good-looking, smart and had passed through their teens and art school blithe and apolitical, focused mainly on their work and imbued with expectations of future careers for which they would not have to hustle. They must have found you entertaining, authentic even, if not Black, because they seemed to include you, to tolerate you *despite* your politics. Your taken-for-granted coin of exchange for years had depreciated enormously in value but could still cadge you an invite to a dinner party where the increasingly sophisticated food was washed down with mineral waters and evermore well-chosen wines.

Thus you witnessed the birth of the Hipoisie, people who gravitated, as though by natural selection, to the lofts that would, in the fullness of time, become gazillion dollar real estate prizes. As they turned one notch further away from Boho, your hosts flowered as the hideous but all too true characters populating the cocktail parties in William Hamilton's *New Yorker* cartoons.

And here, thirty plus years on, you, Katie and Gwen, the three of you, incubating an altogether different kind of life, high up in a little socialist bubble above thoroughfares of Manhattan. What choice do the rock doves have but to adapt to foraging higher still than the stratum at which the circling hawks glide? Safe after a fashion, as long as the raptors remain incapable of imagining their hoped-for prey looking down on them.

Δ

Pinochet dies. Not exactly Houdini, but an escape of sorts.

• • •

Must one be a disaster tourist in one's own country?

Δ

You say ecommerce and I say e-coli – let's call the whole thing off.

• • •

In China, they've appropriated the old Castro Convertibles song – we're not using it any more – to serve as a slogan in support of their President:

Hu conquers space with fine design…

• • •

Parked in front of you this a.m., decorated with a dayglo orange parking ticket, a big, stupid, black Ford SUV. You learn, from the chrome letters affixed to its tailgate, that that this model is an Escape. The logo is italicized, signifying forward momentum. but beneath this word, straight blocky capital letters boxed in with a thick border: LIMITED.

Well, at least they're honest after a fashion. Escape (Limited) for how many? Thirty thousand North American Ford workers just got their pink slips.

• • •

Tomorrow the Virgin of Guadalupe rises, over the hill of Tepeyac and yes, 14th Street. Down in the harbor, on any day, Our Lady, who also, at will, takes on the aspect of Tonantzin, mother and moon. How do you say "imprisoned lightning" in Nahuatl? Or "Mother of Exiles" in Ladino.

• • •

Last night watched Sydney Pollack's documentary on Frank Gehry, né Goldberg. Whew, people have a tendency to get fixated on an object. When Gehry was a child in Hebrew school, he made a drawing of some important Jewish figure whose name you've suddenly forgotten. The rabbi told Frank's mother that her son possessed *goldeneh hendts* – golden hands. It's true, his drawings, unmediated are beautiful, far more dimensionally realized than his buildings. Now it comes back, and no wondered you disremembered. The subject of Goldberg's drawing was Theodor Herzl.

• • •

Said the little lamb to the shattered boy…

Shattered boy?! What made you hear that in the piped-in music over the drugstore's sound system – bad speakers, or your own funky ears?

• • •

Kan ya makan, back in February, the Dubai government-owned conglomerate DP World, acquired leases and operating contracts for six U.S. ports: New York, Newark, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Tampa and New Orleans when it bought Peninsular and Oriental holdings, a British port and shipping company, for a mere $7 billion. A frenzy of anti-"semitism" was quickly whupped up by political figures grandstanding on the cheap about a bunch of towel-heads owning 'merican ports. Visions of (Arabian) Trojan horses danced in their heads, not least in the febrile brain of New York's own Senator Chuck Schumer, who's always trying to prove he's not boneless.

So great was the nativist furor that the new owners agreed to sell off their investments and today the new deal was announced. All DP's U.S. holdings, the terminal operations that set off the firestorm, cargo-handling enterprises at sixteen ports and the New York City passenger ship terminal got gobbled by a subsidiary of the American International Group, founded in Shanghai just after WWI by the Cornelius Vander Starr, the first *lo fan* to sell insurance in China. Starr lasted a long time at the

helm and when he departed in the late sixties, turned operations over to Maurice "Hank" Greenberg. By all accounts, Hank ran a pretty tight ship until the early oh-ohs, when he started miscounting noughts on his balance sheets. So much need, so little time – between quarterly reports. Pending a regulatory inquiry, Hank walked the plank – but not very far – in early '05.

And the bottom line, please. A-rabs, thankfully, control our ports no longer – rather a gigantic mostly-legal extortion racket that agreed to pay a $1.6 billion penalty for accounting fraud in February right around the time DP bought the ports. So here we are, all gelt and no guilt. And a Heppy Chanukah to you, Henkeleh bubby.

Δ

When in the extreme, the body must turn,
Get myself free and move my shadow without leaving a trace.
So says Liang Zhen Pu via Li Zi Ming in Ba Gua song 21.

Δ

Wednesday is the day of rest
in the house with the bamboo floor
picking off the barroom flies
just in case I need another glass.
It's so hot and the mirror's getting dull
I couldn't see it, couldn't see it if I tried.
The man in the mask
has sold out all for nothing at all
and now the monsoon's here
and it feels like judgment day

Watch out for the eagle's eye
or the opium on the breakfast tray
and the laughter of the dying monk

from the poison of the tse-tse fly.
All the mountains, they have no sides
and the robbers, they have a thousand lives.
You can see it all in the rivers of Shanghai
and now the monsoon's here
and it feels like judgment day.

So sang John Cale, once upon a time to the west.

Late morning turbines overhead – god love 'em – a plane flying entirely too low to be so far from a landing strip. But there's no seeing it for the density of the cloudcover and the rain splattered on your window. It's up there somewhere, metal in the air, metal in the droplets. Beyond this, the sun writes its own biography, chapter and verse. *Vade mecum, vade mecum*, says your book, go with me.

• • •

Carter's done it now. Set himself up. Them Zionistas gonna put a hurtin' on that boy. Po' Jimmy. He crazy, so he don't know no better. Thinks truth-talking more important than life itself. If he'd come by me, I'da told him straight up: Jimmy, you got to watch what you say.

• • •

And then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects. So said Frantz Fanon to himself, *Kan ya makan*, but others heard too.

• • •

Images of various Gehry structures still resounding in your head. If not Euclidian, than what sort of geometry can it be? Not, seemingly, elliptic or hyperbolic. Nothing native to (poor old Bucky's) planet earth. Must be Lovecraftian. The geometry out of space.

Finally you get it. What you've witnessed thusfar as the breakdown of the West – the setting sun of American hegemony – is maybe just that. But it's also the birth – or, more likely, the coming of age – of a new math. Hard to tell.

This realization also casts, to your eyes at any rate, the WTC in a new light. Its extreme parallelism was always a breakdown of the thing it over-represented, a monstrous joke, perhaps unconscious, on two thousand-odd years of Greek geometry and the myriad assumptions that flowed therefrom. Like "equality." One hundred plus stories above the level of the harbor, so grotesque had the extension of parallel lines become, that folks swaying at their desks up there used to get seasick!

If the geometrics are unsustainable, of course the building will be. If not Mohammed Atta, then some one, or some thing else. One shouldn't be fooled by the obvious: that Yamasaki's late buildings are so vertical, and Gehry's style isn't about that per se. The mission of both men was, and in the latter case, is, to call out loud and clear the dismantling of what we knew and believed to be eternal and universal principles of building. Of which phenomenon Gehry's work exemplifies the next decisive development. Would that Gehry was an anarchist – a destroyer in service of the future. He's not. Would that his nihilism leaves, if not something standing, at least a ground in which new shoots can grow.

Of course it's not just Gehry. He, like all architects, is a billboard artist, so whatever the form is, you see it writ big. Strip matters down to their basics, and the whole political and corporate game reveals itself to be infused with the same anti-ethos, anti-logos. You'd defy anyone, anyone, to listen to a speech by Condoleezza Rice – the most rhetorically gifted of her cabal – and find an ounce of common sense therein.

Plenty of hard lines drawn. But no way will any three of them permit you to construct a triangle. Is this a good thing? Who knows? It's a thing. One we've never seen – or perhaps seen but not recognized? – before.

• • •

Hard to see world with head up ass.

Δ

Ahmet Ertegun died last night, age 83. Class ears.

• • •

Vexatious fixations. Fixacious vexations.

• • •

Santa must jump over fire. Is he therefore a Zoroastrian?

• • •

The geomorphic X. Turkey, the Isthmus of Panama – imagine, but for a little upthrust of land that the Atlantic and Pacific are one at the middle.

• • •

Gas is the new oil.

• • •

Chiasmus.

• • •

The Grand old Duke of New York he had ten thousand men
He marched them up to the top of the hill
And he marched them down again.
When they were up, they were up
And when they were down, they were down
And when they were only halfway up

They were neither up nor down.

Duke of New York, a pub in Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*. "Just past (it) going east was offices and then there was the starry beat-up biblio and then was the bolshy flatblock called Victoria Flatblock after some victory or other, and then you came to the like starry type houses of the town in what was called Oldtown. You got some real horrorshow ancient domies here, my brothers…"

But if you really want to knock one back at the Duke of New York, just go to Glasgow. Nae, ye willnae find it on Saucheihall Street, but just twa blocks south at 57 West Regent Street, Lanarkshire, G2 2AE. Tell 'em Wee Geordie o' Le G. sent ye – the Man a' Table Four.

Nae onlae tha', but Duke of NY is a criminal tyrant in *Escape from New York* wherein:

Snake Plissken [Kurt Russell] hisses "Where's the President?"

To which the Cabbie [Ernest Borgnine] replies: "The Duke got him. Everybody knows the Duke's got him. You don't have to put a gun to my head. I'll tell you."

Says Snake, "Who's the Duke?"

"The Duke? The Duke of New York, A-Number-1, the Big Man, that's who!"

Says Snake, "I wanna meet this Duke."

"You can't meet the Duke!" Borgnine sputters. "Are you crazy? Nobody gets to meet the Duke. You meet him once and then you're dead!"

• • •

What do you want to do tonight, Marty?

• • •

My love is like a white white rose.

• • •

Are there numerous crypto-Dukes of New York? Eminences more dark than gray? *Por ejemplo*, a guy named Stephen Berger just headed a commission that recommended gutting New York City and State hospitals. This is the same fellow who, once upon a time in the 70s, was executive director of the New York Emergency Control Board for the City of New York – read Felix Rohatyn's right hand hatchet – when in the so-called Fiscal Crisis, the banks were drowning in Rockefeller-borrowed short-term debt. Not only that but Berger then helped jack the City Charter into a way more banker-friendly form. While still a young Duke in the 80s, he served on the Port Authority board, hence had a big thumb in the running of the WTC and every other public piracy the agency could manage, and afterward, headed up a passel of GE subsidiaries.

Today, he sits at great height – thirty-eight stories above Park and 49th – upon the throne of Odyssey Investment Partners, who are, by their own description, "a private New York investment firm that specializes in private corporate transactions."

Do the sick or injured folks of Clinton and Hell's Kitchen, when wheeled across the sidewalk on stretchers into the former St. Clare's Hospital (St. Vincent's Midtown, on 51st off Ninth), recognize Stephen Berger's name? Do they know him as the man who would see a condo's awning where the ER sign is now?

But wait, there's more. This would-be eviscerator of the clinics also serves as board chair of Tristar Aerospace (HQ'd in Dallas TX, y'all), which manufactures parts for, among other machines of war, the Bell ARH helicopter: "Hunter, Killer, Survivor" packing "unprecedented power." Not to mention the Bell light twin 429, a chopper that "flies farther with more payload…," and last but not least, Gulfstream jets, those hospital-white birds that serve as the vehicles of choice for CIA "renditions" and land like a dream at secret airports on the Uzbek steppes and whose passengers are never seen no more.

You just don't have the koyach to look up what Stephen Berger is to Forstmann & Company, Hugoton Energy Resources, the Scotsman Group, and Monarch Marketing Systems. Your imagination is vivid enough. Heaven help us. It's too much to bear. A trustee of Brandeis University today, his youthful mind was molded circa 1960 by the political science gods of the University of Chicago. And he lives – lives!? – in New York City with his wife and two daughters.

Odysseus beware. The Cyclops-Duke is after the hospitals. When they're gone, we'll all be "nobody."

It won't happen, but what if one morning Stephen Berger came down from the summit and walked through the gates of Le G.?

• • •

See, see where language leads when you set your mind to banking? The *Times* headline reads "Blizzard Lashes Pacific Northwest." You read: "Lazard Bashes…"

• • •

The scum also rises. Oy, stop yourself.

• • •

How to write *On the Road* without leaving home.

• • •

The evening dispatches tell of an immense storm system: Washington, Oregon, Northern Cally and all the ships at sea. 110 in the shade, except that's windgust mph not Fahrenheit and there's less shade now for all the blown-down trees. What does one call it, a blurricane? Gaia's pushing us toward a whole new language of the elements. Eventually we'll end up with as many words for snow as the Scandinavians, and like desert-dwellers, a thousand different qualities of sand. For now, why not Willie's term, *Tempestuous Rage*?

Will Harry Belafonte recut his classic: *Come Mr. Caliban, tally me bananas*? Will daylight come? Are there homes left to repair to?

High surf at sea level, avalanche warnings above. Said the regional utility's spokesman to AP: "They (the repair crews) had to pull back; it's just been too hairy out there." Time to put up some new yellow diamond-shaped roadsigns: Yeti crossing

next five hundred miles.

While in faraway Palestine, Hamas and Fatah extend olive branches – but only so far as to beat in one another in a contest for who is Balam's ass – closer to home, in the heartland of darkest Indiana, some three hundred 'mericans are vomiting their guts up after having ingested the fare at the local Olive Garden.

And the worst of it is that one never knows whether these Hoosiers were sickened by some rogue microbe let loose by the awful economies of fast food scale and processing, or via an op carried out by producers of food irradiating equipment bent on making their devices the industry standard? Might these be the same or similar folks who seized the market opportunity to offload their anthrax detectors to every mailroom in Christendom before the dust of 9/11 had settled? A wonder that they had such a well-stocked inventory. Well, either they were uncommonly prescient about the demand for their products, or…

Δ

Parallel *New York Times* stories on the righthand side of the front page, each its own vertical column separated, twin towers-like, by a thin margin of air:

"Military Taking A Tougher Line With Detainees."

"Options Weighed for Surge in G.I.'s to Stabilize Iraq."

How not to laugh? Not only an elegy, but a tragic absurdity on every page. And two on Saturday, December 16, 2006.

The door of the café opens, and pulls your attention off the front page, from which it was already quite willing to go.

A woman comes in, sits down at the banquette at Table 6. Marnie, god love her, on top of her game, hands the newcomer a menu, then stands at the ready, hands clasped behind her like an eight-year-old at spelling bee. Five seconds pass, no more. "Do you know what you want?"

"Not yet," the woman says, a little confounded by such upbeat, instantaneous attention.

"OK," Marnie says, turning perkily away. "Search and enjoy!"

• • •

Back home. Check the emails. Waistline Beulah has sent you one with an interesting header: "Observe the crowds that compass him a…"

William Septic's subject line reads: " The stuffing leaves with hides of bears o…"

Surely we must be witnessing the birth of the next great epistolary age – and more.

• • •

This past week, a gaggle of Congressmen – assuming, from their tendency to follow a leader, shit wherever they like and hiss, that they're geese – took off for Cuba. Everyone who looked saw and knows what that's about. Around the same time, unfanfared by honking, a murder of crows from the Federal Reserve and the Treasury Department flew over to China.

These are big men physically and honchos too, Paulsen chief among them. Little Hu, maybe five foot five, had to crane his neck to look up at them when shaking hands. But the white boys' smiles were pinched, and Hu's, his was broad as a rainbow, or a sickle.

Uncle Sam wants the Dragon to keep buying war bonds. And, like the old Borscht Belt plea: "Take my stock market, please" – the New York Exchange, at any rate. Whatever means necessary to float the myth of hegemony for one more day. It's down to hours you could count if you knew the number. Meanwhile, the Chinese use our spectacularly distracting disasters as cover for their own game.

Anything could happen. We'll see. In our time.

• • •

Anything. Sun's been shooting daggers at us, glares and flares. An X-9, sort of a biggie, observed by the Ruskies on the 5th of Dec. – not exactly a Star of Bethlehem, but some sort of kosmic message for sure.

Now it's possible that the astronauts up there in the shuttle may come back with a healthy-looking tan from another burst that happened on the 13th which was strong enough to whack out the circuitry on several unmanned missions and fritz the short wave radios in China. Fact is, as a precaution, the space station and Discovery crews moved their billets to the most radiation storm-shielded quarters available on their respective vessels.

And here, on terraces, through high windows, down at the Battery or out on the piers, even though we're not far north enough to see the heightened aurora, New York City had, on this second night of Hanukah, an out-of-this-world-class sunset. Festival of lights. Coronal mass ejection. Dance of the charged particles.

Funny thing though, according to the astro-boyz, the sun's supposed to be in a quiet phase now, purportedly gearing up to snafu power grids, GPS systems and a host of electronic communications some time around 2011.

On verra. But there's a question. Do you continue writing *Brave New York*, or change its name to *Notes from New York Under the Sun*.

Look up into the skydome this evening. Troposphere's clear as a crystal bell, yet not a trace of Sister Moon. She's hiding.

Anything.

Δ

Mid-evening, not too cold. You're walking home down Seventh when you see, ahead of you, the word MEXICO spelled out in big cantina-esque letters atop a transparent plastic-sided trailer parked curbside in front of Madison Square Garden.

Inhabiting this oblong bubble is a young woman in an aqua bikini. The whole interior is illuminated as if by bright sunlight and yes, there's a man in there with her, dressed in dark winter clothes. She poses the man before a wall-sized backdrop – sun, sky and blue ocean – presumably the view one sees from a beach in Cancun. Then she steps behind a camera set up on a tripod and takes a snapshot of him. Now you see that there are a couple of other men, lined up at the tailgate of the trailer, waiting to be admitted to this extraordinary world. The man just photographed exits, bearing a polaroid souvenir of his "vacation." The photographer begins to go-go dance for the

spectators on the sidewalk. As her next subject enters the bubble, she stops dancing and turns to pose him.

Weird and powerful the intensity with which this island of crystalline tantalus shines, while all around it, the almost palpable darkness of the pre-solstice night has managed to defeat the illumination of storefronts and neon signs by the dozen – their accustomed brightness so forlornly dimmed that it seems they might wink out altogether at any second leaving MEXICO the only source of light. Swarming in all directions on the sidewalk, ice hockey fans wearing immense, shapeless Rangers logo'd shirts manufactured in foreign lands. In the gloom these people appear to you as shades out of Hades, confused by the atmospherics of a living city. They're like buffalo let loose on an alien prairie, drained of the energy to stampede. But then one of them bangs into you and it turns out he's as solid as you are.

The light turns red at 31st Street and unleashes a stream of cars barreling west. Good excuse to look back over your shoulder at the young woman. Petite. Blonde. Exquisite features. At this distance, no apparent tatts or piercings. Now she's taken on a kind of Marilyn persona – vamping it up for the little knot of onlookers, her moves carried off with apparent good humor and even, perhaps, a touch of self-irony.

The guy she's about to photograph stands slouched against the background. He seems a little embarrassed. Acts goofy, but he's handsome, wearing dark clothes. Easily twice her body mass.

The door of the trailer's cab swings open and a fellow of middling height emerges. He stands there, attempting to affix something to his head. Which turns out to be a battery-powered headdress in the shape of a "Mayan" step pyramid. Aha, there's some savvy marketing for you, making a not-so-subtle connection with Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto*, soon to invade a multiplex near you. Your light's gone green, or rather the red hand has been replaced by the bright white silhouette of a hurrying pedestrian.

Nearly home, you stop at Gristedes to pick up vegetables for salad and find yourself negotiating your way around a strategically-placed promotional mountain of Samuel Adams sixpacks. Already halfway to Cancun you're lightheaded enough that the slogan cracks you up: "Don't Be Afraid of the Flavor." Well golly, you never had thought to be – till now.

• • •

Said Hilaire Belloc:
Noel, noel, noel, noel,
May all my enemies go to Hell.
Noel, noel.

Hilaire was a strange duck of French-English mix, who, at the turn of the twentieth century, also penned this doggerel:

I shall never forget the way
That Blood stood on this awful day
Preserved us all from death.
He stood upon a little mound
Cast his lethargic eye around,
And said beneath his breath;
`Whatever happens, we have got
The Maxim Gun, and they have not.'

"The Modern Traveler," includes the bracing lines: '*We shall not fear the Hottentot / For we have the Maxim Gun, and he has not*.'

Asked once why he wrote so prolifically, Belloc replied: "Because my children are howling for pearls and caviar."

A great friend of Chesterton's and profoundly Catholic, he considered the arrival of Protestantism on a par with the siege of Vienna by the Turks. He voiced too a great distaste for Semites, hook-nosed and rag-headed alike. And feared their revenge. Funny, you almost said "our."

Δ

Once upon a time, the family of a princess drowned their willful daughter in the

river for refusing to marry a man she did not love. She was reincarnated as the baiji dolphin, popularly known as "goddess of the Yangtze." Too much electric fishing, crap in the water, and now the Three Gorges dam. Conservationists sighted the last baiji in 2004. "Functionally extinct" is one way of putting it. But whatever else, the goddess has taken herself elsewhere.

• • •

Sitting eight steps up on a brownstone stoop, waiting for the car to go legal. Damp stairs. Cold ass. Try to orient yourself on this strange, sad day.

• • •

Great realizations happen around the age of 15.

• • •

It's hard to be you. But there are rewards.

Δ

We are speaking of hard and soft in balance,
There is nothing difficult in mutual assistance of firmness and gentleness
Gentleness and firmness should be used with Quian and Kun hands,
Open heaven and earth and sea waves surging.
So says Ba Gua song number 27.

• • •

Mom and dad. Mom and dad lap the waves. *The ocean will have us all*.

• • •

Remarkable what one doesn't notice before one's nose. For all the mornings you've spent at Le G., you never paid attention, until today, to what happens to the orders once the waitstaff punches them into the computer/cash register. The computer sends the order to a little printer about seven feet away in the cook's work area where it emerges translated into Spanish. On what sort of journey do these gazillions of electronic impulses go? And how far? Is this a dedicated link between these two machines? Or do the bleep bloops travel over the internet? Do they bounce off a satellite thirty-odd thousand something kilometers away? Whatever. All that invisible action of the zeroes and ones through complicated circuitry so that people standing within easy vocal range don't have to speak to one another.

Not to mention the great divide of the tongues. The waiters, many of them born in Europe, speak a different "American" than the Mexican crêpe-makers who seem to find their comfort zone behind a barricade of *no hablo ingles*. So there's not much verbal interaction between the folks who work the floor and the guys in white aprons, apart from an occasional venture into Spanglish, exchanges of mutual smiles, and the prevailing good-fellowship of the place that's due primarily to Mario's beneficent presence. And Mario, who, like you in your way, must be an encarnation of Mercury, speaks sufficient English and French for basic conversation. He's the one player who can talk to everybody.

Funny that somewhere, maybe right down the block, people in an office are slaving away at keyboards to create intermediary systems that disarticulate direct human communication in the interest of selling products with which to reassemble it. High-dollar glue to fix up what they've smashed. What sort of business is that? Would they even recognize that that's the business they're in?

And then too, something there is that must adore a wall. Else there wouldn't be so many of them – disguised as doors.

• • •

One such wall-loving something has got to be Raytheon. By all accounts, the infamous mega-weapons manufacturer is poised to build the Saudis a $10 billion

unscalable concrete curtain running along their border with Iraq. *Good fences*, so the same poet said, *make good neighbors*. Yet *something there is*…. Contradiction, Robert, contradiction.

• • •

New Year's resolution: start calling your city New Delhi. Naw, that's taken. Nueva Delhi? Makes sense, but it ain't euphonious, yo. How about New-New Delhi? Keep working on it. In any case, the grand old Duke has been deposed for good.

Ah, the true Delhians. Would that we had an ounce of their energy – an atom of their math. With the next turning of the wheel, we'll see who's the "sub" continent and who's on top.

• • •

Favorite names for Ba Gua moves:
White ape offers flowers.
Old monk holds up the alms bowl.

• • •

On the stage at Robert Bly's big eight-oh bash last night at the 92nd Street Why, Coleman Barks told a funny tale. When the he and Robert journeyed to Iran a couple of years ago to be fêted and loaded down with honorifics for their translations of Hafiz and Rumi, Bly delivered to his hosts, at the end of their sojourn, a encomium on the beauties of Persia, culminating with the following offer. If Iran gave Isfahan to the United States, Iran could have Texas as in return.

The Persians, being savvy, would never fall for a deal like, but hey, you gotta try.

• • •

Goodyear makes tires for Humvees in Kansas. Only in Kansas and nowhere else.

How tactical is that, Mr. Multinational Rubber Company? Particularly given that since early October, seventeen thousand members of the United Steelworkers union have been on strike, greatly reducing production at sixteen Goodyear plants in the U.S. and Canada. The workforce at the Kansas factory numbers only two hundred, but the Army's threatened to invoke the Taft-Hartley act to force them back to work.

Maybe they'll have to airlift some of those blown-out-tired Humvees back from Anbar and actually invade Kansas. Imagine the sound of the flooping rubber as the offensive tries to gather momentum on the great plains surrounding Topeka.

Do Humvees come with a reverse gear? That, more than anything, is what's needed now.

Dorothy, Toto – in living color and cinerama. We are the wicked witch of the west. In Mesopotamia now. Where noplace is home.

• • •

Yet amongst the Sumerians, our army, newly reinforced, will shortly "surge." Will the insurgents resurge more surgently?

• • •

A story is also called an account. There are lots of ways to add it up.

Δ

Got brakes?

• • •

Yene velt (Yenem's velt). Yiddish for another world, someplace else (inaccessible) – the world beyond. Depression joke: there are three worlds, "velts": die velt, yene velt, and Roosevelt.

• • •

Der Führer shenkt den Juden eine Stadt (The Führer gives the Jews a city). Title of a film produced by the Nazis at Terezin (1944?) and directed by Kurt Gerron, an inmate and renowned actor and singer. The film incorporated excerpts from performances of Adolf Hoffmeister's libretto and Hans Krása's music from the opera *Brundibar* (Bumblebee).

• • •

Propose turning Israel/Palestine into an international park. Call it Yo, Semite.

• • •

Tom and Maureen back from Cambodia in one piece denks gott. At the café for his traditional iced mocha pitstop this a.m., Tom looked especially good, jet lag notwithstanding – tall, good color in the cheeks, well fed. You take heart.

• • •

The Misfortune 500. Or maybe 300-odd million. Just watch them tickers. Watch that dollar.

• • •

The stocking cap of good fellowship.

• • •

Mid-afternoon coffee with Leslie – in her case diet coke. Pinned to her coat, a *Senator Barak for President* button the size of a dessert plate. What to say? Absurdism to

the rescue. You suggest, given her reputation as a cookbook author and world class dinner party hostess, that she could greatly aid her chosen cause by creating and popularizing a new dish: Coq Obama.

Levity. Levit be.

• • •

Stalemate is the new winning.

• • •

A bungled execution in Florida last week crashes the whole juridical death machine in JebWorld and darkest Cally. For the moment, at any rate.

Seems these bad actors the state hires to kill folks legally can't even run an IV line properly. Punctured the fellow's vein and it took, by the official timepiece, thirty-four minutes for Angel Nieves Diaz's heart to quit.

Unbidden comes the image of ancient sages, sitting by the river bank, fishing with straight needles. All praise. All praise the dog. And the dog's breakfast.

Don't carp. Carpe.

• • •

Pick up the *Times*. Every story on the front page reads like a passage from Nijinsky's diary.

• • •

Gaia, she wears a key between her breasts. Who'll go there? Who'll be bold enough to extend a hand – unto that cleavage?

• • •

What to do when you suspect your trade towers were infested with thermites? Dial 911? Ah, but it's too late.

• • •

Gaia, she plays a funny game: lose until it's time to win. She calls out: "Brother Sun, help me fight fire with fire!"

• • •

4:11 p.m. in the deepening sky. A soaring jet way up there, invisible – its contrail festooning out. Looks like the goddam space shuttle blowing up.

• • •

Three generations of longing.

• • •

How to be generative with corpses on your back?

• • •

This just in: Sheldon Silver, nominally Speaker of the State Assembly, waves his liberal wand of impotence and voila! Pataki, Gargano and at least thirty-eight other thieves – among them Forest City Ratner, the Building Trades Council, Old Uncle Tom Cobleigh and all – now have official clearance to drop their $4 billion bomb on Brooklyn. Or as the *Times* put it: "A state oversight board voted this afternoon to approve the Atlantic Yards project… knocking down the last regulatory hurdle for the biggest real estate project in Brooklyn history." Yes, there'll be some knocking down alright. And Frank is Gehryed up for it. All praise the dog and his breakfast.

Four billion, so they say. Who know what the final pricetag will be? And the

City's immediately visible share, is only $100 million, if you don't count all the $200 million already expended on "infrastructure improvement."

In the great future, the public coffers will offer up billions in subsidies, with negligible tax revenue in recompense. The Nets get a stadium – that's the plan anyway – snuggled amidst the vast towers of displacement and yuppification including a sixty story monstrosity that's been dubbed "Ms. Brooklyn," with no intended irony whatever.

"Shovels in the ground" as of this coming February. That's what Ratner promises, though it's really a threat. Unless some state judge plays the unlikely hero. Any stay will likely be temporary though, 'cause in New York State these days, a well-connected commercial developer can drive a cement truck through the "public purpose" clause in eminent domain.

Wotta deal! It's the real estate crime of the century – and there are ninety-four years to go.

• • •

Azzam and Hawwa ate of the pomegranate…

• • •

Occasionally, amidst the smoke and fog, a gust of wind will thin the billows sufficiently to allow permit a tantalizing glimpse of the landscape beyond. In this case, your zephyr is an article by Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, a professor of Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research at Harvard. Shear the prose of its Academese, and there's a lucid argument for the American Century having segued into the al-Qaida Moment.

Mohamedou reckons that although al-Qaida has not staged any spectacular, global attention-grabbing ops recently, its overarching success lies in having introduced into the arena of political and cultural conflict the model of "a private group (which) has wrestled the martial function normally associated with governments (away from them) and acted militarily in the name of self-defense."

In so doing, al-Qaida has helped create "a new international context wherein military affairs are moving rapidly from a predictable framework of monopoly, distinction, and brevity (where the state retains a dominant role) to an unpredictable order of privatisation, lack of differentiation, and open-endedness (where the place of non-state actors has become central).

"In that respect," says Mohamedu, "Hizbollah resorted in the summer 2006 conflict to the full panoply of al-Qaida's own methods: public declarations of war, use of religious phraseology, commando operations, strategically-targeted use of weaponry, responsibility of the citizenry of the enemy state, and extended video and audio messages by charismatic leaders. Al-Qaida, as the flagship organisation of this kind of politico-military mutation, had illuminated the weakness of Arab states unable to address the political issues afflicting the middle east. In Lebanon, Hizbollah similarly revealed to the demonstrating Arab and Muslim millions that their governments were the equivalent of naked emperors unwilling to lead their people even when matters of life and death were at stake.

"What is novel here, above and beyond the discussion of terrorism, is the manner in which private groups have in essence transformed Louis XIV's dictum *l'État, c'est moi* into one akin to *la guerre, c'est moi*. In so doing, al-Qaida, Hizbollah, and to some extent Hamas, are taking the international system to pre-Westphalian notions of legitimacy in the conduct of warfare. In a region where many governments have lost credibility, such claims are not inconsequential.

"Their religious idiosyncrasies notwithstanding, the future may witness both the proliferation of this type of actor and its increasing empowerment. The potential here for offensive asymmetry, anchored deep in the ability to disrupt and paralyse the enemy through flexible tactics and determined long-term thinking, also endows such groups with a maximum of psychological force. In July 2006, Israel may have dubbed its counterterrorism operation 'Summer Rain,' but in his message six months earlier, Osama bin Laden had already remarked that 'the swimmer in the sea does not fear rain.' There it is: agility versus might – an impossible equation for the strong state, and one that 2007 may again exemplify."

What would Stalin, Churchill, Roosevelt and Mussolini have thought of all this, eh? Not to mention Bismarck, or for that matter, Louis XIV? And what, one wonders,

does pre-Westphalian ham taste like? Soon to know. Unless of course, the pigs grow wings. Which well they may, some time in their upcoming ascendancy – Year of the Fire Pig.

• • •

Well widen my gyre and call me Falcon. The Center? Fuggedaboudit.

Δ

Yesterday, early evening, J. called to tell you her father had died. This morning, in the light of day, you began wondering: What happens when a parent – a father in both her case and yours – attempts to wrest back the primal qi, the core of birthright energy, with which, sans voliton, he endowed his child at the instant of conception?

• • •

Above, around and beneath the subjugated territory soon to take on the slave-name Atlantic Yards, there lies, in its fertility, Omphalia – and welcome to it – the newly-discovered, and eternally unfolding, paradise on heavenearth – existing, yet unbounded by the Republic of New York – where the gates always stand open to the daughters and sons of Azzam and Hawwa, wherever we have journeyed from.

The great city of the mind. Only the self can tear it down. Or build it.

• • •

Look at the Guggenheim Bilbao, then at a lotus. Oy-yoy-yoy!

• • •

Soon, the Yangtze will have to flow underground.

• • •

Seventy years ago, Lupino Lane (né Henry George Lupino) stepped onto stage in London, and in a Cockney thick as clotted cream and wide as all Hyde Park delivered this recitation:

Lambeth you've never seen,
The skies ain't blue, the grass ain't green.
It hasn't got the Mayfair touch,
But that don't matter very much.
We play the Lambeth way,
Not like you but a bit more gay
And when we have a bit of fun…
Oh, Boy.

Then came the tune:

Any time you're Lambeth way,
Any evening, any day,
You'll find us all
Doin' the Lambeth Walk. Oy!

Every little Lambeth gal,
With her little Lambeth pal,
You'll find 'em all
Doin' the Lambeth Walk. Oy!

Everything free and easy,
Do as you darn well pleasy,
Why don't you make your way there
Go there, stay there.

Once you get down Lambeth way
Ev'ry ev'ning, ev'ry day,
You'll find yourself
Doin' the Lambeth Walk. Oy!

Somewhere along the line, first a Lambeth Gal and then a chorus join in. And on the melody it goes verse after verse, the tempo gradually accelerating, until the walk become a kind of ecstatic dance.

• • •

Vade mecum, vade mecum said the book to the writer. *Go with me.*

• • •

Well cross my legs and call me sadhu.

• • •

Solstice tomorrow at :22 past midnight, though right now, midday on the 21st, sol's in hiding. Wearing shades. Nonetheless, a sharp corner soon to be rounded.

Circles, Tom B. reminded you at Ba Gua class on Tuesday, come in all sizes.

至 is how it's written in Chinese – the ideogram that translates as "extreme."

• • •

Tom and Maureen's bring you a souvenir from Cambodia, which they bought at the "Russian market" in Phnom Penh. It's the most extraordinary little object: an elephant about an inch and a quarter high, two inches long. He now lives side by side with the carved stone elephant, about the same size, that they gave you after an earlier trip. The new elephant, though, is made of small metal bits soldered together. The ears

are folded washers. Trunk, tail and tusks, bent wires of varying widths. A hexagonal nut, threaded inside, forms the body which stands on nubbly legs composed of solder alone.

The elephant wears a red ribbon looped through the hole in the center of the nut and the bow sits gaily on his back. This creature, and many others like him are assembled from pieces of landmines and other ordnance – the ongoing legacy of two generations of war. And once upon a time – perhaps in childhood – the person who crafted your elephant lost some part of him, or herself, to the same kinds of materials she or he works with. But unlike now, they were packaged with high explosives. Which, just like this souvenir, another human being made.

• • •

Solstice wheels. Go round and round. Humvee tires and all.

• • •

"Surely," says Ibn 'Arabi, of a Qur'an verse in which he reads a solemn warning against knowledge founded in the intellect alone. "Surely in this there is a lesson for him who has a heart and who gives ear and is an eye-witness."

• • •

Six to the ninth.

• • •

A storm of gigantic proportions dumps all sorts of frozen water on the West and Midwest, and deluges Louisiana. In England, fog and freezing rain shut down Heathrow.

In and around the play of the elements, men wield their powers as they may. Russia, via Gazprom, essentially nationalizes the LNG resources of Sakhalin island,

consigning Royal Dutch Shell, the initial big investor, to the relative sidelines. Grinning like a Cheka cat, Vladimir Putin announces that "the government of the Russian Federation has been informed about this and we have no objections."

• • •

It makes you laugh to recall how Victor Borge used to seatbelt himself onto the piano bench before starting to play. More and more you think you ought to strap yourself in before sitting down at your desk. But really, it's only a matter of holding onto the tiger's tale of the world while it lashes. This ain't no lotus, this ain't no lotus, this ain't no rosebed, this ain't no foolin' around.

• • •

至

Δ

Impossibly gorgeous sunrise distracts you from the task of making the bed. Into your head comes the tune to *Lambeth Walk*, with new, unbidden words:

Once you buckle at the knee
Never can you stand up free
You'll find yourself
Doing the slowdeath crawl. Oy!

• • •

Pull your bike up in front of Le G. and chain it to the accustomed signpole. Passing by, a tall, well-favored young woman walks a frisky gray dog, which leaps ahead of her on its lead. The woman is talking gaily, in Hebrew, of all tongues, and you

think: what a lovely moment of interspecies communion! Then you notice the phone wire, half concealed by the fur of the woman's hood. Another micro-idealization gone by the boards.

• • •

The front page of *Chelsea Now*, the local paper, features a big, demonically-hued photo of the Avalon party space, formerly a dance club, and before that an Episcopal church, built of brown stone in the Oxford style. Deconsecrated, back in the '80s, the church was resurrected as Limelight, it's internal vaults thrumming first to countless iterations of *Love to Love You Baby*, and ultimately to the latest innovations in techno.

Your fellow passengers in the elevator look at you askance when you burst out laughing, having read the first graphs of the accompaning article wherein you learn that the venerable building is owned by an entity that calls itself Ashkenazi Acquisition Corp. which is shopping it as a mini-mall. Too tame, too tame. What they ought to do with the space is open up Gotham's first free-trade methlab *and* lifestyle emporium. Fund it all with tax-free bonds via the Empire Development Corp. It's a two-fer really and could serve as a model for future enterprises. Forget green development – go straight for the hallucinogenic.

But seriously, what is Ashkenazi Acquisitions fronting for? Surely something. Some triad? Mayhap. Mishap. Salaam/Shalom-Ni-hao. It's back along the silk route we go, except this time around, all the threads are unraveling.

Look up unto the whirling satellite of glass, Ezekiel. What does it tell you? Look down at those bones, so dry. Whatever kind of creature owned them?

• • •

Peri-solstice, aphelion, perigee-whiz. Around and about. Ellipses. True anomaly or the old same old? We will see what there is to see by starlight.

• • •

I might get burned up by the sun
But I had my fun
So sang the Chambers Brothers once upon a time.

• • •

Drink it – it's good for you: Agua de luna. Set it up, sister.

• • •

Peri-solstice resolution: look into the relationship of desire to capacity.

• • •

You ride your bike all year round, but it's time to take Gwen and Katie's over to storage. Shanksmare on the way back from Eleventh Avenue, you pass the Porsche-Lamborghini dealership – the cars in the showroom decorated with big red bows on the windshields and hoods. Outside by the repair dock, a small fleet of posh roadsters, red n' yellow and all sorts of Christmas colors. A few doors on, the early morning traffic in and out of a wholesale plant warehouse has deposited a stray sprig of holly on the sidewalk, pretty well smashed up. Incongruous. You pick up the cluster to find it's still got one intact leaf. Try to strip it off the main stem as a keepsake. Prick your thumb. A little bead of blood wells up. Still, into your coat pocket the leaf goes.

Now you walk past a wide expanse of former warehouse, its street level gussied up with a fabulous brushed steel front. No ostentatious marquee, just twin metal-framed photos of a come-hither blonde wearing a Santa hat, one on each side of the door. SCORES reads the sign: A MEN'S CLUB.

For some reason you reach into your pocket reassure yourself your keys are there. Yep. And so is the holly – whoops, pricked again.

Now, on your right, a wall of high fencing lined with sheets of corrugated metal. The gate's open though and within you can see great mechanical jaws swing to and fro, moving all shapes and species of beat-up metal around. Funny, this block: classy

driving machines for sale at one end, and at the other, Manhattan's last working scrapyard.

They don't process cars here, but damn near everything else by the look of it. Today's special, obsolete HVAC equipment, of the generation currently being replaced by new and more powerful coolers to chill out the ever-multiplying electronic genies that inhabit every home and office, generating heat. Piles upon piles of graying vents and motors and fans, heaped up like so many perfunctory Frank Gehry creations. Lord, where does it go? They ought to just drill a hole to China and just shove it all in.

Another colorful something underfoot. Sure, why not? Reach down and pick up *Glitz & Glamour Ball* – a glossy card stock invite to *New Year's Eve 2007 at the ROXY,. 515 W. 18th St.* Prominent sponsor logos: WKTU, 103.5 on your ef-em dial and HOT97. *Group Discounts & Large Private Sections Available*. So, what's the entertainment? Couldn't be Guy Lombardo and His Royal Canadians. Ah, here's the *DJ Menu.* SMOOTH G. is billed as the "appetizer," to be followed by ENUF as "main course." And, for dessert, the grand finale, LIQUID TODD.

Open the flap and check inside. A weird, demonic image that resembles a kaleidoscope of Kabuki masks radiating flares. There's type here too, small and practically illegible – specifics on the "packages" being offered. Here's a relatively modest one: Table for six, $175 a head. Beneath, even finer print lists the *Number of Expected Guests* for each of several discrete environments within the club. Do the math. Somehow, the ROXY figures to pack three thousand souls into its capacious chasm.

Fact is, everybody has to be somewhere when the ball drops.

• • •

This just in from Sunny Spain. The bears in the northern Cantabrian mountains ain't hibernating this winter. Seems the warm temperatures keep sufficient nuts, acorns, chestnuts and berries growing to make it "energetically worthwhile" – that's the phrase the wildlife folk use – for the bears to not slow their metabolisms down and instead carry on foraging.

Elsewhere in Eurolandia, the swallows that summer in England apparently have no intention of migrating to Africa any time soon. Buff-tailed worker bumble bees,

which usually die out with the first frost are achieving an almost Genesis-length longevity, still buzzing around Nottingham and York – though not "new" York.

Certain diving ducks that migrate west to English lakes and reservoirs are staying put in cozy Mother Russia and Scandinavia, while in Wales, the primroses are in bloom – they never stopped – as are the "Early Sensation" daffodils which usually pop up as winter wanes. Lord knows what's happening in Africa to Hepburn's calla lilies.

Red admiral butterflies usually hibernate in winter, and darter dragonflies appear about mid-June through October, but they're respectively flitting and buzzing in Cheshire, Norfolk and Hampshire. Now everyone knows that in Hartford, Hereford and Hampshire, hurricanes hardly happen. Right?

And if Napoleon, or Hitler were invading Russia now, we might never have had *War and Peace*. Or Stalingrad.

• • •

On your way to meet Mickey for lunch at French Roast. Pass by Bigelows pharmacy to find, slouching nonchalantly behind the plate glass window, a gigantic blue-faced, snaggle-toothed Abominable Snowman. He's half-winking at the passerby, part Sendak wild thing, part his own creature self, however stuffed. Levity levitbe.

• • •

Calling Brother Thorsten: alligators all around. Conspicuous confusion. Amidst the evergreens and poinsettias, a bush of hungry, wounded souls.

• • •

Open the mailbox and sift the contents on the elevator ride upstairs. Observe. That a good many of the greeting card envelopes you've gotten this season have come bearing a curious holiday stamp: an abstract geometric "snowflake" with six salients, bluish gray in color, and, weirdly enough, encompassing a series of five-pointed

starshapes and pentagons. This object looks entirely too metallic to have been crystallized from water – in short it resembles a star wars battle-station, or something deadly that a ninja might hurl.

Δ

Eric B.'s Becky had a near miss last night. Hit by a cab at the corner of 24th and Eighth. Rainy, weird night. 10 o'clock or so. Some things over-bright and haloed, others too seamless with the darkness to be seen. Concussion and some forehead abrasions, face bruised. Treated at St. V.'s and sent home around two in the morning.

You find out about this in the café, when Eric rides up and chains his bike to the parking meter. Never seen him look like this. Utterly distraught. No reason why not to be – his son Andrew was killed by a car twenty-someodd years ago.

Later, as you're sitting beside him, you glance out the window at what must be almost his view, what he might see if he were not looking into the past. There on the corner, plastered to the olive green traffic light switch box, a bright red sticker. In white big block letters: ALIFE.

It's hard for you to notice who else is there. Tom, of course. Artist Leslie. Gary. Mark. People come and go. Tamatha. Do you say anything to her, or just make eye contact? Dylan comes by with an affirming word. You get up and ask Guy if they've got any hard stuff, and he pours a double measure of rum. Bring it to his table. Then nip out to the corner Koreans and buy two bunches of roses, one red, the other white.

Walk Eric to the 8th Avenue uptown stop. Down the stairs he goes, into the tunnel. On his way to give her comfort.

• • •

…Let's hear one for Newspaper Joe (Newspaper Joe)
he caught his hand in the door (caught his hand in the door)
Dropped his, ah, teeth on the floor
They say hey, now, Joe, guess that's the way the news goes

If you want to see me
well, honey, you know that I'm not around
But if you want to hear me
why don't you just turn around
by the window where the light is…

• • •

The world soul gone mad.

• • •

This afternoon, in the midst of Ba Gua exercise, the image seeps back to you like mineral water beading on the ceiling of a limestone cave. You could swear you wrote about it at the time, you even have a trace memory of having done so, but look through your notes and can't find any evidence you did. So you recreate it now.

About a month ago, up at the Met of a Saturday evening with Katie, Gioia and Ken, you left them at the cafeteria table to call home and check on Gwen. On the way to the payphones up front, you passed through the Medieval hall where the Neapolitan Christmas tree was being assembled, and there, atop the narrow platform of a hydraulic lift, a young woman perched, dressed all in black. Standing beneath her on the flagstones, two older and more earthbound women, each holding a large photograph of the finished tree taken from their respective angles. They called out to her and gestured, and you watched, dumb as a ceramic ass, as the elevated woman stretched forward over the railing of the cherrypicker to place an angel just so among the boughs, then leaned back to take in what she'd done. A spotlight caught the oscillating current of her auburn hair and the crescent white of her cheek. That's all.

Gwen answered on the third ring, sounding cheery. Reading mangas on line. Just finished takeout sushi for dinner. Had she fed the cats? Yes. Terrific. Love you. See you soon.

Δ

UN imposes sanctions on Iran for its nuclear enrichment program. $2 billion to fix up UN headquarters. What will they think of next.

• • •

Open a few gifts before leaving. Leslie N.'s given you a lavishly illustrated book on the villages of Provence. It is in these photographs that you see for the first time how the clusters of rooves in certain towns of the Vaucluse and Bouches-du-Rhône – Eygalières for example – articulate in an integral and non-programmatic way, the language of refraction that Gehry attempts to impose, *ex machina*.

• • •

Excape from New York. To M. & B. for Christmas Eve and day. Northwestern Connecticut. Never before.

• • •

Not far from the multiplex of dams B. is breaking down, a kind of wooden trident-head, perfectly gnawed at about nine inches above the ground where *kan ya makan* the beaver stood. A sapling around the width of your upper arm had divided into three and the beaver went for the offshoots. Wove them into his hydroengineering project somewhere. He was at work on a very substantial tree a foot or so away, had managed to get about a fifth of the way through its trunk before the trapper M. and B. hired took him out.

From around and about, you gather four thin branches the beaver cut to length and stripped of twigs and bark. Into the trunk of the gray ghost they'll go. You're no Natty Bumppo, though Tom C. half-jokes that you're his urban counterpart. You'll bring the evidence of beaver back to the city where Astor made his fortune.

One animal did it all, the trapper said. The entirety of this architecture. The moon shows now, clear as a sickle, and you get cold staring at his half-ruined labors,

trying to fathom some infinitesimal spark of his water knowledge, and what he was laboring to do.

• • •

Everything is always happening.

Δ

Roof collapse of a five story building, purportedly under renovation on West 113th just east of Frederick Douglass Boulevard. At least one fatality.

• • •

James Brown dies at 73.

• • •

In Lagos, an immense explosion kills at least two hundred and sixty, and likely another several score will die of their burns within the next few days. Professional thieves, it is said, opened a conduit in a gas pipeline, then left without fully sealing it. Whereupon hundreds of people from the local Abule Egba district grabbed any kind of container they could find and rushed to collect the bounty spurting forth. Many children, even toddlers were pressed into service.

This is the second blast of its kind in Lagos this year. In June, a hundred and fifty people died. Ten times as many were killed in a pipeline explosion in the southern Nigeria in 1998.

• • •

Another event that didn't rock the minds of the West eight years ago, was the vanishing beneath the waves of the equatorial Pacific of several uninhabited islands in

the atoll nation of Kiribati – formerly known as the Gilberts. A bitterly-fought and particularly bloody amphibious assault took place on Tarawa Island, now the capital, in 1943. In the fifties and sixties, the Brits and Americans found some of the remoter islands useful as hydrogen bomb test sites. Today, it isn't ordinance dropped from above that threatens the islands, it's the rising sea. A couple of thousand kilometers to the southwest, the people of low-lying islands of Vanuatu, have been evacuated as the water level laps ever higher against their shores.

It was expected that the Carteret Islands off Papua New Guinea would be the first populated islands to submerge, some time around 2014. But it's Lohachara, an Indian island in the Sundarbans where the Ganges and the Brahmaputra rivers empty into the Bay of Bengal – once home to ten thousand people – that's claimed the title. Nearby, Ghoramara is two-thirds under water. Refugees from both islands have fled to Sagar, which is also, little by little, losing ground to the sea. All in all, seventy thousand people, not to mention four hundred tigers and countless other species live on twelve islands in the area that faces imminent inundation.

In parts of Lower Manhattan, it is reliably reported, many a basement has become too soggy to store anything in. Venice syndrome, coming to a sestieri near you. And the Bathtub, what about the Bathtub?

Funny how once-sunken associations float to the surface. Back in the '70s, when he was recording for Island Records, John Cale sang a song called "Barracuda" that featured the nastiest bassline ever recorded.

Dark woman in the water drowning
Sinking in a funny way
Black footing full of faces floating
Mimicking our final days.

So ran the first verse. And then his refrain:

The ocean will have us all, the ocean will have us all.

Δ

The man killed in the Harlem roof collapse yesterday was Richard Joseph, aged 33. Born in St. Lucia, he grew up in Barbados. Joseph had expressed qualms to friends and family about the working conditions at the building site, a tenement sold by the city for rehab to a developer called the Neighborhood Partnership Housing Development Fund Corporation and managed by an enterprise known as Global Partners L.L.C., its principal owners-of-record being a certain Alan Levine and Ralph McKoy. The city had, in the past, halted construction due to numerous violations by the contractor, Transcorp Construction.

Intent on accumulating enough money to visit his two-year-old son in Barbados, Joseph pressed ahead, reckoning his luck would last a few more days, despite a vivid premonition, expressed to his relatives, that he'd die on the job at 280 West 113th. But, he told them, Friday, the 29th would be his last day. That was it. Outathere.

• • •

The city's "fiscal year" for construction accidents runs from October 1 to September 30. This past cycle saw twenty nine killed – as against eighteen the year before.

• • •

Who are Alan Levine and Ralph McKoy of Global Partners, L.L.C. Who is Amram Niazi? His name appears on the permits issued to Transcorp Construction. Why is it only Richard Joseph's face the papers print? He is dead. What of these other men who need to be brought out of the shadows that we may know them?

• • •

The Godfather's gone off
To heaven or hell
But the Angel's still with us

Whenever we call
Mercy, mercy me

• • •

There are all kinds of personalities in this world. Take Hurricane Erin for example, practically unremarked on in her time for all the ado about towers, penta-gram-gons and Pennsylvania fields. From September 1 to the 17th, she danced like a dervish from Africa to Vineland, passing by Bermuda in a 120 mph anti-clockwise whirl. In all her sixteen days and nights, Erin caused no deaths or injuries – only minor damage. All kinds of personalities in this world.

• • •

Vineland the Good. Greenland the Green. Weather, or not?

• • •

Double double-oh seven approaches. Something in there about a license to kill. Twinned. Oh Moneypenny, the things you imagine!

• • •

In Ba Gua practice, one is to hollow the chest and "pull up," the back. That way the energy can flow around the body to the dantian.

• • •

Adrien, your massage and acupuncturist neighbor opens her door to show out one of her clients and catches you, sweating profusely, in the midst of walking the Eight Mother Palms in the widest part of the hallway. You chat a moment after the elevator has taken her client away, and ask her something on the order of *what's the energy like*

these day? What are people bringing to you?

"Pfft!" she says, and shakes her head.

"Pfft?"

"Yeah," she says, "it's just haywire."

And straws in the wind.

• • •

"The people of this country will not be stampeded. They will not panic when a few desperate New York officials and bankers try to scare New York's mortgage payments out of them." These words David Gergen crafted and Gerald R. Ford uttered – read off a teleprompter and instantly broadcast to the waiting world. Condensed down to a two-syllable imperative, they took up the whole front page of *The Daily News* once upon a time in October, 1975.

See, Gerald, it's inevitable. All of us DROP DEAD eventually, cities and cities, and men alike.

Δ

Always a particle, never a wave.

• • •

Mogadishu, Mogadishu.

• • •

Where has Oregon, boys,
Where has Oregon?
If you want Alaska,
(I'll-ask-a) where she's gone.
She went to pay her Texas

She went to pay her Texas
She went to pay her Texas,
That's where she has gone.

What did Mississip, boys,
What did Mississip?
What did Mississip, boys,
Through her pretty lips?
She sipped a Minna-soda,
She sipped a Minna-soda,
She sipped a Minna-soda,
That's what she did sip.

• • •

Haj time. Round and round the Ka'aba, like a teddy bear…

And here, in darkest Gotham, the holiday pilgrims circumambulate the Bathtub, anti-Ka'aba of the western world, while all unaware, demonic dust, liberated from the Deutsche Bank building, swirls about them.

• • •

Mogadishu.

…Write to shake off the dust; write at the peak. Sayeth Jabès *kan ya makan*.

• • •

James Brown at the Apollo. Fifteen-odd blocks from where the roof fell on Richard Joseph.

There are four black horses
With eyes of flaming red

Their rovers are tied with ribbing
All around my baby's head

The bells are ringing, and their sail is going to sea

Yes I know why they're ringing
They ring on for me
Oh yeah

I wish I could see my baby
This can't happen to me
No…

Baby please forgive me
I know I've caused you pain
I'll place your tears with diamonds
Just to see your face again

Ashes into ashes
Dust to dust
Ashes into ashes

Once in another life – the life of a child – you saw him perform this at the Apollo. Sixty-five maybe, or late sixty-four. With your then-buddy Jon.

Brown sang all his hits, but "The Bells" is what stayed with you – the way he'd sink to his knees and his men would raise him to his feet, drape his cape 'round his shoulders. And then he'd sob out the final lyric, and again, sink down, his face upraised – caught in the red-green spotlights – transfigured with despair. One-man Tragedy. And Kronian Zeus and Ox-eyed Hera looked on.

• • •

Kick up the James Brown
And crank up the funky sound
It won't be the last time
You hear a scream
'Cause in 21 verses now
Storm is a-raging
And you will satisfy your destiny

So sang Terence Trent.

• • •

Nominally via the accomodating Egyptians, and no doubt paid for by your taxpayer dollars, Israel gives Al Fattah a mega-sleighful of belated Christmas presents. Neither frankincense, myrrh, nor gold. But other metals, mostly lead, and all, for some reason in multiples of two. Quoth the *Times*: "Four trucks with some 2,000 automatic rifles, 20,000 ammo clips and some 2 million bullets passed from Egypt through the Israeli-controlled Kerem Shalom crossing into Gaza… and were handed to Mr. Abbas's Presidential Guard at the Karni crossing."

That's a lotta handing. And more than enough slugs for every depressed American in a good-sized rust-belt city to take out a Dunkin Donuts with, then commit suicide. We already got the guns. Democracy! Lock 'n' load.

In Hamas's stocking, naught but coals.

• • •

And yet, and yet a strange triangle: England, U.S. and Israel. Which are the angles and which are the sides and how does one measure and describe the unholy geometry thereof? Who serves which how? Almost certainly it will fall to the Israelis to bunker bust Iran's nuclear labs with nukes of their own, or of our devise, or perhaps plutonium granted by the Queen. The Jewish state will take on that role, and its attendant karma. It's a tricky triangle, Pythagoras eat your heart out. It's all whirling

too fast and makes your head spin. The vapors – but you're no Victorian heroine, constricted by whalebone, and no fainting couch at hand.

Δ

You wake up having dreamed of 9/11's aftermath with the words in your head: *We're not ready for the aftermath. We haven't done the math yet*.

• • •

Hanging beneath the windows of the Army recruitment office in the second floor of the anonymous taxpayer at 22nd and Sixth, a shabby yellow banner, edges flapping in the desultory, unseasonable breeze.

IT'S NOT YOUR EVERYDAY JOB
ARMY RESERVE
A star, and then in smaller letters:
AN ARMY OF ONE

A crazy man passes, walking at a good clip, his windmill arms taking up lots of sidewalk. "Hello!" he shouts. Black gimme hat is all you see of his head, underscored by the bobbing fur trim of his parka's backslung hood. Already halfway down the block, eyes must be fixed straight ahead. "Hello!"

• • •

The Moving Omphalos writes; and, having writ,
Swirls on…

In the satellite photos taken at or near their peak intensities, both Erin 2001, cat. 3, and Katrina, cat. 5, both possessed what look to be prominent outies – the former with a little darkened crater at its center. Who could tell then, staring down into the knots of their spirals, which would write the texts she did?

…nor all your Piety nor Wit;

Shall lure her back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it

So wrote Omar, kan ya makan, and Fitzgerald saw it all, rising on the swell in his rubber yacht. Autobiography of the dearest kind.

• • •

Beneath the headlines "U.S. Is Being Told Saddam's Hanging Seems Imminent" (note twin passive verbs) and "F.D.A. Tentatively Declares Food From Cloned Animals to Be Safe," comes the third party:

"Gilded Paychecks: Pay Packages Allow Executives to Jump Ship With Less Risk."

Ah, but what if there's no other ship in sight – only you and a salt-washed plank?

• • •

As when a smoke issueth from a city and riseth up into the upper air, from an island afar off that foes beleaguer, while the others from their city fight all day in hateful war…

• • •

And the nub of the tragedy my droogs be this:

Saddam plays Paris and the Achaeans – that's us – think he stole our Helen-WMDs. And we believe it 'cause Agamemnon Dubya Bush told us so and he'd sacrifice anyone or anything, up to and including his own topless towers, to get us all (Aul-is) down to our boats – wearing our fine bronze armor – and an Artemesian wind to suck us into war. So that's what launched a thousand ships.

But listen sisters, and brothers too – and you hear this from a stone Geminian, born under twins – that while Castor and Pollux may sometimes blow ye sailors to Bermuda – if only to pull them from the waves undrown'd – they may also show up on stage to explicate the nasty flim-flams visited upon us by the Olympians.

Look you now at the final scene of *Electra*, wherein the Twins appear *ex machina*. There's been a gruesome murder and the double corpses lie crossed upon Xother, to wit: the Dioscuri's own sister Clytemnestra and her consort Aegisthus. Slain they were by mad Orestes and Electra, (Clytemnestra's children!) in revanche having whacked their dad, Agamemnon. All in all a horrible, vengeful thing of myth – too gnarled and unempirically far-fetched to qualify as History.

Then Castor speaks. He prophesies Electra and Orestes's futures (not good), makes burial plans for the Cly and Aeg, then almost offhand turns to face the audience. "Oh, by the way, our other sister Helen – you know her – she's on her way home from Egypt. She's been shacked up there for years – never went to Troy at all. That bit's just men's delusions. All they need is an excuse. See, Zeus, he sent a phantom of her there – then roared with laughter watching mortals slaughter one another."

Thus unravels a tale as knotty as navels. And that, folks, is what, and all, she wrote.

• • •

Smoke rises through the upper air
From a besieged city on an island.

• • •

The centaur will not hold. No putting what's born back into the egg, Leda. And see what comes of making love to a beautiful swan?

• • •

"When will you be done?" asks Marianne over coffee-breakfast. She wants to pitch your elephant of a book to a friend, a bigshot agent, gϕd bless her.

"I don't know," you say, "I'm waiting for something. Maybe it's going to happen. Or has happened and I don't recognize it."

"Metaphorically or in reality," she asks. And without thinking, you reply.

"When I feel them come together."

• • •

Ding dong. Almost. All across Sumer, little American lads and lasses dug into their holes. The news refers to this as "high alert." Holding breath.

• • •

Rolling and tumbling. That's what you do. On the knotted rug Katie's brother brought back from his tour in Afghanistan. Tom B. wants your body to know what to do if you're taken down – how save your head and tailbone and come up fast. The practice makes you sick to your stomach, even if it's been hours since a meal. Floods in Maylasia, from torrential rains. Earthquakes wrench cables apart fifty fathoms deep off Taiwan and a billion computers go diver down across Asia. Nothing to do but tuck and roll. This time you combine firm and gentle. You're sweating like a fountain. But little nausea this time.

• • •

It's a mad juxtaposition on the front page of the online *Times*. The biggest type says "Iraq Prepares to Execute Hussein." Just to the right, a two-column pic: an honor guard of Marines pallbearers carrying a stars and stripes-draped coffin. Look closer. The caption's small: "Private Service Held for Ford."

• • •

5:05 p.m. in Gotham, City of Fools. 1:05 a.m. on a new morning in Baghdad: Abode of Peace, Mother of the World, Gift of the Gods, Abode of Beauty, Round City. Also *Um Al-Basatin*: Mother of Orchards. It's not voluntary, but you can't help but feel something for the man. Almost like what you felt for the WTC, a kind of sympathy for the monstrous. Would your heart go out toward Bush in his final moments, or is it only

a particular kind of monstrosity that hooks you?

"TV Executives Debate Whether to Show Execution" says the headline online. Steve Capus, President of NBC speculates about showing "a wide shot of Saddam hanging." And then, humbly, as though he, himself will pull the trapdoor's lever, "I want to do this with a measure of taste, but I don't want to stand in the way of history."

• • •

Hanging. Now there's a veddy British way to go.

• • •

Breaking away. The Ayles Ice Shelf, three thousand years old and forty-one square miles. No longer part of the Ellesmere Island in the Arctic, but now its own ice island and potentially, an agent, free to roam. This happened a year ago August, but AP's just got round to reporting it now. Calling Castor and Pollux. We'll need you up north when the Ayles, or bits thereof, drift into the sea lanes. Mariners beware.

• • •

Another big storm hits the Rockies and Western Plains. Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow.

• • •

1:30ish, Crawford, TX time, the President, First Lady and their two Scottish Terriers Barney and Miss Beazley, sit out a tornado scare inside an armored vehicle parked next to their twister shelter. Had the tornado materialized, Secret Service would've hustled them into the bunker. "High Alert."

• • •

Imagine Saddam is MacHeath. In Brecht's telling, Queen Victoria's herald bursts in at the last instant, bearing a pardon and a knighthood. Or suppose that instead of U.S. Army Task Force 134 ushering him under cloak of darkness from Camp Cropper near Baghdad Airport to Camp Justice in the Green Zone, Saddam shoots through the wormhole back to John Gay's London. A Player speaks up, protesting the Beggar Judge's sentence: "Why then, friend, this is a downright deep tragedy. The catastrophe is manifestly wrong, for an opera must end happily."

To which the Beggar judge replies: "Your objection, Sir, is very just; and easily removed: for you must allow, that in this kind of drama, 'tis no matter how absurdly things are brought about. So – you rabble there – run and cry a reprieve! – let the prisoner be brought back to his wives in triumph."

And the Player concurs: "All this we must do, to comply with the taste of the town."

• • •

Fear of death, sure. But must we turn it into fear of life?

• • •

Ding dong.

Δ

Open the morning email. Someone purportedly named Leadsmen Tibia has sent you one. Its subject: Wine Mumford.

• • •

You meet Kathy in the elevator down. Desultory conversation around her wheeled valise whose zipper she's left partly open and her impending daytrip to her daughter in New Jersey. As the door opens at the lobby she says, "You know you can

restore your hair." You must look nonplussed, not quite sure your heard her right. "You can get your hair back." She mentions a pill – Chinese herbal? – that's sold across the street at the Medicine Shoppe, or "anywhere."

She's headed out the back door, you, wheeling your bike, out the front. Her Parthian shot: "Everybody likes hair."

"That's OK, Kathy," you say. "I'm just getting old."

• • •

"The waist is the axis to move the four limbs… If the left foot needs to lift, the weight should be shifted to the right hip with a slight lifting of the left hip. If the right foot needs to lift, the weight should be shifted to the left hip with a slight lifting of the right hip. In this way, the alternating footwork can be natural, light, nimble and active. Mr. Liang Zhen Pu used to say: 'Lift without showing it, just lift with the mind.'"

So says Li Zi Ming, commenting on Song 29.

• • •

Rolls and rolls. Lighter. Less nauseous.

• • •

Imagine you're a golden horde. What you don't realize is that right behind you come white and blue hordes, and behind them a green horde, a purple one too, hot on green's heels, then puce and magenta next in cue… orange… beige…

Δ

If you were a believer, you'd be tempted to imagine that gϕd sent Darwin to the Galapagos.

• • •

Somethere, out or in there, in the immensity of the Great, not to say kosmic pig, one discovers the baconosphere.

• • •

Au café, the grotesque man at Table 13, who looks a bit like you on steroids, leans in toward his woman and begins, with portent: "Putting science aside…"

• • •

Don't overextend the steps in turning the body and changing gestures,
Remain calm and walk by sweeping the ground.
Extend the hand only after perceiving the coming situation,
Steadily, softly and firmly as a smart girl threading a needle.
—Song 30.

• • •

Sing the next song.

• • •

Sing footwork on the slippery slope.

• • •

Open email. There's one from Susan T. Always a small champagne bottle pops when you read her poems. This time giddier than most.

Happy

Swing from the trees – you deserve
to be happy and eat bananas

All day into the next: it's the start of
a brand-new year to be happy

So by god just throw back your fears
and dry those tears and be happy.

• • •

Enough pop-up. World-on-head needs pop-down books. Lift the lid and watch the house go flat.

• • •

On the northwest corner of Eighth and 29th, there stands, for now, a four-story brownstone-faced building with scaffolding enveloping the ground floor facades. Number three eighty-two. What makes this building wonderful is that it is the leaning tower of Clinton, been leaning a long time, a generation and more, a visible two degrees or so northward toward the pole, and may lean longer still, unless the city does a pre-emtive takedown, folks being so nervous about collapses these days. So we need to send Galileo up there soon, today, right now, to drop a cannonball and feather into the vacant lot next door and see if they ever hit bottom.

According to *El Times*, three eighty-two's owner is installing more than half a million bucksworth of structural support, invisibly inside. But hey, you never know. For Wilfredo Santos, super for the building just across Eighth, the future is a sure thing: "It's bending," he said. "It's bending and it's going to fall."

When did superintendents stop being janitors? Being a super, as once Jack was upon a time on 12th Street, can be pretty super. But Janus was a god – presided over doors and gateways. In his earliest form, he opened the sky at daybreak and closed it at nightfall. In time, his duties evolved into the guardianship of beginnings and endings,

entrances and exits. In imagery, he was shown looking toward both past and future. There's a double-faced image of him you can see on old Roman coins. The Romans also built him a temple in the Forum. It's doors, so they say, were kept open in wartime, and shut in times of peace. It says something about the Romans that the doors were only closed in four moments of respite during the seven hundred someodd years between the earliest kings and Augustus. And yes, O best beloveds, Janus lends his name to January, the liminal space between the end of one cycle round the sun and the beginning of another.

"How are you," you used to ask your mother sometimes when she looked particularly rattled.

"I don't know if I'm coming or going," she'd say. As a kid, you found that a particularly intriguing reply.

"You can restore your hair," says Kathy. Take a pill. Sure, why not?

But Old Man Janus, he just keeps opening doors.

• • •

Write to shake off the dust; write at the peak.

• • •

In the summer of 2001, at the age of 18, Jessica Cawvey enlisted in the National Guard after graduating with honors from a community college near her hometown of Mahomet, Illinois. The single mother of a daughter, Sierra, she shipped out for Iraq in early 2004 to serve in the 1544th Transportation Company. Specialist Cawvey came stateside on leave that July to celebrate her daughter's sixth birthday, returned to Iraq and died in Fallujah on October 6th when an IED detonated near her vehicle.

Understandably, her little girl felt, besides grief, great confusion too. "She pinkey-sweared she wouldn't die," is how Sierra put it to her grandmother.

"We had to explain," said her grandfather, "that it was not mommy's fault, that she wanted to come home."

• • •

"In the long run," said John Maynard, 1st Baron, Keynes, "we are all dead."

Δ

You get home with two minutes to spare, switch on the TV, get ready to pop the cork. A silly man posing as a billionaire drops a sheep from the top of a tall building in Longacre Square. Look out the window. There go the fireworks, two sets of them visible – in the harbor off the Battery and to the southeast off Brooklyn Heights. Your view of the former is mostly blocked by the World Financial Center, but you see the coronas of the higher bursts, and for all the world it looks like the American Express Tower has gone volcanic, spewing a dandelion effusion of scarlet magma.

Hue and cry from the streets carries on past the finale, then occasional whoops over the woosh of cars. Two thousand oh-heaven.

• • •

Torrential rains pound the city from around 2 a.m. Despite or because of it, the whoops and party horn blasts continue until well after dawn. The Wunderground weather website promises unseasonable warmth.

Nausea.

• • •

Martin said to his man, fie, man, fie
Martin said to his man, who's the fool, now
Martin said to his man, Fill thou the cup and I the can
Thou hast well drunken man, who's the fool now

I saw the hare chase the hound, fie, man, fie
I saw the hare chase the hound, who's the fool, now

I saw the hare chase the hound, twenty miles above the ground
Thou hast well drunken, man, who's the fool, now…

• • •

Having flipped the switch that dropped the sheep, the fake billionaire presumes to read the entrails: *Less 4 U. More 4 Me.*

In truth, both the sheep – which is real – and the man, made of nine zeros, all frauds, keep falling.

• • •

Far-off in Nantes, famous for its edict of toleration, *ils ont dit non, non, non!* Multitudes took to the winding streets round midnight to protest the arrival of 2007. As the second hand made its final sweep past XII, the marchers, without skipping a beat, changed the chant to *Non à 2008*.

Flushing, New York, was still a village when Nancy Davis Reagan, née Anne Francis Robbins, was born there in 1921. Yesterday, perhaps the midst of a mid-afternoon California nap, the ex-First Lady stirred to the sound of a thousand voices: *Non, non, non!*

In 1657, Flushing was an uppity town. When Peter Stuyvesant tried to rule, imposing, in his way, a theocracy of Dutch Reform, they Remonstranced him but good, saying, in part:

> The law of love, peace and liberty in the states extending to Jews, Turks and Egyptians, as they are considered sons of Adam, which is the glory of the outward state of Holland, soe love, peace and liberty, extending to all in Christ Jesus, condemns hatred, war and bondage. And because our Saviour sayeth it is impossible but that offences will come, but woe unto him by whom they cometh, our desire is not to offend one of his little ones, in whatsoever form, name or title hee appears in, whether Presbyterian, Independent, Baptist or Quaker, but shall be glad to see anything of God in

> any of them, desiring to doe unto all men as we desire all men should doe unto us, which is the true law both of Church and State; for our Saviour sayeth this is the law and the prophets.
>
> Therefore if any of these said persons come in love unto us, we cannot in conscience lay violent hands upon them, but give them free egresse and regresse unto our Town, and houses, as God shall persuade our consciences, for we are bounde by the law of God and man to doe good unto all men and evil to noe man. And this is according to the patent and charter of our Towne, given unto us in the name of the States General, which we are not willing to infringe, and violate, but shall houlde to our patent and shall remaine, your humble subjects, the inhabitants of Vlishing.
>
> Written this 27th of December in the year 1657, by mee.
>
> *Edward Hart, Clericus* (and signed by some twenty-nine others).

Old peg-leg came down on Flushing like a ton of bricks. Jail, starvation and banishment followed for Hart and those who would not immediately recant. Yet in 1660, Flushing's Quaker Meeting sent this declaration to Charles II, their would-be English king: *We do utterly deny…all outward wars, and strife, and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretense whatsoever, and this is our testimony to the whole world.*

Deposed by the Brits in 1664, Stuyvesant lived on in Manhattan another eight years. He's buried in the Stuyvesant family vault, now beneath St. Marks Church-in-the-Bowerie not far from where a pear tree he brought from Holland, and planted at what would one day become the corner of 13th Street and Third Avenue, bore fruit for two more centuries, until it too died.

• • •

I saw a flea heave a tree, fie, man, fie
I saw a flea heave a tree, who's the fool now
I saw a flea heave a tree, twenty miles out to sea
Thou hast well drunken, man, who's the fool now

• • •

As one may read a tree's age by its rings, when in a New York basement, just look up at the ceiling and count the pipes.

• • •

A weird, blurry b/w portrait of a young Marine cropped into a square – extreme close-up, eyes wide and blank – graces the front page of the online *Times*. Look closer and you see the kid's face is overlain with a grid of fine black lines, like graph paper. Ah, the picture's been divided into three thousand tiny interactive "buttons." Click on the bottom right square and up comes a picture of F.E. Pokorney, Jr., the first American soldier to die in the invasion of Iraq, on March 23, 2003. Click on the far upper left and you get the name William D. Spencer, killed on December 28, 2006. But where Spencer's visage should be, an eerie, pixilated black silhouette appears. Click around at random and you find a few more blanks interspersed among the vague, grayed-out features of these mostly young ones. Who provides or withholds the photos here? And for those depicted, who selected that particular image? What other likenesses didn't make the cut?

At your accustomed focal length, these men and women's faces have the quality of collaboration between Gerhard Richter and Chuck Close. It's only when you stand back across the room and turn out all the lights that the image of Jeremy R. Ewing, who died on April 29, 2004, coheres at all. And now, at this remove, he's the size of a postcard, still out-of-focus.

"Faces of the Dead," the headline reads. The copy below invites you to an "Interactive Feature" wherein you'll "Learn about the individuals by clicking on any square to see information about that person." But what's to be discovered there? The soldier's name, date, branch of service, date of death, hometown. Only this and nothing more. So much not on the table.

Δ

A lattice-work of days.

• • •

Nantucket sleighride. You're the whale, the tale, the barb and the man.

• • •

All men drown.

• • •

Once upon a time, when he blurbed *Divided…* Marshall Berman wrote that "Darton knows …where the bodies are buried." No, you don't know anything. Nor are the bodies buried. They are simply strewn.

• • •

Eventually the world itself drowned, so weighed down it was by an excess of wisdom.

• • •

Under mysterious circumstances, a 140 page document laying out Giuliani's presidential campaign strategy goes missing, gets photocopied and handed to the *Daily News*. Among the points addressed are the former mayor's presumptive liabilities, including what the *Times* calls "his controversial former aide," Bernard B. Kerik. Not just former aide, but ex-Commissioner of Police, and a man so altogether corrupt, brutish and detestable that his loyalty to his ex-boss emerges as a kind of mitigating virtue.

No matter. The thing that galls you is this: the benighted alley between the

Tombs and the new detention center on Centre street was, until recently, hung ubiquitously with signs proclaiming it Berard B. Kerik Plaza – just as the jail itself was named for the Commish – and now all the signs have disappeared. Someone, the fastidious Bloomie no doubt, has effaced this embarrassing name from the site, probably in response to the various criminal charges leveled against Kerik and/or the implosion of his nomination to head the Department of Homeland Security.

But for shame. It's weasily to wipe a man's name off public facilities in order to pretend he never existed. Let there be a visible record of the choices made by the political class. Kerik rose, after all, to be a powerful official in New York City and beyond, elevated through the acts of other powerful officials. As a cop, he received thirty medals including one for valor under fire. Later he became Commissioner of Corrections. Queen Elizabeth dubbed him a Commander of the Order of the British Empire. In 2003, on the heels of the occupying army, Bush appointed him Interim Minister of Interior of Iraq and Senior Policy Advisor to then Presidential Envoy Paul Bremmer.

In some strange way Kerik – monstrously – is what he is. You've got an idea who you're dealing with. These other quavering bastards are always trying to change their colors to suit the temper of the time, and Kerik's cardinal sin lay in reflecting back at them exactly what they are.

• • •

The *Times*, legendarily weighty on Sunday, has on Tuesday defied the laws of gravity. In an article on the unseemly scene at Saddam's execution, the paper of record reports a "volley of taunts that continued right up to the moment of the hanging itself, and afterwards, as Mr. Hussein lay suspended from the rope."

• • •

I saw the mouse chase the cat, fie, man, fie
I saw the mouse chase the cat, who's the fool now
I saw the mouse chase the cat, Saw the cheese eat the rat

Thou hast well drunken, man, who's the fool now

Δ

Your junkmail filter fails to catch a message from "Tricia Friend." Its subject: "you got no choice."

• • •

So many vapors, so few pythias.

• • •

Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.

So says the inscription on the portico of the GPO where you've come on a stamp-buying expedition. The stairs are pitched in such a way as that, at nearly 57, it's easy enough to bound up 'em three at a time. Though you used to do four. But that hoary adage, attributed to Herodotus, need to be changed in keeping with the times. *Neither particle, nor wave, nor electromagnetic fields will delay the nanosphere on its superconductive rounds.*

• • •

Biking wrongway down Eighth Avenue from the GPO, you notice that not only is number three eighty-two leaning, and more like three degrees than two, it's also bowing, and gracefully too: a lovely concave arc from cornice to where bricks meet the ground. Beneath the scaffolding, the now-shuttered Estoril del Sol, its once-white baroque-patterned door beginning to peel paint. A pity, for you alone, that you never ate the paella de Valencia there. Even in its absence, it feels delicious – especially and particularly on an empty stomach.

At Le G. this morning, the realization – growing on you incrementally these past

several years and now gone critical – that the place is a magnet for spooks. Thomas shakes his head when you tell him that so-and-so is likely CIA. Couldn't be, Thomas says, if he were CIA, he'd never have lost his cool like that – you both remembering the time Eric B.'s remark provoked him into a near brawl. True, you say, but the fact is few are in the CIA, but many are *of* the CIA. For every operative, how many informers? There are a great many leaves on that great, deep-rooted tree of deception, the Good Shepherd Company being only one recent and by no means definitive branch.

What to do? Out them? Spread the word about this or that one or them all – the ones you suspect? Challenge them publicly? Several have told you of their affiliations in almost so many words, or imply they are ex of this or that. It's hard for them not to boast about it, particularly in an atmosphere of so many free tongues. A private laugh that you've probably introduced several spooks to one another while they pretended to be meeting for the first time.

What to do? The ox is way bigger than you are and very strong. But it fears even a small fellow grasping it by the horns and in one turn, throwing it down. What to do, Mr. Man at Table 4? How to deal with this bumper crop of True Believers and deists ex-machina?

Nothing. Sit by the river side. *Muddy water, let stand, becomes clear*.

• • •

Little barrel. Big fish. Lots of 'em.

• • •

I saw a maid milk a bull, fie, man, fie
I saw a maid milk a bull, who's the fool now
I saw a maid milk a bull, at every pull a bucket full
Thou hast well drunken, man, who's the fool now

Martin said to his man, fie, man, fie
Martin said to his man, who's the fool, now

Martin said to his man, fill thou the cup and I the can
Thou hast well drunken man, who's the fool now.

• • •

Hope's a funny thing. Keeps undying. Let it go.

• • •

Sartre said it more or less like this: You're entering the gas chamber in Auschwitz. Do you walk through the doors free or not free?

• • •

Does an ox go "Moo – I wish I were the bird on my back and not me?"

• • •

Homer – was he real? Worry less about who said something than whether it's got a germ of truth. Strange to compare the information provided by the *Times* in "Faces of the Dead," with that related by Homer about so many warriors, soon to die at Troy. Perhaps a few words only, a particularity or two, but you come away with the sense that this man lived, and that, in some small way, he mattered. If only to other mortals, like yourself.

And if this singular mortal had his qualities, than did not the dead man's brothers – soon to join him on another shore – thousands of them – who went to their graves unacknowledged by even so capacious a mind as Homer's?

But more – even in the manner of death something can be said: "One with a spearcast above his nipple, The other with a swordstroke to the collar-bone, Shearing off the entire shoulder From the neck and back."

And next to die at Diomedes's hand – fuelled as it was, for the moment, by Zeus's rage and protected by Athena – "Abas and Polyidus, Sons of old Eurydamas,

who read dreams, But read no dreams for them when they left home. Diomedes cut them down and moved on."

• • •

A man falls down on the platform, stands up, then convulses and tumbles onto the tracks. Train's coming – big red number 1 in a circle. Another man sees this, leaves his two girl-children and jumps down. He presses the fallen man into the gutterway between the tracks as the train rumbles over them both. The pressing-down man receives a smear of grease on his wool cap for his labors. Gasps and screams from the onlookers: "They're down there!" From below the undercarriage, Man 2 calls out: "Tell my daughters I'm OK!"

Power's cut and both men are pulled free without serious harm. What brings on a seizure in one man? What makes another jump into the void?

• • •

And what of all these dots and deltas, symbols you've interposed to denote divisions in time. It doesn't work that way any more. Your moments unwind one into the next. Yes, there are spokes on the wheel, but who can see them when it's turning so fast?

So take my shoes off
And throw them in the lake
And I'll be
Two steps on the water

Once sang Kate Bush, more or less like that.

Where did Mary land, mom?

And who blew off these doors of experience?

Scarlet fever. Jack had it as a lad. Makes you daft if it's bad enough. Weakens the heart. Kills you if it's worse. Exotoxins. Well, where would you be then, Poppy?

Or as the ex-pig said about the sausage factory: *It was the wurst experience of my life*.

• • •

Jokes and half-jokes.

In fat silver magic marker on the side of a mailbox: ATTENTION PEASANTS. Four doors west, on the same block, in black magic marker, on the base of a dayglo orange traffic cone – one of three set up before a derelict townhouse: UNBUILDIT.

Turn the corner bearing north by northwest on Greenwich Avenue. There's a beautiful wide window, gray with schmutz on the vacant storefront of a shoe repair that you remember being there since the year one. If you had a can of dayglo orange spraypaint – is there a hardware store nearby since Garber's moved? – you'd write across it: INVITE MY EXECUTIONERS TO THE FUNERAL.

And along the way you notice, as you have these past days, written nearly as ubiquitously on many a surface as STOP BUSH was seven years ago: 911TRUTH.ORG.

Stop to take of your scarf, put it in your bag. St. Martin's Summer or some other kind of miracle?

Global warming's so Yang. What's needed as a corrective is a little dose of Yin. Nuclear winter.

Chucking under its chin: "And whose little fear are you?"

"Watch out for cars," Elena said as you parted. So you are very aware of the huge black SUV that cuts off your corner at Eighth and 20th. It roars to 21st, screeches to a halt before the red light. Squint to read what's written across the wide back window. A large green drippy horror movieish "M," and in tamer white letters next to

it: MonsterEnergy.com.

In the waning spring, yet January light, all the girls and women on the street, even the least favored among them, look fine. Each man, irrespective of his condition, resembles in some way your father. A twentyish woman walks past, drinking from a Starbucks cup, sunglint off her pierced left nostril, wavy hair, her feet in electric yellow New Balances. The shock of color cracks you up.

Deafening siren. A kid stomps a sheetmetal sidewalk door hard as he can. Outside Starbucks, the strangely tall dark handsome neighborhood madman – part buccaneer, part dragqueen, smokes a brown cigarette and fastidiously adjusts his shirt cuffs. He takes a long drag and leans against the building near a red standpipe. Your bag, balanced on top of a fire hydrant while you write this, falls into the gutter.

You don't feel safe on the street any more, so you open the door of Jamba Juice – Gwen's favorite place of refreshment and refuge. You almost expect to find her here, but she's still on her way home on the subway, or still hanging out uptown with her mates uptown. There are other kids here though, messing with their Blackberries, flipping straws up and down between their teeth like impossibly long cigarettes. Barry White's "You're My Everything" gets drowned out by the roar of juicers. In the spot where you can't hear it, you hear it: *You're my reality, But I'm lost in a dream. You're the first, you're the last…*

Welcome home says the clock, and the chair says Welcome home. All you remember of a song your mother used to sing in her baritone register. Oh yes, and the lamp, the rug, the table, all say Welcome home.

Wolf moon. Hanging in the sky. Full as it gets.

What's your goal in life? To die.

Thor's day. Two days shy of Epiphany-Three Kings Day, four before the Manhattan Solstice and two weeks prior to the commencement of Pig Year, which will no doubt bring everything with it, including the oink.

Good Lord, those buds on the gingko tree across from the café. Maki says the

cherry trees in the St. Luke's garden are blooming. *Semper ver*. Fi!

Green is the new gold is the new red is the new pink.

The iceman cometh. The snowman? – fuggedaboudit!

Tillie Olsen's dead at 94.

We have most always lived in the grip of evil men. The question is one of consciousness. And conscience.

Let the bidding begin. Saddam's noose. Muqtada, supposedly, holds it now. Highest call so far, from a Kuwaiti gazillionaire, willing, it is said, to pay "anything."

Meanwhile, the world, and foremost the Chinese, unreel us – the 'merican empire, gϕd love us – plenty of rope.

Carpal to carpal, c-spine to c-spine, weak joint to weak joint. Whose wrist wraps Che Guevara's Rolex? And for how long? Time will tell. Back in the day, Booker T. played a song, and the MG's backed him up: *Time is Tight*.

Walking fast forward, the tall woman pulls on a cigarette that seems not quite lit, then without time for exhaling pitches forward, lips colliding with the plastic top of her just upraised takeout coffee. So much imbalance on the streets. You too, unable to move without knocking over something, unwalkable without tripping, grazing your knuckles on this or that rough metal object. Only the garbage men, slowly making their way down 21st Street, behind the flashing lights of the truck are accurate in their flings: curbside to jaws of maw almost offhandedly – black bags with yellow cinches. But they leave behind the Christmas trees, stacked in front of the larger buildings like the dead of Antietam. Gathering them up must be some other crew's mission. Bag for bag, it's all gone or going.

Erin, you'd forgotten her name, was at the café this morning – in from the West Coast where she now lives with husband and daughters aged two and four. She's here scoring a movie, indie feature, *Year Zero*, set in a thirty day slot in the near future just as,

and after, the youth eighteen and over receive their draft notices. You remember, sitting here, on these brownstone steps in the sunlight, ass cold though, waiting for the Gray Ghost to go legal, how radiant Erin looked pregnant with her first – how you almost couldn't talk to her – that part of your mind shut down, the place that manufactures speech. Music.

A woman passes heading west. She's talking softly, but when you look closer you see she's got no wire so it must be herself she's conversing with, just like you. Ass cold, plane unseen in the clouds but diagonally audible overhead, northwest to southeast. Music.

Now, walking east a townhouse mom you'd thought so sexy once, a whole half year ago, hailing a cab to get her kids to private school on time, wearing a fedora-shaped openweave straw hat. She was the one who, late this fall, was daft enough to rush into the oncoming traffic, both children right after her, to try and snag a taxi on the other side of the avenue. A miracle none of them were hit. You can still see it: the kids, dodging between one lane and another, mom legging after the vanishing cab and turning to yell "watch out!" Nothing to do but hold your breath. She comes to the café now and again, hangs out with the famous actor.

Project away. Is it grief of heartbreak that's gripped her face, got her sniffling. Or could she be a junkie, sick? No, folks like her can always score, no need for them to be hurting that way. You don't know what the matter is, why her coat swings open in the not-friendly breeze, why her pant cuffs drag. Is she losing weight and the waistband's slipped? Even if you asked her, presuming on the scantiest acquaintance – one creature recognizing another from the cabbage patch, small gesturing in her direction – you might not know. She might not know.

The Chinese notebook, black with red binding and corners, is out of pages. You're penning the inside cover now. At the bottom, on the left, there's a manufacturer's logo: a pyramid, but two dimensional and unfolding, as if it's made of origami. On the side facing you, what looks like a stylized outline of a man's head in profile. Hieratic? And beneath the pyramid's base the company name: Quitman®.

Quit man. Quit while you're ahead. A neck, a body. Sound-limbed, straight-hipped. Loose-waisted. Opposable-thumbed. A man entire. All.

Bicycling, words come: *I want to raise a child less rigid than the one I've had to be.*

And this wheel you're writing. Painstaking, like a sand mandala, easily swept away.

Did you hear the one about the elephant who mistook his own toenail for a mouse and tried to run away from it?

Ground under feet – never!

Olfactory terrorism? Round about nine a.m. Gas attack or leaky line or what? – epicenter Chelsea. Get the story from a guy waiting for his car to go legal, just like you. Evacuations, sirens bleep-blooping. Hyperventilating populace. You've been cooping in the Gray Ghost with Leslie. Looking up through the rain-dropped windshield to the peaked brick tower tops of the seminary. Roll down windows all the way down. Deep breath. The usual.

Home and elevator up. A neighbor on the 15th floor didn't smell anything out of the ordinary either – no one did where you were at: 21st and Ninth and then home via 22nd and up Eighth. She keeps parakeets too, fairly close to a window open this morning and they haven't turned color none.

Ask Gwen when she gets home and she reports a scent not unlike "when you're riding behind a funky car" permeating her school's hallways early in the day and dissipating gradually. In her description it's nothing like the mecaptain lots of others smelled or imagined they did.

Quoth one *Times* blogger, "I hate it when the Mayor tells us that he does not know what the problem is, but he does know it's not dangerous…" Yes, Bloomie was all over the airways, calmly stirring up fears, looking like a billion dollars. He's a fine go-figure of a man. Another blogger advises that "methane outgassing from the earth's crust often carries a biosmell with it." Mmm, biosmell, that's a keeper.

Meanwhile, sixty-three – at last count – grackles, sparrows and pigeons discovered lying stone cold dead in the streets of downtown Austin, TX.

The proposed new Transit Hub downtown at Fulton and Broadway would

involve digging another "reverse" bathtub, smaller, but, from an engineering standpoint, very like its way famous cousin a couple of blocks west. And this, sayeth the *Times* blandly, must be done since "there is a high water table in this part of Lower Manhattan." Tide's icumen in. Lawd sing all you cuckoos. Sing while you steal some other birds' nest.

And down it comes, the house that Descartes built.

How to open up your eyes and not stop listening?
Can I get a witness?
How to witness, without overbearing?

This dawn was supposed to be the Manhattan solstice. But when you raised your head at six, the rain was beating so hard on the plastic windowsills it sounded like the cats clawing your rug. Total overcast to the east. No rosy-fingered nothin'. Not in this latitude. So back to Land of Nod.

Some other day you'll catch it – Gotham Stonehenge – the sun streaming directly down the cross-streets amidst the dwellings made for people who imagine they are gods. New York City, you know, where the vapors come up and play. Oracle of Omphalia. Got motive. Opportunity knocks. Given time, you want to visit all her sacred sites.

Bicycling home. Along Eighth Avenue near 25th Street, a vatic emanation spills up through the subway gratings: "Ladies and Gentlemen: After an earlier incident, Queensbound E as in echo trains are running normally." But are the N for Narcissus trains still stalled, spooked by their own reflections?

Once upon a time is as good a way as any to end.

It is said that when flowing water meets an obstacle, it builds up until its volume and strength permit it to spill around or over or under the impediment in its path. Sometimes the blockage gets washed away, sometimes not, and the process begins again. The obstacles the rushing water encounters do not leap up before it, but exist in

the nature of the path itself.

Once upon a time, a painter named Li Yin lived under an emperor who excelled at accomodating the strange and exciting ways of foreigners, who – depending on where one sat – might or might not be called invaders. Li Yin painted a mountain range in autumn and you have to look closely at the landscape to see there are little people in there, nearly blending with the rocky forms and undergrowth. His inscription says that he has depicted both northern and southern cliff routes by which travelers can negotiate the obstacles in their path. He further says that never having visited these mountains did not deter him from painting them since he had seen them in a dream and given the enormity of the universe, they might very well exist.

You saw this painting a long time ago in Boston, where it lives at the Museum of Fine Arts. When you lived in Boston, briefly and unhappily, as a college freshman, a group called the Standells had a big local, meaning New England hit. Each verse finished with a great couplet: *Because I love that dirty water / Oh, Boston, you're my home*.

Will Manhattan rise up one day – a new wrinkle on the Appalachian front? Or will its great buildings serve as so many grottoes for marine life to swim through and around?

The Indians of New York harbor saw Henry Hudson's ship, *Halve Maen*, appear over the horizon. Some thought, though this is apocryphal, that it was the Manitou for the ship resembled in some ways the Creator. One native witness saw, as the ship drew closer, "a house of various colors… crowded with living creatures."

Navigating the waterways of the bay, Robert Juet, Hudson's navigator recorded "a very good land to fall with, and a pleasant land to see…" Off the south coast of Staten Island, he spied "many salmons, mullets and rayes, very great." Off Coney Island, the *Halve Maen*'s crew caught ten mullet "of a foote and a halfe long apeece and a raye as great as four men could haule into the ship…"

Crossing into Bergen Neck from Staten Island they found "lands…pleasant with grasse and flowers and goodly trees as ever we had seene, and very sweet smells came from them."

Era y non era.

Kan ya makan.

The urban plague-round: bugs, bullets and bad water.

How long would it take a squadron of C-130 gunships ranged along Seventh Avenue to reduce Penn South, and the Elliot Houses to rubble? Minutes or an hour? And when?

If only a topographer in a helicopter
would pass over my shadow
I might be imposed forever
on the maps of this city.
—Grace Paley, "At the Battery"

Memory's a camel. Bactrian. It's humpy ride carries you back two summers to Sisteron, in Provence, sixty-odd miles northwest of the Côte d'Azur. There, at the mountain-pass fortress that served as the only possible bottleneck to Napoleon's return, a rain squall forced the three of you to take shelter. When the tempest cleared, you found your vehicle in the carpark looking as if it had been painted in camouflage, covered in great splashes of mud. Sand, windborne, mixed with water at some great altitude. Origin Africa. I who am south will move north. Sahra.

You actually buy the *New York Times*. The headlines don't matter. A three column-wide pic of Condoleezza Rice, tight close up, mouth open as if in song, right hand raised before her in a blur. She either has been or soon will be weeping. Testifying, she is, before the Senate, three representatives of which are pictured immediately beneath her, more or less photo-kiosk size. Two white guys in ties and a black man in the middle. All captured with mouths open, hands raised. The three men still wear the masks of Senators, but Condoleezza's mask has dropped. Only yesterday, the paper showed her, wearing her armored suit, a warrior before the podium, bronze helmeted, such face as showed rigid enough to bounce quarters off. But today, something's snapped. One straw too many. The hero's mask fallen away. A mortal. Who realizes she's played the game of gods and they have used and abandoned her. Tragic. She could be a Trojan woman. Or Iphegeneia. She's bearing witness now.

American gunships shredding Somalis. C-130s. Condoleezza know how many thousand rounds it can fire in a second. But instead you ask her: *How much more terrible does it get?* She may not tell. But she sees it, just as those without imagination are condemned one day to meet, if only for an instant, the real. Just like us.

Rockets hit the American embassy in Athens. Pythia no longer speaks, but vomits. A prophesy in every stomach.

Eventually the concept fails, holes spring in it and the stuff leaks out.

All that is modern buries itself in the sands of Sumer. Of Persia. Enough sand to bury any machine. Soak up any torrent of blood. Long before the crescent fluttered on a flag, or took the form of a Viennese pastry now identified with France, rivers made that semi-arid land now called Near East a fertile zone. Fecundation. By any and every means. The cycle of flood and drought. And the birthplace of beliefs that travel in far longer timewaves than any so-called strategy.

It's raining in New York. Wets your coat, your deforested head, your bicycle tires, your little bell, the thousand cars around you, the delivery man's thermal bag, the umbrellas of the passing folk. Through the grates over the subway coffers the liquid falls to furnish the Ailanthus trees with a bit of nourishment, or just make muck. And in every drop that hits, you feel it: A tiny grain of sand.

BOOK OF MANITOU

January 13 – March 3, 2007

Chaos should be regarded as extremely good news.

—Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche

Green is the new gold.

…If one is only able to advance and does not know how to retreat, or vice versa, he is unlikely to be successful in battle and will most likely be defeated… warns Li Zi Ming in *Liang Zhen Pu, Eight Diagram Palm*, 2nd Method.

A state of despairity, of despair, however mutually shared between or among creatures or things.

Red's the new pink.

In the situation of waiting at ease for a fatigued enemy, a small force is usually very effective, observes Li, further on in the above annotation.

Commas gone wild. Apostrophes in the air.

Apo = a prefix from a Gk. Preposition. It usually signifies from, away from, off, asunder, separate, as in apocope (a cutting off), apostate, apostle (one sent away). Apocarpous (of ovaries of flowering plants – consisting of carpals [wrist, joint] that are free from one another in buttercups or roses). Antonym = Syncarpous.

Strophe = to twist, to turn. In Greek choruses and dances, the movement of the chorus while turning from the right to the left of the orchestra; hence, the strain, or part of the choral ode, sung during this movement. Also, one section of a lyric poem or choral ode in classical Greek drama. Sometimes used to denote a stanza of modern verse.

C.f. *Antistrophe*.

If you want to apply the tip, first apply the root. Li Zi Ming recommends this in his, 3rd Method, Stepping.

How do you score the game if the whole idea is to drop the ball?

ERIC is EPIC, with augmentation.

Vigilantes for peace.

You are indispensable to yourself.

Via email, Louella Mercer offers: A cure for your problem. Pitchstone Aquinas writes on the subject of Tear He authorized. From Quarrel railway: making Years informed. Someone or thing writing under the nom d'algorithm National Enzyme suggests moving Woodruff Dupe. Translate Emery finds: offensive Those drying. And Harrison Bacon's epistle comes titled: yellow decision hospital system.

All around, people driven to distraction by the shimmering, buzzing, whirling refractions of their own selves.

One might think, given their identically colored scales that the milk snake and the coral snake were one in the same. Yet the former is quite harmless and the latter, deadly. The trick to telling them apart lies in the order of their bands. Hence the Texas rhyme: *Red touch black friend of Jack, red touch yellow kill a fellow.* Jump, me sons and daughters!

Conspiration.

Three days ago, January 16, 2007, China announced it possesses foreign reserves valued at $1 trillion. They begin testing a thermal fusion reactor nicknamed "the artificial sun."

We're working on a new virgin of that…

The problem with Israel is that it is real. Better to have remained a dream.

Anarchist is fine so far as it goes. You'll answer to it as well as any other epithet. But it literally means no ruler, or without a ruler, whereas for you, sovereignty inheres

at a whole 'nother level. A different relationship of man and master, lord and vassal, within and amongst the selves.

Bacon ex-machina.

What if the condition we call strife or conflict is seen as a discordancy of emotional or cultural energy – a kind of atmospherics, an engine of weather in all its changes? *Les temps*.

In the film *Ridicule*, the petitioner-hero awaits his opportunity with extraordinary perseverance. Finally, a chance encounter in the gardens of Versailles with the King and his retinue. "Make a witticism," demands the King, "I've heard you are most amusing." Silence. "Go ahead, say something witty." His patience wears thin.

"About what, your majesty?"

Pause.

"About me!"

Laughter from the courtiers. The poor fellow has cooked his goose now.

The petitioner takes a breath and replies:

"But the King is no subject."

A beat, then explosions of mirth, from all except the petitioner and the King, to whom this consummate play on words must be explained. Whereupon he laughs too.

It's way better in French. So much so that it is almost a crime to write it here in translation.

Rene Riffaud, one of France's last surviving WWI veterans dies at the age of 108. In an interview a few months ago, he described the close of the war:

"We were guarding a bridge. An officer arrived and told us that the armistice had just been signed. We went to town to celebrate, to eat bread that wasn't blackened, and we amused ourselves by watching the flights of geese taking off to go and bathe in the Rhine."

Riffaud, born in Tunisia, never applied for veteran's benefits. When he was 107, his granddaughter filled out the form for him.

"I took so long in getting the veteran card because I wasn't a fighting soldier. I never engaged in military discussions. I was more worried with living than looking back to the past.

"I expect no reward from anyone. My son had the veteran card, but I never felt the need for it. I am a 'poilu' because I was forced to see and do certain things. I have nothing of a volunteer.

"The war was a massacre. There was a lot of destruction, lots of spite, and lots of heartbreak for everyone. It must not happen again."

Change Gotham's name to Nu Dubai. Where, in any Starbux, you can order a Cathay olé!

Bizarro world is up to you.

Global war. Ming. Who is that anyway?

All round the world, a chorus of querulous voices lamenting: *Oh no, the Chinese shot down my cellphone!*

Return with us now to those thrilling days of jester jeer…

Lamb of the midnight stun.

Take the materials of the night. Add sunlight. Wait.

Lots of hoarfrost this a.m. White on the macadam. How not to hit the little but nonetheless actual man who's crossing the street in front of you . Too much brake and the bike'll slide and there's a car coming up on your right.

Black ice everywhere too, slick as oil. Eric B. comes off his bike on Greenwich Street heading uptown, jams his calf in the frame. A car, driven by a Punjabi, slides helplessly toward him. He holds up an arm to stop it. From the sidewalk a woman calls out, "Stop! Stop!" Eric's bag ends up underneath the car, one corner of it heat-

fused to the engine block.

Once upon a time, you saw someone hold up a handful of crude oil. It's a disgusting thing. Anyone who would refine and burn that stuff – the deadest, deadliest energy harbored by the earth – deserves the ugly black and chrome Denali that devolves from oil's processing, deserves the inner death that results from colluding with such a machine.

Eric B. picks himself up, considers returning home, but presses on uptown to the café. Through the window, you watch him chain his bike to a parking meter, notice that the milk crate on the rack's askew, half on, half off. That's where we are. On until off, and some and everywhere in between.

He sits down, shows you his injured leg. His coffee appears, and with it, milk.

Oil discovered in Ugaska. No, I mean Alaganda. No Conganda. The Democratic Republic of – no, Condugango. Where ever. Beneath the lake, the Nile headwaterish lake, another lakeful of Texas tea. Beneath Denaili. Expedient Denaili. Who owns it, the sub-lake? The oil companies of course! We're rich, rich! Providing we can stomach it.

Eric's basically OK, only reinjured an old football bash from five years ago – the outside edge of a Yugoslav's boot shearing against the bone. Your family's got to stop getting hit by cars you tell him, remembering the period ten years ago or so when you and Katie couldn't stop falling down. Both of you. Every week another fall. It was ridiculous. And worse.

Back in August, the U.S. announced we had the right to shoot down any satellite we wanted to. We said Checkmate! But the Chinese play a game without squares.

And once, long ago, your father used to dance you around singing: Joshua fit the battle of Erico.

What's the difference between Eric B. and Eric D.?

Denaili *is* a river in Africa. White Nile, Blue Nile. Black. Sahra move south.

A friend emails you a poem. In it, the lines:

(*Now, remember the sheep from the goats.*
The old notion of the elect: Heaven's reward only for the chosen.)

What comes to you is the image of Poor Mad Georgie W., sitting among the schoolchildren, doing his worst to read them a book about a goat. Now how perfect is the universe that could produce that?

Nothing is unforgivable.

From she to shining she.

Said Seneca, not too long after the earthly coming and going of a certain Essene prophet: "This is the difference between us Romans and the Etruscans. We believe that lightning is caused by clouds colliding, whereas they believe that clouds collide in order to create lightning. Since they attribute everything to gods, they are led to believe not that events have a meaning because they have happened, but that they happen in order to express a meaning."

Searching for oil used to be an Essoteric art. Now it's gone Exxoteric. Can't keep things underground forever. All in the open now, except for what can't be known.

Said Bartolomeo Vanzetti strapped into the electric chair: "I now wish to forgive some people for what they are do-to me."

Then a thousand volts times two which, according to an eyewitness, caused purple foam to slide down his face. And of course the smell.

Among thousands of people, only three to five can be close. Meaning that of countless enemies, only a few are, at any time, near enough to engage. So advises Li Zi Ming in his Victory Method, number 12.

Jerilou sends photographs of four of her favorite cacti which grow on the mountain where she hikes near Santa Fe. Now, all covered in snow. You call to thank

her, having mounted the pictures on your wall beneath the south-facing window, next to your desk, and in the course of the conversation, she relates that Los Alamos (the poplars) was once a boy's school and that the site was believed by the Indians to be a place where, if one's heart was right, it would rain.

Some kind of rain came out of Los Alamos – all those shimmering leaves – and it fell in the condensation aftermath of those great theoretical clouds turned real over living deserts and two inhabited cities. It strikes you as not entirely accidental that this was the place where those heartless men convened. No, not heartless, for no one can be that and live, but denying the nature of the organ, in service of…?

Only now are you beginning to understand the meanings in the novel you wrote years ago, *Orogene*. In half-dreams the meanings come, as did the images themselves.

The death machiners wish to provoke humanity into destroying itself. For their greatest fear, among so many terrors, is that Ibn 'Arabi is correct when he suggests that "If He has given us life and existence by His being, I also give Him life by knowing Him in my heart." Compare with Angelus Silesius: "I know that without me, the life of God were lost."

Infindibula.

The cliff steps out from under you.

Saints mauled by Bears.

Death of L'abbé Pierre. 94.

Distorted in the dark-tinted rear window of the silver Windstar LX parked in front of you, the sharp-peaked rooves of the Seminary. Here, in reflection, the rigors of right angled apexes take on swooping curvilinear forms. At the window's top and bottom edges too, the naked branches of the street trees appear as veins might on a backlit leaf. And every few minutes, arching across the field, a flock of pigeons,

attenuated to geese by the magical optics of late-capitalist safety glass when played on by light and the singularity of your coign of vantage.

BBC World service bounces a mother's grief from New Orleans to transmitter to radio, and the Gray Ghost's aerial isn't even up. "These children got no respect for one another. All they care about is money and drugs. They won't be happy, not one of them, until they all is dead and gone." Part speech, part howl.

The quicker you are, the slower I am. This is Connecting Method, 15, Li Zi Ming.

We call those things bad which cause us discomfort, and those things that give us pleasure, good.

You cannot see her, but her voice echoes high and quavering down the subway station: *…coming for to carry me home….*

At your end of the platform, two figures, displaced-looking. Several trains arrive and they don't get on 'em. One slouches on a bench, and the other stands nearby. The standing one's a man, though you're not immediately certain of this since he's so bundled up you can only see his eyes. His slouching companion is turned away, so you read the appliquéd letters on the back of his, or her, bulky jacket: COLORADO AVALANCHE.

Curiouser and curiouser. It seems that, for some time now the sun has been engaging a big body that's come up from the south – a comet named McNaught. Such is the intensity of the electromagnetic dialogue between these two entities, that realtime images transmitted by the Solar and Heliospheric Observatory (SOHO) satellite have been, at times, shut down of recent weeks. That's conjecture, of course, since the SOHO folks don't explain the interruptions. Are the discharges overwhelming the technology, or is there some other rhyme or reason to it? No matter.

There's been a theory, propounded by an eminent astronomer, that McNaught – which some wag dubbed the Great Comet of 2007, and it stuck – among other comets emanating from the southern reaches o' the universe, may be a harbinger, a herald as it were, of a much larger body not yet on anybody's radar but nonetheless heading more

or less toward the sun. And it occurs to you today that not only is McNaught another way of saying McNothing, but that Mc means, "son of," or homophonically, "sun of." Put 'em together and you get "son (or sun) of nothing." So who or what might this Nothing be? And when, if ever, do we get to meet him?

Funny names these comets got. The last one to get a rise out of you was "Hale-Bopp." Which did sound like a Shakespearean salutation: "Hail Bopp, well met," or a prayer-opener: "Hail-Bopp full of Grace." A Hail-Bopp Pass being, presumably, the kosmic ball thrown forward in a desperate attempt to save the game. H-B did, at the time, stir up a good deal of apocalyptic sentiment, back in ninety-seven when *it* was the Great Comet. Flares of fear drawn out like so many tongues of gas. The Heaven's Gate folks did not, apparently, find the name humorous enough to deflect their collective death drive. True, if H-B had impacted Old Uncle Helios, that would've been quite a bop. We might have become been the sons and daughters of naught, or just plain naught.

Now McNaught is, in fact, much brighter than its predecessor, or any comet since 1965, and was visible at times and in certain places, like Australia and Switzerland, even by day with the naked eye. And though you couldn't figure it out even in a Genesis-length lifetime, the coming and going of McNaught, taken together with all the weird-ass solar activity of late, has got you wondering if the dance of these powerful kosmic energies might not have some little something to do with life on earth. Not letting the Bushies off the hook. Or any other local demons. There are evil ones. But hey, maybe the game is bigger than we can wrap minds around. Or maybe not a game at all? The gods, sane or crazy? Or is it just what it is.

Mc Naught, who might be called Son o' Nuffin' in Cockney, made perihelion a week ago, January 16, and so we're waving 'is nibs goodbye. If you lived down in Costa Rica, late of a moonless night, you might see 'is tail. Godspeed, McNaught. Safe 'ome. It's a long way to Tipperary. A song written two years before the Great War, by a certain Mr. Jack Judge. But then the trenches changed the lyrics:

That's the wrong way to tickle Mary,
That's the wrong way to kiss!

Don't you know that over here, lad,
They like it best like this!
Hooray pour le Francais!
Farewell, Angleterre!
We didn't know the way to tickle Mary,
But we learned how, over there.

What Jack first wrote was this:
It's a long way to Tipperary,
It's a long way to go.
It's a long way to Tipperary
To the sweetest girl I know!
Goodbye Piccadilly,
Farewell Leicester Square,
It's a long long way to Tipperary,
But my heart's right there.

Or as your Cockney grandmother Anne Freeman would've sung it:
My 'art's right there.

You, you've, found your heart and lost it. Left and righted it. And now?

Tomorrow a.m., jury duty. Along with a time and place to show up, you have been issued an index number. Every body visible or sensed, each far-flung little icy pebble in the outer belts has been issued an index number. Every sovereign, single one.

Ah, to be young and dirigible.

Lies! More Lies!

Working title for this book: *Lies My Muse Told Me*.

You pace up and down the third floor hall of 111 Centre Street, while inside on the video display in the jury room, a light-skinned black woman with punctilious articulation assures the all within earshot of their "indispensability" to the "system of justice."

Out the east-facing windows, the imposing front façade of The Tombs, partly scaffolded for renovation. Down at the other end of the hall, sixty-eight steps to the west, you see, across the street at the corner of Franklin and Lafayette, a low-rise building. It's got beautiful light ochre brickwork, terra cotta detailing, and bays running up the Lafayette side, faced in elaborately-ornamented pressed sheet-metal. Best of the Old School. Must date from around 1880. On the ground floor, a merry-looking storefront overhung with a bright red awning, it's top only lightly sooted: ERIC'S HAPPY DELI.

You amble back down the hall to find the video presentation's finished and the clerk in the midst of listing, over a slightly boomy mic, the possible grounds for being excused. When she gets to "if you have problems with the English language," you nearly jump out of the chair you just sat down in, but don't, since you realize almost right away that what she meant is not exactly what she said.

Language broken. Always.

Using others' narratives to guide you through your own internal world.

Can you use words to get beyond, or before, words?

When the object is gone, its shadow remains. But if the shadow remains, is the object gone?

Cast shadows. Yes, to throw. But also to mold.

The spin on a billiard ball they call "English."

Who no know go know.

Ach, *who no know go know*. All well and good to say it, but wha' can ye ken, and wha' can ye nae ken? Ye dinna knoo, do ye?

It gets werse. Can ye ken and nae ken at the same time? Ye noo noo, do ye? Ach, well, there's nothing for it but a wee dram o' the single malt. Doon Sauchiehall Street! Yer health! Nastrovia! L'chaim! Here's mud in yer eye! And may yer kilt n'er get caught in an updraft, unless, that is, yer Marilyn Monroe. In which case, I'd nae mix the single malt wi' the prescription stuff. Better to live wi' the shadows, and if ye must, wi'in 'em.

Late morning in the jury room. Florescent light overhead, rustle of newspapers, a cough, blown nose, tap of heels in the corridor and the domesticated roar of the HVAC. Shallow breathing's all you can do here.

Sitting midway across the room from you, arms resting on the long table, a strikingly pretty young woman with, yes, now that you've seen it, the ugliest haircut in the Western World. OK, not the Western World, but certainly in this densely populated room of a hundred or so souls. Part of her attraction is that she looks a little crazy. And her full brown eyebrows clash interestingly with the red gold of her awful hair.

She reads, with deep focus and apparent diligence, the Juror's Handbook, and occasionally takes exquisitely slow bites of a never-ending cookie. Her name is called and she stands. Horrifying brown bell-bottom pants and long-sleeved matching top over which she wears a long, lacy pink sweater fastened at the midriff. Your name comes up too. Off to see and here.

You have the right to remain solvent.

Rather than crowd on to an elevator you take the stairway to the tenth floor to discover, first, that there are lots of steps between stories in this building, and second that a large L-shaped office block half-wraps around the ERIC'S HAPPY DELI building. This larger structure is a creature of the early 20th Century, faced in beige brick with wonderful cast concrete human-faced gargoyles, some in clusters, set into the façade at strategic points.

A vast number of your cohort troop into the courtroom. Jason Johnson stands accused of having perpetrated the Class A felony trifecta. It's alleged that he fatally shot Balbino Diaz, known as Beano, in a conflict over East Harlem drug turf. But that's not all. Diaz, a leader of the Ultimate Power gang was kidnapped at about 3 p.m. on September 14, 2003 from 114th Street between Pleasant and First Avenues. Then driven to Queens, then robbed, then murdered. His body found the next day inside a porto-potty in Idlewild Park.

When Jason Johnson rises to acknowledge the prospective jurors, he appears remarkably open and present. The judge seems fair and reasonably good-humored, and reminds you spookily of a superannuated version of Katie's pal Lois. The DA surpasses clichés – he's got the face and body language of a sand shark. Johnson's attorney is a round-bodied woman with soulful brown eyes, which, almost instantly, she fixes upon yours. She knows, or some part of her does, that if, just if, you make the cut, she's got a prayer.

But you raise your hand when the judge asks if there are any people who might have problems, and you tell your best version of the truth. Dismissed in a New York minute.

This is indeed a no-smoking building. But a good seven tenths of the folks lining this corridor are talking on cell phones or punching away at their blackberries. No cigarette fumes assaulting the lungs, just dozens of people being slowly microwaved, and you passively, collaterally damaged.

Find a spot on a bench and look out over the fantastic city. The immense Federal Courthouse tower. The Municipal Building where, once upon a time, you and Katie wed. Visible behind a shorter building, the top floors of the slab that used to be Chase, until they wuz Chased. If you lean left, from behind the ghastly oblong of the Federal Building, you catch a sliver of the Woolworth Building's lower floors and one peaked corner before its tower setbacks begin. Why, oh why, are all the flags at half-staff?

Kapuscinski dies. Only 74. Young for these days. "It is terribly important," he said in an interview not too far back, "to have what I write authenticated by its being

lived. You could call it, I suppose, personal reportage, because the author is always present. I sometimes call it literature by foot."

Lunchbreak: down to Century 21 to buy underwear. Purchase made, you circumambulate the Bathtub and the Deutsche Bank building to scope out it's "deconstruction." The crane around front stands idle. But that's not odd, given the hour. On the south face, an elevator attached to the scaffold makes periodic climbs and descents. Don't see any material coming down though, or trucks to haul it away. This side of the building, beneath the black mesh, has been deglazed and stripped of cladding. Down to steel and bones. And dust.

Walking north on the far side of the West Street highway a view across the breadth of the Bathtub. Across the top of Century 21, a huge banner hangs. Bold white caps on red: WINTER CLEARANCE SALE.

Larry Silverstein's new trapezoidal 7WTC, thrilling and ghastly all at once. Terrible its proportions, and the bottom four floors wherein lives the Con-Ed substation sheathed in what look like vertical heat vents. But above, glass – very reflective glass. A vast mirror, to duplicate, in reverse, whatever's playing out around its eye.

As you head up Broadway, a young political hireling with a bearded moon face steps into your path. "Help the Democrats," he says, gesturing toward his clipboard.

"Ah, the Democrats…" You'd actually forgotten them.

"Yes, and here's how we'll do it… just one minute…" But the minute's gone, or it never was and up ahead of you, a woman walking just to your left mutters: "Get rid of Bush." Pause. "He's a red devil!" She likes this last formulation so much, as though she's discovered the exact wording of a bedrock truth, that she repeats it, bookended by other imprecations, until you scoot ahead of her across the just-red light and her voice vanishes into the general whroosh.

"Peel, Eat. Repeat Daily." So says Chiquita® on the sticker you removed from the luncheon banana you bought at your namesake's happy deli. Paste it into your notebook. Words to live by. Maxims from the Branding Angel.

Half past three. A plump gal who has whiled away the hours alternating between reading from an airport novel, dozing, playing with her blackberry – she dropped it twice – now wanders about the jury room repeatedly intoning the word "torture," high and mellifluous. Maybe she moves some kosmic waves around, for the clerk suddenly appears at the mic and announces to the ragtag remnants of this morning's overflow crowd: *That's it for today, you can go now, see you tomorrow*.

I should be very careful in dealing with him if I were you.
And why is that?
Because he is one of the most powerless men in the world.

McNaught's come north and gone south. Does the son precede the father? In which case we are waiting for Naught. Or, as some call him, God-O.

CDFA = Commodities for a Dignity-Free America.

Whitehall rattles, Washington strikes. Or is it t'other way round? And what smooth beast, having hatched, coils about Bethlehem?

Exactly how many heads does the serpent have, and which of these are the true and false ones? How can one tell?

Down to jury duty on the C-train – day two – you stand in the swaying car and feel yourself a dragon swimming through clouds.

One series of WWII Russian offensives, known as the Rzhev Meat Grinder, claimed an estimated million to million and a half lives. And those were combatants. Who know how many others perished? The Rzhev battles, it turns out, were intended as a strategic diversion to keep the Germans from reinforcing Stalingrad. Officially, they were a disaster for the Red Army which lost three times as many troops as the Germans and any mention of them was kept out of Soviet history books for a generation and more. Had the Rzhev offensive succeeded, what would have

happened? But did it succeed by failing? Only a Field Marshall would presume to judge. And would he know?

What do you believe? You believe the Great Game isn't.

Jury duty. It's not Auschwitz.

When his hand comes, my hand enters,
If I evade by angling the body, surely he will withdraw.
When he withdraws, my hand enters,
If he parries, my three attacks continue.

Li Zi Ming goes on to annotate this poem, Method 18: "The true aim of pointing at the mountain for chipping the millstone is toward the rock, not the mountain, because the rocks are the material for the millstone. Like the tactics of relieving the Zhao State by besieging the Wei State, the method of making a feint to the east while attacking in the west is applied.

"When this method is used, it is necessary to be calm in the mind and take the tactics of conquering the movement with stillness. If the enemy wants to punch me, I just turn the body to evade it and wait for a chance to attack back. Because he misses his strike, surely he will be eager to attack again quickly. When he moves his arm back, I can take advantage of his gesture to walk forward. Certainly, he will try to take the blocking method if he wants to evade me, then I can use the palm penetration to poke him continuously, giving him no time to breathe and he will be confused completely."

By three attacks, three rapid, penetrating palms are meant. It's a Ba Gua adage that *even a great hero fears the three penetrations*.

…When the right hand is blocked, the left will be useless,
No power will appear if two hands come at the same time.

CNN on the big plasma screen in one of the side jury rooms. Ford's losses for 2006 tot up to $13 billion. No mere bag of shells. Our Ford, *pace* Aldous, may soon be gone. After many a summer dies the swan.

LZM's annotation for Method 17, Accepting the Single to Support the Double, goes on to explicate: Even if his two hands come together, I need only evade him, he will be completely useless because he has no more hands.

In his Method of Extricating Body for Becoming a Shadow, Method 19, he writes:
I call him in when he does not come,
I move away when he comes.

A young woman with impossibly colored red hair, wearing a baby blue hoodie and black workout pants sits lotus-style on the broad window sill that doubles as a heat vent in the Court House corridor. On her cellphone: "My mom was like, the insurance will cover it. But my dad was like, you better talk to…" The psychoanalyst in you wants to ask: What were your mom and dad like?

This morning a throng, nearly agora-sized, of prospective jurors pacing up and down the corridor chatting on their phones. It's as though an informal competition had been declared among them, or else there's a kind of ballet telephonique enacted here, as they pass, weave and swerve round one another. Gods of justice, please, send something else to *voir* and to *dire*!

Many times the clerk calls her name, but the woman never comes: "Nora Sponce."

Church bells resonate with deep internal gongs.

The word is not even a chip off the old block. It is less than we need by a long shot. And we don't – can't – really grasp it. What a thing? What a thing!

Word and thought get born together, or else one soon after the other, in any case fraternal twins. No getting back inside Humpty once he cracks we double-yolked sons and daughters. But what is it that came before?

Hallway's emptier now, a massive jury selection having been called. But one young woman wearing an olive green hooded sweatshirt with Number 9 Commando – King's Own appliquéd to the sleeve paces up and down like the caged primate she is, designer eyeglasses and ponytail notwithstanding. Suddenly, her phone leaps out of her hand, skitters across the half-shiny composite floor and slams against the side of the wooden bench you're sitting on. She picks it up and keeps walking, keeps talking, neck crooked into the phone's embrace.

Sitting here, gently marinating, tissues getting ever softer, you realize that you are very good at communicating with words. You ought to do less. Perhaps not naught, but less.

E is for entrepreneur. You're nothing if not that. All these people sitting around at loose ends. An itinerant manicurist could make a killing here.

The succeeding traumas of birth and the loss of the transformational object are compounding griefs for which no amount of subsequent pleasure or affirmation can make whole. When word and thought begin, the Golden Age ends. Of which nothing remains but its traces: yearning.

A novel which you'll write under your true and false secret pen name: Frank Yearning. *When the Word, Woid, Void is Enuf.*

By whom, how and when is it determined what is adequate? Another book to write, this one under the name *Ima Goodnough*.

Your mother, you have come to realize, was a person of fantastic aesthetic and sexual richness. The great wealth once known, the sharper the grief in its loss. But yet, if the loss is not a loss, but one side of a breath, can one in later age, learn to con-spire?

You remember now that, on top of kidnap, robbery and murder, poor Jason Johnson – for whose trial, this morning the other half of the available jurors in Christendom were mobilized – stands accused of conspiracy. Quadrafecta. This is a book so heavy the New York State Eunuch-fied Court System will have to construct a very powerful machine to move, let alone throw it at him.

A balding, white-haired fellow of mid-to-later years parades the hall in a black jogging suit, pinstriped in gray. Something in his gait and affect telegraphs to you the notion that he's unlikely to have jogged in recent years, if ever. He has rolled the right leg of his pants up past the knee, and it's not a pretty sight, bare flesh down to the fraying once-white sport socks. Would that Ben Franklin strode out of the elevator just now, walking stick in hand, ambulating on his famously well-turned calves. Ah yes, lovelier still if he were in company with, under the circumstances, John Peter Zenger.

Sorry Beano, sorry Jason. Maybe you should've lied to get on that jury. Gwen suggested as much last night. But you didn't. Take a breath. Move on.

A woman talking on an orange phone sits on the bench just east of yours. She has a delightful voice, a gorgeous laugh. Even her coughs sound lovely. Unplacable accent, maybe middle-Europe. "Fly fishing?" she asks her man whose voice you only hear as a faint buzz. "Fly fishing?" More conversation, about a yoga class she's teaching on Sunday. "Diz is za thing," she says, "you would be perfect, if only you were to show your face for a few minutes."

Doors open in the elevator bank and suck a breeze down the corridor. She smells good too.

WC break. To pee at the urinal, mounted at a height ergonomically perfect for dwarves, you must straddle a vast lake of piss that's collected on the floor before it.

Both stalls are occupied, so that's the option. You flush a shiny steel valve embossed with the words AquaVantage, but the water isn't loud enough to drown out a fearsome catarrh from one of the stalls. Back to bench. Another voir dire call. "Eric," the clerk booms. You jump. Then "Wonderman." Settle back down. What does he look like, this shadow you who, even now, walks toward Room 5 to sit at Seat 16?

Walk down to the west end of the corridor, mostly deserted, to practice Ba Gua. Take off shoes. Two people come out of a courtroom. Classic New York accents the botha them. He, an attorney: "You got no assets?!" She, probably a client, "Nuthin'!" Her phone explodes in "The Flight of the Bumblebee."

Ten minutes pass. You're doing knee rotations when a fellow approaches down the hall. "Dan Mudo," he calls out. You turn. He's rotund, Latino, suited. "Dan Mudo?" he asks again.

A short interchange ensues in which you learn that a similar looking exercise is practiced in the Korean martial art he used to study, Dahn Moo Do. Live and learn.

Today, your main corridor interlocutor is a tall, thin woman wearing a gorgeous, oriental-inflected green jacket. She's a big-time accountant, consults with some global firm, often gives expert testimony. Anxious to get back to her work, but her face transforms when she smiles.

Yesterday, you talked at length with a man, impeccably dressed, whose nervous hand gestures, finger snaps and the like, you found fascinating. His father, he tells you, was the first black Captain in the US Navy. He himself served in the Coast Guard and Navy. Nowadays, he's the story-teller on the Freedom Schooner *Amistad*, a traveling museum. This spring, the schooner will sail to England, at the Queen's request, then to Portugal and Dakkar before returning to its home port in Mystic by way of the Caribbean. He'll be on board for the whole voyage, though when stateside he lives most of the time up in Washington Irving country where, he says, they do an absolutely hair-raising outdoor dramatization of the tale of the Headless Horseman – blazing pumpkin and all. Mike keeps his own horse upstate too, which he rides with the Buffalo Soldiers, another history reenactment project. He's not to be found among the jury pool today, so they must have snagged him for Jason's murder case.

Another voir dire call. "Eric," she booms. "José." Eric José – like that name. She calls two Ericas as well. So many alternate selves amidst the jury pool. "Tamara Jones." A pause. "Tamara Jones." Tamara Jones is Nora Sponce. They're calling names like there's no Tamara.

Justice, she's a scaly one. Or is it him?

3:30. Almost home. If no voir dire's soon, they should dismiss you any minute now.

You ended up in this hallway and a half-degree of honesty from serving on Jason Johnson's trial because you registered to vote back in 1980. Katie and your then-best friend Paul convinced you that you had to vote because if you didn't – horrors! – Reagan might get elected President.

Your name called, after about a dozen others.

"Thank you for your jury service," the clerk intones. "Have a good rest of the week." A pause. "And have a good life."

This morning memory's forgotten. You can't even remember your cellophane number.

McNaught's gone south taking all the warmth with him though not, thankfully, the light, particularly astonishing at dawn and twi.

High pressure, breathless air on your bike, the temperature at McNaught degree or below. Any chance for condensation gets snapped up in a New York nano.

Meantime, we're left to wonder why the Bodhidharma has no beard. The short answer being: He doesn't exist.

Meantime, little moves in the Great Game.

Meantime, the news generates and is itself, a lotta buzz. Bees make honey, mosquitoes bite with greater or lesser consequences for the bitee, and flies, well, flies buzz too and eat what they eat, live long enough usually to make more flies.

Mais, nous sommes tous Blanche Dubois.

And the great, indecipherable koan of our age: What's my ringtone?

The Great Game take what? Act which? Scene who? Suicide bombing in Islamabad. Brits up the Khyber Pass. Again. When will somebody hook these bad actors off stage and into the alley? Somebody will have to be us. Bumrush the jam. Or just let the drama play out.

Rays sting. Crocks bite. Elephants trample, crush and fling. Insurging, insurging the animal kingdom. Gaia takes a long languid stretch in the warmth of brother sun, and mountains of ice roll into the sea.

Still preying on your mind that you didn't lie your way onto the Jason Johnson jury. But opportunity comes again if no one answers the door first time around. Tom makes an appearance in the café to order his iced mocha special. What's in his clear plastic takeout cup is warmer, you're certain, then the atmosphere outside. You tell him about Jason and Beano. He shakes his head. Offers up some knowledge about certain gang wars in LA – the drug world's equivalent of ethnic cleansing. But ethnicity, while a factor in the equation, didn't seem to be the point of this particular killing. More about the economics of borderlines, as in: We control up to 425 West, so don't be crossing that seam on the sidewalk and try to sell your shit at 423.

Tom also tells the cop term for when a bad guy kills another bad guy: Community service homicide.

Norm Buchbinder, of Buchbinder and Warren, died last week at 84. He was your landlord back in the early '80s when, for a few years you and K. had a studio at 1

Union Square. *Chelsea Now* says he "spearheaded (the neighborhood's) renaissance." Still, he seemed, for a landlord, to have been an OK guy.

Wow. Will journalists ever learn to beat their spearheads in to ploughshares?

Achilles back in town. Trojans beware. Poppa's got brand new god-forged armor, a shield that's supernatural, and his spear – it flies straight by itself. Nor stops till it draws blood.

"Not one of them that are living is blessed." So said Solon to Croesus, who, at the time, didn't believe him, but came round to the notion.

Thetis was a good-enough mother. Better by half than many. But the object, however transformative, only works to a point. Thus every ego comes bundled with an unStyxed heel.

A flame, who knows how eternal, burns above the tomb of the unthought known.

The flame, the object. The flame casts no shadow. Yet we carry a torch for the object. The knowing you thought for an instant, but which didn't stay apprehended long enough to write down. Just wait. It'll come round. Can't sublimate the sublime all the time.

A man coasts on his bicycle down Ninth Avenue. In the lane to his left, a car travels. What you glimpse from your vantage inside the café, is the image of a man riding on the hood of a car. Illusion: windowsill plants block your view of his bicycle, plus man and car are traveling more or less at the same speed, so for an instant, your mind knits the two of them together in an unlikely, yet possible relation. Such are the unities we create, little attempts to mend the split. Into the void leaps a state of self, powered by the senses.

On the counter at your local butcher shop, a pile of 2007 giveaway calendars. Every month, a photo of a different breed of dog. Are the butchers trying to tell us something?

The desacrilization, domestication and resacrilization of oil. There's the oil that lubricates, the oil that burns, and the oil that …

Give me oil for my lamp…

Sugar, that earlier manufactured need and colonial commodity – a spoonful of it in the gas line and the engine shuts down that big oil-black slick Denali midway through the Holland Tunnel. Same with the Escalade coming the other way. An *embouteillage*, bottleneck, blockage of energy.

Give me oil from my lamb. Lanolin. Fleece, golden and otherwise. The stuff that knits. Another way of keeping warm.

UgandaKongo. The lake of water sits over the lake of oil, like two incommensurable trigrams. And never the twain shall…

Feel math. The infrastructure. Any signifier can change value. The leopard's new stripes. Three quarter time. A minuet.

A tiger in your tank. All white, but spotted.

Proudly sponsored by the UniStyx Oil Company, Ltd.

Before all this, an exceedingly painful muscle spasm above kidneys in floating ribs, right side. A visitation while stretching in the shower. Almost crippling. A teeth grinder even swinging your leg over the bike seat. Ah well, you too shall pass.

There is the State. And then the self, in its many states.

The ship doesn't leave if everyone is busy waving.

Rope trick. There's a rope. It exists, but you do not hold it. You hold the idea of a rope. And it this which draws you and upon which you draw.

We believe fossil fuels to be our lifeblood. Who's petrified now?

In all ways, times and places we've depended on the kindness of strangers, including dinosaurs we never met personally, only their dragon descendants. But this is not a total dependency since we can shift into another state, or at least imagine it what that state might be.

E.B.'s got and idea to ship out the young Mormon men to proselytize in Iraq. There's a surge of 21,000 for you. Send the boys in navy blue. For your part, this would entail a name change, from Mesopotamia to New Utah.

A surge against insurge. How beautiful is that. Let X equal.

Insurge gently. *Softly softly catchee monkey*.

Why the saying: *Don't look a gift horse in the mouth*, when that is precisely what one ought to do?

Who knows what breaches perforate the hearts of men? The shadow knows.

Breaches or, moral-geologic faults. In any case, deficit points, fractures in continuity.

If you can keep your head while all around they're falling off and rolling 'gainst your shoe…

No problem, says the slip inside your fortune cookie, put in your pocket after lunch on your second day of jury duty, crushed and forgotten, just found and eaten, *No problem can stand the assault of sustained thinking*. Even the unthought known?

Anything could always happen.

Amman. No plan. Afghanistan. I reckon Iran. Roll Jordan, roll. Man O Manichewitz. Whole world round.

You 'fraides of that Tigress?

GWB, just like a whole lineage of false brothers before him, selling everybody's birthright for a Mess o' potamia.

You, you're from Missouri. Wherein poor Flori died, boys.

You spotted it last Thursday in the corner of the window of a little shop on Mott street and inveigled Katie into buying it for you as a reward for surviving jury duty: a glazed porcelain figurine, about eight inches high, of two acrobats performing a dragon dance, one balancing upon the other, the topmost raising high the beast's enormous, wild-eyed head, almost as large as the dancer himself.

The old woman who ran the store wrapped the piece very carefully in paper, then set it in a cardboard box, recycled from some previous use, which she painstakingly taped shut. At Katie's suggestion, the little men and their dragon now bask beneath your desk lamp, next to a terra cotta Buddha, a tiny copy of the Universal Rights of Man, and near the mini-procession of tiny elephants Tom and Maureen brought you on their trips to Cambodia. The lead elephant is carved of a soft yellow-green stone, and is perforated to show, contained within its body a still smaller elephant, facing in the opposite direction. By implication, this elephant within elephant sequence could continue on into infinite minuteness. Walking alongside and slightly behind the stone elephant(s) comes the recent arrival made of ordnance parts soldered together and sporting his jaunty red bow.

When you woke up this morning – and Sundays lately have been tough on your psyche for some reason – you realized straightaway that you'd thrown out the box the old lady had wrapped the dragon dancers in. What had you been not thinking? Indeed

the cardboard wasn't sturdy enough to pack anything else in. But after the fact of its disposal, you realized it had been marked by hand with some of the most elegant felt-tip calligraphy you'd ever seen. Why get rid of it so hastily? For the beauty of the characters alone it was worth keeping. And who knows, in time you might have learned what they mean. Banal perhaps, but gone is the opportunity to know those particular things in that particular way.

Method 23.
I am in the center with enemies on four sides.
Going through the flowers to strike the willow either in the west or in the east.
No matter how the wind and clouds change in the eight directions,
Don't remain in one place, nor step without purpose.

Li Zi Ming's annotation speaks of crisp sudden strokes, as confusing and difficult for the enemy to track as the movement of a butterfly.

About a year ago, a young billionaire, or soon-to-be-one, told you a joke that you only partly remember. It concerned a debate among three nationalists, French, Spanish and German over whose language was the more beautiful sounding. The litmus test came down to the comparative lyrical qualities of the word "butterfly" as sounded in each tongue. The Frenchman waxed rapturous over *papillon*. The Spain-yarde allowed as *mariposa* was more lovely. To which the German retorted: "What's the matter with *Schmetterling*." And the interesting thing is that this young scion's quite venerable father was Prussian by birth. Iron butterfly. First class. In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida.

Flu symptoms. Cancel your day.

Emails: Millie Stern send you word of: , schizophrenia be avert , bedford be pantry the snoopy. Closely followed by Bridget Myrick, who wants you to know that: it euphoric be chopin some domineer in delegable it's abovementioned.

Exactly how free is the association?

a.m., au café: Tsering shows up with a gorgeous necklace hanging from a delicate chain. It's a real aspen leaf, she says. They dry them out, then gild them. What happens to the organic material? you ask. I don't know, she says.

It's a latticework of gold veins, really, lying on the finely knit deep crimson wool covering her chest. The leaf does not tremble or flutter. You know that Tsering exists. If you reached out, you could wrap your fingers round her elbow and press your fingers into the crook of her arm. But its all stillness. You're aware of Dylan, seven-odd feet away at his table, the stentorian quality of whatever he's declaiming. And the sound of plates banging, hubbub, some Talking Heads over the speakers. But your awareness hangs as suspended as your field of vision. You must be breathing. So must Tsering. The heart upon her chest seems to have quieted yours. Slowed or stopped it altogether. Bronwyn calls out to you from up front at the register. You're supposed to head out together. And you do. Your next sensations are the brown of Tom's coffee through the clear cup and the cold of your bike's handlebars. How you made your way from one moment to the next, well, back here in your room, you can only shake your head. You were there. Then there. Not painful this Tsering-searing, nor perceptibly hot, though it must have been, the pouring out from that crucible. Indelible. Through and through.

Populus tremula. *Populus grandidentata*. Trembling. Bigtooth.

Virtus Non Stemma. Seward Park High School motto. You wore it in white on your navy blue gym shirt. Worth Not Birth, yo.

So yes, Bill, a writing student you met at Goddard, and a naturalist, told you something about aspen trees: that their root structures interconnect making a stand of them, in effect, a single organism. Each tree communicates its status to the whole. If one becomes sickened by a disease, its neighbors pick up the signals it sends. Such an organism might evolve from a single tree. Over time and generations, the grove possesses the capacity to travel. Is it too much to ask what it knows? What they know?

Hurricane Juan, a creature of late September 1993, became, in his day, the worst storm to hit Halifax, New Scotland, in six score years. Actually, he was first noticed as a tropical wave off Africa on September 14. And then, like Topsy, he just growed.

I who am south will move north. Sahra.

A Kentucky Derby-winning horse whose right hind leg was shattered in the Preakness this past May was put down today. Curious the *Times* headline: "Barbaro Is Euthanized After Struggle."

If you went to work for British intelligence, you'd want to be fluttering, far out on that limb called Special Branch.

South African TB. The wildlife's rampaging, insurging, though you have to use a microscope to see it. Or simply note the symptoms. Can't keep a good microbe down.

Thich Nhat Hanh observes that "in order to rally people, governments need enemies. They want us to be afraid, to hate, so we will rally behind them."

Haifa Street. Just direct your feet to the Sunni side. If your feet are still underneath you that is.

Not too far, as the black-necked Crane flies, from where Thich Nhat Hanh was born, lies Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh city. After the war, a museum opened there, the Museum of American War Atrocities. Recently this name was dropped in favor of The War Remnants Museum. The old trope used to be "names changed to protect the innocent." How ever was that true? And in Vietnam, they call that period The American War.

How's about a new global MoMA, this one called Museum of Modern Atrocities.

Said Thich Nhat Hanh: If I had to choose between Buddhism and peace, I would

choose peace.

Li Zi Ming also says that "the best method to conquer the enemy (is) by mixing the real and false according to the individual situation and circumstances."

Kalypso = a tuneful nymph named "I will conceal."
Apokalypse = off with the covers, (sleepyhead).

When the music's over, turn out the light.

Kalypso promised Odysseus immortality, but he wouldn't stay. And some say the sea nymph died of her grief.

To confuse his mind, first confuse his eyes, says LZM and goes on to annotate Method 28 with the following: "Puzzling the enemy begins when confusion is introduced to his eyes. Because the mind commands everything, in mental confusion it fails to direct the hands and feet…"

Brother famine, Sister drought.

A couple of weeks ago, on January 10, the Veteran's Affairs Department website revised its total of American soldiers wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan downward from 50,508 to 21,649. The difference, apparently lies in an interpretation what constitutes a wound, or in this case, the cause of it. The lower figure reflects only the injuries directly inflicted by hostile action.

There. There now. At one stroke, the wondrous erasure of the statistical gap between the Veterans Affairs Department and the Pentagon.

Speaking of which, or whom: it, or they, plan, shortly, a "conventional" explosives test in Nevada, to be known as Divine Strake. The idea is to detonate 700 tons of ammonium nitrate and see what happens. Will that kind of kaboom prove a better bunker buster than a nuke? Only one way to find out.

Given that the Nevada site was used extensively for nuclear tests in the '50s,

residents in nearby southern Utah whose families have suffered unusually high cancer rates, fear that the explosion will send a mushroom cloud of radiation-tainted particles into the air, to be blown, by prevailing winds, their way.

Not so says the Pentagon. And as for Divine Strake, they insist the name has no meaning.

I'll just need your post-mortem signature on this, sir, in triplicate, please.

I who am in the east will move west.

Surge. Scourge. Splurge. Anyone think those twenty-one thousand additional troops are going to stay in Iraq? Won't they be needed one country to the right? Or one jog up toward the left? And from what pool of unconscripted humanity did this magical army arise from anyway?

Today is the tenth day of the month of Muharram, known as Ashura, on which, annually, the Shi'a commemorate the martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali, grandson of the Prophet, (SAW) and his family at the Battle of Karbala, a thousand-odd years ago.

So… don't forget to send your favorite Ayatollah an Imam-o-gram.

A leaky tank of propane behind the Little General, a gas station and convenience store near Ghent, West Virginia, explodes killing at least four and leveling the building. The blast shakes the air and earth for miles around. The only thing left standing in the vicinity, a sign displaying gas prices.

Around 9:30 a.m., Leslie rushes into the café, heavy-jacketed against the freezing weather, her head wound round with a muffler, only a slit of soulful eyespace visible.

She pulls out of her bag a book for you to give to Mark: Ozenfant's *Foundations of Modern Art*. She unwinds the muffler sufficiently to say, audibly: "I'm very sick," then spirals the scarf back around and, giving a little hands-pressed-together bow – the kind you associate with the mystic east – exits into the cold and blustery day. Her costume is, entirely, atmosphere appropriate. But as she stood there in front of you, it seemed,

neither more, nor less, than purdah.

Your friend calls, apologizes for not having much time. He runs an important institution, and of late, spends so much time apologizing for not having much time that he has even less time and must therefore apologize more.

You passed through a wrinkle in time last week, down at jury duty. No wonder you're disconcerted this side of the threshold – body weak, mind exhausted. Time to let the horses gallop over you. No way to outrun them.

Also last week came the news of Helmut Wimmer's death nearly a year ago. Aged 80. You didn't know him, nor even his name until you read the obit, but as a child, you knew his work: the astonishingly detailed kosmic paintings, turned into slides and projected into the dome of the Hayden Planetarium. It's because of Wimmer, who started painting for the planetarium when you were around four, that no one will ever be able to convince you that you haven't been to Mars.

And the outer rings of Saturn, they're just like the Bronx to you.

Dance of the acronyms: TBI = Traumatic Brain Injury, most often inflicted on American casualties in Iraq by IEDs. Says the *Washington Post*:

"…These blast-related brain injuries differ from other severe head traumas, and the complexity of treating returning troops with 'closed-head' injuries is taxing an already overburdened military health-care system. There is not a neurosurgeon who works in a trauma unit anywhere in the United States who doesn't know what to do when an ambulance brings in a biker who has suffered a severe head injury in a highway accident. The standard care involves using calcium channel blockers to protect damaged nerve cells against further injury, intravenous diuretics to control brain swelling and, if the swelling becomes too great, removal of the top of the skull to allow the brain to swell without increasing neurological damage.

"All this works with the common types of severe head injuries, but it does not work with brains damaged by shock waves. Despite the usual interventions and treatments, the majority of blast-injury patients who have neurological damage do not

fully recover. There is a growing understanding within the neurosurgical community that blast injuries are different from those caused by penetrating or skull-fracture trauma. It is thought that shock waves damage the brain at a microscopic, sub-cellular level.

"'TBIs from Iraq are different,' said P. Steven Macedo, a neurologist and former doctor at the Veterans Administration. Concussions from motorcycle accidents injure the brain by stretching or tearing it, he noted. But in Iraq, something else is going on. 'When the sound wave moves through the brain, it seems to cause little gas bubbles to form,' he said. 'When they pop, it leaves a cavity. So you are littering people's brains with these little holes.'"

Who says the U.S. isn't a socialist country? We *are* collectively mad. If we weren't there'd be five million people shutting down DC right now, not waiting for a bunch of useless Democratic punters to do something. Mothers and fathers by the thousand ought to lie down on the highways and out on the tarmac, blockading with their bodies the convoys, the jets – every working pathway of the criminal machine that steals their children – turns them into murderers or carrion or both.

Whilst, toward the limitless robo-urban war of the future, the Pentagon juggernaut rolls. Along the way, it encourages virtual mom and pop operations to climb aboard the R & D offensive they call DoDSBIR (Department of Defense Small Business Information Resources).

What grabs your attention is the phrase "urban clutter," used to describe a city in a solicitation for proposals to acquire new technologies in the area of "Information Systems, Sensors, and Battlespace" under the general heading: ***NAVY SBIR FY07.1 PROPOSAL SUBMISSION INSTRUCTIONS:*** *N07-102 – Finding Repetitive Crime Supporting Structures (Building Intent)*. To wit:

> In support of repetitive crime, such as the insurgent attacks associated with the war on terror, responsible hostile actors need to leverage supporting facilities. To sustain their hostile behavior bad actors (insurgents, serial killers, drug dealers, etc.) need places from which they can train, plan, store material or simply sleep. The *urban clutter* affords considerable concealment

> for the actors that we must capture. The ease with which their supporting facilities can blend into the clutter further complicates the task of finding civilian distributed hostile networks. Novel capabilities are needed to aggregate and classify facilities, develop facility network diagrams and ontologies that relate details about a facility (e.g. location, size, floor plans, intended use, references in human intelligence or open source data, etc.) to hostile actions via the decision preference factors of the hostile actors. A facility network diagram, for example, would connect facilities used to plan with facilities used to store to facilities used for temporary housing. Facility classification should be based on both geographic profiling and a developed understanding of what building features make the best supporting facilities to a reasoning hostile actor. The analysis engine that results from this effort will be dynamic, allowing new data sources to be continuously used to improve predictions and detect changes in past patterns. The Building Intent project will provide near real time data prediction tools that will aid in shutting down facilities that support repetitive hostile action."

Certainly, it would not be entirely beyond your resources to put your head together with a few of the savvier noggins and rare wits at Le G. and come up with an algorithm or three to satisfy the bid. If, that is, the pay were sufficient to keep you all in cafés et tartines and leave a generous something for the waitstaff. But what, exactly, do they mean by "Building Intent"? Have we indeed come all the way down the road of technological advance to find ourselves back at the threshold of the ancient Greeks? If buildings can intend, then surely, O Pentagonal Ones, all matter must be alive!

Which is as it may be. But meanwhile, Boeing's large Dogs o' War division promises our future military the ability to "break free of the tyranny of terrain." Items to look forward to from Boeing, Lockheed Martin and others are devices such as the Common Aero Vehicle (CAV), which will be able to "crush someone anywhere in world on 30 minutes' notice with no need for a nearby air base." This to be unwrapped by Christmas 2015.

Not long after which, the Air Force proposes to gift itself with some bagatelles

called space-based Hypervelocity Rod Bundles (familiarly known as "rods from God," designed to "strike ground targets anywhere in the world," as well as the Guardian Urban Combat Weapon, an "air-launched lurk and loiter reconnaissance, rotary winged, unmanned, combat air vehicle designed for urban warfare."

And so it comes back to that darn clutter, fogging up the sightlines. How archaic those two big stupid towers were. How Old City. And the Pentagon itself – how can it stand to sit there like that, cluttering up the battlespace, yet yearning somehow, almost like a mystic, to "break free of the tyranny of terrain." And then?

Once, back in '67, you'd swear you saw the Pentagon rise. Thousands of others did too. Some, like you, thought it levitated eight inches or so. Others saw a foot, a yard or more. No matter. But next time it starts drifting upward, we could just take our hands off the balloon string. Let it fly.

When you were growing up on West Broadway between Bleecker and 3rd, your family's phone number was AL4-5789. The AL stood for Algonquin, just like WA stood for Washington, GR for Gramercy, CH for Chelsea, MU for Murray Hill and CA for Canal. Or, as Glenn Miller's swing song ran: *Pennsylvania six five oh oh oh*.

Though you mostly try to attune to the still lingering spirits of the Algonquin, you do recall, every time you look at the city being made and unmade around you, the old Dakota proverb: *We will be known by the tracks we leave behind*.

"President Bush's surprise visit caused a frenzy on the already chaotic trading floor at the New York Stock Exchange." So says the caption under the pic of a mob of traders reaching out to press the presidential flesh. Just to the right, on the *Times*'s electronic front page, you see the Dow is up 81.23 at 2:20 p.m. Now *that* is Green Zone.

But what exactly is it that Bush has come to shove?

In the old WWII movies, when GI's were ordered to dislodge the enemy from some strategic hillside no matter what the cost, the NCO invariably growled something on the order of "OK men, we've got to take that piece of real estate."

What are you trying to say? That the cities of the world, depending on their circumstances and disposition, and even parts thereof, may be divided into real estate –

often highly-priced commercial and residential – and battlespace. It's confusing. As much to you as to the Pentagon. Will Grozny one day have a gigantic H&M on main street designed by Jean Nouvel, to make up for the one Paris wouldn't let the company build on the Champs-Elysées?

What sort of sneakers will be in style when Addidas opens its first megastore in Fallujah? Will "shopping Mecca" drop its metaphor? And what of the crossroads we bear, Fifth Avenue and 57th Street? Battlespace circa 2025? Or just a video game, "free of the tyranny of terrain." Or is the split between the rubble and the glitz as much an illusion as any other schism when, in another kind of truth, he, she, it, they and we – subject or object – add up to so much clutter.

Isn't every store a Target? And what's this "from" business. Why not just call whatever blows 'em up God's Rods?

The world's a funny place, you find yourself saying, as a kind of filler in conversations where something your interlocutor said pushed you into dumb, headshaking mode, and, for the moment, you can imagine no further. Got to stop using that phrase. It's just inane.

A new day. Still feeling like a Picasso internally. You've noticed that since you started practicing Tian Kan and Ba Gua that you don't get actively sick as often – fever and the whole nine yards – but you do go through periods, up to a week or so, where it feels like you're fighting some pathogen that never completely takes hold. General discomfort, cold hands and feet. It's as though your immune system is strong enough to put up a good fight, but doesn't have quite the energy to lift the siege. Stalemate until the invaders give up and find another opportunity elsewhere. Oh well. This is what it is. Wait it out.

You knew you'd slid over the edge when people you encountered seemed to possess the energy not just of animals or composite beasts, but of different forms of flora as well. A friend you hugged this morning, for example, gave off the distinct flavor of banana *qi*. Perhaps this perception was generated, in part, by a remark of the

recently late, and lamented Molly Ivins, who said that if a particular congressman's IQ dropped any lower, he have to be watered twice a week. Though this seems a grave insult to plants.

Another café friend, who seems by turns a bold and furtive woodland creature, of russet fur, by profession an anthropologist, makes a conscious attempt to leave you – you've been keeping company in the front seat of the Gray Ghost waiting for her to go legal – with a catalytic bit of grist for the mill.

He relates that an associate of his studied games across the globe and found they articulated three distinct conflict types. Games of skill – such as who performs the best Parthian shot – deal with mastery. Chance games address notions of responsibility and causality. Games of strategy relate to ideas about authority.

Your friend also mentions that, among the latter type, Go, unlike chess, has yet to be successfully computer modeled. Too analog? Or is it just those amazing shifts of value, in a fundamentally non-quantifiable, relational field?

If there is treasure in the dantian area, the mystery can be infinite. So says Liang Zhen Pu via Li Zi Ming in Song 5, the Eight Diagram Palm Applications.

St. Brigid of Kildare, we'll drink to ye tonight. And to all thems you watch over: blacksmiths, bastards, nuns, cowherds, chicken farmers, scholars, seamen, travelers of all sorts, midwives, and even old Eire herself.

Your shoe feels loose so you stop to put it up on a standpipe to retie the lace. Having used the object you notice words cast into the metal. It's a POWHATTAN standpipe, manufactured, kan ya makan, in RANSON, W. VA.

Amazing. The table on which they intend to execute Ronell Wilson, convicted of killing two policemen, is actually shaped like a cross.

No nails, just one spike in a vein and then the cocktail. This cross, horizontal, lies in Terre Haute, Indiana, and is reserved for Federal executions. It's been used three times since the moratorium was lifted in 1988. Two killed there were Texans: Juan Raul

Garza, and Louis Jones, Jr. The third, Timothy McVeigh was born near Buffalo, NY.

At the moment, Ronell Wilson occupies a cell near Gowanus Bay in Brooklyn. Possibly, if he has a window and it faces in the right direction, he's got a sightline to Staten Island where, from what you can gather, he was born.

Something tells you he won't go through years of appeals. It's just too much. If the process had dragged out through the federal courts back in Bible days, Pilate would've been well advised to put even a hardcore guy like Jesus on suicide watch.

How long is it that Mumia Abu-Jamal has lived with a sword over his head? He'd know. You've forgotten. Tide and time. The horrible killing, in 1971, of Sgt. John V. Young. And just a few days ago, a whole new crop of arrests of former Black Panthers in the same case – the evidence against them based, at least in part, on information coerced from suspects by the New Orleans police back in '73.

Your doorbell rings, aggressively, as you write. "Fuck me!" you say, Boston on your mind? Jump up, son. Through the peephole, a looming figure in the hallway clothed in dark blue. Shit, this is it. But the cops never come singly. So yes, it's the mailman. Open the lock and exchange salutations. He hands you a cardboard mailing envelope containing the latest *Cabinet* magazine. Some kind of silhouetted dark sexy-legged raptors on the cover. Winging their way through an indigo jungle. Pure fantasy, if anything's pure.

Could these strange muses fly you away – you and Kate and Gwen – to that street in St.-Denis where, not long before you visited Paris last year, the town named a new street for Rue Mumia Abu-Jamal? You can almost see the sign affixed to the wall of a building on the corner, a deep blue enameled background, bordered in green, and there, bright white, in the center, his name.

Generally, the enemy creates an opening just prior to his closing in attack. Therefore, in combat, as soon as the opponent's opening is spotted, we should move quickly to prevent his closing. If the opponent's force has not been completely expended in this attempt, we should induce him to attack again.

Which is what Li Zi Ming has to say about *the principle of pointing to the east but attacking west to create an opening.*

When Staten Island Chuck, Punxutawney Phil's New York City cousin, emerges from his burrow tomorrow, Candlemas Day, who knows what he'll see? The shadow knows!

No shadows anywhere! Phil and Chuck agree. Winter's over. And soon the year of the pig. Hog that is. Ground or otherwise.

The image comes of two Titanics rushing pell-mell toward the same iceberg in the night. But why not three Titanics? Or a dozen.

The birds is coming. Who can say? In any event, the guidelines, courtesy of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, are in place for a marshal law-style lockdown of these United States in the event of a flu pandemic. Plus we've got a new index, born in anticipation thereof. The CDC has adapted to its purposes the hurricane standards currently used by the National Weather Service. Except in this case, the measure isn't wind velocity or other characteristics of a storm, it's the number of fatalities. Hence a Category 1 scenario would involve 90,000 dead. The highest category, 5, envisions the equivalent of the 1918 Spanish Flu in which 1.8 million died – roughly two percent of those infected. The death rate for bird flu thusfar, is more on the order of fifty percent.

On average, around 36,000 Americans die of flu during a "normal" season And we're nearing the end of the 2007 cycle. So do the Centers know something we ought to? Or is this just the rumor of another surge on the wing?

Wonderful appreciation of Kapuscinski by Verlyn Klinkenborg in the *Times* in which he recalls a talk K. gave in Berlin in 2003: "Herodotus and the Art of Noticing."

Would that you could notice with even a whit of the art of either H. or K. Still as the former vowed: *I will go forward in my account, covering alike the small and great cities of mankind. For those that were great in earlier times most have now become small, and those that were great in my time were small in the time before. Since, then, I know that man's good fortune never abides in the same place, I will make mention of both alike.*

"A world in which all our expectations were constantly belied," says Gombrich, "would be a lethal world."

The pictures on the front page of the *Times*. Trying to decode this newspaper has become more and more about deciphering an oracle too stoned on vapors to explicate coherently. Or it's akin to reading the guts of a sacrificed animal that longed for its own disembowelment.

Yesterday's image, a soldier in desert camo surrounded by his family. In the background and seeming extending infinitely to both sides of the frame, knots of servicemen and women and their loved ones are visible, all sitting at what look like aluminum picnic tables in some dreadful cavernous Halliburtonish building prior to shipping out to fight The Long War.

Our soldier cradles a newborn, his son, who is enveloped in a purple striped suit that covers him head to foot. His face is bare though, and what we see of it is turned to his father, who feeds him from a bottle. A woman to our right tenderly touches the infant's toe.

Further down on the page, a target – bull's eye rather – in red, yellow and blue. Ah, Jasper Johns. Yes, no lie, the retailer Target has bankrolled an exhibition of Johns's early work at the National Gallery of Art, not too far distant from the Potomac, across which a young man named George once, on a bet, threw a silver dollar.

This morning, the image is an aerial shot of the former town of Lady Lake, Florida which yesterday was erased by tornadoes. The caption describes it as having been "hit hard." A retirement "community," neatly gridded and well provided with SUVs, Lady Lake lies as flattened as it if had been done over by squadron of C-130s. Yes, the building styles and paved streets, the occasional still-standing lamppost tally with suburban American snowbird heaven, but at this remove most trashed habitation looks pretty much alike. The caption tells of "rescue workers combing piles of rubble for survivors."

The town is small, but you can't tell that from the framing. What mind's eye, even glancing at this picture, wouldn't assume it to be Beirut, Fallujah, Najaf? Unless, of course, their minds and eyes were elsewhere. On the future perhaps. The Bears play the Colts tomorrow, first game of Super Bowl XLI. Not too many wingflaps south – for

a healthy egret – from Lady Lake to Dolphin Stadium, Miami.

A slender, blonde young woman emerges from the subway exit. "Wow," you think, "exquisite." Such a fine-featured, ethereal energy. Then you see how fleshless her face is, how unnaturally thin her calves, outlined as they are by black leotards. And her silvery ballet slippers, she's shuffling in them, wears them with the heels squashed down like slippers. She couldn't run a yard if she tried. What is she, eighteen, twenty? These children, these sacrifices.

Two thousand five hundred turkeys sacrificed to bird flu on a poultry farm in Suffolk, England. The threat, so say authorities, has been contained. The official name for this strain bird flu is H5N1, but doesn't that sound like the intersection of two highways? Curiouser and curiouser.

The bird toll worldwide since 2003 stands at 200,000 – either killed by the virus or culled to prevent its spread.

Are they proud of it, or what? The last time the NYPD released data on the number of people they'd subjected to a "stop and frisk" was in early 2003 for the year '02, the total then being 97,296.

The stat for 2006 represents a bump of four hundred percent and change to just over a half million: 508,540. But the cops won't make the data for the intervening years available so there's lots missing from even a sketchy likeness of the suspected trend.

2002 though, by anyone's math, qualifies as the year after 2001, so one might expect a tendency to go a little hog wild. It'll be interesting to see how they rationalize the increase. But one thing's clear. If you were a New Yorker stopped by the cops in either year, you would be sixty percent black.

Collude or collide. Seems we'd rather do the former. But then, in time, life becomes a colludoscope, everything illusory and sparkling, nothing held down.

Today, cries of seagulls wheeling round Eighth Avenue and 23rd Street, borne through your open window on the pre-spring breeze, cause an upwelling of almost

Proustian insistence – sense impressions, deep as anything, of your maritime city yout'.

And in their wake come memories of actual events – the first from when you were perhaps five or six, when your grandfather sailed for Europe on the S.S. United States. Apart from Meyer's cabin, the whole scale of the ship seemed vast beyond vast, not least the huge globe in the center of the salon. You didn't try to spin it, the thing was far too massive. But you did walk up to examine it and saw for the first time the unrecognizable words: French Indochina. *What's French Indochina?* you'd have asked under other circumstances. But the adults all seemed caught up in the emotional tide of Meyer's departure, and then someone shouted "All ashore that's going ashore!"

Your party walked down the gangplank and waved from the pier as the ship pulled away, and though the question hung in your mind, it grew smaller in urgency until eventually it vanished over the horizon altogether. But the odd coupling of those two words, one familiar, the other compound and exotic, held open a mnemonic gap in knowledge that the unfolding of your country's history, in time, filled in.

It couldn't have been many months later that you heard on the radio about a disaster at sea in which the Andrea Doria sank after being hit broadside by another ocean liner, the Stockholm, off Nantucket.

Both ships were familiar to you from pictures – ocean liners being great objects of fascination then. The Andrea Doria was a fine vessel, but hardly exceptional looking, a bit dowdy even when compared to the ultramodern Stockholm, built like a yacht, with a sweeping prow and sharply-raked superstructure. A few days after the Stockholm sailed into port, you and Bea walked up to visit the survivor in her midtown berth. An incredible sight greeted your approach – the majority of her brilliant white bow had been vertically sheared away to reveal a dark and cavernous cross-section, a jumble of twisted steelwork dimly visible within. You knew, rationally, that the ship could be repaired. But you had no capacity to imagine her whole again. A longshoreman walking by flirted with Bea, stopped to talk awhile, and explained why the Stockholm, even so grievously damaged, had not gone down.

Then, a few years later come two school trips. The first, a guided tour of an oceangoing tug – the kind that venture out a day and more into the Atlantic to bring the

big ships in. The tug is completely self contained: galley, bunks, a tiny common room – a waterborne home.

The next visit is to the Seaman's Church Institute Museum, just north of the Battery. The museum is in the top floors of a tall building with multiple setbacks and is surmounted by a large cross, visible some distance out into the bay. In the museum's display cases are hundreds of models – some exquisitely detailed – of every conceivable kind of vessel: junks, outriggers, galleons, clippers, river steamers, the Andrea Doria, the Titanic and the Lusitania – all crafted by sailors in their presumed idle moments during interminable voyages.

You project yourself in miniature onto the deck of each vessel. I try to imagine the ports they are bound for, where they come from and what cargoes they hold. In your imagination, the lower floors of this building are filled with pious ex-seamen – getting haircuts, eating bowls of fish chowder, praying in chapels, dreaming in multi-tiered bunks – home from interminable voyages.

Heading west on 23rd Street, you overtake a middle-aged woman, walking slowly, her body torqued with scoliosis. She holds a semi-ripe avocado in both hands and she's gnawing at it, rind and all.

Now Hilary's gone and said that Iran poses a threat to the U.S. and Israel. And suddenly the purported Iraq "surge" looks to be 50,000 troops. Amazing these jumping numbers. Last week's decrease by half in American soldiers wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan. Prior to that revisionist bookkeeping, we saw the body counts from the WTC and Katrina day by day bumping down to a fraction of the predictions floated in the immediate aftermaths.

There's that word again, aftermath. As though there's been an accounting.

"I'm working on it." That's what you say to folks these days.
"You should get your writing serialized."
"I'm working on it."
"Did you find an agent yet?"
"I'm working on it."

Working too on a nascent understanding of a possible homology between the theosophy of the Sufi mystic Ibn 'Arabi – for whom the believer and God are reciprocal aspects of the same constant re-creation – and a psychoanalytic awareness that would allow one to inhabit a hitherto unexperienced dialogic space, to form a new and compassionate relationship with Self. In this space, the bruised, distorted, or mutilated ego would not so much find itself returned to a "whole" state before the breach, or "fault" with the transforming object, but would allow for a recognition of the reflection of the object within Self and Self within object.

God, for Ibn 'Arabi, is always one's own god – the god we are capable of recognizing given who we are – the reflection of Self which, out a multiplicity of Divine Names, corresponds to our own, very singular, spiritual nature. Rather than assuming the role of all-powerful transforming object, the mystic's God creates the believer precisely out of a need to be known and is therefore created by the believer. That which the orthodox believer upholds as the transforming object thus becomes, to the mystic's Creative Imagination, a transforming energy with two ever-shifting valences – a reciprocally of subject and object – a profound dialogic intercreativity between the two.

Henry Corbin, whose text on Ibn 'Arabi you've been studying, invokes the image of the heliotrope's prayer as imagined by the late Neoplatonist Proculus, specifically the manner in which sunflower turns toward the sun, orients the whole of itself toward that which gives it light, hence life. Sunwhere within us, are we not both the flower and the sun? Cannot the shadow the object casts upon the ego be interpreted as night? One half of a perfectly formed day?

Ibn 'Arabi's Sufism meets Object Relations? Reciprocity or trainwreck? Not sure. Working on it.

Riding with the bad boys: military parlance for ops in which U.S. troops support the terrorists on "our" side.

One morning – it must've been well over a year ago – as you exchanged greetings with Donaldo, he called out from his wheelchair: "There's a muddy road ahead!"

No idea really what he meant by that. Still, it stuck in your memory.

As best as any can guess, there are around fifty thousand American mercenary soldiers in Iraq. Another fifty thousand other sorts of "contractor." Sand then, liberally mixed with Blackwater.

You can set your watch by Greenwich Mean Time, and it will stay as accurate as mechanism and environment permit. But there is no calculating by lived psychic time. Experience can not be coordinated. Caesar gets his, but the discontinuous rules another, wider, deeper sphere.

They made Christ a judge [Pantokrator] who wanted to be judged. What you meant to say was: they who wanted to be judged made Christ a judge. But both can stand.

"Moving one step," says Li Zi Ming, "will attend to eight directions."

Joshua fit the Battle of Portmanteau…

Coincidentia oppositorum = the coincidence, or co-instantiation of opposites.

Intrados = the interior curve of an arch.

February 5th: the big freeze of Oh-Heaven.

A whole bloody country – no empire – full of magical thinkers! You revel in it, bathe in it, like ass's milk.

This young pole-vaulter, Yelena Isinbayeva – her movements endowed with an astonishingly supernatural grace and authority. Yet she seems, in some way, entirely, recognizably human.

C.f. our desert camo'd soldiers, sniper-fodder, our graceful, authoritative children we've turned into Sauron's Orcs, testing only the defensive instincts or murderous ingenuity of others.

With wind chill factored in, the temp this morning – nine degrees – purportedly feels like eight below. Amazing the power of abstraction to suggest experience. And, through experience, or imagined experience, to arrive back at abstraction.

A *New York Times* headline to remember: "Dysfunction Fuels Cycle of Killing in New Orleans." If one were starting an energy company one couldn't do better than to adapt those first two words as your corporate moniker. And Dysfunction Fuels Cycle sounds technical enough to pass for a bit of science. Interesting also to break down the whole sentence into its constituent tropes. Which is richer in octane or semiotics, the sum or the parts?

Note to self: Change title of book to *Commie Sutra*. Certain of finding international readers too numerous to shake a stick at.

Jakarta becomes an underwater city.

News comes that about three weeks ago the Mossad assassinated, in Isfahan, a major Iranian nuclear scientist, Ardeshir Hosseinpour, along with several of his colleagues. DC rattles, Jerusalem strikes.

You've come down with a case of Herodotus envy. First of all, you don't have his chops. Secondly, the Persian Wars, were simple stuff compared to this. Or does it only look that way now?

That black liquid's really Mother's essence isn't it? – that they're out looking for, poking round in that desert. And under the sea. Obverse viscous milk. Enough to burn.

Old pattern, very hard to break.

She looked up into his eyes and found them wide with shock, verging on horror.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"I – I've – I've discovered I'm not Jewish."

She entered, dropped her bag on the floor, completely disconcerted. His eyes fixed on the open envelope in her hand.

"Darling, what is it?" he asked.

"This letter from the landlord. He's cut our rent in half."

New Suburbanism: it's ubriquitous.

Constant movement and change, and cultivation of Qi.

Yes, now you've seen and read it all. The *Times* isn't just the paper of record for its pictures, worth ten thouosandweight of words, it encompasses the Bible, Qur'an, Bhagavad-Gita, Gnostic Gospels, Stephen King, Mickey Spillane and any other text you could name. This is not an organ of news and opinion, but rather the all-seeing, all knowing eye of something much larger and more puissant than any mortal's truth or imagining or agency. It cannot be anything less than an emanation of the Divine.

Videlicet: Immediately beneath a two-column photo of Fashion Week spectators ogling the admittedly fine, close-fitted, black satin jutting hip of an Oscar de la Renta runaway model, the following headline and teaser to end all stories:

Astronaut Charged with Attempted Kidnapping: *Lisa Nowak, 43, drove hundreds of miles to confront a rival for the affections of a fellow astronaut, wearing diapers so that she would not have to stop.*

Stevie Wonder sang it when he was still, officially, "Little," and therefore very great indeed: Heaven help us all.

Multum in parvo, much in little.

Rent's up all round town. Increasing for Tom B. at the loft where he teaches Ba Gua. A ten percent jackup at your, up until now, affordable storage space. Hard to tell the neediest from the greediest. Suburbanization, yeah. But the force underlying that is

speculation – the game that ruins the game for everybody, expect for today's so-called winners, for whom everything is, in any case, already shit.

How's about some Oscar de la Rent-control. For small businesses too. Yo' buoy. That's not just speaking, that's speaking in tongues. Next Christmas, instead of the traditional sob stories, just feature New York's True Neediest: thems that lords the land and what's built out of it. Or stakes claim to. And behind him, the force of Law. Unless we tell the story another way.

Ye see youn birkie ca'd 'a lord,'
Wha struts, an; states, an' a' that?
Tho' hundreds worship at his word,
He's but a cuif for a' that…
Sings Rabbie Burns.

To which Herodotus of Halicarnassus adds: *Our story must now go on to inquire … how it came about that the Persians became the leaders of all Asia. I will write my account according to the evidence of those Persians who desire… to tell the very truth. But I know three other ways to tell the story…*

The aristocrats have left the building.

Further thoughts on the homology between Ibn 'Arabi and the bold shrinks of Britain as stated in so many words by Corbin:

"Prayer of man and Prayer of God. Each in turn is determining and determined. Prayer of God determined by the form of man, Prayer of man determined by the form of God, are strophe and antistrophe of one and the same 'confidential psalm.' And this is the situation by virtue of which the mystic's soul is termed 'his father's mother' as well as the situation described in Suhrawardi's Hymn to his Perfect Nature: 'You are the Spirit which engendered me (my father in respect of the spirit that you formed), *and* you are the child of my thought (he who is engendered, who is created by my thought of you.)'"

So many cognoscenti in the wheel.

Proposal for a teeshirt: *Property of the Bonfire*.

Washington Irving, the same fella who popularized the moniker Gotham for NYC, also minted the phrase Almighty Dollar. Another coin that stuck.

Kingdom come, kingdom go.

I went down where the vultures feed
I would've got deeper, but there wasn't any need
Heard the tongues of angels and the tongues of men
Wasn't any difference to me…

Phony and antiphony.

Kan ya makan Nader Shah, ruler of Iran, and more recently known as the Napoleon of Persia, invaded India. That was in 1738, or by other calendars, 1116. It was, by all accounts, a very ugly business – civilian casualties then, not being euphemized as collateral damage, but simply a given. Still, for all the vicissitudes of Persia since, it's been two hundred and sixty-nine years since they tried to gobble up somebody else's territory.

Up north, Eurolandia gave birth to the cuckoo clock. Jacques Vaucanson presented his automaton Flute Player to L'Académie des Sciences. Bernoulli published an intriguing theory on the dance of the gasses. All in all a banner year for sci-tech.

Invasion-wise, it was pretty quiet on the Western Front, the Treaty of Vienna being concluded, a shuffling of principalities among the princes, nicely tying up the War of the Spanish Succession. A year later, Hume would declare that it is not Reason that tells us that when a rock is dropped it must fall. Rather custom and experience rule the day. Reason's true the way math is. But it isn't Reason to think that any observed effect follows any cause by force of Reason.

So even Reason took a personal day off. And the great wars for resources, spent their holiday basking at Club Caribe, prior to embarking on the next age of conquest. Thus with the Turk more or less at bay, having gone as fur as he could go, actions had to wait on circumstances – a year or two – till Maria Theresa, by virtue of Succession, acquired far greater land and dominions than a gal in them days had a right to.

And nothing, absolutely nothing happened in New York City except a bit of traffic – some of it human.

But Persia. Persia hasn't put her boots on others' ground for quite a while now. Still those issued to our sons and daughters will likely soon be visited on hers.

Heaven help us all.

Phew, an Anglo-American sigh of relief. Liverpool football club has been purchased by two of the greediest villains alive, George Gillet and Thomas Hicks – though neither made the latest Forbes 400 cut – it really takes a billion plus to be in that number. Gillet is an ex junk-bond addict, and Hicks pals around with Dubya – still, they're our bastards, not some pack of oil-grimed tablecloth'd sheiks from Dubai, the next highest bidder. The victory is likely Pyrrhic though, since it may free up Dubai Investment Capital to buy Liverpool's actual port. And now, with the Northwest Passage opening up in the nearer term than predicted, what a pearl of global positioning that will be, whatever swine engulfs it.

If you were a forward buyer, you'd be sinking your capital into Liverpool and Glasgow. What goes around…

"We may have – ah – a blue on blue situation."

"Ah shit! Got a – got a smoke. Fuck! God bless it!"

"Confirm those are friendlies on that side of the canal."

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!"

"We're in jail dude!"

These strange, shattered bits of dialogue come courtesy of a newly-surfaced videotape, now nearly four years old. Shot from an American military jet, the tape also records radio transmission between the pilot and another Top Tomcat, as well as with their air and ground controllers – at and just after the pilots realize they have fired on,

and hit, a British convoy traveling between "Group Boxes 3122 and 3222," near Basra. Matty Hull, a 25 year-old Lance Corporal of Horse died in the strafing, in which several other members of the Household Cavalry Regiment were wounded.

Mysteriously, the tape went missing and the official story became Shit Happens. But sometimes the same shit waits around until a different day. Until, as in any turbine system, it encounters the fan.

Now a narrative, however fragmented, must begin somewhere, and this one, though it starts long ago, takes a decisive turn with the choice these men made to go and murder others. But its defining moment comes shortly before their epiphany with this question from Command: "Can you switch fire, and shift fire, and get some arty rounds on those?"

"Roger… Looks like we got orange panels on them though. Do we have any friendlies up in this area? Confirm there are no friendlies this far north on the ground."

"That is an affirm. You are well clear of friendlies."

You'll never walk alone. Sing the Liverpool fans.

Juggling too much? Drop some balls.

Movement from stillness.

In the subway station, a poster for Fitzgerald & Fitzgerald, a law firm whose strong suit is collecting settlements on behalf of children presumably victimized by medical malpractice. "Fighting for Kids Since…" Their logo consists of this slogan, beneath the company name, surmounted by the silhouette of a green, top-hatted leprechaun in boxing gloves striking a pugilist pose.

Much of the ad's space is taken up with boasts of the gazillion dollar settlements F&F have obtained for their clients. But the type is secondary to the dominant image – an Asian infant, male, photographed in close-up. He's perhaps eight months old, calm, centered and alert, his face framed by a soft flannel hood. Someone ace with a magic marker has drawn a Fu Manchu mustache the baby's lip and the same wag, or another, has written WORLD'S YOUNGEST BOXER on his forehead. Beneath which, a different

hand has rejoindered: NAH, HE'S KARATE AND FULL OF HIS EGO SHIT.

Train's coming. Pull out your sharpie. Add your bit to the dialogue: MAYBE. MAYBE NOT. EITHER WAY, HE'S THE FUTURE.

Time and circumstance. One day, it all comes true.

Lunch with Michael K. at New Green Bo. The patronne there made herself indelible in your mind some months ago when you went to eat there one busy weekend noontime with Katie and Gwen. Scarcely had you made eye contact with her and held up three fingers than she barked: "Last table ready go!"

Today, the cold has half depopulated the streets and restos of Chinatown. A relative hush blankets the accustomed clatter of this dumpling house. You bring the check and cash up to the counter, turn the knob of the dispenser and out rolls a toothpick. You've given exact change so there's nothing to hand back, but Mme. smiles. "Thank you very much for coming."

Ten thousand miles of river and sky,
ten thousand miles of my heart,
Whirling, swirling flower catkins scatter
through the level woods.
Bridges blocked, roads closed off,
my horse's hooves are slick.
Again I say, at Indigo Gate one cannot go
but in circles.
Wrote Seisho Shotai.

Alley cat à la carte. Go on say it five times fast.

Earth going down, sun going round. Out of an unseen chimney, east against a brick wall, wind dance of the smoke sprite shadow.

Off the west face of the Chase slab way downtown, the glass reflects a cross-

shaped star, fantastically bright white-gold – the gleam of an impossible diamond. Through binoculars you make out multiple spectrums in its arms. As unreal a sight in the urban cosmos as the Star of Bethlehem embossed on million Christmas cards. So intense, you type now with green afterimage dots animating the light gray screen. Turn again to look back and the star's elongated, side arms drawing in and now it's gone. The building's side's just a flash among myriad highlights, dimming.

First coming, second coming. What the hell was that? Anything could happen. Anything will.

Hudson's river, what you can see of it, can't be frozen. But it sure looks like a flume of ice.

Beyond, on the other shore, a topped out skyscraper, it's elevator core solid, the rest a tracery of steel. The Chinese Garden State. Does any one study the *Chieh Tzu Yuan Hua Chua*, to learn painting? Does anyone remember the Parable of the Mustard Seed?

Li Zi Ming, born in 1900, lived ninety-three years. Toward the end of his life, he exhorted his students, among them Vincent Black (who took down his words), to carry on "enduring work in the company of men to unveil the real Ba Gua."

Who knows how these things translate, but unveil is a lovely word to use in this context. And, as you received it, Li did not say: the true Ba Gua, rather the real.

Baghdad Café. So many years since you saw the movie, but the plaintive voice of Jevetta Steele singing "I am calling you" resonates in your head at all sorts of peculiar moments. Most especially, the way she sings "I" – drawn out for two whole bars with a tonal rise and dip that sounds like the world's most languid ululation.

Sam knows the game. Buy low, Zell high. Thus, Zell's company Equity Office Properties Trust, the largest robot, er, officespace landlord in the U.S. of A. changes jaws for $39 billion after a fierce tussle in which alpha-Blackstone rips the prize from beta-Vornado. Blackstone plans to immediately toss a chunk of Equity to Macklowe for something in the mid ten figures.

On the residential front, Starrett City goes the dogs as well. In this case, a stroke of the auction hammer worth 1.3 bil gives Berkshire, L.L.C. the privilege of soon displacing upwards of ten thousand highly diverse working folk, kids, and retirees, and, in the meantime, turning down the heat in winter as an incentive toward tenant departures.

The *Times* photo of Starrett's forest of Brooklyn towers – one of the last great refuges of that endangered euphemism "affordable housing" – is shot with a lens that makes the buildings at the left and right of the frame look as though they're falling inward toward the center. Is the paper of record sending the new owners a message about the wisdom of their investment? Berkshire is described as a private "equity" firm – equity being equitable to the degree that stocks are "securities."

Top of the world, Mom!

All it takes is a dullard and a dream.

8 million naked in the storied city.

Propose a new book: *Suicide For Dummies.* Finding a genuinely experienced author to write it, though, would be a New Age topic unto itself.

Were you to take a female name, it would be Aporia.

The Suburbanization of New York, an anthology to which you've contributed an essay, due to be published soon. Ambivalent to say the least about putting one step after the other toward a March filled with readings and public events. Remember what happened last time you stepped outside the cave?

Katie, as you're walking toward her doc's, through the clanging and banging of more worse than useless buildings on the rise, says she thinks of you as a phoenix. Beautiful image and true, far as it goes. But no one's a myth. How many cycles do you get?

Some armature of the greed-driven machine with a Donald Trump decal stuck

onto it is busy throwing up a ticky-tacky condo hotel on Spring Street. You want to go forty-two stories high, you got to bite down into the bedrock, and the boom-shhhh of the pile drivers makes the teachers' mouths move silently as the vibrations literally shake the walls and of the Chelsea Career and Technical High School just across Sixth Avenue.

By comparison with the new kid on the block, Chelsea Career, a substantial building, in its own right seems almost retiring. It began its life in the last quarter of the nineteenth century as Industrial High, a public trade school. By the thirties it had mutated into Automotive. By the fifties, when you were growing up a few blocks to the northeast, everyone simply called it Vocational.

Funny how the school's shifting identities do and don't synch with the transformation of the neighborhood to the east from an anonymous agglomeration of manufacturing and residential blocks into SoHo. And funny this name game. The journey from Industrial to Career and Technical. Around what year did Career and Technical start sounding quaint? Obsolete. But what did it ever mean anyway?

Let the monkeys of signification swing. But are their arms long enough to make it across Avenue of the Americas? Does it matter that at every hand the forces of speculation fragment habitat into tinier smithereens? *Push 'em from the pull of the bush*. Or has survival become another vestigial organ – an appendix – another something we can do without? So un-virtual.

Deridada.

Justice thunders condemnation.

Ah, those cunning linguists. How engines of difference buzzed in their dreams.

You say de writer, I say deride her, let's call the whole thing off.

You say de rigeur, but dare I da? What's la différance? Comment?

Zeus, aka apo-Rhea.

Priest accused of pedophobia. Dot com.

Can gods stay fates? Sometimes for a year or three, sometimes they cannot.

A small woman, Amelia Chemienti, 82, killed by an enormous truck early Monday. Ninth and sixteenth just across from the Chelsea Market and the Maritime Hotel. So great the asymmetries, and perhaps the optics of too-bright sun on a foggy windshield, that the driver of the flatbed owned by the Sunny Lumber & Hardware Co. of Brooklyn, loaded with cinderblocks and bags of cement for a local delivery, apparently did not realize he'd struck anything, much less a person. He'd begun offloading his materials when a witness pointed to the body down the block and the bloodstains on his tires.

"I never saw this in my country. It was very bad," said an Afghani man who serves lunch from a cart on the corner by the hotel.

Waited for, the accident happened. Take an avenue that's virtually a southbound expressway, with a single, anomalous lane of traffic flowing north. Add the perpendicular street and you get a compound crossroad. The Devil, famously, loves such places. So many ways to compromise the senses, strike an X through the soul – efface the presence of mortal things.

No safety or surprise. The Doors.

Too sad, too late the tales of Uncle Remiss. Not to mention Aunty Bellum. Still *Alice* tells it best:

> However, the egg only got larger and larger, and more and more human: when she had come within a few yards of it, she saw that it had eyes and a nose and mouth; and when she had come close to it, she saw clearly that it was HUMPTY DUMPTY himself. "It can't be anybody else!" she said to herself. "I'm as certain of it, as if his name were written all over his face!"
>
> It might have been written a hundred times, easily, on that enormous face. Humpty Dumpty was sitting with his legs crossed, like a Turk, on the

top of a high wall – such a narrow one that Alice quite wondered how he could keep his balance – and, as his eyes were steadily fixed in the opposite direction and he didn't take the least notice of her, she thought he must be a stuffed figure.

"And how exactly like and egg he is!" she said aloud, standing with her hands ready to catch him, for she was every moment expecting him to fall.

"It's *very* provoking," Humpty Dumpty said after a long silence, looking away from Alice as he spoke, "to be called an egg – *very*!

"I said you *looked* like an egg, Sir," Alice gently explained. "And some eggs are very pretty, you know," she added hoping to turn her remark into some sort of compliment.

"Some people," said Humpty Dumpty, looking away from her as usual, "have no more sense than a baby!"

Alice didn't know what to say to this: it wasn't at all like conversation, she thought, as he never said anything to *her;* in fact, his last remark was evidently addressed to a tree – so he stood and softly repeated to herself: –

"Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall:
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the King's horses and all the King's men
Couldn't put Humpty Dumpty in his place again."

"That last line is much too long for the poetry," she added, almost out loud, forgetting that Humpty Dumpty would hear her.

"Don't stand chattering to yourself like that," Humpty Dumpty said, looking at her for the first time, "but tell me your name and your business."

"My *name* is Alice, but –"

"It's a stupid name enough!" Humpty Dumpty interrupted impatiently. "What does it mean?"

"*Must* a name mean something?" Alice asked doubtfully.

"Of course it must," Humpty Dumpty said with a short laugh: "*my* name means the shape I am – and a good handsome shape it is, too. With a

name like yours you might be any shape, almost."

"Why do you sit out here all alone?" said Alice, not wishing to begin an argument.

"Why, because there's nobody with me!" cried Humpty Dumpty. "Did you think I didn't know the answer to *that*? Ask another."

"Don't you think you'd be safer down on the ground?" Alice went on, not with any idea of making another riddle, but simply in her good-natured anxiety for the queer creature. "That wall is so *very* narrow!"

"What tremendously easy riddles you ask!" Humpty Dumpty growled out. "Of course I don't think so! Why, if ever I *did* fall off – which there's no chance of – but *if* I did —" Here he pursed his lips, and looked so solemn and grand that Alice could hardly help laughing. "*If* I did fall," he went on, "*the King has promised me* – ah, you may turn pale, if you like! You didn't think I was going to say that, did you? *The King has promised me – with his own mouth* – to – to —"

"To send all his horses and all his men," Alice interrupted, rather unwisely.

"Now I declare that's too bad!" Humpty Dumpty cried, breaking into a sudden passion. "You've been listening at doors – and behind trees and down chimneys – or you couldn't have known it!

"I haven't, indeed!" Alice said very gently. "It's in a book."

"Ah, well! They may write such things in a *book*," Humpty Dumpty said in a calmer tone. "That's what you call a History of England, that is…"

The Goldberg Variation: Goldstein, Goldfarb, Goldman, Goldhagen, Goldfinger, Goldfrapp…

The count, as of today, is ninety-eight Halliburton employees killed since the invasion of Iraq, the latest by friendly fire. Four hundred thirty wounded by hostile action, if a corporation's accounts are to be believed. If we want to know the true story, we'll have to open the books. So many figures, so little accounting.

Are you getting ready for *metaxu* – the separation which connects?

Out to Tenafly with K. and G. to visit Susan O. and her boyz, Sam and Ben. Susan drives you back into town, down the Palisades Parkway, and there, through a gap in the trees, shows the western upright of the George Washington Bridge. In the background, between the vertical cables, a pair of massive, attenuated shadows. You must have jolted back in your seat, but it was only a microsecond's illusion, a trick of late afternoon winter's light. Still, it made you wonder: what would happen to folks' minds if, as they approached the city via a score of arteries, the accustomed gap in lower Manhattan suddenly filled with the familiar towers we'd just gotten used to being gone?

The flower children have left the building.

The city speaks in tongues. The sign on top of the passing cab yells "Rocky!" Donaldo said "Muddy…". Which, or both?

The ultimate in tourism: visit the Garden of Eden, go naked, and when you look down, find you have no navel.

Sit by the river watching the Loch Ness monsters jumping. Playing tag with the bottlenose or common dolphins. And the cotton is high.

Tell me how shall I send thee?

So many pores and pocks and seams and crevasses for the free-floating, windborne seeds of class war to nestle, root and grow. Better erase those navels soon, or else who knows what sprouts there.

The civilized keep alive
the territorial war.
Erase the race that claims the place

and say we dig for ore…

So sings Kate Bush, masquerading as an Aborigine.

Thus grows protective tissue around the image of what class war looks like. Who alive can reminisce from witnessing the pre-photographic moment of 1848? And the visual cues for fascism? A newsreel from the thirties. But the magic lantern projects illusions until that's all we recognize as real. A touchdown Monday morning, yes, but what to do come Sunday?

Many an aborigine's mistaken for a tree
til you near him on the motorway
And the tree begin to breathe.
See the light ram through the gaps in the land.

Ibid.

The current passes through you so strong at times, it could kill a mastodon. Direct, alternating, pure discharge of the frictious atmospheres. Clouds busting themselves. Squall line. It's raining elephants in Coney Island, just you go and see.

See the light ram through the gaps in the land…
See the light bounce off the rocks to the sand…
See the sun set in the hand of the man.

Bush again.

Sunday a.m. Ba Gua Zhang. The high peeps repeating pull you out of your exercise to the window and the sight of a dark brown bird, his bill sharp curved and pale yellow, dancing on the edge of your neighbor's balcony. Red feet. First time you've heard that call up here, lo these forty-five years. Here comes his mate, her beak a darker tone, to dance beside him. Watch out, you two, we got raptors in these parts. But they're fast these two, got speed on their side. Off they go like shots.

And you, little bird, your fax machine covered in light gray powder, just like the

coat you dusted off yesterday. Particulate shearing. Sharing. Where to fly?

Cops are Finest, firemen Bravest, jail guards Boldest. And our other uniformed service, sanitation workers: New York's Strongest.

Vapor clips.

The things they carried and the things they dropped.

Coming in with the golden light
In the morning.
Coming in with the golden light
With no warning.
Am-bushed.

Jackson is the new Lincoln. But today still belongs to Abraham. Happy birthday Mr. President.

Someone's got to step up to the plate. Glass window. And jump.

In the wide doorway of the Gap, Donaldo positions his wheelchair so his face is full in the sunlight streaming northeast over the cornices. You reach out to shake his hand, work-gloved so as not to get blistered from all the friction of rolling of his wheelchair up hill and down dale. "A place in the sun, eh Donaldo?" You've blocked the rays, at least partially, and are likely a silhouette from where he sits. Still he must recognize your voice. "Yeah," he says, "Me and Theodore Dreiser."

There's a mom in the neighborhood who's a dwarf. Her shoulders reach up to about the handles of her Maclaren stroller. She's got a resolute, stone-carved look to her face on the weekdays you see her, making tracks down Ninth Avenue – running late, it seems, to drop her child off somewhere south of where you lose sight of her at the north corner of 20th Street.

Once, early last fall, you saw her, sans stroller, pulling her toddler by main force across Ninth as the light changed – the kid lagging as you remember from long ago that they are wont to do. Though their heads came to almost equal heights, how easy it was, even a block away, to know instantly which one was mom.

As you're riding home, a mini-SUV, silvery, zips past, swerves into the alleged bike lane and cuts you off. Hit brakes and swerve round the rear bumper and see at closer range than you'd have preferred to the red and black print on a yellow bumper sticker: "The Few, The Proud, The Moms" next to a Marine Corps logo. Varoom and she's gone down 25th Street. Is that how they drive outside the Green Zone? Or maybe in it?

Up the wheelchair cutaway you go, past Frank's God News stand on the corner, past his display of belts, hats, backpacks and teeshirts the foremost of which reads: TOO BLESSED TO BE STRESSED. You wave to Frank, but he doesn't see you – too busy pacing figure-eights on the sidewalk, talking into his cellphone.

No one else nearby, so you ride down the curved walkway, fingers grazing the hedge, swing your leg over and dismount beneath the overhang. You spot José in the lobby, pushing a big, shaggy drymop across the floor. He punches the button to let you in and the doors swing wide. An exchange of *Buenos dias*'s.

On the elevator up, a promo line from a movie poster you saw in the subway a few years ago pops into your head. "What Didn't Kill Him Made Him Stranger."

That's it, you've joined the non-uniformed ranks: New York's Strangest.

Mirable dictu: They managed to get through the entire Grammy Awards program last night without anyone mentioning either the wars we're in or the next in cue. Joan Baez muttered something into her chest. Neil Young got mentioned, the better to deep six him. A gaggle of payback-in-guilt awards were piled upon the Dixie Chicks. Nobody wanted to play Fawlty, or had the Moxie. No one sang Guantanamera. A corollary of which was the non-appearance of any Latinos. The televisual content reduced and flash-frozen into two contra-epiphanies: Smokey Robinson can still sing. Sting looks thirty.

The interpretation's yours, but the intelligence comes via Katie, since you didn't

watch the show. What were you doing? Listening to Gould's Goldberg Variations, 1955 and '81. Over your headphones you heard Katie and Gwen calling, ran into the living room in order to catch most of Gnarls Barkley's *Crazy*. Then back to Gould. *Maybe we're crazy… probably*.

Countdown to Costa Rica, three days. The exchange of feeble conversation at the café begins to drive you misanthropic. It'll be great to have a bit of shore leave from the Ship of Fools.

Lately, you get anxious about a thing you've already done, and altogether forget what needs doing. Crazinesses – for which the only balm is self-forgiveness, in whatever dosage you can tolerate.

Head for Paul's on the E-train. Does the announcer over the PA at the 50th Street station really say: "Ladies and gentlemen, because of a small plane on the uptown local track at 103rd Street, there will be service changes…"? The doors close before you hear it all. Next stop you're out and on the way upstairs when you hear the announcement repeated. "…because of a stalled train… uptown B as in Bravo, C as in Chelly…" You're OK now, you know he means Charlie. Delta. Epsilon. Fuggedaboudit.

It's all too weird. A friend emails to say she thought of you recently while studying Solomon's Temple, particularly Boaz and Jachin, the twin columns of immense height and width that are said to have held up the portico. Built of brass they were, in various measurements of cubits, hands and fingers. And hollow inside. Capitals adorned with pomegranates and lilies.

It didn't immediately click until that Joachim (Jachin) is the name of a character in *Orogene*, your still-to-be-published novel. He's the father in law who encourages the protagonist-narrator to seek the Perfected World beyond the Sea. The voyager sets out, and, in the midst of crossing the unknown waters, addresses the infant son he left behind:

> So your Papa broke the law. He acted flagrantly—told anyone who'd hear him that he meant to seek a greener world beyond the sea. How many boat-builders had they stripped of flesh to answer for the same offense, then

used their bones to fructify the ground? How many, like Fox, simply disappeared? I don't know their number, Tyler, but over generations, many. Why then, when they held me in their jaws, did they spit me out, alive and undevoured? What moved or stayed them? Who intervened?

I'll wager it was old Joachim, for once when Naphtalie was great with you, he gathered us round his table to share out such morsels as his privilege allowed. How soon the boards lay bare. Then he turned toward me and begged to hear my sweetest tales. Do you suppose that night, well-nourished on the fruits of Orogene, he slept and made the journey too? He must have done, or else there's no explaining it. Ask him someday what he saw. Have him tell you what he told the other Parfaits.

When you look back at previous drafts of the novel beginning with the first one in early '99, you see that the character who becomes Joachim is referred to as "Napthalie's father" until October 2002, when, for whatever reason, you received that name.

Hiram, a man of Tyre, crafted the columns for Solomon. A great worker in brass, Hiram was also, according to lore and legend, a widow's son. Widows too are made, and widowers, when columns tumble. Now Boaz wants to know: "who did you name after me?" That's easy. When the narrator reaches the other side of the unknown sea, he falls under the protection of an elder named Beaumarchais. Who is also a bit full of himself. The "bo" sound is fine by itself, but "bo-ass" nails it open and shut.

Squeals along the Hudson as the *Times* goes on the fearpath again. Once upon a pre-invasion not so many years past, one of their most serviceable villains, Michael R. Gordon, in concert with Judith Miller (since sacrificed to the gods of psy-war), whupped up what passes for a frenzy in this nearly-pulseless empire by conjuring up images of Saddam's imminent mushroom clouds over America. Flash forward to last Friday, when a front page story under Gordon's byline asserted that "civilian and military officials from a broad range of government agencies," have evidence that Iran is supplying the "deadliest weapon aimed at

American troops" in Iraq.

Déjà vu all over again, Yogi. Alas, Boo-boo, it looks like we're dumber, far dumber, than the average bear.

Ah yes, and, in a way uglier still than outright disinformation, the *Times* has, of late, been lowballing the civilian death tolls from a whole string of bombings, when compared those reported by other domestic and European papers. Strange, how the Gray Lady is often associated with German Jews. But they've an oddly Catholic ethos, in the most deeply opportunistic way. To these folks, *mea culpa* means *all clear to sin again*.

A propos of which, their online front page today carries a photograph of Jesus as His face appears in the sear-marks on a fried pierogi. A pierogi unattributed to any source, much less "civilian and military officials from a broad range of government agencies." No, the Man of Sorrows, in dumpling or any other form, is on his own and among enemies. Vinegar with that? Let the wontons defend themselves, as a quivering, naked emperor once said. All the news fits better if you filter out the com-passion.

The camel's nose, as *on dit*, is in the tent.

Finally figured out what this is you're writing. And just by looking through the glass. The fellow's teeth are too long, so he can't be Holden Caulfield. Must be a going-of-age story.

Erase the race that claims the place
and say we dig for ore…

Search for songlines in the bedrock.

Feel the pull of the bush.

Oh schist!

Cow one is not cow two.

The map is not the territory.
The word is not the thing.
Said Alfred Korzbyski, *kan ya makan*.

Before the city sold 'em to developers, the Church marketed air rights. To the great upstairs. Because in the next world, as in this, it's all about location, location, location. Vocation only gets one so far…

Around three in the afternoon, outside Le G., in conversation with Uwe, Eric B. and Tamatha, when a flock of seagulls, a dozen or more, swoop north around cornice height, up to 23rd, then double back again. Such a number, behaving like that means the ice storm's icumen in.

Must they? They must. The Bushies will offer reasons for what we'll do to Iran and some of them may even be sincerely believed. But they themselves will remain unconscious of the deeper impulses that made them act as they did. When you've played the game to the point where you only have one move, you've no real autonomy at all and it must be an awful thing to be trapped in nihilism, serving Phobos body and soul.

What winds around one way twists tight as it can, then unwinds, sometimes at blinding speed. But though we're a new animal by comparison with some others, our collective memories either can't or won't remember who or what it was, in the beginning, turned the key.

Only one chance for peace, send Hadassah to Madrassah and vice versa.

A colder city in the winters. Dimmer too, away from the concentrations of light. You remember the fans in the subways, before air conditioning. But there will be a compensation. Just when they've been given up for well and truly lost, the Dodgers will come home.

Schnee, schnee. A blanket of it, along with what the meteorologists call

freezing fog. The white did not arrive at Christmastime, rather deferred to Heart's Desire Day. Lovely in the viewing, treacherous underfoot. Mud step.

A snowplow drags over something metal. Sparks shoot out behind its edge.

Off to Costa Rica on a pre-dawn flight. Below, growing tiny on the horizon, the city where Conquistadors dig up into the heavens for gold.

Amidst our Uranium experiments – prior to the practical application of fission upon two Eastern cities – the discovery of Promethium, a hitherto unknown element. How odd today that the West, presumptive inheritors of the Greek ethos, should deny the Persians a right to possess humankind's deadliest light. Do we imagine it was wrested from the gods for our illumination alone? Will anyone renounce its knowledge until we do?

Gas. Funny sort of word. Turns out it's the Flemish way to spell *chaos*. Initially used by a 17th Century Dutch chemist to describe invisible, apparently formless, products of combustion and fermentation. But there's no need to drill for chaos. It can be found anywhere folks turn liquid fuels into vapor.

Too much Ouranos worship in the form of Uranium and certain other elements must be making Gaia annoyed, restive. What'll happen when she shrugs? Blue sky dreamers beware.

Eye-like patterns on the closed wings of the Blue Morpho may fool some would-be predators into thinking the butterfly is too large an animal to take on. But those who attack and seize the "head" of their prey, find little reward for their labors. The butterfly escapes, shy one wing out of three, which in any case regenerates should it live long enough. Immense inputs and outputs of energy and multiple transformations attend the winged rebirth of a creature that flies, assuming its chrysalis was sufficiently rich in nutrients, for a month, more or less.

Monarch butterflies, their green pupa banded with tiny golden dots about

two thirds of the way up to where they attach, look something like tiny Fabergé eggs, or miniature Christmas ornaments, until, as the butterfly matures within, the pupa turns translucent to reveal the markings of the folded-up wings inside.

You're seeing things. Optical tricks like none before. If you stare directly into the descending white rush of the *Magia Blanca* waterfall for, say, half a minute, then shift your focal length, and gaze a little left or right, you will see the jagged rockface behind the cascade melting upward. What's liquid now?

Down here too, coral snakes – *red touch yellow*… and that most feared nocturnal viper, the bushmaster. You don't see the bushmaster, nor does he see you, really. What he senses are tiny differentials in temperature between you and what's around you – lets him know exactly your shape and location, hence where to strike. Ambush.

Alternating clouds, sun, and mists sweeping down the hills then dispersing – this place, El Toucanet, in the coffee-growing highlands feels even more hallucinatory than it did nearly four years ago when you visited just after the invasion of Iraq.

Gary looks more or less the same, as does his wife, Edna, a Costaricence whose cattle farm the lodge is built on. Their two boys, slightly older than Gwen, now go to High School in Santa Maria.

Trying to shake your bronchitis, you sit on the deck and rotate, like a heliotrope, toward the sun whenever it's unveiled. Close eyes. Open them when the clouds return. Two black hawks circling. Too far off to see if they're great or common.

Look over at the feeder where a roufous-tailed hummingbird has alighted, its beak dipped in nectar. Gone in an instant, but you're not inclined to rush anywhere. Comfortable, this chair: metal frame, nicely welded, synthetic mesh back and seat.

Something draws your eyes along the terrace floor to the bottom rung of an identical chair that you've got your feet propped up on. A small sticker, no more

than an inch long, discreet: MADE IN CHINA.

Last summer, at the Musée Branly, beneath the ramp that curves up to the exhibitions, you noticed, resting on the floor and roped off in splendid isolation, a stone sphere, say seven feet across, perfectly round to your eye.

You circumambulated this artifact, then leaned down to read the description on the display card. So surprised were you to see it came from Costa Rica that you straightened up abruptly and banged your head on the underside of the ramp.

Now Gary tells you that numerous spheres like it, many as large as the one you saw in Paris and weighing up to fifteen tons, have been discovered of late, near the border with Panama at the Diques Estuary between the Térraba and Sierpe rivers. Mystery balls. No clues thusfar to their dates or origins. Excavations in '05 also uncovered a wall of oblong boulders, ramps and circular formations.

Over on the Caribbean coast, there's a partially excavated site which may have been a kind of city state on the land route between Incan and Aztec cultures. Astonishing mortarless stonework, up on a mountain's slope, circular foundations and what likely was an aqueduct system. Whose work? Who knows? Pre-columbian for sure.

Welcome Pig Year.

Will it be possible to see McNaught when you leave the highlands for the Pacific coast? Here, just outside the town of Copey de Dota, you're two thirds of the way down the inner slope of a bowl of mountains two thousand meters high. So for all the brilliance of the stars at night, you don't get a wide view of the heavens. It's a whole different sky down here though, eight degrees north of the equator.

Note: given rising water levels, rename New York. New Dacca.

No quetzals showed themselves on this morning's walk, but many birds of other kinds: tanagers, woodcreepers and finally, after teasing you for twenty minutes, stepping out of the shadows and onto a sunlit branch, el toucanet. Emerald green body, azure throat, signature yellow and black bill, chestnut tail. They're famous these gorgeously plumaged ones, for stealing other birds' eggs.

In Costa Rica, yes, one can order huevos revueltos for breakfast and one will be served, as in other places in the Spanish-speaking world, a plate of scrambled eggs. But in CR vernacular, one asks for huevos pateados – literally eggs kicked around. Same idea, altogether different image. One thinks, immediately, of miniature soccer players contesting on the surface of a hot pan.

Overcast, then clear. Un arco iris, its bow curving over the mountain to plunge directly into a patch of hillside, golden in the sun.

Asleep, all night, at the wheel of dreams. This morning you sight one, two – many quetzals. At least five of them move about in the branches of the same tree, feeding on tiny avocados. One fruit drops and you taste the slick green material inside the skin. Liquorish-like.

On horseback along the Rio Pedregosa into the Fila Dota, seven hundred meters up into the Alto Roble cloud forest.

Somewhere in el norte, they are celebrating President's Day. But you are spending a good chunk of the morning with your guide, Don Abel Pacheco, eldest son of the former president, an ex-hippie back-to-the-earther turned dairy farmer and cheesemakers who keeps a few horses, mostly for visitors to El Toucanet.

Gwen rides Tijo, who gave you so much trouble four years past. Katie's on Isabella and you've got Coquetta, and indeed, she's a sweetheart. Tijo drops behind early on as he did with you, and no way can Gwen goad him into catching up. You offer to change with her on the way down.

As you near the summit, Don Abel tells you of the Conquistadors, seduced by a perhaps self-invented legend: the golden danta, a tapir, life-sized or larger, of

incalculably value, that the Indians kept hidden somewhere in the highland forests. So voracious were the Spaniards in the pursuit of this prize that the Indians developed the theory that they ate gold for food and must therefore starving. Thus, according to legend, certain captive soldiers were fed a soup of molten gold.

Out of the cloud forest. Tie the horses up at a fence by the overlook. Caribbean and Pacific atmospheres vying with one another, almost within reach. Sometimes mist, then away it blows and to the northeast you can view seven mountain ranges in succession, and, in the near opposite direction, glimpse the Pacific. Isthmus weather.

You flash on an old map, probably early 20th Century – around Panama Canal time – that showed the sister oceans, Atlantic and Pacific, their hair depicted as long waving currents, tenderly touching lips just a few degrees south of here.

Don Abel offers you each a piece of the fruit he's been carrying in a mesh sack hanging from his saddle. They're emerald green overall, giving way to an orangish patch toward the bottom, citrus-pocked skin, about softball size, with an indentation where the stem attached that you can dig your thumbs into to begin peeling. The rind's thick, like a grapefruit's. No surprise, it's a tangerine-grapefruit hybrid, very tart and refreshing. Somewhere in the lowlands, Abel's father grows these. Katie and Gwen remain by the horses while you and Abel walk further along the road to a fantastically sloping hillside farm. He offers you a hit of his joint. A pickup with hay in the back, the first motor vehicle you've seen in hours, rumbles by. A woman with a baby in the passenger seat. The man driving, smiles, reaches an arm out the window and waves to Abel, who doffs his hat as they pass. "These hillbillies," Abel says, turning away from the dust cloud. "It's taken me twenty five years to earn their respect. They used to call me Abel the pothead. Now I'm Don Abel the pothead."

Then he waxes prolix on the subject of his brief period as a representative of his district, how he could magically put a bridge here, a water pump there. But the bureaucracy, he says, nearly did him in and attributes the stress of the presidency to his father's chronic heart condition. In the course of the conversation you learn that the Pachecos of Costa Rica go back a long way. One of Abel's forebears died

repulsing the American invasion of 1856. Some of William Walker's men, sore losers, are said to have returned surreptitiously, killed some Ticos and dumped their bodies in the rivers. Whatever the truth of that story, shortly after the mercenaries were driven north, came a serious outbreak of cholera.

Who was U.S. President in 1856? Abel knows. Franklin Pierce. Jeez, you'd forgotten all about him.

On the 26th, three days after you leave for home, a big anti-CAFTA protest will be held in San José. Strikes, protests of all sorts across the country. Who knows which way the legislature will vote? – there's no plebiscite. If the treaty gets signed though, it's a cinch that in a few year's time, the hidden hand will be dumping Gringo bananas on the Costa Rican market. Water to the ocean.

Late p.m. All day, mist alternating with sun and rain as a big Atlantic storm surges over the ridge and the Pacific winds push back. Contest, no decision.

Walk about twenty meters down the road to the cleverly concealed barbed wire gate – well-blended in with the fence so songbird poachers won't know it's there – then take the trail up the mountain. The rainbow you saw from the terrace follows you like an animal, or so it seems, all the way up and around scores of cow-made switchbacks, finally into the shade of the cypress forest at the summit of Doña Edna's farm.

The rainbow stays ahead of you too for much of the way down, arced across half the valley, and when the mist clears and you lose it, you realize the light's going to and you'd better hurry up. That's when things go wrong. The black raspberry bushes that offered you sustenance on the way up now snag you and when you slip on the loose earth, one thorny brother demands a handshake. You lose the path, find yourself starting to wind upward again, this time around the other flank of the hill. Nothing to do but retrace your steps in hopes of finding the desired direction. Now, in the fast-diminishing visibility you're more or less repelling downhill, minus a rope. Ah, the path again, marked here and there by post-alimentary evidence of transhumance. Open the gate and let yourself out onto the road. Ten minutes to nightfall.

Iris descended her spectrum'd *arco* with a message for the mortals. But you didn't encounter her on the cowpath. Or else you didn't recognize her. So who did she come to speak to? About what? Gods know.

Autochthanoi. Greek for "themselves and their earth," having always lived where you are now. Once, a long time back, you wrote a story about the Golden Age, a time before Weight. Part of it ran:

"…at one time there were more gods than missionaries and everyone was on a mission, confused, but loving it, fat as pigs, but permeable, alive to this bird, that stone, that pebble under this warm skin, and distended families – talk about roots – there was no stopping these autochthonous mofos, even ice steamrollers couldn't slow them down…"

But you were slow going up that hill. The air's thinner up here at seven thousand feet than on the twentieth floor all those degrees north, but it's blessedly minus the particulate. Still, your lungs feel like you're carrying stuff around in them that oughtn't be there.

Despite the gazillion mass media images of the towers hit and dropping, it took several days for a sense of what had happened to permeate those parts of the city that didn't have a direct sight, or smell line to the WTC. So it's weird, beyond weird to read in Heroditus on the fall of Babylon:

"As it was, the Persians were upon them when they were quite unaware. By reason of the size of the city, as some of the inhabitants say, when the outer parts were already taken, those who lived in the center of Babylon did not know that that they… had been captured. They had a festival going on at the time, and they continued dancing and enjoying themselves until they learned the truth all too well."

Killing time before your flight in Juan Santamaria airport, you browse the copious periodicals on sale, among them the Spanish edition of *Newsweek*. On its cover, the a Janus-head composed of the right half of Ahmadinejad's face, and the

left half of Bush's. The head isn't completely a composite image because it's riven down the middle by a dark, smudgy-edged divide over which a column of bold white letters has been superimposed – each line allotted its own word:

THE
SECRET
WAR
WITH
IRAN

Flying toward Houston from San José, the most astonishing clouds you've ever seen. Altocumulus, appearing as immense blanched canyons with up-cropping mesas. Occasionally, in this light, the vapor massifs seem to cast reflections of themselves, as though condensation occurred according to some Rorschach principle. Then, descending from a cumulonimbus, a nappy vertical cylinder, and this, beyond belief, daubed in hues of the spectrum. Look away and back. You're not hallucinating. At least, you don't think so. It must be some rare confluence of light and prismatic moisture. Iris making another try at communicating with you?

For the last two days, down at the Pacific Coast, and accelerating now, images of your times in Paris, of all places: Rue des Saints-Pères, Palais de Chaillot, even the weird barrel vault of Charles de Gaulle Airport. And the Vaucluse hills – rushing up behind your eyes – emotional locomotives that derail anything else you're seeing or have a mind to imagine. Along with these vivid waking dreams comes a grief so intense you can only yield to it when it insurges. Never felt your feet so firmly treading one of your many roads not taken.

What might have happened had you allowed a million molecules of desire to condense into a single solid form? Regret isn't logical, it's just there. You're a lucky child to the core, no denying it. Your survival skills have manifested in the proscriptive, kept you away from the worst sorts of self-collusive harm. Only now does it become clear that the prescription your body thrived on at the age of fifteen has been filled by a very different sort of drug, a potion that's short-circuited your

ecstatic drives in favor of an abstract sense of duty, that's bound you to your life in the city like a slender-shouldered Atlas incapable of imagining a shrug. And now a jet is flying you over Honduras, inexorably toward Houston, thence New York and the million dead worlds you schlep around to what earthly good – yours or anyone's? – you've no idea at all.

Who knows, hopefully Gwen will get it righter than you did – allow herself to be drawn toward what sustains her most and find the will to embrace it. The mangrove doesn't get hung up on what it's supposed or not supposed to do – it just shoots roots down into the water, as many as it needs. These trees grow a meter every year. So they say. It's a simple system really, or it can be.

Passa la vida. Down below, the cloud mesas turn from gold to copper to red. Probably over the Yucatan now, or the western tip of Cuba.

On the little displays that hinge down from the luggage compartments overhead, a movie flickers. It's about a football team made up of young misfits, incarcerated except that they're released to play games. Their relentless coach agonizes over their every loss. He goads and provokes them until, somehow, they get it right.

Black mountains. Now the clouds coming into Houston all greenish-white, pulsating with the winglights. Impossibly slow descent. A voice from some never-made episode of *The Twilight Zone*: "This is your captain. Not exactly sure what's going on here, this is a first for us, folks, but we can't seem to locate Houston. No cause for alarm though. We've got plenty of fuel to get us to Atlanta –" Then suddenly, highways, several vast, diagonal runways and a gazillion azure lights.

For an instant you imagine these as trace emanations of the once-radiant Vicki Lynn Hogan, girlchild of this town, whose body grew sumptuous, overflowed its earthly confines of satin pink. Too thin the stalk for the blossom, not enough nutrition caught by roots. Untimely, returned to earth.

It's hard to call in advance what will become a historical signifier. But if you had to bet on one, you'd put money on the slow motion, mass murder of women in and

around Ciudad Juárez becoming legible, over time, as the moment future generations will look back upon and say: This is when and how the West lost any claim to civilization.

Justice thunders condemnation.

AP puts the number of nominally civilian contractors working for the Pentagon in Iraq at close to a hundred and twenty thousand, around fifteen thousand shy of the official troop count. As accurately as they can estimate, approximately eight hundred have been killed thusfar, and another three thousand plus wounded.

But, as the mercenary adage goes, in Iraq, "what happens here today, stays here today."

When you reached the Pacific, you shaved off your beard the better to feel the sun and ocean on your face. Now the growth comes back, more salt than pepper.

There once was a man among many – his name and situation do not matter – whose reaction to perceiving certain proportional relationships, some triangles for example (like those suggested by the branches of a fern, or the pattern of stitching on a woman's jeans) was to feel a buzz, like a hummingbird's flight, straight toward his fibonacci. Go figure. If this buzzing sensation continued long enough, his golden mean attempted to establish an angular relationship that became most insistent. Ah, the music of the spheres!

Accompany Gwen to the Met. She's researching a social studies project on ancient artifacts from Asia. She homes in on a pair of exquisite Korean ceramic vessels to sketch and notate. While she works, you cruise earliest historical China and find yourself pulled, immediately, toward a bronze ritual wine vessel dating from the 12th century BC. It's called a gong, molded in two pieces – a spouted beaker and its cover – the whole representing a creature that looks like a cross between a tiger and a dragon.

On closer inspection, the vessel is a nearly hypnotic visual assemblage: two confronted profiles of a fantastic animal, the *taotie*, give the effect of a single beast split in half and wrapped around the container's surface. Geometric patterns representing various animal parts suggest that this composite being is undergoing incessant transformation.

At once grotesque and naturalistic, the beast possesses a wicked saw-toothed grin and a zoomorphic tail that serves as a handle. Inlaid along its back, turquoise chips in the shape of an anti-clockwise spiral partly uncoiled to resemble a snake. The wine it held would be served to the spirits of ancestors, and the object itself accompanied the dead into the next life.

Whew, you got out of the way of that big black Chevy Suburban by a frog's whisker. Would've made an ironic headline: *Contributor to Suburbanization Book Run Down by Suburban*. And just a week shy of pub date too.

"Nice hat," you say to the Asian woman in the modified black leather pillbox who's riding the elevator down with you. She's a neighbor, Gwen knows her niece from middle school, but you've done no more than exchange hellos before. Turns out she's a milliner by profession, worked for Eric Javits for many years. Lost her job after 9/11 and became a baker. Makes hats on the side now, including the one she's wearing.

For some reason you flash on something you read about the death of fedora culture, a moment exemplified by JFK's brave new tousled look: running on the beach at Hyannis Port, getting sworn in hatless amidst a sea of covered heads. Not least Jackie and her collection of iconic chapeaux. And later, Dylan's *Leopardskin Pillbox Hat.*

It was George Trow, or one of his ilk, who associated Kennedy's ascendancy with the image of high wind that blew across America and swept off all the fedoras.

And here on the street, you can see it's true. And not just old school hats either. So many bare heads even in this frigid weather. What care we now for the headgear once deemed so essential? Funny too, particularly these days, with the sun flaring even out of its own seasons and the ozone about to drop the last of its

veils, how we've foresworn the most commonsensical forms of protection.

Coming home, you approach the front door of your building and spot the madwoman, a neighbor, whom you've nicknamed Napoleon for her air of grandiosity, and her manner of appearing to survey the horizon as if the empire's destiny was being played out in a great battle invisible to ordinary mortals. She stands just to the side of the entryway, smoking intensely.

Prone to outbursts, this one. Once, when you passed one another in the lobby, she pointed at you and screamed "Imposter!" Then she shifted her eyes and ordered her phantom entourage to arrest you. So you tread warily and draw on your cloak, if not invisibility, than of minimal outward vibe. Hand into pocket. Key at the ready.

As you close the distance she takes a pull on her cigarette so deep that she seems to rise upward a few inches with the effort. You're walking by when she exhales, and have made it past her, nearly through the door when you hear her voice behind you, not loud, but almost metallic in its ring: "Good day, Mr. McMurdo."

"It doesn't get bigger than this!" proclaims James Cameron, director of, among other classics, *Titanic, Terminator* and *The Abyss*. And maybe he's right. Picture this: the humble son of a carpenter – not John Carpenter – gets into trouble, gets tried, gets Passion, gets crucified, gets buried in Jerusalem alongside Mary Magdalene ("we are just good friends"). Fade to black and rest in peace. For two thousand years, OK?

Exterior. Dawn. Wide angle on the Judean hills. Super title: AD 1980. Arm up on a crew digging the foundation for a new apartment complex. Close up: *Bang!* goes a shovel hitting something hard. What's this? Stone boxes, ten of 'em. Ossuaries labeled Jesus, Mary and Joseph and you get the idea – it's the Holy Family mausoleum. Oh yes, and one set of bones belongs to J & M's son, Judah. So big, so big it's all kept hush hush. Until now.

This, in essence, is the story that BBC News runs on the "documentary" Cameron has produced and is flogging unto Kingdom Come. The report

concludes that folks living in the East Talpiot neighborhood are delighted with the attention. Quoth one resident, "Our house prices will go up because Christians will want to live here."

Location location location. Let the credits and the good times roll.

It may be due in part to the lingering effects of bronchitis, coupled with horror at the latest madness – Qatar, Oman and the UAE agree it's fine that Israeli jets overfly their countries on the way to nuke Iran – but whatever the cause, in the last few days morbid thoughts beset you, run roughshod over any sense of wellbeing. This afternoon, out of the gray, ice pellet sky, words you read in your teens flashed into your head. Would that you could claim a right, should the dark days you've foreseen for your city come to pass, to your own version of Robert Falcon Scott's final sentiments:

"…but for my own sake, I do not regret this journey, which has shown that New Yorkers can endure hardships, help one another, and meet death with as great a fortitude as ever in the past. We took risks, we knew we took them… and therefore we have no cause for complaint, but bow to the will of providence, determined still to do our best to the last… Had we lived…"

No such claim is possible. We will not come to grips with things. Passively, as though we ride on sledges, the dogs pull us on. And we feed ourselves to them.

If Scott set out for the South Pole today, he'd find Antarctica a far different place than it was a century ago. In the past thirty years alone, thousands of square miles of ice shelves, five millennia old, have disintegrated with the result that in the Weddell Sea, off the continent's shrinking coast, one can easily see exotic creatures that would have remained hidden in those icier climes and times: spindly orange sea stars, fan-finned ice fish and herds of roving sea cucumbers.

What would he think of the thick settlements of sea squirts, fast-multiplying animals which look like gelatinous bags, who've presumably colonized the area since the ice shelves collapsed?

Scott was a geologist, but would he have delighted in discovering probable new species of shrimp-like amphipods, and cnidarians – organisms related to coral, jellyfish

and sea anemones?

Not warm enough yet for him to sit on the shore, roll up trouserlegs and splash his feet in the tepid water, nor throw sticks into the waves for the sled-dogs to retrieve. But patience is a virtue. Just give it time. Eventually, pony rides for young Peter while R.F. and Kathleen lay back on the shingle and work on their tans.

Poles – what poles?

The Man at Table 4, he feels warm, pleasantly full. Then a cold snap. He senses the starvation around him, so many souls in anguish of need. How to tell the false from the true when they're conjoined, twined and twining like Caduceus' snakes up and down the Axis Mundi?

Detrit 'r' us.

Into the valley of debt rode the six billion.

Bill, the brilliant accountant, swamped with tax deadlines, sneaks into the café for a quick cuppa. He introduces you to some of the mysteries of the number 23: Prime, composed of two primes, adds up to a prime. One needs nine cubes to achieve it, its only sibling being 96. You tell him first of the origins of "23 skidoo!" then of Katie's interest in puzzles and he writes out a French rebus: A dinner invitation from Louis XV to Voltaire, videlicet:

$$\frac{P}{VENEZ} \; a \; \frac{6}{100}$$

To which M. Arouet replied:

Ga

When you coast up the cutaway and past Frank's God News stand, he's preaching to a woman you've seen in the neighborhood, so you don't wave. You already said good morning a couple of hours ago when you went out, and complimented him on his cap, black, with the word SAVIOR embroidered on the front in the form of a rainbow-colored fish.

The woman is listening intently, head inclined to one side. "Jehovah," Frank assures her with great confidence, "will give you your hots desire." Say what? Ah, his New York accent, thick enough to cut with a knife. The ears the comment was intended for, at any rate, seem to get it first time around, for she nods, waits in expectation of his next benison.

Signs o' the times: What Gwen says, with a hint of sarcasm, when someone doesn't grasp the obvious: "That's what Wikipedia is for."

After a many-coursed banquet, the Chinese markets burp. After which, the other exchanges, East and West race pell mell for the loo to void themselves. By 3:30 p.m. the Dow is down five hundred points and the Battery's up. No, the Battery's still down, so what's up? Does the erupting gas bubble in Cathay have anything to do with the scheduled visit later this week of State Department heavy, and seriously bad (though not quite thousand-year-old) egg, John Negroponte – once the scourge of Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama? ¿Quien sabe?

What to do but wonder at the rhetorical flights of the so-called financial analysts,, who hover hummingbird-like as the land beneath them crumbles. Assessing the recent "disappointing" performance of the durable goods sector, a guru for a firm eponymously named Global Insight, observes that "We have a picture of an economy that – while remarkably resilient… in the face of negative housing and energy shocks – is starting to show signs of battle fatigue."

And, in shrinkspeak befitting analysis of a different sort, another financial bitemaker opines that "The housing market still has some issues that need to be worked

through."

Too bad regular human folk can't get a order of protection from the hidden hand.

Weird reddish glow on the horizon to the south and west. Isn't it the east that's supposed to be red?

Cheney flies to Pakistan, growls to Musharraf that he must "act against terrorists," then trips across the invisible line the Brits drew and is treated to a mighty close Afghan shave.

Aha, it's the Bronx that's up. The Bronx River at any rate, for a beaver has built a lodge along the west bank of the newly-cleansed waterway. First beaver to make a home here since who knows when, despite the pair of 'em on the city's coat of arms, and the glazed beaver tiles in the Astor Place subway station.

Bronx wildlife officials have named him José, after José Serrano, the congressman who snatched the funds to restore the river from the dogs of war. Beaver José apparently migrated downstream from Westchester. The lure of Gotham was just too much to resist. He wants to wake up in a city that never sleeps…

That's it beaver man, go for it. You've got a window: a window of invulnerability.

No one can figure what's happening to the honeybees though. By the tens of millions, across the country, they've left their hives and flown off, never to return, CCD, colony collapse disorder, being the acronym de jour. But hey, it's not like bees are really important or anything. I mean, pollination – it's like, so overrated in the Age of Monsanto.

Evening in New York and the markets opening in Asia continue to swandive. Nonetheless, technological progress flaps bravely on. China News reports that scientists at Shandong University of Science and Technology have implanted electrodes in the head of pigeon creating what they call the first "robot bird," whose brain,

according to the director of the project, is now "precisely controlled by computer programs." Algorithms translated into electrical stimuli control the pigeon's take-off and landing, as well its turns while in flight. It's actually a cyborg bird, but "robot" apparently sounds sexier to the Chinese.

"Robot bird is better than traditional mechanical ones, as there is no need to worry about power failure," enthuses one researcher. "Besides, birds are much more flexible than common robots, particularly in a harsh environment."

Rescue missions, photography, mapping, "even national defense," all have cyberpigeons in their future. The sky's the limit. Apart from those mountain raptors, who haven't yet gotten with the program. Or as old saying goes: Easier to control robot bird than hidden hand.

The day begins with a certain Myrtle G. Fields sending you an email with the subject line "slipping latitudes." And almost immediately after, an e-missive from a certain Alonso Yoder (an Amish Latino?) headed: *it ridgepole but coco in fuji try alimony in baptistery*. The message itself contains a link for purchasing meds online along with a strange little coda: "Koshabeh and Khooshabeh were found in an apartment in the city's West Rogers Park neighborhood, and Eyvazimooshabad was found in an apartment around the corner.

"'Right now I wouldn't say it's a suicide note ... but it's more about, again, how he feels disrespected, and that's pretty much a (recurring) theme in the note,' Byrne said."

Right. Now's a good time to order those meds.

The respiratory condition afflicting so many children living and schooling near the expressways of the northern borough, why not call it Bronxitis? Hope José el castor doesn't come down with it.

K = an X that was running toward the left and hit a wall.

The AP feed is headlined *7-Year-Old Killed in Missouri Tornado*, but such is the nature of wish-fulfillment that you read *7-Year Old Kills Missouri Tornado* and a

image of Pecos Bill as a young whippersnapper flashes in your mind. For a New York instant.

Turns out the victim was a girl. Lived in a trailer park. Would that she were Slue-Foot Sue. Would that.

Dead cat bounce, a term being bandied about in financial circles as the market "struggles" to rebound. Think Schrödinger's cat: coexisting within a sealed box, in both living and dead states – suspended in quantum superposition – until it is observed.

The physicist also wrote that: *There is a difference between a shaky or out-of-focus photograph and a snapshot of clouds and fog banks.*

Long ago you read about *Gli Intronati*, a Florentine Academy of the Sixteenth Century, whose name translates roughly as The Stunned Ones – stunned as in a slack-jawed with wonderment. This morning, you joined them, your induction caused by reading – in a particularly unguarded mood – these passages in a book by Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Self: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*:

> It is an ordinary feature of our mental life to engage in subvocal conversations with oneself. As I have been planning this chapter, for example, I have thought from the second person pronoun objectifying myself to say: 'You must include Winnicott and Khan because much of your thinking comes from their work.' Even if a second pronomial identification is absent it may be implicit, as for example, when I think 'don't forget to provide ordinary examples': the 'you' is implied. This constant objectification of the self for purposes of thinking is commonplace. It is also a form of object relation, as Freud so sagely understood when he evolved his theory of the superego to identify that part of the mind that speaks to us as its object.

Bollas goes on to describe a trip to Rome during which he "had several occasions for working through different issues in the management of myself."

While leaving the plane and heading for a taxi I was anxious about not making my hotel on time. I had been thinking in the first person for much of the flight: 'I will do this, prepare that, visit so-and-so,' but as the taxi went slowly, my anxiety increased and I required some brief holding activity. I said to myself: 'Damn it, the taxi is too slow and I will be late [anxiety increases]. Look: there is nothing you can possibly do about it, so stop worrying [slightly modified]. But people will be kept waiting [re-emergence of anxiety]. Don't be silly [unfortunate use of a bit of psychopathy]. Anyway, there is nothing you can do and what will upset your friends here is if you arrive in a state, so leave it be.'… As a result of this brief spell of self-objectification, expression of anxiety and reassurance, I was able to enjoy the taxi ride to the hotel and to arrive for the lecture in a good-enough state of mind.

A day after my arrival in Rome, when I was sitting in an outdoor café, a beautiful woman walked by, to which I responded subvocally: 'look at that, will you!', a remark to the self as object that can certainly be read in many ways.

It would be interesting to give further thought to the phenomenology of this intrasubjective relation. How do our patients, for example, handle themselves as an internal object within intrasubjective space? What is the nature of their ability to give expression to their affects, to bear internal conflict, to mediate between instinctual demands and superego prohibition, and to facilitate a good-enough solution to the conflicts between the areas of the mind? What is their conscious and unconscious experience as the object of their self management?

Remarkable news: HUD has blocked, at least temporarily, the sale of Starrett City to the greed machine, eponymously and publicly known as Clipper Equity. Stand by. Pure coincidence, no doubt between this move by the Feds and the gazillion dollar defaulting sub-prime home market?

You flash on some words of a Thai banker that stuck with you when you read them back in 1997. Thailand's central bank had just exhausted its entire cash reserves in

a failed attempt to support the Bhat and he gazed upon the wreckage of his country's economy. *The market*, he said, *was not afraid*.

A tsunami'sworth of junk loans out there, waiting on the turning tide.

Global capitalism is, first and foremost, a gigantic failure of the collective imagination.

The junkmails sail in on the morning tide. One from Consuela V. Rocha: "my ears stuffed with my own nose."

This particular twister – one of thirty-one cyclones that, in rapid succession, visited Alabama, Georgia and Missouri – ripped a brand new high school to shreds in Enterprise, Alabama. A military town, near Fort Rucker. Eight students dead.

You gaze at the rubble on the front page of the *Times*. What kind of construction codes do they have there? Or was the school built by Bechtel, or Halliburton? How many ways can these people be betrayed?

Galloping days.

At unpredictable moments your mind replays images of the towers collapsing, and in particular seems to zoom in on all those puffs of smoke or dust ejected outward. Like multiple Vatican chimneys they looked, but sidewise, not vertical. Scores of popes being born.

When you first started coming here to write, passing beneath the forest green awning, the place was called Café Le Gamin. A few years ago it became Le Grainne Café, named eponymously for the new owner, a woman born in Cork. Grainne is the Gaelic form of Isolde, but practically no one who isn't Irish has a clue that it's supposed to be pronounced Gronya. Some people deal with the conundrum by calling the place Granny while others go euphemistic: the watering hole, the living room, the campfire, Le G., the G. spot…

This a.m., as you park your bike outside the café, you look up and watch a third

jet complete a triple cross of white chem or contrails across a wide swath of skydome. Far higher, wisps of what appear as genuine cirrus slowly migrate east toward where strange rhomboid clouds hang over the building tops. What to do but shake your head and breathe whatever's in the air.

Near the back tire of your bike, some rank barf deposited on the sidewalk ran partly into the gutter before it congealed in proximity to numerous bits of flattened restaurant debris. If you had a choice between the two, you'd infinitely prefer to navigate around piles of dogshit and conventional refuse than deal with whatever stuff it is that parties unknown are pumping into the atmosphere. But you don't have a choice.

Ah, Table 4 remains unoccupied, though it's ten or so minutes after eight. Alan and Mark are talking amicably across Table 5. Under the awning you go, to catch an hour, hors de combat – at least in your mind – among friends inside the Green Zone.

The world is, and is not, your mood.

In all these years, whenever your work has been attacked, it has never been taken on critically. Most often the ideas have not been addressed at all, rather you yourself have been dismissed as a utopian – hence absurdly naïve – or as a cynic.

Kan ya makan, a cynic was someone who sniffed – with the assiduousness of a dog – at every doxa to find out its nature, what it was made of and if there were any constituent truths lurking beneath the assumptions. Nowadays, though, cynic is mostly used as an epithet by people who have already determined their own answers to questions which are in any case rhetorical. These folks, having observed, traumatically, that the universe plays tricks, react by anthropomorphizing that perception and inducting it into the convenient assumption that legerdemain, deceit and meanness are not phenomena, but rather constitute together the universal state of human relations. People are shits, apart, of course from themselves and their friends. They themselves, of course, are not cynics – they are the exceptions to the rule – the genuine ones.

Five, say five degrees right of the Empire State, its superstructure bathed in blazing white, the moon rises. Last full moon of winter, variously known as Worm

moon, Crow Moon, Full Crust Moon (in snowy regions for the alternating thaws and freezes), Sap Moon (in maple sugar country) or Lenten Moon.

This moon turns red, and takes its time disappearing as our globe interposes itself, obscures the sun's intended rays. Gradually rising, the moon returns, deep red. Eclipsed. Incrementally, a white crescent begins to brighten the lower left and the shadow of our curvature draws upward and to the right until the moon shines whole again, its myriad pocks cast in gorgeous whites and grays – as though we never came between her and her illumination. Still, what was witnessed: a monthsworth of phases in four hours. Abruptly, as if on cue, clouds rushing from stage left half mask her in fleece-like shreds.

When you look again, the clouds have cleared, but the moon's shrunk to half her former size. Such tricky optics. Yes, and a simulation of what she would look like if the sun dimmed to an ember.

Lhude cuccu lay it down, whatever song makes sense to you.

March says the calendar, but dead stillness in the glitter world turning to swamp.

It's a muddy road ahead says your one-legged friend. Bad moon rising.

TMG. Too Many Ghosts.

Sunday, and the *Times* confesses, not to its multitude of sins – heaven forefend – but something so old, it's news again: The war is class war. Across four columns high up on the front page, the camera looks down on the upturned and tearful face of Pvt. Resha Kane, an eighteen-year old, five foot tall soldier whose father, hands resting gently on her shoulders offers her up, Agamemnon-like to the dogs of war. Visible, though partly obscured by the elder Kane's forearm, the red and white stripes of the gold-bordered American flag sewn to her khaki sleeve. This is the scene of her departure her hometown of Needles, CA. She's bound for Los Vegas, AZ, then to Fort Hood, TX, then to…

Who knows what compels us to sacrifice our children? Do we know that we send them off to murder and be murdered so that awful gray men whose faces we rarely see – only their political flacks – can grasp at more of what belongs to no one and everyone, and attempt to relieve themselves, however fleetingly of their terrible fear. What makes them so afraid that they demand our children? What mechanism of

helpless obeisance permits us to offer them up?

Impossible to tell what daughter and father are thinking at this moment. What is known is that Pvt. Kane wants to study biochemistry, to which end she has been promised a check from the Army College Fund and the Montgomery G.I. Bill for $37,200. That's the carrot dangling at the end of a three and a half-year long stick. To grasp it though, she must trade deserts – make the pilgrimage from Mohave for Sumer.

Are Pvt. Kane and her father aware that if, instead of being a soldier in the Fourth Infantry Division, Resha were a Blackwater mercenary, she would receive $182,000 in compensation for six months of shooting from the hip in the same sands? If they did know, would it matter?

Resha's dad, has to go off to work as the lot manager of a car dealership, so her mom will drive her to the airport, surrounded by her three younger sibs, in the family's white van. Resha hasn't learned to drive yet. But the van, plastered with stickers advertising Jesus and the Army ("My Daughter is Serving") gets a six chopper escort from some guys, mostly veterans, who call themselves the Bullhead Patriots.

Bullhead, Searchlight, all were gold mining towns kan ya makan. By the looks of it, Resha is a natural blonde. "Nobody wants to go," she says. "But it's our job. That's what we're trained for. We'll go over, do our job, and come back." Viva Resha. Keep your head down. Viva Los Vegas.

It's raining desert.

At the bottom of the page, a much smaller picture of another embrace. George Bush in Alabama. He's found two young women to hug, seniors who attended the storm-wrecked high school in the background. The President has flung an arm around each girl, and he enfolds them, gathers them into his bosom in a supremely protective gesture. Megan Parks and Sarah Carroll attempt to smile. So traumatized. What else to do? Daughters serving.

They call them goods and services, but how good are they? And who and what do they serve?

When Barak Obama becomes President, do you suppose he'll call up the Vietnamese and, on behalf of the American People, tell them, "Sorry about your three million"? Will he get the population of Iraq into a group chatroom and apologize to them? What will he say to the Persians? No, the Northwest Passage will open up way before then.

And at the other pole, what would Scott's famed companion, Titus Oates, do today? The ornithologist of the party, who, knowing he was doomed, and his comrades down to their last biscuit, said "I am just going outside and may be some time," then stumbled from the tent into the howling storm.

Some time done gone. Nowadays one takes a Princess Cruise down there, to where Arthur Gordon Pym lost his reason in the great whiteness. Dump effluvia into McMurdo for the mutant penguins, all gray now, to feed off of. "I am just going to the spa deck, Captain, for a wellness treatment and a pedicure."

"Ah," Scott would reply, looking up from his blackberry. "Just make sure you're back in time for tea."

And Vickie Lynn Hogan, better know under her nom de guerre, Anna Nicole Smith, whose body, like John Brown's, lies a-moldering in its grave. A daughter abandoned before she reached sacrificial age and who in turn abandoned an infant girl too young to be able to remember, when she grows up, the presence of her absent mother. Is there any truth that may be told? Much less one that will march on?

In her own words she told of her desire to "be the next Marilyn Monroe." At the time she said that, probably very few weighed that statement for its morbid implications, however unconscious.

"Think for yourself," sang George Harrison, "'cause I won't be there with you."

You're telling all those lies
About the good things that we can have
If we close our eyes.

Direct and unsparing lyrics that, until many years after you first heard them, you had no real ears for.

The future still looks good
And you've got time to rectify
All the things that you should.

"CONFIDENTIAL" reads the huge type in stencil-style lettering on a billboard over 23rd Street between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues. "Your Closets Are Scarier Than Bush's Agenda." The copywriters who work for Manhattan Mini-Storage's ad agency have come up with a smoothly tongue-in-cheek, neighborhood-specific appeal.

You try to imagine the clever lines that didn't make the cut, or even come to their minds: "Your closets are smaller than the cells in Guantánamo." Strike through that one. Or "There are more skeletons in your closet than they found at Ground Zero." Naw, back to the drawing board. Take a deep breath and move on.

Hang Seng's down four percent so far today. Time to propose new name for securities markets out there on the rim: Hang Ten.

Kan ya makan, Gaia created her most powerful child, the giant Typhon. He soared hundreds of miles high, and spread just as wide. For limbs, he possessed a myriad of vast serpents. He nearly defeated Zeus, it is said, who, after a terrible fight subdued the giant with thunderbolts. But when the Arabs, who studied the Greek myths, spread Islam to Southeast Asia in the Middle Ages, they brought his legend, which transformed into the word typhoon. Hang Ten could serve too as the hero, who rides through the tempest, atop the great wave of the giant's fall.

Not just in the East, but everywhere: *the ink is red*.

Proletarian. How many times have you used the word without knowing its origin? A Roman so abjectly poor he had nothing to offer the state but his offspring.

You used to joke that Fannie Mae or Mae Not. But now she Won't. Perhaps she Can't.

Mort = dead + gage = pledge, risk, stake. And now, the bottom drops out of the subprime and Alt-a markets – the twin towers of dead risk. Trillions and trillions served up to the Gadarine Swine, which are legion, and who hallucinated, in their diabolic swinishness, a trough that would be endlessly slopped, forever.

Plummeting first and fastest, from a share price of $32+ to $3.50 in a matter of a six weeks, a real estate investment trust – and yes, its principals actually named it this when they chartered the company in Delaware in 1995: New Century Financial. "A new shade of blue chip," is how they billed their bubble.

Another eponymous and evaporating REIT: Accredited Home Lenders. Lovely and lightning in its way how reversals of fortune play out at the level of hubris-fuelled nomenclature. Accredited gets dissed, and most likely dissolved, New Century isn't very financial. A short century too, twelve years. But then, they do call stocks, even the most speculative among them, securities. And how much confidence can one place in a Trust? Equity? Hmmm. Wait and see. A corporation that calls itself Fidelity – well to whom and what? Reciprocally, a holding company at some point becomes a vehicle for letting go. Will the day come when financial entities are named Crossed Fingers Ltd., Give It a Shot, LLC., Speculations 'r' Us, Kosmic Wheel Tontine, Blind Gamble, Crazy Risk or, for that matter Faith, Hope, or Charity Divestment Co.? Yet there's a time it is said to every purpose under Heaven.

Year of the Pig. The bank turned upside down. *If I had a hammer…*

All your life's been spent in the city which much of the rest of the world saw as America's human face. Perhaps some part of us imagined we were that too. What now, sisters and brothers? Surely there must be something we can do besides stand on the dock and, in the thankful absence of confetti, wave Hegemony goodbye.

Paper tiger burning bright…

He's not the Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo. Just the Man at Table Four, who sits at the crossroads and looks in six and eight directions. But his chair feels evermore like a hot seat. Will he continue to cultivate internal alchemy – the kind that

transforms *qi* into *jing* into *qi* into *shen* into *qi* into *jing* onward into the great future?

Or some morning, like this one, will he electrocute himself with the force of his own energy? He thinks, at times, of Vanzetti, the purple foam sliding down his face, then, since that's too ghastly, of Bugs Bunny finding himself in the stewpot amidst the carrots and celery, breathing a deep breath and saying: "Mmmm, smells delicious – rabbit stew!" before he does the math and leaps out. Whereupon, the chase ensues, Elmer Fudd wielding a cleaver, his anticipated dinner two jumps ahead, Bugs's ears flying behind him like flags.

And there they glide, the pair of them, hunter and prey, visible through your window, among a thousand other cumulus creatures, scrolling fast right to left across the skydome and the water-towered global village below, a vast vapor procession headed east, in the steady airstream. Wind from the west, steady as she goes.

Tonight, they predict, the mercury plummets. Molecules jostle molecules as they exchange one pressure for another. Rush hour on the atmospheric plane. Impossible to imagine the promised snow. Ah, there's another cloud cottontail, this one pursued by a blunt-horned rhino that might be expanding into a whale. But this rabbit's tricky, trickier even than Bugs. Not just because he's flying, but because he's flying upside down. Which reminds you of your uncle's Mike's old aviator quip about what happened to the duck who tried that: he quacked up.

The other night, during the eclipse, when you shifted your eyes from the moon to the Empire State, there they were as on every evening when the visibility's good, clustered just below the spire, the dancing fireflies: camera flashes of a multitude of tourists atop the observation deck. Unabated.

Is it possible that the kosmic drama to the east was somehow invisible up there? No, surely it was seen by some. But then there are the radiant faces of the lovers and beloveds, the friends clustering together to get into the frame and behind them all, a carpet spread of the city's gigawatt hallucination.

Sure, there's only so much a body can take. In. Only so much grace and so much of its opposite. And as the sky grays outside, your muse reaches and pulls your chin gently round, away from the distractions beyond the window pane. She wants you all to herself. For how long now, she's poured whatever overflowed her into your ear, and now there's no more speaking because she's done with truth and made up things, her

tongue has filled your mouth. It's rooted as deep back into your skull as your own is, way back to the Atlas bone that allows the cranial globe to pivot on your spine. Paired organs, yes, not one, but far too twined to tease apart. And why try to separate them anyway – what would be the point? You'd have to be crazy to renounce such an embrace when really, closing in on your fifty-seventh summer, alive to this rock in that stream and that chopper, black and peculiarly silent, moving straight southeast, unlike this morning's gulls.

Tongue-tied, still breathing. Whatever's in the air. A blessed place to be.

The gentle breezes have woken,
Now everything, everything must change.
—Ludwig Uhland