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a novel

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(BrownpaperpublishinG)

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*KINBOTE: What we term Original Sin
can never grow obsolete.*

*SHADE: I know nothing about that. In fact
when I was small I thought it meant
Cain killing Abel...*

—Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*

‘How about her?’

‘Her?’

‘Yes, we don’t come here often. It’s not like this is our favorite place. If you mess things up it won’t be awkward, we’ll simply stop coming around.’

‘Why would I mess things up?’

‘Because you’ll be doing it and I’ll be watching and you’ll stop when I tell you to stop. That’s the plan.’

‘So you won’t even touch?’

‘I might choose to touch, but I might also choose not to.’

‘And what about me? Do I have a choice?’

‘No, you have to touch. But over her clothes. And you’ll kiss, but I decide how long it’ll last.’

‘And what if she wants more?’

‘I don’t care what she wants.’

‘I might want more.’

‘I might want more, too. But we have to know now how far we want it to go. We can’t let things go their own way. We won’t have time to discuss things as they happen. It can’t be any other way and you know it. You know you can’t pull it off without me. I’m the one who has to ask.’

‘And if I ask?’

‘Go ahead. Ask.’

‘No, you ask.’

‘Why me?’

‘Because you want to do this more than I do? Because you want to see how I’ll perform? Because you’d like to see if we could pass off as a single human being? Still not convinced? You want me to ask? Okay then. I’ll ask. I’ll watch. You do it.’

‘Okay, there she is. Ask her.’

‘I will.’

‘What are you going to say?’

‘I don’t know, I’ll think of something.’

‘That won’t do. You have to know what you want to say. Otherwise you’ll ruin it.’

‘You just worry about your part. You know what you’re supposed to do?’

‘I’ll think of something.’

‘What does that mean? I’m not asking anyone anything if we’re not clear on what you’re going to do.’

‘I’ll improvise.’

‘That means you might not do it. I’m not asking her anything if there’s a chance you might change your mind halfway through.’

‘Then don’t ask. I’ll ask, you do it.’

‘Okay. But why her?’

‘Why not? She’s a hard working girl in need of a break from the everyday hustle. She deserves more attention than she’s been getting. She’s got both her feet well on the ground, she won’t freak out on us, won’t scream bloody murder. Besides, I think she’s got a slight crush on you.’

‘She does not.’

‘She might not. She might have a crush on me, but I think you’re more her type. Not too strong, not too silent, just right—’

‘Thank you.’

‘—and she’s your type. And I guess my type too. Look at those hips. You can see she uses them for walking, you can see

she makes her living on those legs. And she has a kind, tired face, eyes that don't get enough sleep, eyes that are dying to tell their story but people don't listen, people don't care about other people's stories. If they look at her, they look at her breasts—'

'She's coming.'

'—her shoulders slightly stooped, she must've already had breasts when all the other girls in her class had nothing but mosquito bites, so she learned to hide them—'

'Shhh, she's coming I tell you!'

Threads of palaver span the coffee and pie place like freshly spun cobwebs knitted by voices coming from all corners of the room doused in cinnamon sunlight—the specs of dust dance. A young woman with a brimming coffee pot runs rounds around periwinkle vinyl tables cutting through talk like a sailing boat through surf, her lighthouse eyes blinking mechanically, passing out an uninhabited look. Sleeves of a red shirt rolled up above her chapped elbows, muscles of forearms taut, skin bristling against the cooler stream of air generated by the sway of her body. She's adorned with things: a holstered notepad on her left hip, a wristwatch suspended by a safety pin on her right hip, a ballpoint pen shot through the syrupy nest of her hair, a nametag worn out above her heart, spelling in mock, broken handwriting—*G r a c e* .

G r a c e lowers her pot like an ominous cloud or an advertisement blimp over cups, the stream of hot, black liquid propelling the smell of coffee upwards in jets of steam from cupped whirlpools. *G r a c e* reaches with scalded fingers into bulging apron pockets to produce fistfuls of small plastic cups of cream, packages of white and brown sugar, artificial sweetener and dispassion.

G r a c e walks up and down the aisles between tables and booths trying hard not to step in the rhythm of the radio playing *Mujer, si puedes tú con Dios hablar, pregúntale si yo alguna vez te he dejado de adorar* although from time to time it seems that it would be most appropriate to start dancing, like the sunlit dust, turn a segment of a day into a scene from a musical where the accumulated dramatic tension and frustration are resolved in a sudden outburst of choreographed movement. Everybody knows the lines of the song they are lip-synching to, lights change color, cash register turns into a disco-ball... Then back to normal, just as suddenly.

G r a c e takes note of a man sitting alone at a table for four motioning her for another piece of cherry pie. She also takes note of the fact that the man doesn't need another piece. Sugar is only a substitute for what he really hungers after but cannot get. Utter despair makes him content to receive slices of pies from hands of perfect strangers. In her mind she makes the man stand up and swing his belly sensuously, arms poised embracing an invisible partner, someone half his size, fifth his size, someone so petite she can step on the man's feet and have him dance for the both of them. *G r a c e* nods to the man to acknowledge his request, then stops by the table where a woman and a man sit, each folding a paper napkin as they speak.

'And how are you guys doing?'

Howdy? How do you do? How are you? How are you doing? How's it going? How's everything? How's it hanging? How's it been? How's life been treatin' you? Of all the questions that put a polite mask on the lack of interest she gets to choose only one that will both generate suspense and defuse it. There is an infinite number of possible answers, each of them infinitely meaningless. Good, and you? Not bad, how about you? Great, couldn't be better.

Can't complain, and yourself? I've been better, but then again I've been worse. Fair enough, and you? Alone and depressed, but aren't we all? Excellent, and I hope you are doing okay, too. First rate, and you? I feel better now, I feel better than James Brown. And how about you?

The woman looks up at *G r a c e* clearly meaning to communicate an important piece of information. The napkin becomes an icy top of a mountain, or a roof of a house:

'Do you like Glen Miller?'

Is it possible they had noticed the suppressed bounce of her gait? Not that she would lose her job over it, as a matter of fact, if the manager would find out, he'd make her dance during all of her shifts, maybe even organize an entire squadron of swinging waitresses, chorus girls who had given up their iron curlers as scrap metal that has become a part of a government-issued canteen, girls who had given up their silk panties so that Johnny can parachute into the heart of Belgium and never come back home, again.

'Do you like movies, Grace?'

The woman is relentless, but then again so is the hold of the daydream that's keeping Grace on her feet. By contract, every automaton is allowed to develop a hidden harmless fantasy, as long as it doesn't hinder its performance. A refrigerator can dream of being an explorer deep in the deserts of Africa, perched on a dromedary, lost in profound ruminations under a pith helmet as long as it maintains a particular temperature. A carwash attendant is free to be an undercover secret service operative as long as he doesn't drop his towel to the ground where it will pick up sand or chips of beer bottle glass and ruin the paint-job of many a car, cause frustration, pain and, not to mention, considerable cost to many a customer, many a manager, Manny the manager in particular.

‘We have these tickets for an advanced screening, but a friend stood us up, so one ticket will go to waste unless you like movies.’

Movies? They are not to be trusted. The man and the woman. But they are interesting. They are something every refrigerator, or a television set, or a waitress should explore, learn more about, observe in a controlled environment of a laboratory of her mind. Grace doesn't often have an opportunity to be curious, her intellect is a dried up percolator, ground coffee waiting for hot water, but her surroundings don't provide any, they are just as dehydrated, and only occasionally has she a chance to wonder. This makes it impossible for her to refuse any proposition, no matter how sinister it might seem. A psychological explanation of this phenomenon might be that Grace feels the entire world has conspired to make her miserable, so she'd gladly agree to any arrangement that would promote her from a marked person to a random victim. Or she might be a random victim already, yearning for some custom-made violence, desperate for someone to develop a strong personal obsession with her as such, as she is, to single her out.

‘When's the show?’

The woman's stare is most conspicuous. There is something behind it, a challenge, a dare, an invitation to another plane of existence where everything is considerably more difficult, where ideas and emotions are made from scratch and shaped into words that leave you wondering about their true meaning. The mere possibility of being tricked, of being lied to, of being worth the trouble of being lied to, excites Grace immensely. The hairs on her forearms and the nape of her neck react in tingling anticipation.

‘Friday.’

The man is silent, but catches every word uttered, catches it with his eyes, turns it around, scrutinizing it, before releasing it to its destination, as if slightly changed, burdened with additional meaning, or boosted by a new implication. Grace feels as if a gentle hand in a thin surgical glove has entered her insides, intrusive warmth handling her organs, inducing a sugary queasiness of intensity that makes her second-guess her impulses.

‘Friday? I’m working Fridays.’

The woman’s face relays no surprise. Her intent is kind but unwavering. She reminds Grace of her dear old mother. She knows what Grace wants to hear and is not afraid to say it, even if Grace might be afraid to hear it being said.

‘Did I say Friday? I meant Saturday. You work Saturdays too?’

Words come hard for Grace if they are not linked into familiar trains with a ‘May I...’ locomotive, with impersonal servility that Grace puts on under her uniform, close to her skin, to soak up her sweat, the smell of her private, intimate inhibitions, a diver’s suit to dive into the morass of her profession. It’s hard to utter a negation in connection to work. Her tongue rises heavy and pink toward the hard palate and the back of her teeth. Will she be able to say it? A gust of breath rises from the bellows of her chest, strums the vocal chords gently propelling the sound to the trap of her mouth. Is something coming out?

‘No.’

‘Okay then. We have a date.’

First day resolution: Make a conscious effort to approach people more freely. Everyone is alone, everyone needs communication, even those who think they don’t. This one room is a rented apartment in the Little Folklore Gone

Stale Neighborhood, this room is the whole world abraded shaped and determined by empty yellow walls separating void from void. Go outside and make a connection. Ask for a lighter, the man with eaten green teeth waiting for the Cincinnati Special at the Greyhound depot, he won't depart, even if you don't smoke, because he never leaves that corner, eaten with grayness. Impress the street preacher by reciting in a foreign language how Cain and Abel made love in a field of ripe wheat. When Abel returned to rest in his mother's lap, Cain was to commit suicide but changed his mind. Make them think outside of themselves for a while.

Second day: A room full of people. Poets masturbate in public. Fellow human travelers express their individualities. Individuality rocks. The two of us stand isolated, can't resist the pressure. Leave without saying good-bye to the host, an eighty-year-old engineer who claims to have invented the artificial diamond. No one in the room listens, no one questions, everybody talks at everybody else, as if they are putting their cotton insides on the market, as if they feel obliged to pay with words for free food and alcohol, courtesy of the inventor of diamonds. Run! Without saying our names twice we ran. A perfectly clumsy inappropriate cowardly retarded selfish rude monological despicable adolescent neurotic unforgivable thing to do. An awkward escape. A betrayal of all values we had sworn to uphold.

Third day: A new resolution. Okay, we made a mistake. Admit it and move on. No apologies. No feeling sorry about missed opportunities or plans gone sour.

With a spoon he draws a sun out of a coffee ring stamped on the plastic face of the table.

'I grew up with no friends and no toys that would

substitute friends. Whenever my mom saw I was about to get bored, she'd reach into the hallway closet and take out a long heavy walking stick that once supposedly belonged to my grandfather. Here, she'd say, see that old wall in the back of the yard? Go poke a hole in it.'

She spreads a napkin that soaks up the coffee sun to produce a dark hapless print.

'Reading the papers I once found a picture of a stranger, a young man, my age, hit by a car. Three helicopters took off from the hospital roof carrying his organs to different parts of the country. He smiled in the picture, as if he was auditioning for a toothpaste commercial. Black and white photo. Curly hair. You wouldn't guess it would ever turn gray. I looked up his address in the phone book and wrote to his parents. Told them, God or no God, he will be remembered. They never wrote back.'

His spoon rings noon against the empty cup.

'We shouldn't have left that oil heater out in the street like that. People shouldn't be allowed to own things if they don't have anyone to give them to. Not even in LA.'

'You realize we still don't know the names of any of our neighbors?'

She folds the sun, rolls it into a damp stump of a stogie.

What's in a name? A prison made of reason. Chevron, Exxon, and that other one with the extinct green reptile. So she, a Shevron, he a Hexxon, drove across ten straight states putting a hex on the instinct green reptile. You will never know their names, because he is defined by her, and she in turn by him, neither of them existing without the other. They arrived here, in this city, approximately seventy days ago. Sixty-nine, to be exact.

You will never know what either of them looks like which will make them beautiful in your mind's eye. Some details will be provided though, to test your attention – a

mole on the right side of her left breast is the size of the dot on this *i* but tends to travel across her body, uncontrollably, appearing now here now there, so if you're looking for the purpose to this novel it is to map the trajectory of the mole across her skin represented by the page you have your hands on. Remember this.

Yet what sometimes appears as her left breast, other times protrudes more as his penis on the right of which there is a mole the size of the dot on this *this*.

Last time they crossed the continent something happened, something that spoiled for them staying in one place for too long. They had flown West, knees jabbing the seats of passengers in front of them, observing their progress on a cleverly designed little screen with a map that said nothing at all about the land below and how it stretches like a sleeping darling's back (with your ear to the ground you can hear its heart beating) and how traversing it makes time disappear, seep into the ground, like a treacherous, long-awaited rain, leaving clear skies in its wake, skies that press down on the horizon like a blessing, a curse, a mixed message, seal of solitude, warranty, a proof that everything is exactly as it should be and that there is no sense in crying about it, spilled milk of clouds watching you through your car window, a giant holding you and your world in the palm of his hand like a drop of water reflecting his face, the glimmer of the smile of the sun, his breath raising dust for miles on an open country road, your world, for you haven't seen anyone who'd claim it, for hours, for so long that you start to doubt whether you exist at all.¹

1 Solitude is best born when there's no one to share it with.

They had flown West, but the truth of it was revealed to them only when driving back East, the truth of how places are connected not by other places, nor by strips or stretches of land, but by a timeless vacuum, a terrible hourless void of unparalleled cruel beauty, a nothingness that never grows old, never grows tired of existence, never looks away. It lives right outside of your town and encompasses everything between where you're starting from and where you're heading, a state of its own, a realm of crystal lucidity, domain of senseless size, vast regions of crystallized time, a monument to time carved in ice of its own sleek surface. Between here and there, any here and anywhere, time does not exist except as a remote, painful memory, eternity is sand between your teeth, smell of gasoline on an empty stomach, cold air reaching under your shirt to grip your spine like a witch's claw, to keep you awake, make you see all that is around you, all the millions of years of creation that have stopped in their tracks for your benefit alone.

Between here and there, in the lap of time, we experienced a zero gravity existence, our thoughts barely touching the ground of our minds, spiraling in the wind of cold, clear panic, zephyr of fear howling against the windshield of our automobile—a capsule of sanity swallowed by the scenery that couldn't care less. Between here and there the rational mind doesn't mean anything, the more you have of it, the more you'll lose, only those completely insane ever leave this region with any trace of who they were before they first entered it. Between here and there, where we were and where we are, we lost almost everything, our perception of the world, our perception of the flow of time, the meaning of life. Eternity picked our pockets and our bones clean. Left us with a blank page that hurt our eyes just to look at.

From the moment we drove into any town we felt alone in a new and complete way. Suddenly all people lived across the river from us, every language became unintelligible, every piece of memory we might have shared with them became a puzzle riddled with blank spaces, missing pieces. Suddenly all time became not enough time, given a taste of eternity we could no longer stomach the days, the hours, even minutes and seconds became hard to endure. The logic, the order in their passing completely lost, every moment began to press us, weigh down on us, every moment an oyster that might be carrying that pearl that is the key to the gate of eternity, every moment if deciphered a password for a momentless existence.

Solitude is best born when there's no one to share it with. We'd get up in the morning, grope around the motel room for things scattered the night before, wash, dress, pack up. Then we'd take advantage of our complimentary continental breakfast, pile up stale bagels and muffins on paper plates, pour vapid coffee in paper cups, sit down to erase any sign of us being there, our passable, passing, paper existence. We'd try not to get noticed by people around us, lost, every one of them, in the early morning of getting started again. As long as we'd be eating we were safe from idelwild questions, but put your paper cup down and someone will test your accent, with easy questions ready-made for just such an occasion.

Two men sip their coffee standing up, a habit, or they might need the exercise. They'd be father and son, matching shirts, camouflage vests, brown burnt necks, finger-stained caps, matching amber eyes under the visors, one pair circled with tree bark of wrinkles, the other's face smooth and oily, expressionless like a rifle butt. We close our eyes, praying they don't ask us where we're from. We forgot that yesterday, and forgot where

we were going the day before. All we're left with is who we are, together, isolated.

The younger one sips his coffee like an actor, spitting it back in the cup in the same sip, the steam of the drink raises against his face but doesn't get inhaled by his nostrils. He has a hole in his palm the size of a quarter through which he's watching us. We stare back at him through our closed eyelids. They are hunters from Indiana, out to hunt the elk, the bear, the time. The older one has a hole in his cheek, an inch to the left of his mouth. The coffee he drinks trickles out the hole and down his chin and neck, inside his shirt. Between the sips he whistles *From The Halls Of Montezuma* through the hole, his teeth clenched. An old woman with a plastic flamingo headpiece bids them good morning as she fits herself behind the front desk. She's too short to reach the porthole, so she sits on a stack of Gideon's Bibles. An old married couple cuts into their bagels with plastic knives as they echo a good morning. Tips of their fingers have grown together, his left hand to her right hand and vice versa, in a way that prevents them from ever playing piano again. They seem happy, with their palms forever open. Everybody knows everybody else here, except us.

We retire back to our room, eyes still closed, just as the hunters leave. Pick up our bags, drag them to the front desk, settle our bill, again avoiding any questions we're positive we can't answer.

Outside the motel the new day is a shirt frozen solid on a clothesline. We throw our bags into the trunk, throw ourselves in the car and reel away across the driveway gravel, onto the overpass, and at thirty-five enter the highway. At forty-five the road and the clouds come together to form a tunnel, a narrow, metal, black, barrel of a gun tunnel, a barrel pressed tightly to the temple of the destination, a

coal black, sooty suicide threat, a destined to fail blackmail attempt, a cry for attention, cry for help, at forty five the car shakes like it's going to fall apart. Pushing fifty-five makes everything that much worse, the road coils from under us like a live coal-roasted black serpent, a snake, a vine, gnarled and twisted root vein of the tree of life with truth as nothing but evenly distributed deceit.

Only when we reach sixty-five does the sky break open, it bursts like a crystal dish smashed against the wall, flung full force with both hands, shards and shrapnel fly in our face like razor sharp tears, the roof over our lives is removed, spinning the sun is pinned east of the azure, ahead of us, we are free, but completely exposed, to the bone, to the very marrow, as if we had died somewhere down the road without ever noticing it, hypnotized into life everlasting by the broken line dividing the road, our flesh eaten away by sand, coyotes, and ants, but our mind pressing on in a beige 1994 Nissan Illusion converted to run on madness, fear, pure panic, loss of self, lies, togetherness, while scattered, our bones bleached by the sun stay behind us forever decorating the desert, mixed remains of not exactly one person, but much more than two.²

'There are moments that could last an eternity.'
'Could or should?'

2 By the time we make seventy-five not even a memory of who we are exists, all we have brought with us has been scattered across the plane as an offering in exchange for a safe passage. Surely we should be glad to have come even this far, but this far is not where we want to be and if we can still measure how far we have come then we surely haven't come far enough.

As soon as I say that, they are displayed before my mind's eye, a painstakingly set up exhibition, photographs hanging from a bright, whitewashed wall in a room with no corners, every one of them titled and dated, though they're in no chronological order, but are arranged according to color, shade, warmth. Oil heater, blue comforter, box of Oolong tea, pint of honey. Left on a curb, a last-minute offering to the gods of the sun, so that the car trunk would finally shut, as if we're never going to be sick, or cold, or uncomfortable again. We look back to LA and see:

Dropping the car off at Song's. *Buy Japanese. American bad.* A framed certificate of service in the Korean War between autographed photographs of B-movie stars *To the best mechanic ever* weathered and oil-stained, under a filter of soot. Reduced to vagrants for a day, while Song tunes up our ride, we worry how much will the repair cost this time. We travel Monday. Looking for the closest Bank of America ATM that happens to be miles away. We walk up Silverlake, all the way to Sunset, walk as if we live in each of the small houses along the way, hiding in the dark green shade of the morning, imagining life in every new place our eyes discover. We notice grass crying for a cut, feel vulnerable on foot, vulnerable but free, gladly flinch before the passing traffic, or a rare passerby with too many shirts on in a rainbow sequence, likely more unhinged than we are, because unlike him we just bought ourselves a day of freedom in exchange for a four hundred dollar radiator. It's a guilty pleasure, we don't want our car to brake down often, we cannot afford it, but we cannot ever

find enough time to do nothin', no one's rich enough to do nothing these days, so the days sail by unspent, except by the poor, the very poorest, those who can't really afford to do anything, those free for nothing, good for nothing.

On Sunset we'll first head south, downtown, see how far we can get before we get half hungry to turn back and reach *Alegria* well famished. One day we got to the cold heart of the city, concrete dusk everlasting, baptized with paupers' piss and spit, discount diamond shops and clustered dim dead lighthouses of progress toward the abyss of insanity. One day we got to the new version of a replica of a facsimile of a faux Chinatown, delved into the crowd of its market buying with our eyes things we didn't need, couldn't use, basked in bunched energies of enough people to fill all the streets of Beverly Hills any time of day, and make it more human, at least for that day, under the condition that they first burn down Rodeo Drive. One day we made a full circle around Echo Park Lake, its water cannons ejaculating white plumes of spume like it harbored a school of well-hung sperm whales. Saw a brown turtle doing a backstroke, yellow belly up among flexile condoms, beer cans, and blooming water lilies. Passed Sister Ally McPherson's temple, kicked lose scraps of discount salvation littering the sidewalk, empty halls gawking at us like cow skull eye sockets, asphalt under our feet boiling sucked by the gloryhole whirlpool upon which the witch sat counting the money as it went up her pink piggybank slit—money, that sweet sacred pie in the sky stuffing.

Back we'd go, down Sunset, playing tag with the sun, the scene bleached, corroded, bright: mission-style shopping courts, dowdy draperies, store signs, awnings, shirts on backs of schoolchildren thinned, peroxidized, erased just enough for the whiteness of the paper they are

written on to come through, placed between the eye and the sun, a burning blindness of cognition. At *Alegria* we eat our lunch of rice and beans and sweet carbonated pork, enjoy the shade, shade our minds by shutting eyes to sort through the images engraved on the insides of our eyelids, fruit of fatigue blended with ice.

Then a glance, a smile, and out we rush for the final stretch of the race, to catch a show at *Vista*, rest our feet in its butter gap-toothed popcorn mouth, best single screen theatre in the world, one we could see screening the story of our life, small wonder its pharaoh style decoration, when it was meant to be the tomb of entertainment, a fake memory capsule, a tooth with a cyanide filling to bite on in days of despondency such as these are and will be, for the brandy to flow, thick, honeyed, cherry red like blood, like ripe flesh, like theatre curtains, like lips, lips lick locked, teeth knocking teeth, days like these...

Each day this new home takes ever longer to get back to. They stop in front of the hardware store. Fancy them big screwdrivers. They stop at the bookstore. Ring the bell, unsettle the dust. She steals a look at him over a book she considers not worth buying nor stealing. Shelves curve under heedlessly stacked paper headstones waiting to be reused, waiting for another person with the same name to die on the same day. Like the two of them for instance. Two insects in the amber of time would be her take on the situation. The room wraps around them, yellow lamp light, she's humming inside his head something he's humming inside hers, he can see it by her lips moving without producing a sound, his chin syncopating the rhythm as it drops down into her memories of their former selves, heavy, drunk with time they've been

exposed to, dizzy, winding, revolves, carouses, carousels, the wall of death gallery of the mind.³

Midday we stop for lunch. We hesitate for miles, highway exits skirting towns appear to be too final to fit our purpose. We need a place to stop from which we'll have no trouble moving on again, a roadside diner where we're served by slow-moving ghosts of middle-aged women, honeys to call us Honey, a coffee cup, soup of the day, salad bar, dinner roll, grilled chicken breast, pork shoulder to cry on, a disk of a tomato, iridescent plastic parsley, coconut cream pie, moot root beer, a blessing in disguise, a place where all the spooked by the road road-people huddle to hide from the lack of time, much too much truth, monumental slabs of insight that pave the road from here to there over the soft, heaving ground of nothingness. In short, we look for a heaven. Or a reasonably priced hellhole. Where restrooms reek with profusely flowing urine, truckers bathe in spoon size sinks, children get lost in game arcades, cash registers ring, crockery sings, while from treetops out yonder crows observe with wise opal eyes, measure, witness, record, perched up there like concealed cameras, or maybe they are miniature movie projectors responsible for the image of the world, biomechanical contraptions shooting many-

3 I'm not surprised by what I find in here: I turn around inside myself to take it all in, inside of the inside of myself, and as I turn I make images melt into one kaleidoscopic emotion, one complex emotion made up of hurt and happiness, closeness and pain, deep sorrow, elation, indifference, pride, shame, unrest, stillness of mind... With every revolution the merry-go-round picks up speed until all colors bleed into white, white as the wall, as white as day, even faster until the round room in my head starts to dissolve, vanish, like a trace of a warm breath on a clear, cold window. I'm granted a most singular vision, I see everything in perfect detail, but what's more, I get to choose what I see.

colored light on that same blank sheet of paper from enough angles to make it appear multidimensional, make it real. Sip of the coffee, smack of the tongue, one last trip to the john, and hurry out to escape the maple syrup hold of our diner booth. Gas up the car, put it to speed, put mind to unrest so that the big sleep don't get it.

When they first met they decided they had no use for the world and the world resented that, very much, still does, the very bond they created severed them instantly from the rest of humanity, left them with threads and ropes of cut ends in their hands, ligatures they are to this day trying to mend. Being too familiar with one person makes you a stranger to the rest of the world, or so they experienced. Since they met, no home has either of them but the home they have in the other, no place where they don't feel as visitors except each other's eye, no permanence will they have as long as what it is that makes them *them* exists. People are not cruel, strangers are not dangerous, neighbors are not vengeful, passers-by are not even aware of their actions, no, people are none of that by themselves. But human beings are biologically conditioned to ignore happiness, to be blind and deaf to happiness, anyone's happiness, particularly their own, happiness is incommunicable, a place one cannot map out, a place one cannot even send a message from. Individuals are selfish, all people are, those who appear altruistic are simply gaining from others something those others weren't aware they possessed in the first place. One person's junk is another person's treasure. Once upon a time even the two of them were selfish, maybe even more so than the average person, maybe they were artists of egoism, masters of that fine art,

each wanting everything for oneself, everything, the world and beyond. They weren't kind, they weren't sympathetic, their purest desire was to feed each one's own burning desire, they were so bad, so useless, so selfish, that they were each utterly alone. The only thing greater than their selfishness was their loneliness. The only thing greater than their loneliness was their selfishness. But, what happened? They met. They weren't blind to each other's misery, no person is blind to misery, people are misery-hounds, they respond very well to tragedy. The two of them had each trained oneself to respond well to misery, to smell it out, in a string of hair, in a flake of skin, nail clippings, damp coat sleeves, lint-lined pockets, they each saw the extent of the other's unhappiness, they compared their miseries in a glance, and one glance was all it took for them to see that the other's loneliness was equal to the loneliness each of them was experiencing. So they decided to swap, trade their solitudes, as if those were black marbles to change owners, slipped from hand to hand, at a single precise moment, so that neither of them would end up tricked, end up holding all the black marbles, all the sorrow, all the misery of the world. Because for people, their own misery is poison, but other people's misery is honey, and their poison is other people's honey. The only problem is that people are selfish, sure they like to get as much honey as they can, but most are reluctant to give up their poison, they guard that poison that is their own better than they would guard the honey they'd get for it, their loneliness is a golden retriever, one they take out for walks religiously, keep locked in their apartment while they're out working, one they pick up shit after with plastic bags, or plastic disposable gloves if they come better prepared. Nevertheless, one would think that it wouldn't matter how little misery people have to give, if in exchange they'd receive more honey, but the honey

isn't in receiving, it's in giving, and misery cannot be sliced into slabs and distributed piecemeal over time. So upon meeting a person one needs to give up all one ever had, all the loneliness, the misery, the sadness, all that one was needs to be surrendered, and for some that's hard, for some the pain of losing pain is debilitating, for some the pain of relieving the other of pain reminds them there's honey in that pain, honey they cannot have without giving it away, but honey they'd still rather keep in an unlikely case that it would turn into more pain. It's a question of holding a dead sparrow, watching a live one sitting on a window ledge, in your hand and in your eye you're holding everything a sparrow can be. In the sorrow you keep inside, and the sorrow you see in the other, you have all the happiness you could ever have, but something makes you hold that dead sparrow as if by letting it go you'll lose it all, you'll spook that live one on the sill into flight of no return – no matter how much people are scared of being alone, they are even more scared of not being. Any feeling they might have, any feeling at all, is a sign one is still alive, and it's a hobby that can fill one's life, checking your pulse is.

A sample supermarket interrogation conducted by a friendly underpaid cashier⁴:

- (one) 'And how are you today?'
- (two) 'You live off Murray Hill, right?'
- (three) 'I know because I saw you walking the other day. I was at the funeral parlor. You know the one? Vittantonio. I grew up there. My son went to the university.'
- (four) 'Where are you from?'

⁴ who's not even allowed the comfort of a seat during her shift behind the register.

As we leave you look at me with those big pleading brown eyes:

‘Wanna go out to the movies tonight?’

‘Sure, why not.’

The afternoon part of a day’s drive mirrors the morning. We could claim all the land as far as our eyes can see, and still would end up looking at a birthmark on its wrist. The country tries to slow us down with its green grasses, the clouds fill our mouths like marshmallows, wheels of our car whistle on a rough hymnbook asphalt, whizzing by black snake tired truck tire skins, we roll down the windows and let the wind scatter our belongings where we can’t find them anymore, we don’t ever want to find them, clues to lives of a pair of strangers who drove straight through the heart of the country missing something every mile or so, until there was nothing left of them but scraped knuckles tucked in pockets. The impossibility of a return no longer bothers us, we can’t recall ever being any place to return to. The inevitability of an arrival doesn’t frighten us, we’re still far from where we’re heading, feels as if we’re getting farther and farther, no one expecting us, us expecting nothing. The radio leads us on, further forward, with stories of bad weather and yodeling coyote lullabies, as herds of phantom barbed wire buffalos thunder after us, burs of sunset caught in their curls, hoofs plowing the sod to regain them long lost bones.

At the end of the day a motel room awaits us. The car stops at the parking lot with a feverish shudder. Checking-in is easy if you never checked out. Shell-shocked, we sit on the bed for a minute before it starts moving, reeling across the motel driveway gravel toward the highway overpass.

We brush our teeth. Turn on the television to warm us up. Change the channel. Change our socks. Sit on the bed for a minute before it starts moving again. Walk out. Night licks its paws. Fed on birds and mice. Blackbirds. White mice. We try to walk toward a promise of a town but only end up on the other side of the highway, in a twin sister gas station restaurant, with a twin brother motel looking on in our coffee. As soon as we set the cups down the table starts moving, we walk out before driving off with it. Hope the evening waitress appreciates it. Back in our room we take of our clothes. We lie side by side, hand in hand, close our eyes, wait. There's a storm abrewing, one that will sing us to sleep. Here we go.⁵

What is she in they, what he in us? What am I in we, what him in me?

5 Is it all death? Was it death trailing us through Wyoming? Did it deaden every moment of our trip to a complete stop? Granted, we could have died there, in between here and there, and there it wouldn't have mattered as much as it does here, the space between two places is more accepting of a person passing, in the state of eternity death is not an event. Yet what if the book of time of no time is unlocked by a bony skeleton key, what if traveling across the continent in a used car was as close as we ever got to dying? What if we had developed a taste for it, what if now every moment seems so painful because it comes with a realization attached, that we're still alive, in a most rude mundane, troublesome way, chained to the tree of life with moments linked, not into an eternity, but in a long life of almost bearable solitude, unspeakable suffering, pain that grows from the chest like a weed flower, from no soil at all, out of faint memory of a time when we weren't able to see clearly, what with all the tears in our eyes, crying over the fate of the world and our role in it, crying over the lack of strength to turn back time, stop it in its tracks, terrible, tragic realization, a price tag that life comes with, price tag we didn't think of removing until it chafed our necks raw, made them sensitive to the yoke of time. Is time pushing us along or are we pulling it, our demise, carrying it on our shoulders so it appears, no matter how fast we run, that it's always right there with us, stepping in our step before we even put our foot down, already in the room of the moment when we walk into it?

It's a weak city, this one, doesn't put up a fight, one can force it into anything one wants, or two want. Rust and iron, forsaken, bridges overgrown with weeds, groans of trains leaving in panic, thundering by as fast as the wheels will carry them, holding their breath while cutting through the reek of a carcass of industry, black-eyed warehouses and a low burning brown-green river. Even the hobos left to seek less dolesome hunting grounds, towns further South or West, escaping the quicksand of this mellow, undecided, mid-belly sobbing for its amputated spine. Look at its people, smug rambling poets and pistol-whipped unionists, stray dogs with tails between their legs, piss stains on their pants, deep dark rings under vinegar-diluted eyes. It's a brittle place, prostrate before your feet like a self-proclaimed victim testing your potential to be a bully, forcing you to be one, prove it, put your money where your mouth is, leaving you no choice but to be cruel, to overpower, manipulate, shake, dismember. What then are we doing here? Why him, why me, why here, why we? The main weakness of these gutless clusters of bricks, shaggy wooden porches, these living dead is the inertia of their endurance; they stay, bear, tolerate without reason, despite all common sense they persevere. But him and me, we should be moving. We must. For is there anything worse than being as weak as everybody else? Surrendering, like a naïve hardworking waitress you can sweet-talk into practically anything, even into her own demise.

'I have a solution.'

She must be thinking if I had left the back door open

again. She's looking down at the floor, scanning it for ants. But even the ants are hard to see if there aren't any. 'Solution to what?'

'The Turing test.'

'What's the Turing test?'

'A test given to machines to check whether they've developed intelligence.'

'And? What does a machine need to do?'

'Play chess and carry out a meaningful conversation.'

'So? What's your solution?'

'Building a machine to our own image is a waste of time. The answer to the problem lies in crafting people more to the image of the machines. What's the use of making artificial human beings, there's already more than enough people around, there's more of us than them, and we can't get more human than we already are. So the way to do it, the way to erase any difference between us, would be to make human intelligence more artificial, make ourselves more machine like, take a step or two in their direction so that they're able to catch up.'

'Is that what god did? Everything was good; he created the universe, the stars and the planets, the earth and the skies, the life, plants and animals. It was all good. But then he decided to make something in his own image, so he created a human being. What if in his desire to make humans more like him he made himself more like us? Didn't the same thing happen to Prometheus? He was an immortal, but was punished to suffer mortal pains, his reward for being good with his hands was that he wasn't a god anymore. They had it in their guidebook of godly conduct way back then, it said: Don't play with clay.'

'I don't believe in god.'

But she's not even listening. She's got good eyes:

'Look there's one!'

I don't look. If I ignore it it'll go away. Even if it's not there in the first place.

Other people resent us. We ignore them in return. In our gym, a flustered woman in a tight yellow leotard came here to exercise her charms, leaving her inhibitions, her on-again-off-again boyfriend, her mother's ideas of propriety hanging in the locker, expecting a taste of safe thirty-minute freedom. Two boys with crew cuts and matching college t-shirts desire a discreet, yet attentive audience for their contest of strength in the atmosphere of plastic air. The boys are displeased with the fact that we don't even share a slight moan when the weights reach the apex of the trajectory, when eyes don't make the most of the mirror-lined walls.

You straddle one of the machines, clinging to its spidery limbs, caught in a completely intimate wrestling match. A tear of sweat on your shoulder fascinates me. As the muscle under your skin moves, it glistens rhythmically, every twinkle charging the tingle in my abdomen, iron disks clang dully counting off the moment it will slip, and trickle down to feed the dark, wet stain of your armpit.

When you're done I sit in your place to soak in what's left of you.

A minute.

You lean back collapsing from a sit-up and the room swooshes by tilting upside down, white and blue athletic insignia blur up, sounds combust in a pop of air, for a split second the bench is not going to support you, there will be nothing there at the end of the bend but a bottomless pit of exhaustion. It swallows you up, pushes you deeper down with the lick of its tongue, your mind a blank.

A heart beat.

Then you surface, as suddenly, starved for a breath, before plunging back into the fleeting nothingness.

What keeps two people together is what keeps the whole world apart. Everybody is born with a tendency for detachment, as strong as the desire to connect is, yet more potent since it's not even an instinct, not a drive to act upon, but an awkward exoskeletal protrusion, stretching far beyond the reach of our arms. People use this distance to navigate the dailiness, as feelers to feel with, tentacles to secure their place in the world. Only when two people meet, when they decide to unite, do these organs of separation become a bond, they overlap, they reach the core of the other, strike root, become as much a part of another as they are a part of the original being, two distances combined, transforming into proximity.

What keeps two people together separates them from the rest of the world. The consequence of their shared perception is absolute clarity, one can deny what one sees for a lifetime, or the equivalent of, but two, seeing the same thing, from two sides, comparing notes on the events they observe, make a perfect witness, support the terrible accusation that the world is a perfect, human-made, inhuman place in which being alone is the only asset, the only property you can carry in your pocket, wear on your lapel, or take to your grave. Yes, solitude is the most prized possession, you can have it in your coffee, you can have it on your mind, it is like a dog that never dies, never gets run down by a speeding car, never gets poisoned by your neighbors, an utterly democratic disease, terminal, venereal, convivial.

What keeps two people together is everything that keeps them together, everything they have in common, or make in common, together with everything that keeps them apart, everything that doesn't kill them, everything that keeps them less silent, everything that keeps them talking beyond the point of wanting to talk. Two who stay together don't have less of anything that other people staying forever apart have, whether it be fear, or malice, distrust, silence, envy, or hate. If anything, two who stay together have more, more of everything and their staying together gets built not on hiding, excluding, throwing things out, but keeping them in, letting more and more of them in, collecting impressions of the world, keeping the world out, exposed to their perception. More than anything, two who stay together have more loneliness than the combined loneliness of a Saturday night bar.

'We'll talk about it more when you come back,' she says.

'I'm going somewhere?'

She crosses her legs. 'Yes, thank you. The laundry's in the dryer.'

And the dryer is in a row of driers in the laundromat at the front of our apartment building. *Swift Clean*, says the neon sign with lettering slanting away from the shiny sweat-soaked, piss-dew-stained crotch of month-worn jeans toward a head falling on a freshly dressed pillow. The shop is always open, attendantless, assuming airs of a public place perfumed with ocean's midsummer night's lilac detergent breeze and the metallic smell of liberty coins. It would be a perfect place to organize a reading in the winter, the machines providing sufficient heat and a veritable challenge for the poets used to not being listened

to but resentful to being called liars by the centrifugal rotation of tin drums.

When I walk in there the washers jump up in a cheerleading sequence happy to see me. The air is hot from floor up, packed tight between the rows of appliances shining like spaceship intestines—in the fumes of the laundromat everything's possible, though nothing ever happens. I slip between the rummy rumble and the dingy down din trying to remember in which of the dozen windows with two insides and no outside did I put our alternative skins, when I notice a woman fishing in the entrails of the very dryer I was looking for. I might be already late anyway—the machine had half swallowed her.

Arguably there is certain erotic pleasure to be derived from a complete stranger handling your underwear: the warmth of the dryer can be mistaken for the warmth of a body that typically inhabits the sock, the shirt, the panties. Bundled up with a sheet or a pillowcase the fabric offers resistance to the touch not unlike a real body would, a bra filled hard with a kitchen towel, mixed with the smell of a fresh fuck-buddy, one who has prepared, saved oneself for you—the clean and the pure cannot fail to arouse, virginity screams to be defiled—arguably there is certain erotic pleasure to be derived from handling complete stranger's underwear, too.

But instead of warning her of her mistake I stand back to admire the woman's behind. Her ass is high and finely balanced in tight shorts on long legs with thin ankles landing on small feet in nothing but flip-flops. The shorts are pink and velvety smooth, curves accentuated by embossed panty lines, as she struggles for the wrong load of laundry she shifts her weight from one foot to the other, and a wonderful weight it is, each hip swinging like a tight boxing glove punching me bellow the belt. I

immediately respond with a seriousness of a wet-nosed pointer discovering a partridge.

More often than not, I resort to masturbation the way some people seek solace in nail-biting, tongue-biting, lip-biting, scratching, cracking knuckles, blinking, running fingers through what's left of their hair, pinching mustaches, fingering beards, tugging ears, yawning, resting foreheads in their palms, raising shirtsleeves, flexing muscles, sucking teeth, snapping fingers, nodding, shaking heads, looking down, looking up, glancing sideways, twitching noses, crossing legs, uncrossing legs, repeating words, closing eyes, thinking back, reciting poems, listing friends, listing achievements, listing random ways in which some people seek solace or bursting in a raspy staccato cough whenever excited, aroused or annoyed.

So I take another good look at her swinging behind, and, what the hell, it's a nice enough day, I reach into my pants.

For me it is a form of stress management, the only difference being that rather than pocketing a bright-colored rubber ball I use what nature has provided me with. Soon the space of my pants becomes too confining, I take my penis out and continue to stroke it. If I'm quick enough I might come before she turns around. Imagine what would happen if I'd come just as she turns around.

I lean back against one of the washers. The machine is on, rocking me gently.

Judging from my experience there had never happened a thing like this except within the domain of literature. Only in a book can one find such a perfect segment of time, when the sun is bright enough to chase everybody off the streets, boiling brains like one-minute eggs, preventing anyone from even thinking of visiting the laundromat, placing a beautiful woman like this one in such an awkward position, making her

dig through my towels and shirts. But it's all true, I swear, this is exactly how it happened, I recognized the opportunity of the moment, and even as I was living it I knew I was going to write about it and could only hope to do justice to the moment.

I walked up behind her, holding my penis in my left hand like a gift, an offering. She might not have noticed me coming but when I placed my palm on her hip she shuddered. She didn't flinch though, and didn't wiggle out. With both hands I pulled down her shorts along with her panties. I had no time to waste.

I ran my fingers between her legs gently, up and down, convincing her she should spread open for me, and when she did I parted those ridges and slipped in. The heat that the drier was still breathing out soon made us sweat, I slid over her each time my hips ended the thrust by slapping her behind wetly, each time I pulled out of her with a pop and snap of the tongue, our pelvises exchanging sloppy kisses, noise dripping into the sound of washing machines purring and protesting like honey into hot milk.

Again, understand the facts of this are true. The only fiction is in the description. I did cheat on my wife with a horny hussy in a laundromat and no one but her and me and you will ever know about it, okay?

I reached inside the drier from where delicate sighs of pleasure were emitted to find her breasts between hot towels and once locating them I started squeezing and pulling on them, turning her nipples like radio tune dials, and held against them to steady myself to give more force to each stab which made her moan louder in a singsong cadence pacing me like a gym teacher with a whistle down her throat.

By now you should all be thoroughly disgusted with me, unless you are aroused in which case you have become my accomplices, taking for granted everything I told you,

and assuming for your pleasure and peace of mind a lot more than I had implied.

Because finally I folded over her lunging inside the drier, collapsing in a series of convulsions over her in the suffocating heat. From within the tin drum the act appeared all but fun, I could hear her suppressed screams more accurately repeated in short metallic echoes. I was no longer certain whether I was bringing her pleasure or pain, which makes you, my friends, possible accessories to rape.

I remember from my college days my roommate occasionally bringing girls to our room, not even bothering to let me know ahead of time so I could get lost. He was what is referred to as a man's man. I never quite figured it out, how being a man's man equaled to being a ladies' man, but there you have it. His girls usually made a lot of noise, most of them too drunk to realize there was someone pretending to sleep in the next bed, and by the sort of noise they made one could not be sure of what was going on.

Her face was buried in my favorite sheets and for a moment I was considering pressing down on it, keeping her under the surface of steaming laundry, calculating whether the jolts of her struggle for air would contribute to the exquisiteness of the experience. I am often able to scare myself like that, with a perfectly evil thought, and I am often surprised how quickly something as senseless as evil can start to make sense when placed within a particular context.

The thought itself made me panic. The cylinder of the drier started contracting, the woman became tense and calm.

Suddenly, a pair of strange, heavy hands gripped my behind parting it like a cut melon. Before I was able to scream I felt the tip of another man's penis on my anus. I bolted and scuttled inside the drier, pulling the girl in along with me. The giant porthole slammed shut at our heels. I

touched the glass, it was still warm. The girl and I stared through it, each, I presume, looking for his or her attacker.

She appeared not to notice me at all. Somehow it made sense, for I wasn't able to see who was it that had tried to take advantage of me either. All I saw was my own reflection. All I hoped for was that no one would feed the machine more quarters. From the inside of the drier a quarter seemed like a terrifying thing, maybe because the glass door magnifies them, same as it magnifies one's fears, this steel womb offers no security whatsoever, even the warmth it provides is suffocating, the affection of a scalding cauldron.

I had enough presence of mind to pull up my pants. I still hadn't had a chance to see the woman's face. Then another face appeared in the window and I thought it was a reflection of the woman's face. But in fact it was her - standing in front of the drier with our laundry basket.

It was her turn after all...

She opens the dryer, takes him out, takes herself out. They are life-size rag dolls with buttons for eyes and stitches for grins. She examines the male doll's genitals, they are made of a double sock packed tight with sand. She then tucks the sock-penis into the other doll's clean cloth vagina, so that they are easier to carry, in one warm hermaphrodite bundle. Takes them home in a basket, puts them on the bed.

'Now what was it you were saying?'

A doorless den is their house, an apartment they call a house because they spend most of their time in it, a snail's

shell they cannot part from. Three small rooms yawning one into another with empty doorframes, and a bathroom with a broken latch, for smells and sounds to freely circulate and play. They grope their way through jelly-colored wormholes traveling from one space to another, two somnambulists passing through creamy layers of a rich chocolate cake, their nostrils and gullets filled with sweet dough. Life is sweet, a sheltered saccharine life in a witch's house, a trap for Hansel and Gretel minus the witch. Each room with a function, climate, rules of its own, a thirty-five-square-meter chateau, but packed with countless concealed dimensions, where stories are begotten and dialogues interrupted, sentences uttered and dreamed of, step-ladders of chants, spirals and labyrinths of ideas in motion. Reek of orange peels, moldering away snowy green in the open plastic garbage sack, awaits the company of the fish gumbo leftovers.

This home is a flying carpet, the world whizzes by and when they open the front door they are already in a new place. Sometimes it is too hard to step out, one can get too sure of oneself, two twice as sure, that nothing can surprise them, that the world is predictable, its nuances of new all too familiar. They get drunk on tea and listen to the night pass by, their eyes aching wide, sand-filled, soaking up the meowing moonlight.

'Why should we risk all this? Get a disease, get pregnant, stabbed seventeen times...? Why should we jeopardize our happiness getting involved with someone else?' She strokes his head, tugging on his hair to check if it's overgrown.

'Feeling self-sufficient again? That's good. But how long will it last? How long before you start planning our next hold up?'

She bites his lip, harder than she'd bite her lip, as if

it's not his lip either, but a lip, a bite of a stranger's skin, teeth probing the texture, then sinking deeper after that supple muscle underneath it. Embarrassed by her desires, she blushes effortlessly. It appears she only has a choice between one of the two: a memory without an act, or an act with no memories. How else can she have a meal of another person's appetite if every cupidity keeps spilling into the ordinariness of cause and effect chronology where the effect prevents a body from ever learning what it was able to cause.

'We can always feel guilty.' He stops her hand at his forehead, to sense its weight, allow her to read what's inside to be read, without him having to shape it into thought.

'It's not guilt, but a question of whether we can bear the consequences of our imagination. With another person, who do we become? Will we even be able to recognize that new us? Or are they going to be too much for me?'

Silence is hunger. It salivates over words it wants to hear, the more difficult they are to swallow the more it suckles on them, drawing them out like eggs out of a hen, slick, new and shiny, burning with an inner glow, yet fragile, unstable, liquid inside. Like hunger, it tickles the palate, like ants tickling abdomens of aphids. Silence is shared, created, maintained with no small effort, until it exhausts itself and turns into a soft noise of deep respiration.

'I want pancakes with chocolate and marshmallows and whipped cream.'

'We'll have them, and wait, yes, we'll be eating them by the ocean, glistening waves whispering underneath the oleanders, naked, and then an open, daring plunge into the cavernous blue.'

Lenzo Beverages doesn't offer real liquor. Its best-selling item is Colonial Club Finest Quality Charcoal Filtered Diluted Vodka with a two-headed eagle perched on the label under a Kremlin style turban. Add that to your orange juice and all you can hope for is a faint soda pop buzz. Since the store is just around the corner of the university campus it didn't get the license to keep the student population way high and happy. Although, knowing Lenzo, maybe he himself didn't want it. He enjoys easy life, no trouble, no fuss, no intemperance; his big shiny yoga belly plump underneath faded T-shirts and a long, fuzzy Whitmanesque beard, gray and unkempt, show that Lenzo isn't into money. Just likes sitting in his half-stocked store lit by neurotic yellowish bulbs and static-exuding television set, regularly joined by his equally rotund though less coordinated father-in-law. They watch baseball and vend lottery tickets, nowadays the main venality of the neighborhood. Little Italy is, to be both geographically and historically precise, a little Sicily, somewhat withered cluster of shaky wooden houses and apartment buildings, lackluster heirloom of once rampant Mafia activity. Now shaky-kneed and Alzheimer-ridden, the Cosa Nostra progeny's only claim to notoriety will be if, come January, they get sued for trying to save on heating in dismal studios they imprudently rent out to pre-law students.

Therefore, lottery tickets are so beloved because they feed the dream of, if not living, then at least leaving in style. To help potential winners on their way there's Vittantonio's funeral home, a redbrick solemnity just across the nervous blinking eye of *Play the Numbers* sign. Tremulous hands, liver spot dotted and cracked, strive to circle the right damn digit, for once in your life do one damn thing right, stop to think, don't I deserve something special, fingers calculate,

guess, puzzle, analyze, hesitate, add, deduct... *Lenzo, have a favorite?* Not allowed, the knotted beard shakes basking in its own wisdom.

Only because they are Sicilians, not used to the harshness of winters, the aborigines of Little Italy think they can be pardoned for not cleaning the sidewalks during the snow season. Truth is, many of them never ventured out of the neighborhood for more than an hour's drive, let alone flown *Alitalia*. Why the thick crust of deadly ice doesn't cause, year in year out, any serious injury is probably direct merit of the Virgin Mary herself whose bonsai-size cast-stone statues proudly decorate every front yard, accompanied by a smiling donkey.

Smell of dankness permeates this world with its one foot in the deep end of history. The young don't know how to talk to the old, the old rarely talk to each other anymore, what's said is said, no need to go over it again, the best among us already gone, God bless, so will we, Holy Virgin Mother of Christ forgive us our sins. And the weather doesn't help either, with its swelling discolorations, clouds suffering from indigestion, shadowing once salient city of steel.

Now and then a gang of youngsters from the adjacent black neighborhood decides to bring back the good old days, bolts into Lenzo's, or any of the neighborhood thrift-art-galleries with a tired routine: *Le's all be friends. Le's he'p each other out. Keep each other going. T' is a wonderful country. We all paesanos here, we sh' stick together.* The Marlon Brando lisp peppered with the *wuzzup* element gives their effort a postmodernist pastiche charm. They take the change from the till, steal a case of beer and a couple of bags of chips. After they're gone Lenzo calls the police, police takes a report and files it.

Zia Lasagna (nicknamed for her complexion, not her culinary talent), Lenzo's grandmother, confides

in him her suspicions of being watched by her tenant, a PhD student from South Korea, who works nights on biochemistry papers and sleeps during the day. *He's spying on me with that little TV of his (It's called a computer, nonna), in front of the screen all the time, you know? What if he sees me when I, you know...? Faccio la pipì, or something worse. What if he's crazy?*^{6*}

I had a dream. The two of us were walking down to a river or some other body of water. We were going there for a swim in the water yellow and brown with the sand stirred up by the currents. You walked to my right the way we usually walk. It was a dark, hot, humid day, and when we got down to the river we saw a woman there, and a bathroom sink half sunken in the river bank sand: she was bathing a small baby in it. We looked at the baby and it was not more than a fair size fetus, fully formed but small, purple-skinned and curled up, shriveled up like a prune. But it had a big head, almost bigger than the rest of its body and it was talking to the woman as she was bathing it. It spoke in full sentences and when I looked at its face it smiled at me, thin purple skin of its face stretched and its mouth widened full of little, round, same-size, tobacco-stained, yellow little teeth. The whites of its eyes were clear when it looked straight at me and for a moment I was afraid it would jump up at me and bite. But we, both of us,

6 * In the morning I look through our bathroom window directly above the sink and see a beetle suspended on a thread of spider silk turning on the slight current of air to the tune of 'Tu vou'jàll'Americano'. The sorry insect must have had its insides already sucked out, appears to be dancing and whirling ... *whisky & soda...*

got down on all fours in front of the sink baby was bathing in to take a better look, for we have not ever seen such a baby, so strange and frightening and interesting. When we got closer to it, its face looked thin and old, dark purple yet transparent enough to show blue veins coiling like worms under its skin. I must have looked surprised and must have had an amusing expression on my face because the baby immediately mimicked it to the best of its abilities. This surprised me even more, so I made a grimace just to test it and indeed the baby copied my new expression and when I started adding foolish, inarticulate sounds to the faces I was making, the baby started reproducing those as well and it relaxed and started taking it as a game and was much amused by it.

The symbolism of this dream, as far as I can gather, is that the desires of our intellect are always greater than what we are capable of performing at any given moment. But that is rightly so, because it is the function of the intellect to make us do more and do better. We have teeth, we can bite, but we have a pleasant disposition as well, and the ability to grow.

Since last night not afraid of ex-boyfriends any more. It struck me as a revelation, suddenly, as if the waves of energy once scattered and lost had recombined bringing appeasement and sense, like knitting undone for the thread to be spooled up in a new and radiant ball of yarn. Then again it might have merely been the question of having a sip of club soda with lunch. It could have been all that and then some.

He and I went to the theater prepared to suffer through a bad movie for the sake of scouting the scene, testing

the softness of chairs, whether the armrests can be raised to spill the seats into one. We were pleasantly surprised to discover that the darkness became complete once the feature presentation commenced, in the upper rows the whirr of the projector was loud enough to cover the sounds of shuffling feet, crumpling clothes, sighs of minor discomfort. It took a horror film to start me thinking that I'm not scared to think about those men any more and not horrified by the possibility to spot them at the next table in a café, pass them by on a windy winter afternoon; clusters of children upon their arms and shoulders dangling, diddling, belittling the world from the vantage point of their fathers' horsy necks.

It's ten years now since I had my last fling before becoming the two of us. While he hypnotizes the kettle into boiling, I collect men from the past this morning, fresh and anew, stacked one into another like flamboyant matryoshkas, pudgy and harmless, to amuse myself. Man-dolls, shaved and clean, dressed in watercolors, with clipped moons in their eyes and flowers on their molten hips. Transparent in spite of layers, big on the outside, inside small, smaller, miniscule, deeper you get, more fragmented and trepid 'I-s' you find, muzhiks full of themselves (ornaments getting cruder and dirtier inside). Locked in tight-fitting wooden eggshells they smile their retarded smiles. I can touch the oval bodies, clammy and irrelevant. Nothing comes out of it.

Looking up their names on the web, what happens to paths when they split, me choosing them rather than them me. And it was a good choice, to be the one who did the choosing, but much was amiss. Search: _____ Go. Unoriginal names shared by hundreds, cannot tell who's who, extensive listings of lottery winners and high school graduates. Look, the photographer has his own website, his

name contaminating every page like a deadly virus. I don't know what it is I really want, to see how far I progressed, or how close I remained. It would seem that once you feel affection you will not stop feeling it, once you hate you cannot stop hating, but that's not true: given time, all that is left is a box of faded snapshots that might have come from a family album, a family that is not my own.

Separate instances of compromise, that's what those had been, people going only half of the half way to each other, they were only half there, and myself only half ready to be taken. Yet even then I was aware of the inadequacy of halves and was aching for a whole to fill me up, was looking at the world to swallow it with my eyes that were wet with the strain of trying to see it all at once, see it as it really is.

One of my girlfriends was disgusted with my stealing a married man from his two children and his good schoolteacher wife. I replied I was twenty-one and was meant to steal. Later the girlfriend will become a schoolteacher and a mother of two. When he, the married man, came to my apartment, he tortured me with stories of the one great heartbreak of his life who lived in a foreign country, before trying to straddle me, losing his erection just before entering, thank heavens, since I wasn't on the pill. I had never had sex before, although my mouth had been full of it. I took his miniscule cannoli-penis in my hands, and he came, all the while talking about that same woman of his life whom he would never see again and who still lived in that same foreign country. Walking around the city in the summer, his wife and children away for a vacation with his in-laws, he would pick a safe neighborhood, bars with any sport on television and cheap wine. The wine tasted like sips of seawater, my hand

lingered on the stem of the glass, waiting to be noticed, to be properly adored. I figured I had the right to expect it, I deserved to be that one, the only, because that would have been my first time, first time ever.

At the end of Jacques Tati's *Playtime* cars, busses, bicycles, pedestrians, all of the traffic with its noise and unpredictability moves in a circle. Suddenly something which seemed so chaotic, senseless, and tiring merges in a nostalgic serene carousel, everyone follows its own way yet everyone gets connected. People look like obedient marionettes and after the set is dismantled Jacques Tati files for bankruptcy.

Everyone is called upon to be a darling of wisdom, but people often decide to shop instead. This book is not for sale. Please return it if you wish to have a clear conscience.

'Having second thoughts?'

'None whatsoever.'

'Me neither.'

'Strange. At first, when the two of us just got together, I thought I would never want anyone else, I thought I'd never feel alone anymore. But I still do.'

'Why is that?'

'We've grown eyes on the backs of our heads, we've grown new sets of arms and legs and genitals, new faces to face the world even when we're facing each other, we

realize that we want other people.’

‘Aren’t we supposed to be enough for each other?’

‘There’s no such thing as enough. You can’t have enough air. Besides I don’t feel alone in the same way that I used to. I don’t want another you, I don’t want someone who’d want me, I want someone who’d want both of us. The world is an ocean of a definition, ‘to want’ is an atom of oxygen, ‘to feel’ is an atom of hydrogen. We take a swim because we want to feel, and feel what we want, our desires and emotions create the tension that we perceive as a liquid surface, something to dive under, paddle through, glide on, a surface that can support as well as drown us, an expanse to navigate or get lost in. We understand it.’

‘It’s only natural.’

‘It’s ninety percent of our bodies.’

‘It’s ninety eight percent of a cucumber.’

‘We’re strong enough to want to test our strength. After all, if there’s nothing that can be lost, is it worth having in the first place?’

‘I agree. It will bring us closer.’⁷

7 She pulls the bottom of her undershirt over her head to halt any further conversation. She does a thing like that to show her discontent with the subject being discussed, sometimes to allow us time enough to savor a particularly significant discovery that has been reached in our exchange. Her breasts are bare, striped by the light sliced through the blinds. Her belly breathing. The undershirt covers her head like a headscarf. It’s white. She’s a bare-breasted Madonna. Notices I’m watching her intently. Sticks her tongue at me. Impudent Bare-Breasted Madonna. I’m still watching her. Pulls the headscarf over her face. Bare-Breasted Blind Madonna. Waits for me to say something. Like an infant that has hidden under the bed sheets giggling, expecting to be discovered. Bare-Breasted Blind Laughing Madonna. Laughing in the Face of the Firing Squad Bare-Breasted Madonna. She expects me to continue the conversation. I wonder if she can see me through her blindfold. I wonder if I can reach one of her breasts across the table. She’ll hear the chair creaking. I’ll give it a try anyway.

‘Hello.’ The cat says. ‘Hello.’

There are two cats in the house across from ours. One is black and white, the other white and yellow. They are capable of sitting through a whole day on sills of two windows screened by wire, sometimes both of them in one window, sometimes one in each, sometimes neither in either.

In windows they sit and stretch and look through windows at sparrows teasing them sitting on the fence, climbing the bushes, lining up on phone lines like sparrow shish kebabs, but the cats are fed, seem content enough to merely gaze at sparrows without getting too high-strung, never leaving their posts, except to change the position, like a movable two-frame gallery exhibition, giving meaning even to the empty windows, meaning you look at empty windows thinking this is a window in which a cat might sit, or this is a window in which a cat might have sat a moment ago.

These cats would be easy for us to identify with. We see them sitting in their windows, they see us sitting in our chairs in our study. We change places, they change places, and there’s no telling whether these cats belong more in their windows or the two of us in our chairs. We’re seemingly the same. Except the cats don’t say anything and don’t appear to have anything to say, whereas the two of us, as we’re saying things, think of new things to say even before we finish saying what we’re saying, because we operate two brains and two sets of speaking apparatuses, but only a single time to say anything in, since we haven’t discovered how to double the time as well, yet.

But there’s a cat that says ‘Hello.’

‘Hello’ the cat says.

It is a cat that doesn’t belong in any of the windows

in our neighborhood, a three-legged black cat that has learned how to speak out of solitude. It visits those cats in windows and speaks to them, or at least it's trying to speak. Sometimes it manages to say:

'Hello.'

Sometimes it says:

'Mother.'

Sometimes it says:

'Allow me.'

Sometimes it says:

'Help.'

Sometimes it says:

'Zaum.'

It is trying to connect with the cats in the windows, it greets them, addresses them as family in the manner of all the beggars of the East, offers its services, pleads for assistance, indicates the language it is trying to speak in, or maybe it uses the name of its own language to identify itself as well, uses it as its own name, like the English use English.

The cat named Zaum, it tries to speak but sounds as if a cat got its tongue. It says:

'Meadow.'

It says:

'Alone.'

It says:

'How are you? How do you do?'

It is beside itself with politeness, behind its mind. But the cats in windows don't answer back. Maybe because they think of themselves as of a higher breed than Zaum the Cat, which they are, up there in their windows, it down at the bottom of the fence. Or maybe because they are as mute as it is lame, missing the left hind paw necessary to communicate with fellow cats; or maybe because they are

just moving pictures, they are not supposed to speak, to say anything, only entertain.

Yet the three-legged cat is the one we identify with the most. Its plight, we feel, is similar to ours. Its plaintiveness is embarrassing, one shouldn't need to beg pardon in order to say what one has to say, in order to be listened to. One shouldn't begin each sentence with 'Please' or 'If I may'. And we question the windowless cat's integrity, would it try to speak all the time if it would have a window of its own, sitting with its right side turned to the world, hiding the fact it's defective, hiding the missing leg, would it not appear as ordinary as other cats in other windows are, would it then dare to speak, would it then have anything at all to say?

So we do the only thing we can to differentiate ourselves from Zaum the Three-Legged Cat, to separate ourselves from its appalling behavior, to break the habit of identifying ourselves with anyone, any cat, to retain, for what they're worth, our chairs and our voices, our words and the right to speak, the right to demand to be heard, we do the only possible thing – we do not feed it – hoping it will eventually stop coming around, or at least stop speaking, trying to say something, realize it is just a cat.⁸

8 In absence of others each of them becomes another other for the other. Local youth clenching his teeth, exposing to the sun his blistering abdomen, with which he hit the water in a seventeen-foot dive when mid-air his summersault collapsed. Woman sitting knees apart on a curb, a sour grapefruit wedge in her mouth, feeling good about the run in her left stocking and the pile of books under her elbow. Submissive girl with an Aztec eagle tattooed across her shoulder blades who when fucked from behind looks as if she's caught by the bird. Fifty-year-old man who earns his living impersonating a bearded lady in a sideshow, and likes to fall asleep being held by his penis by anyone at all.