

cigarette newspaper coffee soda beer



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a novel, with an introduction by the author,  
antarah crawley

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*We are as water; weak and of no consequence, always descending, abiding in no certain place, unless we are detained with violence; and every little breath of wind makes us rough and tempestuous and troubles our faces; every trifling accident discomposes us; and as the face of waters wafting in a storm so wrinkles itself that it makes upon its forehead furrows deep and hollow like a grave, so do our great and little cares and trifles first make the wrinkles of old age, and then they dig a grave for us; and there is in nature nothing so contemptible, but it may meet us in such circumstances that it may be too hard for us in our weakness; and the sting of a bee is a sharp weapon enough to pierce the finger of a child or the lip of a man; and those creatures which nature hath left without weapons yet are they armed sufficiently to vex those parts of a man which are left defenseless and obnoxious to a sunbeam, to the roughness of a sour grape, to the unevenness of a gravel stone to the dust of a wheel, or the unwholesome breath of a star looking awry upon a sinner.*

Jeremy Taylor

*O sing O muse—cognate with mind and all acts pertaining  
O brood O muse upon my mighty subject like a holy hen upon the  
nest of night  
O ponder the fascism of the heart ...*

W. H. Gass



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# *Om` Qi Wu Om* an Introduction

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## *I. Thesis: Manifesto*

Simultaneously or alternately, you may inhabit any number of infinite and often incommensurable energy states, or realities. We are anchored, at least in perception, to our locality while being free to traverse what Huxley calls the whole spaceless, timeless world of universal Mind. We must further reconcile the egregious offense of being born into a social system as a self-aware and self-centered entity. I'm being bitter. "Egregious offense," as if sadistically employed by a sentient and sovereign creator. This Introduction will essay toward the conjecture that there was an origin place, though by no means aware of its self or its repercussions. It's far more likely, to echo Gass, that the real world fell out of bed being born and broke like a dish, so that whatever once might have worked no longer does, and whatever was whole once is now in pieces. This accident was likely met at the hands of a force like gravity rather than a child as playful or person as clumsy as this god must be. Should its intentions be sound, and we are its playthings, then it must have a wit and intellect bent on the sadistic. To quote again that Good Doctor: Had God had the wit of Henry James or Alfred North Whitehead, He would have done better by us; as I am sure, were there one, He would have had, and would have done. What do we really know besides our locality and the consciousness which engulfs it like a cosmic egg? We must not rely on powers as overt as the divine nor as base and corruptible as the social to guide our lives. As with all things, this life of our warrants balance. An effective life is based upon harmonizing with the most immediate reality in the most fluid and adaptive of manners, or embracing each individual moment as if it were wholly self-contained. Yet we know that they are not self-contained; they are not absolute particles. These particles of time occur in waves of

probable eventualities, as a result and in anticipation of the series of eventualities which have produced and will result from that moment, temporal motifs which may fork from the present as in a circular crossroad of infinite radius, where any direction embarked upon may lead to yet another probable outcome of a limited but infinite set. Yes, it is inherently a paradox. We can escape the frustrating probabilities of random occurrence only by exiting the universal system through descent, as through a hole, or ascension, as in obliteration. Furthermore, our individual consciousnesses, which are built upon a seemingly organized linear progression of these series of random happenings, may influence our decision at these crossroads. We must harmonize our unique perception of a rational system of relevant probable eventualities with the infinite scope of the paths lain before us. Synthesizing with the possibility of a future as based exclusively and inherently on the present which has come to fruition by way of one single set of this ubiquitous and lasting system is the function by which we are to remain assuredly and absolutely on our way.

You can sit staring down a blank sheet like a gun barrel or a white rabbit's burrow and find no flare or wonderland. It is not so easy to claim that nowhere is now here. But for those of you who can, you know that the adventures only multiply from there. One must become an editor to one's self. One must become a critic and a curator, all these personalities tugging against and within the rattling skullcell of the imprisoned writer. And doesn't that noun sound so unsettling, as if anyone who listed their cupboard's vacancies were one. But of course it is not as simple as cataloging or recalling. It is not one act, nor is it merely the mimesis of life. The skill of a writer is evident in how well s/he can contain and dissolve this schizophrenia. How fluidly the prose flows from tributaries into one sturdy dam.

In revision, the process by which all writing becomes text, the writer becomes critic, stoic and cynic, and word becomes human, all too human. If these words are to be etched in stone over the author's submerged person, then they must be sound. They must harmonize in the celestial symphony. To remove a scene or apply a new attribute to a character is to alter the metaphysical framework of a story; but upon what basis are we making these changes? We do not read just the text when we readjust the text. We are establishing the merits of a universe. We must therefore rely securely upon a chosen framework. A critic defines and evaluates the merits of said framework. Workshopped material, whether institutional or not, is criticized into being, and in publication becomes criticism against that which cannot be workshopped and that which cannot be published. Work therefore operates on more pedagogical levels than we often admit. Concurrent with Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, the author acts upon her subject, altering it, making representation a farce, a mere recognition. The author actively criticizes her own life in living it and her own fiction in creating it. If one says that the author lies in the shadow of her characters (that the word on the page marks her grave), then the reply must be: Well, what of *their* characters? Are letters not just notions refined from their crude origin? What of that previous life, of other meanings, what mouths have shaped them? Characters are not hardened things, no matter, they are compositions of discrete materiality; at the quantum level they are pure expression, energetic states in constant motion. Our twenty-six letters have come to signify the world to us, but there is a world



which they obscure: the etymology which they assume to bookend (for the time). We must not ignore the world, the references and allusions, which wrought these sets of letters from the inkblack abyss. If we are to have a world in fiction then we must also construct a world around it. As Dr. Gass intones: “Writing A, B, C—all the same. Words, words, words, as Hamlet sneered. No—no difference between life and language...no difference between conversation and news, a letter or an anecdote, history or advice, psychology or travel; no difference between A (writing fiction), B (composing criticism), or C (constructing a theory).”

I've lost the ability to see what is before me as evidence of itself. What we take as object is always an agent mediating its own elementary composition against its metaphysical import; both of these are parentheses which place the text in contention. The utmost importance of context and the agency of language: these are my parent theses.

The New Syllabus is a critical framework through which we will contextualize key texts of the Decayed Modern period in American Literature. These texts explore the convergence of post-war linguistically hyperaware literature, anarchy, philosophical Taoism, contemporary sexual theory / radical feminism, and quantum physics toward *a human* (local, codified male) *interpretation of a nonhuman* (universal, codified female) *reality*.

### *The New Syllabus: A Brief Account*

During the adolescent years of our century, at a time in which the cynic-sarcastic consensus claimed that such a thing could not be accomplished, the public of contemporary American Literature witnessed the development of a unique, impassioned, and exciting zeitgeist unfold via lecture between the novelists Carla Marborough and Walter Kogard. The lectures were not academic. They had evolved, rather clumsily, from parties of close and narrowly likeminded artists spewing drug-fueled sewage sewn sloppily from a medley of yesteryear's theory and the fringiest of contemporary cultural references into public forums attended by the adherents of such wild conjectures and the curious, who remained unsure if what they heard professed was actually devoid of all meaning or if it was obfuscating a more unsettling and incomprehensible truth. Soon the gatherings grew past the intimacy of parties; some attendants were people from the suburbs looking at the weird scene, some were people from the city looking at the weird scene, and some were the weird scene.

During this period of development each member of the recognized Five Schools of the Vanguard had released anywhere from two to six books, at least one of which had to be a criticism which elaborated upon its cohort's unique aesthetic. Public adherence to these letters had been quite productive for the publishing industry, despite its previous aversion to the experimental, likely because it allowed the intellectual landscape to unfold more like baseball, in which stats, which Americans adore, became supreme, and less like hockey, which offered the rare bestseller goal and the odd scrap between ignorant players. Where once the Author wrote her heart out ever so individually, disdaining compartmentalization, and leading inevitably to the generalization of an

indistinguishable mass of voices, the emergence of the New Schools offered the public the spectacle of sport.

Walter Kogard, who led the equally lauded and lamented New Syllabus School, had released his first novel, *Monolith*, two years prior to his noted association with some of the discipline's most eccentric practitioners. The fringe had initially ignored him, despite the Gaseous odor of his prose, because *Monolith* had sold exceedingly well, to the point that one could say that it revitalized an interest in reading in the American public, not to mention its preeminence in Western European, Chinese, and South American markets. His fame as a Time-sponsored literary poster boy, however, soon fell to his infamy when the violently resurged Occupation took as its anarchist doctrine that same work. While he was blacklisted from the corporate side of literary sponsorships, this did little to disrupt his position as one of the most respected men of letters. Should the Occupation not have been subdued, he may very well have been convicted of treason.

Regardless of the success or failure of the New Occupation, whether or not one "believed" in it, Kogard became a person of interest to the far left and those whose work observed it. Naturally, persons of great note gathered round him, most frequently at drinking and reading venues like Samsara, the Narrative, and A Ubiquitous and Lasting System of Hexagonal Galleries, a grassroots library composed of a block of interconnected warehouses in Bushwick.

Adherents to the New Syllabus formed a somewhat militant cohort, although most of the members self-identified as pacifists. How their politics bent left as west while their intellect remained far from confrontational could only be apprehended through the convoluted literature of their metaphysic, which Kogard left unnamed, though certain critics (notably, Susan Strehle in *Fiction in the Quantum Universe*, 1992, an indispensable prerequisite to the present school) describe it as "Discrete" or "Actual" Taoism. The scientific implications of Strehle's Actualism upon the literary and religious philosophy of the NS will be later expounded. Politically, one could distill their message into the slogan "The state's demise is in its stars," which meant that while the Syllabus advocated such an end, no action was needed to fulfill it. The use of developments in the new physics to support key tenets of philosophical Taoism and the fulfillment of the inevitable Way formed the foundation of Kogard's unique brand of passive anarchy. And the Syllabus followed Kogard. In practice, they did not so much antagonize the state as disincorporate themselves to apply rules of law and conduct to their actions. Most of them actually led quite meaningful and productive lives.

The dissenting politics of the New Syllabus naturally influenced their linguistics, aesthetics, content, and form. Ron Silliman makes an interesting foray into the intersection of protest and poetics in his superb and important essay, "Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World," from *The New Sentence*: "What happens when a language moves toward and passes into a capitalist stage of development is an anaesthetic transformation of the perceived tangibility of the word, with corresponding increases in its expository, descriptive, and narrative capacities, preconditions for the invention of 'realism,' the illusion of reality in capitalist thought." The significance of this commoditizing effect on language may strike the contemporary reader as familiar when we consider the command of that unworthy king Franzen to make the text "transparent," to make the novel as consumable as television, as if their audiences

constituted the same market; how this mantra infiltrated, if but unconsciously, the approach of everyone from bestselling hacks to internet alt lit gurus to confessional memoirists to Pulitzer Prize winners of this century (and might we consider furthermore how Gass has felt about that Prize, being awarded almost pointedly to the most mediocre and remedial of works toward the effect of giving the consuming public only that which will appease its lowest common denominator, degrading the prime rib to the commercial quality of a Quarter Pounder). Although, this was not a strictly modern trope. Language has had its enemies since the dawn of capitalism itself, which is namely the culprit for this leveling of meaning across all written mediums, from poetry to subway ads. Language, under this economy, must be subverted to invoke the absolute reality of the market, and, as Silliman continues, “These developments are tied directly to the function of reference in language, which under capitalism is transformed, narrowed into referentiality.” To what is this subverted language referencing?—to the social dynamics of capitalism: “Words not only find themselves attached to commodities, they *become* commodities ... torn from any tangible connection to their human makers, they appear instead as independent objects active in a universe of similar entities, a universe prior to, and outside, any agency by a perceiving Subject” – hence recent contemporary literature's desire to suppress all evidence of style other than a minimal, understated, gritty, realistic stylelessness, as if stories were universally applicable advertisements for the human condition. The New Syllabus was aware of this convention to efface the text in favor of a numbing pleasurable effect, and desired no part of the racket. The world which they sought to represent was not the world of consumer capitalism and its annexes, it was not the world of the suburbs or of *Freedom*. It was the discontinuous world between the deepest of human consciousness, the erratic absurdity of nature, and the sadomasochism of American society, things which are inherently unmarketable. Thus they who dissent from the approved reality become dissenters of the state. And this anarchy becomes not merely a war against the state but a war for representation itself. If we are to consider the import placed on the marks lain on pages, and the whole scam perpetrated by American society to suppress and quell their unique meaning, then the old NS mantra rings especially true: Wizen the Mark, The Jig is Up!

Gass writes that literature is written in solitude and read in silence, and this suppression of observed matter has exercised its effect through the ultimate erasure of the scribe in the wake of an erected reality in writing. Silliman writes that going forward from the introduction of the book and, later, the novel, as facets of capitalism's strive for absolute reality of the subjection of persons and resources (in fiction, it is a subjection of the creator, either to exalt The Creator or to bring into relief created entities [commodities] as absolute), authors saw increasingly less of their audience (just as the factory seamstress never saw the wearer of her dress) until such a crucial point that Barthes declared their death (as if commodities sprung spontaneously from the miracle of the capitalist machine). (It may as well by now be said that everyone is dead: God, says Nietzsche; Author, says Barthes; Novel, says Sukenick—We are all deceased; we are not postmodern but postmortem; and our modern bodies have decayed; nevertheless, we persist through this bleak subreality ...) The New Syllabus retains the need for personhood, the acknowledgement of the hand of the scribe upon the world she has wrought in words; the person is of import; she will not be suppressed by the tyranny of

colonial states. Further exacerbated by the quantification and analysis of human data collected increasingly more often in a digitized world, whereby, as Jonathan Crary writes for Newsweek, we're turned into monetized bits of information, the NS sought to exalt the human in all her physicality, both in body and in text. "In [this] new phase of global capitalism," Crary writes, "...every possible area of individual and social existence is being reorganized to coincide with the demands of the marketplace. The formula is to financialize whatever used to be part of personal or private life, or owned in common," as in the public domain of internet profiles. Neither are humans susceptible to profiling, says the NS, as we are not so conformable as to be contained within a standard mode of presentation (which is why, in my opinion, Tumblr, with its customizable themes, is far more creatively conducting than Facebook). The real person's wont is to break out of this rigid ordering and analysis of a spontaneous life; thus are the dissenters prone to be labeled as "experimental" in the world of literary review. This perceived "experimentality" constitutes rather a rejection of capitalistic commoditization and conformation of linguistic conventions. If the writer wished to turn her commas into colons and to indent five times minus one for every succeeding paragraph, then it shall be as warranted as an endstop like this one. Texts, just like their writers, have a right of individuality, and it is the glory of this great nation that we may all express our true selves. One will dare to wield one's will within the world both real and represented. The NS sought, in this regard, to occupy the page just as their forebearers had done in Zuccotti Park those many years prior. It may seem hypocritical now that Kogard championed all of this having already made his monies in the capital marketplace, yet that success was precisely what allowed him to rally against it so flagrantly, and allow those other artists of similar mindset and skinnier pockets to pursue their important work in this field.

Kogard officially (that is, ritually) established his school at the Hexagonal Galleries on fall's two-year anniversary of *Monolith*. Meetings were to begin with the reading of poetry (Kogard often chose "Into This Time" by Jayne Cortez), then a reading from the *Tao Te Ching*, then a reading of passage from one of the Syllabus' exalted muses: Taylor, Browne, Valery, or Gass. (There were other figures of praise, to be sure, yet none achieved the effect of sublime transcendence through prose as these four). On this initial occasion, Kogard gave a reading of his now famous essay on the Way in Society, entitled "Beat Off, Seamen," which came to shape the greater paradigm of the New Syllabus throughout its tenure.

With this introduction Kogard led the New Syllabus to much popular and critical acclaim, not merely in the political realm (which, while emerging from the personal, was marginal) but, via lecture, though the vallies of postmodernism's most abstract labyrinths. He released his second novel, *Wu-Wei*, three years later, an event which was met less as his fictional sophomore than as the second coming of the Christ, or Lao Tzu, or any number of saints and sages and prophets, for they litter the annals of history like cigarette butts; their frequency not withstanding, Kogard entered among them. Which means that he was vilified by as many as exalted him.

Carla Marborough had released three novels and three works of criticism by the release of *Wu-Wei*, among them, *Bruises*, *Braving the Waves*, *Queer Dykeotomies*, *Barely Escaping from Repression*, and *Mysogynistic Tendencies*. She was often

described as shrill (by her friends) and a bitch (by her enemies) and drank a burgundy with her breakfast of eggwhites and almonds. Where she lay within the schools was a subject of much debate.

There had once been a distinction between the Wound School and the Womb School. The former concerned itself predominantly with the lacerations of society upon the female body and nature's sadistic sense of humor while the latter was consumed more with afflictions from within, but their ideologies, by synopsis, soon blurred, and colloquially they sounded too alike for many to bother distinguishing. This angered Marborough to no end, and she pointedly differentiated between the two when noted, though declined to align herself. A prudent critic would maintain the difference as well, though within the context of the Vanguard they comprised only one, called, infrequently, the O-Thing School. Arguments remained perpetually unclosed.

Not only did the O-Thing straddle two prominent aesthetics, but had within it many informal departments. The Modest School, also exclusively female (if you were to count the transgender /transvestite members), possessed the subtle biting indignation of some Old Realists, but they were too indebted to images of middle-aged women searching for lost socks to stir greater interest.

The Black Hole School, the branch of the O-Thing concerned with black femininity, also represented a prominent cohort, though to the discontent of its members, who longed to be respected as a school independent of the predominantly-white O-Thing. Certain factions within it differed on whether or not the school could sustain itself without the umbrella cohort. No definite conclusion was reached; both faithful and dissenting members achieved renown among Black Star School adherents and the general female reading public; but the only member who achieved crossover success was Sethe T. Garner.

The CUNTY School rested on the fringe of the New Feminist Writers, and could be aligned closer to the New Syllabus. Marborough certainly considered them as much of an enemy. Their scathing inverted misogyny polarized the female reading public, and it came to be a rule that brick and mortar booksellers only carried the O-Thing while the CUNTY School work was disseminated by chapbook, zine, and blog. These works were often short essays and sketches, for the CUNTY cohort abhorred the conventions of plot much as they abhorred conventions of sexual relation. The most prevalent among these twentysomething women was Renata Nigmedzyanov. She had, in some respects, assumed the once-exalted position of Séa Costilla as the self-exploitative confessionalist. Ms. Costilla herself had recently released a novel of great complexity and nuance which located her closer to the Modest School; it was generally the case that by the age of thirty CUNTY bloggers graduated to one of the mature cohorts. Renata, however, had proudly found her niche in this medium, particularly with the story "Date Night," later titled "Gymnopædia."

Renata had a sizable and loyal following on vagrag.com, as well as in their bi-weekly zine. In time, she alined herself squarely beside Kogard. Kogard, in turn, alined himself squarely inside of her.

In the beginning, life was simple. You met your cohorts through readings and seminars. The ideological bent of the event determined who would be in attendance. Neither Marborough nor her apprentice Deborah Scott would have been caught dead at a

Henry Miller discussion. And Kogard would have been amiss to find himself hearing spoken aloud the paintpeeling recollections of Miss Scott herself. What they valued, as team players do, was solidarity, and Renata's betrayal, so to speak, may have been the first straw laid on the camel's back. Subsequently, the publication of Kogard's short reverie *A Grottesquerie* further fanned the flame under the O-Thing skirts, and caused Marborough to retaliate in manners both professional and vulgar. She soon thereafter established a rigorous model of plot, theme, and imagery which was to more adequately guide her cohort, placing her dichotomously opposite the New Syllabus, who concerned itself with content more absurd within forms more daring, as was Renata's wont. Kogard's apprentice Jacob Schmidt complied his pedagogy in two works of criticism, *Gassscape* and *Decayed Modern: A New Syllabus toward the Instruction of Literary Criticism and Execution*. Schmidt had also released a novel called *Dog Found* which was not as readily received. His import lay only in that he catalogued the reveries of the prophet, and if Kogard was the savior, Gass was god.

New Syllabusers revered Gass the way Gass had Rilke. And just as the critical philosophe drew further back from Sir Thomas Browne and Jeremy Taylor, so did the NS draw from their roster of Stein, Sukenick, Borges, Barth, Gaddis, O'Brien, Hawkes, Hofstadter, and Pynchon. Schmidt laid out their mission in this regard, as Gass had for Rilke, to the end of horizontalizing voices once reserved for doctorate theses, who, while immaculate, holy even to the literary sensibilities, were seldom noted.

A now marginal member of the New Syllabus named Edourd Ulger had released a novel of infamy in its early years, *Please Don't Let Your Dog Foul in the Mews*, colloquially known by its latter four-word verb clause. He was due to be as notorious as Kogard, and his work ventured to mend the long unsewn hem of absurdist black humor; but key persons objected to his heavily trafficked fashion blog, Hasidic or Hipster, and he was damned to the obscurity of the unreviewed. He is still spoken of highly when noted in certain circles.

One could postulate that the incredulous, self-deprecating, and restless method of Ulger's *Foul in the Mews*, and the generally lawless approach of the New Syllabus, could be traced from their infatuation with Gass back through the catalogues of the Dalkey Archive, to whom the philosopher offered numerous introductions. It was as if each of the members had been hypnotized by its spiraling monogram. Incidentally, Kogard's federal hometown had lately been overrun by new developments funded in great part by the Douglas Development Corporation, who also possessed the same logo. He could not help but feel that their mutual omnipotence was not a coincidence.

It would be crass to say that the New Syllabus went so far as to try to undermine the canon and reinvent ontological principles of grammar, usage, and character (assuming, furthermore, that those are the sole components of creative writing), because another of the early crossover stars, Jean-Luc Godsdog, had written two heralded tomes, *Go Back and Retrieve It* and *Atoms of Amber in the Fire Mirror*, which operated within structural and thematic conventions implicit in the the Graduate School(s) manifesto; yet by taking on their aesthetic and subverting its effect, he essentially nullified the existence of this once prominent cohort, silently condemning them to a tenure of toiling tirelessly in untrod halls of cultural ruin.

Godsdog and the greater New Syllabus could not have then departed further from the aesthetic of the Graduate School(s), which had existed some seventy years prior to their rise. Where the latter's approach to language was purely utilitarian, a platonic code referencing only that prescribed signified thing (singular) which convention allowed, the former muddled the meaning, turning text to tar. Quite apprehensively, the literary landscape departed from the concrete, Newtonian, observable and verifiable codex of what the elders called Realism toward an ethereal, quantum paradox of fluctuations. To echo Strehle, they wanted to "comment on a lived reality through the pane of art," they wanted to affirm both art and the real world. The reality remained, however, that reality could not be verified, and what was taken as real from one point to another varied widely. Furthermore, the mirror which the Realist once held up to the world was no longer as immaculate as Newton had polished: it was a stained glass, highly ornamental in many cases. If one squinted one could glimpse ripples of the world beyond. To the critics of this so-called narcissistic self-indulgence, Kogard only responded, "For now we see through a glass, darkly." To the Syllabus (in true Actualist fashion), reality *is* discontinuous, statistical, energetic, relative, subjective, and uncertain. Conflation is the rule, modeled off the particle approach to observation, that is, to sense beyond the physic, beyond the black-inked alphabet, to the negative space between letters, the interpretation unfixed, as if having floated coincidentally into that order between the inch margins of this chaotic blankness. When the reading public found itself unsure whether Doris had been looking out of a window or into a mirror when she saw the widow kill her husband in *Atoms of Amber*, it knew that what some had (naively) continued to assume as one consistent reality could no longer be applied to any representation of the world. Modernity, which had departed from the nineteenth century's empirical historicism and romantic nostalgia in the same direction that the individual departed from social consensus, and interpretation from divine doctrine, had now departed from itself, decomposed, dismantled, decayed, its shattered fragments swept into a boundless dustbin. From Modern Relativity literature evolved to Decayed Quantum Theory, two entities which did not necessarily cancel each other out but deepen their water unfathomable fathoms and return the elementary particles to their mother ground. From the dominant Christian paradigm, Kogard moved human morale closer to that prescribed in the *Tao Te Ching*, though he often utilized Biblical passages for allusive, aesthetic, and ironic purposes. He, in particular, believed he was composing a new ideological canon toward the progress of American letters, as expounded to a pedagogical degree by Schmidt. He was, to many, the chair of the New Criticism. Whether or not their dogma exercises a lasting effect on the discipline remains to be seen. As for Marborough, her unique influence has now expired, and the feud which once seemed so titillating has been reinterpreted as righteous indignation against a *man* who was working on an ideology not too dissimilar from her own. What she had not wanted—to be affiliated with *him*, an arrogant bastard who giddily accepts the label of prophet—has happened. It turns out that their aesthetics are quite similar. Marborough remains a significant figure, to be sure, but merely as a component of the now-comprehensive New Syllabus. And Walter Kogard was not so audacious as to believe that his cohort did not require the New Female voice. He exalted Renata to a position of import beyond even Marborough. It seems now that the spectacle of sport was simply a

gimmick to get people to read again—and to get people to read rich writing. That was always the endgame: to instill a sense of immediacy, intrigue, and passion into the literary scene. No matter the self-designation of these writers, for labels are always inconsequential in this regard, the point was always to Make it Ernest. Make it Urgent. Make it New.

*... A curtain is rising on the western world. A fine rain of soot, dead beetles, anonymous small bones. The audience sits webbed in dust. Within the gutted sockets of the interlocutor's skull a spider sleeps and the jointed ruins of the hanged fool dangle from the flies, bone pendulum in motley. Fourfooted shapes go to and fro over the boards. Ruder forms survive.*



## II. *Antithesis: Against Father*

### II.i. *Beat Off, Seamen*, an essay, by Walter Kogard

The current of the Way allows some to drown and others to float. Some people, born into an endless night, drown in all aspects of their life, never to wash ashore again, and are committed entirely to sea. It is not that they are bad seamen, but simply too heavy or unbalanced to float upon the current. For these people, to drown is the organic action, while for others, they float on, or else drown in some regard, and then are washed ashore elsewhere, displaced from the voyage they thought they were to complete. Some people simply do not have a floating composition; they are apprehensive of the sea, and so it is the way for them to remain on shore with the rest of the clan, never risking their submergence; or, if they hear the call yet aren't prepared to fulfill it, out of ignorance or naivete, they will beat off into the waters and drown, and fertilize the sea, so that others may float upon their essence, lent to the depths of the Way. When the Way pulls you down in its undertow, swimming against it will only facilitate your demise. If you have your doubts it's better that you stay on shore and follow the rules, for the sea is strong, my friends, and will always get its way. It floats those who are worthy and eats those who aren't. Therein these less-ready souls may suffer a seachange, and be reborn in another realm to try again.

Although it is necessary for the shore to receive fertilization from the sea, it is contrary to the ideology of the state, and indeed of humanity itself, to let one's self float awash the sea of existence without trying to swim toward a defined shore. All things wish to persist in their being, and for this cause bodies rally together on a shore and forge a nation to hold the mysterious sea at bay. Priests are elected to give sacrifice to the spirits of the Way, to appease the sea, lest its tides wash ashore and flood their community. Warrior-kings are elected to protect the nation with brute force against the wrath of the sea, as well as any other entity which dare threaten the well-being of the state. In this fight for survival, humanity seeks its own persistence, and those who succumb to the wont of the sea to consume them are outcast, lest they incite others to do the same and threaten the union of the nation. Eliot writes that sane people do as their neighbors do, and this is to protect everyone from folly. But there are those of us to whom the sea beckons, and we beat off in our little rafts into the current, searching for that ultimate personal and universal meaning which no nation can provide, which only the sea in its infinite and destructive wisdom can enlighten. And we are at its mercy out there; we give ourselves up to its whims and winds, risking total submergence within it, but hoping that it will wash us upon a more fertile shore. I am of this clan of seamen. I wish to depart from the safety and stability forged on the shore of this nation, and find a destiny on the horizon. There are many of us; we cross paths; but we are on our separate courses, each searching for different things in the depth of the waters. What depth can we dig on land? In the waters, thrashing, there is a deep well of meaning. We are the Mikeys, escaping, holding in our imagination some wistful wish that something lies *down here*, in the depths of our seas. Those on land call us crazy, that we are risking certain death, that we have not the sense to stay with the pack and do as we're told ... but do they not look out from the porches of their grounded homes and wonder what lies

beyond the shoreline? They are simply Mikeys who haven't yet taken the plunge. There is no shame in diving in, my friends, my readers. I shall not look back as I paddle on. Stay at your desk if you wish. The sea beckons me.

Father is our shore, our nation, our set of rules, our sense of shame for breaking them. We are in his balls, where it is so warm and familiar, and we reproduce with each other to forge a community. But when the sea of Mother calls, and father splurges forth his current into her, only some of us take up the call, those more adventurous little sperms. We will not all survive in the sea of the cervix. Many of us will die in our voyage to fertilize that egg of meaning in this life. But those of us who do succeed will produce a beautiful new life, a little being of our own, to wash upon a new shore, to see the light of day, to forge a new community, and commence the process over again. Mother waits perpetually at bay, calling forth those adventurous seamen who will take up the call. Her voice is divine, is it not? for those of us who can hear it in the salty breeze.

There are those of us who return to the shore on which we were born with knowledge of the wide weird sea, and we naturally captivate our communities with our stories, our wisdom, and the sheer fact that we did not perish out there. But we are naturally hated by our kings and priests for showing that the sea they fear is benign to some, uprooting the fear they have distilled in their community, and they ultimately try to break us, silence us, or cast us back to that abyss.

Let me be clear: society need still exist. It is not possible to organize humans in a peaceful and beneficial way without leaders and laws. Mere anarchy will not do. Communism will not do. The people must have a stake in their leadership, and in a company, and that is accomplished by way of democratically-elected officials. A mob will not do. Lines must be established. And citizens must make sacrifices to ensure that the line remains orderly and society persists in its being. This democracy, in theory, is necessary for human survival, though instances of abuse of power come into play in many instances. Nevertheless, leaders must be in place; whether or not they are usurped is irrelevant, as long one yields power and rallies the popular cause. Certain personal freedoms, though ideally few, shall be put into jeopardy in favor of the common good, and people, generally, will abide by these laws in exchange for the protection of the state.

But societies must allow wiggle room for nonviolent outliers to exist without persecution. The state may be secure in knowing that these outliers do not jeopardize its power because the great majority of people will follow the crowd, do what their neighbors do. Indeed, the work of these outliers may bring some good to the common table in the long run, so it is good to have this leeway, lest a totalitarian government lead its country to rot and mold from stagnation. No one, not even governments, should take themselves so seriously as to assume that their way is the only way to do things, and death to whoever defies! Therein is built a quick demise. So long as the outliers do not jeopardize citizen life or the mission of the state, they may be permitted to exist in few numbers. Outliers may be denied certain perks of the state for noncompliance, but so long as they are nonviolent, persecution must not be allowed. It will be understandable, from an animal-survival perspective, that if the outliers should garner enough popular support with their ideas, support which may jeopardize the powers that be in their control, then the state may take some appropriate response. If the powers of the outliers and the state are equally-matched, however, and their champion of the peoples' cause is

equally genuine, by popular consensus, then the decision of leadership falls to the people. This is not mere anarchy in which there are no laws, this is actual anarchy in which all act as judge.

I say all of this to say that in the general model of a society with outliers in which the vast majority follows the rules with willingness and a sense of duty, one need not conform to the regiments of society if they are confident in their abilities to provide meaningful content and advancement for that society while existing on the fringe. There is no fault to be had by those who abide by the norm, but some do not feel the necessity of conformity to provide meaningful product, and indeed they feel it would interrupt their work. I feel that in this time, when I am possessed with the overwhelming impulse to create, I must obey my gut. I must yield to the sea, and return to the mainland of social acceptance when I have forged my soul in gold.

Many intellectuals do not take the radical approach of floating. Though they often deal in lofty ideas, those theories are often grounded in real-world problems and situations; thus, they are lofty while at the same time pragmatic; they usually find a way of incorporating their thought into that established realm of society—the Academy. Fewer succumb wholly and willingly to their mental abyss. Fewer still emerge from it to spread what they've learned. Those most successful intellectuals find a way of merging the two sides seamlessly, appearing at sea while standing on a raft socially allotted. If one's theory yields an increase in popular well-being and consciousness, that intellectual may rally a populous round him and become a person of interest, either good or bad in the context, depending on whether his views work within the greater system in place; if they do he becomes a sanctioned leader; if they don't he becomes a terrorist.

I'm not saying here that those who favor the mind forsake the will to live, or that those who favor the sea cease to stand on ground. In nature, as human animals, our adrenaline will kick in in a fight-or-flight situation, and we will attend to that instinct, which, while being a part of the Way, is that selfish part of it which all organisms hoard. Only in times of peace—be it personal or national—may intellectual games like following the Way of water be embraced. In times of war, of both persuasions, the way of fire is instead sought. And after the fire burns out, the sea comes in, with all its wind, and bathes the scorched earth, fertilizing it for work again.

#### II.ii. *Terrorism as Performance Art*, an essay, by Caesar Maxist

Terrorism is the physical manifestation of the tension between a Self and an oppressing State. The State is a conglomerate entity which may be in direct or indirect oppression of the Self, the Self which in turn may live within or alongside the destructive ends of such a State. A Self is a selfish entity, one whose values or well-being comes in direct opposition with those of another Self or of the State, the latter of whom veils its own selfish desires under champion of Public Good. This tendency of the State to veil its desires as a Public Good is the primary source of antagonism between the Self and the State, for there is no Public Good, by way of the fact that there is no “Public.” The “Public” is made up of a multitude of Selves operating under one *national* identity. Naturally, Selves, under the guise of unification, come into conflict with one another on grounds of living necessities, human rights, and morals. A governing body is needed to set and amend the official policies of the State, whereby the State assumes its own morals and desires by filtering those of the multitude Selves. Thus, the State, as a

conglomerate of selfish desires, becomes the most powerful Self, with its own contrived “Identity,” one which undermines those individual desires upon which it is constructed. Here chaos arises. One selfish paradigm comes to reign over the State, subverting those other paradigms which comprise it, and, masked as a “Democratic” entity, parades a single or oligarchical vision for All under the State dependent wholly upon its own selfish desires and morals. Note that the Self may be the manifestation of one soul, in conflict with the Body as a whole, or a group of bodies unified more than not homogeneously under one vision for the State. So, from one person to one million+ people, the Self, if it possesses this unified identity, may act as antagonist between another Self, several Selves, or the State at large. And while the state is ruled primarily by one or a select few Selves, as elected into the offices of government, whose morals and desires often arise from the same background and who embody what is largely considered the Standard person of comparatively high intellect and leadership ability, every other subordinate Self becomes the ostensible enemy and combatant of the State. That is to say, if a person like you is not a major part of the Ruling Class, then a person like you is the enemy (or, as Frank Zappa says, “If you're not paying for it, you're the product.”)

We can apply Freudian designations here: the Ego is the Ruling Class, the Selves which own and govern the institutions of the State; the Id is the subconscious Self, or the many minority Selves which comprise and influence the State, which serve it and which are integral to its function, but which are nonetheless repressed. The Super Ego is the image that the Ruling Class as Ego projects from within the State, coloring the State any number of hues at different historical points, that is, fabricating the image of the State (as “Democratic,” “Monarchical,” whathaveyou) whatever image the Ego desires and using this image to its advantage while continuing to repress the Id by way of nominally preserving its welfare. Thus does every component of State Identity— Id, Ego, Super Ego—come into clash with one another. The Id is subverted and the Super Ego is warped. The Ego Class, then, assuming its Identity not only as the superiors of the State, but, over time, as the State itself, becomes tyrannical; for as the Identity of the State is abstract, a contrived coalition of Selves, and not based on “real” Selves and their Identities, the Ego Class becomes detached from reality, and therefore it becomes inhumane; it becomes the duty of the Id Class, the many Selves which have/are being subverted by their single abstract designation, to express their discontent with the State in a manner which will make itself apparent—that is, in a public and self-evident way—in other words: Terrorism.

But is Terrorism, as it has been defined, only a tool of the oppressed, disenfranchised, or, in other words, Selves who have nothing to lose? No; Terrorism is the manifestation of tension between any two Selves; thus the State as a maker of laws, wager of wars, and suppressor of dissent, becomes the most antagonistic toward all other Selves besides its own Ego Class; it becomes the most Terroristic.

But State-run Terrorism is called something different.

What is the concept of Justice, Central Law and Legal Precedent, if not a carefully comprised list of methods of suppressing dissent, i.e. vocalizations of discontent between the Self and State values. This includes “wrongs” as conspicuous as rape and murder to value pillars like Drug Policy and Abortion Rights. Who decides the

crimes and punishments and to whom they will be applied? Answer: the Ego Class under guise of the State. (Central Law is ideally the group of values held officially by a State itself, but a State is not sentient and cannot itself hold values, whereas Selves, comprised of sentient beings, can, and thus the Ego Class makes the rules for the abstract State.) More often than not, as with the aforementioned examples of Drugs and Abortion, the punishments implied by the laws of the State, as well as the convictions themselves, disproportionately affect Selves with no ruling power (black men and all women, respectively.) It becomes the nature of the State to protect its owners while incriminating and subverting its possible opposition—those it oppresses. It also sanctions its own violence, that is, its breaking of its own laws, much like a sovereign. In this way, as well as all the others, the State is a Terrorist to itself, solidifying its tension with the groups which comprise it in Law. And while the State is not “real,” but an abstract designation for a group of Selves, we must conclude that it is not the State itself which oppresses the majority of its components, but the Ego Class endeavoring to remain untouched and in power, under guise of the champion of social welfare for All under the State.

The State, naturally, will not designate itself as Terrorist; and the Terrorism it inflicts on so large a scale could not possibly be thwarted in whole by a single Self. Only in the case of all oppressed Selves (colloquially, the “99%”) rising up against the Ruling Class (the “1%”) would the repressed majority, acting under unity of their State, have the resources to combat the Elite. But, of course, the Ego of the State, by Law and Military Force, has in place the antidote to this sickness. In this way, the Ego justifies and propagates its own vision of the State.

The State Super Ego can be directly traced to the Ego/Ruling Class and its values and interests, and it is contingent upon as well as indignant of the Id, the body which it oppresses and, paradoxically (but quite predictably), from which it draws its resources.

The Id will manifest itself, in some way, eventually, whether the Ego wants it to or not.

Applying pressure, as the State does, to matter, will create a wealth of inert energy waiting to be released; the reaction from the Squeezed will be a *Pop!*, a gushing, an “explosion,” after a certain threshold of pressure has been crossed, a reaction which will be equal to and opposite toward the State. It will be the Id bursting forth from the subconscious, and this happens, after such a long period of subversion, in one or all of a few ways: insanity, psychopathy, or suicide.

When the Id bursts forth, it will also become a major player in the Super Ego, for the Ego will itself react, and alter the image it wants to project of the State. Thus the State itself will be split down the party line, independent of a single value system, at war with itself, or, in other words, it will break down from a metaphorical schizophrenia if the powers that be do not quell the uprising and restore a singular order; for a State, abstract, and useful as it may be, will cease to exist without egotistic singularity.

It is impossible, I might add, for a State to remain singular and in tact when its economy and laws are based on the oppression of other Selves, as it will inevitably give way to the aforementioned results.

What is creation but a wrestling with the multitudes of the Self. Yes, a Self may, like a State, maintain a single dominant vision of itself, but it may continue, like a State, to wrestle with darker, unwanted components of itself. The Self cannot extradite those components, for they are inherent in it, each adding an element, wanted or unwanted, to the whole complete vision. But where the Creative Self and the State differ here is regarding what to do with those unwanted parts. The Creator takes those parts of itself and puts them outside of it, as a object, i.e. to be looked at objectively. The State on the other hand does not have the luxury of doing such a thing in a similarly constructive manner; it must subject those unwanted parts of itself. The State, after all, is essentially a construction of the Ego Class; so a construction cannot be constructed by another construction. The State is prone to criticism, as are all creations, for they are objective, but the State itself does not have the capacity to wrestle with and critique itself.

Creative Selves, on the other hand, have, by way of intellect and the capacity of self-critique, that luxury. That is the birth of art: to look into one's own psyche, one's own actions and motives, discern a pattern or capture an emotion, and spit it out onto a canvas, onto piano keys, a page, what have you, to observe it, its inherent value, and its relevance to the internal lives of others. It is a sort of mimesis, a copying or cloning of inarticulate human mechanics. The clone, or offspring, one must realize, is not the original emotion; it is an interpretation, imperfect, but suggestive enough to lend the desired effect. The better the effect is conveyed, the better the piece of art is.

To be fair, the State is the "Art," in this sense, of the Ruling Class; the Super Ego is the construction of the Ego.

Now, when it comes to emotion, there are no wrong ones. Selves, we must reiterate, are selfish, and that is the main source of antagonism within the State, which is also selfish yet pretends not to be (this, in truth, is the most insulting aspect of it to the Self).

The Self is supreme to itself; it is a State apart. It needs to protect its values and uphold its well being. So, when oppressed by another, it builds within itself an emotion of discontent, and a self-righteous, self-confident "State"-Self will not stand for this.

The Law of the State comes in direct conflict with the Law of the Self.

The feeling of discontent grows and, like any feeling, it wants to manifest itself in the real, as a rush of endorphins insinuates a smile.

The feeling wants to find the most effective way of conveying itself. And it *will* break free, as the Id always does. It's just a matter of how. In some it is manifest in letters, some in melodies, some in aggressive brushstrokes, and still some manifest it physically, with action. Ah! Acting—it is the most demanding and all-consuming medium of the artist. It requires the artist, not to represent her/his emotion, but BE her/his emotion. And what happens when an emotion is so strong? Surely a strong, nagging emotion like discontent with the State is not undue. Is it right to silence the discontent the State has inspired? We are talking in abstracts here and have been all along. The State was never the issue. The Ego is the issue. The Ego Class's morals have been skewed to become everyone's morals, and why should we listen to the Ruling Class of Selves any more than we should listen to any Self else? Every Self has as much a right to oppose another Self as the next. Only when a Self comes to power does it become "illegal" or "unpatriotic" to oppose it. But one still has just as much a right to.

And when the Self in power takes measures to stifle the feeling of discontent it inspires, applying pressure to the Masses for any number of years, a Self filled to capacity with anger and resent is liable to one day just ... explode.

The issue people are bound to have with this argument, which, the author would like to add, is not an appeal for Terrorism but a de-villification of the act, is that hundreds, thousands, sometimes millions of people die by acts of Terrorism. Well, to that I say, it's all a matter of perspective whether those lives were worth anything in the first place. The perspective of any Self upon another is valid because the Self is sovereign. Selfishness naturally leads to self-righteousness and war. And in that there is degeneration and regeneration, the rise and fall of Empires; nature: creation: art.

### II.iii. *State/meant*, an essay, by Cesar Maxist

In the same way that it is dangerous for JPMorgan Chase, Bank of America, Citigroup, and Wells Fargo to have the monopoly on the way American society handles their money, the companies Apple, Google, Facebook, and Amazon have an oligarchic hold on human communication. And in fact, it is not four monopolies, but one. In 2021, a trust was organized to handle the profits and policies of these four companies, made up of trustees plucked from the highest executive order of each institution. This group is known as the Social Trust and you have never heard of them.

Every phone was an iPhone, which negated the need to specify the term “phone,” and by 2020 the colloquial term was “i.”

Society is now dominated by the “i.” In this world, the working citizen is a citizen because of his i. Without the i, you aren't online. If you aren't online, you are not alive.

Thus, a subculture emerges that retains an appeal for film movies, physical books, and vinyl records. The printing press has become a platform for revolutionaries seeking to dismantle the Social Trust and the hold on human society that took the soul from all forms of expression.

The physical is the only realm in which the New Society cannot censor our expression. We exist in the only realm where a person can be a person. We exist in the real.

We are the ACT-NAO!

The American Counter-action Tactics Team for the New Age Order (ACT-NAO) exists in opposition to the will of EUSA (Europe and the United States of America) and her armies.

When they who toppled the Twins did so, perhaps they were thinking to themselves, “such monstrous monolithic towers are an affront to God in the spirit of Babel.”

ACT-NAO is the raging fire which will level the sky-scraping eyesores the West has wrought. It is the wrecking ball to topple the hegemony from its pedestal.

The working class is a faceless homogenous demographic to its employers. Likewise, the Owners and Commanders of Eusanian Industry and Capital gain are a mass of gluttony and vice, to be treated and judged with the same offhanded whimsy as those with little to no power are by them. We are not interested in “growth” of economy or production or the like; we would rather destroy the machine than watch it burn out along with the earth and the people on which it feeds.

Whether or not they were terrorists, enemies of the state as deemed such by the Mediaopoly, was irrelevant to them, as they in their hearts knew that they were carrying out the swift and just reparation due to them. It was not fair for them to blow out major factories with IEDs and Molotov cocktails like an Iranian insurgent army. It was not fair to take from Industry and Commerce that which it had earned, the millions of McDonald's restaurants, the Monsanto GMO labs ... But it was just. Just like the pendulum swings back time after time. The hour strikes twelve. History shifts its weight to the other foot. History is tired.

The preliminary phase consisted of securing land and keeping its influence under wraps. Aggies, affiliates more naturally inclined to regress from the city life and exhaust fumes and the constant whirring of gadgets, were stationed in the farms to provide fruits, vegetables, dairy, poultry, nuts, beef, and other natural foods. Produce was shipped discreetly to the affiliated city, protected by armed agents of ACT-NAO, to the bunkers in the cities where it was dispersed throughout the community of culturejammers, adbusters, bohemians, proletarians, minorities, and all other fellows of the ACT-NAO dogma. Bunker kitchens existed to feed those without means of shelter or gas for cooking.

Bunker locations, dates of produce arrival, and names of members were strictly forbidden from being written down, on paper, the internet, or anywhere. All were encouraged to invite people to the meetings, also spread word-of-mouth, and never at the same time or place. Caution was always and strongly advised. Agents of Eusa scoured the earth for the bunkers. No one knew who coordinated the meetings, the food drop-off, or the organization at all. All were urged to describe their position within the organization as “ACTors.” They were always in character.

ACT-NAO severed the obligation of employment. But ACTors worked anyway, to gather information and bring useful bits back to the meetings. ACTors worked in finance, government, coffee, food service, maintenance, all industries, all levels. Identities were protected by black hoodies, red scarves, and sunglasses. Phones were not allowed under any circumstances. ACTors of all ranks within their companies, naturally unbeknownst to their employers, shared information that aided attacks on rogue companies, and offered insight into the practices—good or bad—of all industries, to better inform the ACT-NAO in their crusade against the autonomous Military-Capitalist



Complex which surrounded them. The more money they took out of the pockets of the Owners, the more level they believed their world would become. Many were interested in helping, especially if it meant the continued free produce and communion.

One day, they believed, they would be able to bear their faces to one another. Then, when the rogue corporations would be no more, they would live in communes based around near-by farms, and live as human beings in peace. Taxes would be paid to the local farmers, doctors, and caregivers in the form of skills and services. Armed servicemen would protect the borders of the commune. All citizens would be required to know each other by name. Community would be maintained by limiting adult citizens based on the yield of the affiliated farm. Efforts would be made to relocate wandering vagabonds or excess citizens to another benevolent commune. Skilled members would teach seminars on their craft to better the education of everyone in the commune. All information and services would be shared. Court would be held by a benevolent dictator, and the reach of government would end there. People who executed malicious acts upon another would be cast to the Outside, where the lawless ran amok.

In the cities representatives of each commune would meet in the bunkers and exchange reports on Wellbeing. And as long as rogue corporation ran amok, continuous efforts would be made to thwart them.

They'd ride through they city streets on fixed-gear bikes, faces covered in gasmasks, hoodies up, waiting for the law of Eusa to dare approach them.

They were all born in the late Eighties/early Nineties. A certain nostalgia connected them. A time when things were simple, before the Year One, when everything changed. Based on this, they all shared their disdain for the Baby Boomers who turned their world to shit, who fought the Holy War, who ate up their ozone, who spent their inheritance, and left them with nothing. "What about us?" was the common cry. The common response was, "You left us with scraps, so we'll take what you have." The meek sought to gain the earth.

The militant urban representatives of all the benevolent communes in a defined eight-commune district were organized into an army called the 36 Chambers of Death. The eight generals, each representing a corresponding commune, were named The Genius, The Golden Arms, The Iron Lung, The Rebel I.N.S., The Ironman, The Chef, The High Chief, and Osirus. The commander was called the Abbot; he represented the army itself. Squad commanders were named, based on rank, Knights, Bishops and Rooks. All inferior soldiers, or pawns, were called Killa Bee Assassins. They executed the attacks on rogue corps. At congress in the bunkers, information would be shared; the Abbot would pass down a verdict. They all rode their fixies through the dark city streets.

They do not ride at day time, which is for the fair society. The fair are fair and deathly white. But the day will not save them. ACT-NOW owns the night.

ACT-NOW seeks out the creative destruction and deconstruction and denigration and degeneration of the civilization wrought from Anglo-Western notions of cultural superiority and divine intellect and Christianity. It seeks the true catalytic moment in human history. They are not of radical Islam, but they fight the Holy War, the only war—for human persistence, equality, and communal love. Globalization is a farce, and only leads to destructive colonization. You must love the person beside you first. Give according to your ability, receive according to your need. The hierarchy's been horizontalized; God is dead; everything is permitted. The 2008 financial meltdown ran a hole through the fabric of logic and statistics, exposing the folly of the Western economic paradigm. Neither humanity nor its impulses may be rigorously categorized and crunched into numbers. Chaos reigns.

The capital will be forever on the move; no semblance of the commonplace or of consistency will make itself known. The time-tempest and zealous zeitgeist flows like spoiled petroleum from pipes necks slit.

To reconcile the egregious crimes committed against the American public by the financial industry, and the betrayal of that same public by their federal government by not only bailing out but handing over the role of reparation to those entities who were responsible for the economic collapse in the first place—to the tune of several trillion dollars at taxpayers' expense, no part of which was allocated directly to help citizens in need (which constitutes theft)—the ACT-NAO adopted a “Guillotine” policy with regard to overreaching multinational corporate and financial institutions. Due to this act of inherent hostility toward the American public by the federal government of the United States of America, who re-inflated and subjected itself to the ethereal and self-indulgent whims of a corrupt and destructive industry—speculative finance—which by free market standards should have been left to die of its own greed, the ACT-NAO staged simultaneous guerrilla attacks on the headquarters of those institutions which benefited from fucking over the American public by fucking them over even more, including the Federal Reserve Bank, Bank of America, Citigroup, Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, Goldman Sachs, Wells Fargo, JP Morgan Chase, BNY-Mellon, the International Monetary Fund, and others--“off with their heads!” All personal debts to the public-government and private-banking complex were deemed absolved by the ACT-NAO and this information was distributed so as to unify the new debt-free society by all at once ceasing payments on cars, houses, higher education, insurance, and even those made in the form of taxes to the IRS. Localized socialism became the de facto mode of governance as the ACT-NAO made agreements to communize more farming communities and distribute resources throughout urban communities. Land was now deemed the property of the people who worked and lived on it, to be maintained through their collaborative effort. All citizens of reasonable age and a clear criminal record were provided with and briefed on the appropriate and moral use of a firearm. Prison populations were taken over by officials of the ACT-NAO; records of non-violent inmates were revisited and their sentences were upheld or struck down based on conviction and circumstance. Major manufacturing corporations were disbanded, each factory or laboratory being assumed as the sovereign organization of its workers and immediate supervisors; the products of such would be

consumed and used to support the lives of the workers, and distributed locally to the needs of the community. All such corporate models deemed necessary to the continued survival of society were dissolved in this manner to independent factories. Hierarchies were also horizontalized and managed from the base to the apex, which then consulted with purveyors of other regional products in exchange for their goods. All business came to be conducted in this way, with the net of the ACT-NAO connecting all of the independent communes. Advertising and branding became extraneous and even taboo. The only brand became the brand of the community. The working class now controlled its own means of survival, whereby wealth and currency was valued by the products themselves and not by an inflated paper symbol, markets for the necessary goods were free to operate as normal, and all extraneous business was absolved, including the manufacturing of poor-quality clothes and appliances, of overprice luxury goods, and of junk foods, movies, televisions, cars, and other first-world industries. Growth became fallacious in the wake of the new age of moral and environmental subsistence. All things were valued based on their production cost, environmental cost, pragmatic usefulness, and ingenuity. Arts were once again adopted as the pinnacle of cultural expression, and valued artists who both entertained and informed the community were exalted as icons. Moral support also took the form of prog-religious masses in which both myth and science were embraced as the root of all worldly meaning, and ambiguity was perceived as divinity.

The viral and physical memes spread by the ACT-NAO contributed to, but was not the sole cause of, the adoption of the new governing model in the Benevolent Social Commune; human concern and engagement was the spark that ignited the oil. Post-cutthroat-capitalism, people living in such communities could not fathom how they endured decades of corporate puppeteering and omniscient marketing propaganda. It was good just to feel the soil in your toes, from which your day's food had grown, and hear a local prophet speak of a new spiritual enlightenment, and you realized that American society needed to degenerate, not expand, for happiness and comfort to abound once more.

The ACT-NAO realized that any policy-maker or officer of the United States government was inherently anti-The-American-People and devout corporatist-disciplinarians. Thus, if eminent corporate rule of all sectors of society to the end of making a disproportional profit for the scarce shareholders was the enemy of the future, and the federal government was in favor of that future because of the nature of corporate involvement in campaigning and lobbying, then both corporations and government would have to be dealt with as the problem. No amount of piecemeal lawmaking would deal with this issue in a comprehensive way. Not even a cool president like Obama would uphold the far-left tactics he had envisioned in 2007 and 2008; indeed, any American president would always be the puppet of military-corporate rule because of the position's nature as the superficial face of an existing system—one spiraling out of control. The simple spokesman would not be able to rewrite the teleprompted message. Therefore, the teleprompter had to be disconnected; the fundamental pillars of American society had to be uprooted. And the only way to effectively uproot the order of things

was not bargaining with the power-system, for that had been attempted many times over with little to no result, and not occupying or demonstrating in a peaceful symbolic way, but forcefully occupying the spaces once reserved for corporate expansion. Domestic attacks against the state and its annexes became, not only a necessity but, a duty. Terrorism as performance art, like the folk music of the past. DeLillo was right in *Mao II*: the most immediate, effective, and stirring mode of artistic creation has become the real degeneration of deceitful and oppressive states.

The ACT-NAO vows to act against the interests of the American government and both its corporate and military annexes, and in the interest of the American working class, until such structural changes as horizontal rule, workers' ownership, anti-usury, ecological cost factor, military budget cuts, and political transparency are adopted by the governing-defense complex, and then the two halves of this nation's society may rejoin, to be administered by a new collective, to be called the American Cooperative Tactics Team. Freedom of press, speech, assembly, gun ownership, political representation, dissent, and the civic equality of all men and women of all races and beliefs will always persist.

In the night, from fixed-gear bikes, the chant rang out, and was heard round the world--

“We have a body in decay;  
We have a mind in disarray;  
Off with the head,  
The rest may stay,  
So hands may mold with fresher clay,  
And feet may walk a better way  
Toward a new and brighter day.”

#### II.iv. *Treading Water*, an essay, by Walter Kogard

I took the P6 bus route to Chinatown and stopped in the coffee shop intending to stay for only a while before I got on the Circulator in the direction of Foggy Bottom. I said hello to several regulars who were completing law school homework, and saw at the end of the bar a middle-aged female regular with whom I'd been friendly, so I went over to greet her. As I approached her I happened to glance at the corner table and noticed my friend Zach, who I met through Shoveldog, another regular. He was in D.C. on short holiday from his MFA at Colombia. I was excited to see him, and so unexpectedly, so I acknowledged the female regular and instead went to sit with him.

We had exchanged stories some weeks prior. He sent me *Bad Art* and I sent him *A Grottesquerie* [Editor's Note: this is not the same version which appears later in this volume]. He began our conversation by lamenting the literal bad art in his workshop, and went on to comment on my story, or at least offer his impression of the half he read.

He said, primarily, that his workshop would have eviscerated it.

The *Overture* to my story was “a bit much” he said. It implied a grandiose work to follow when, in his opinion, the story didn't amount to much. The story itself seemed buried under a lot of meandering thoughts and empty theory. Trim, trim, trim, he said. My love for the turn-of-phrase was evident; he pointed out some interesting passages, then damned the rest. All in all, I was “indulgent,” he said.

--Indulgent? I repeated. --Can you elaborate?

--There's a lot of masturbation going on here, he said, and concluded by professing that the work failed miserably as a short story; it did not have the classic attributes of that form: brevity, subtlety, conciseness of plot, relevance, &c &c &c. It came off as the beginning of a novel; only then would he forgive the meandering narrator. But I needed to read more if I wanted to hold up again the high-brow critics. On the other hand, the story was too complicated for a middle-brow reader. Thus, I lay in a gray area and a commercial graveyard.

--I lack discipline, I said. --I know I'm unfocused; it's essentially masturbation. I like to throw words onto the page like Pollock and create elaborate metaphors and delve into my own impressions without being conscious of their clarity; I only care about what sounds good. I think it's a result of my having lived alone for so long. I've come to trust the voices in my head, and do whatever they dictate. That's how serial killers are born.

We laughed.

He went on to say, in spite of his extremely critical response, that he would rather read this type of bad art than the domestic, culturally-saturated bad art of his classmates. He said that although I was in over my head, I was on an interesting track. The South- and Middle-Americans—Borges, Bolaño, Garcia Marquez, Javier Marias, Cortazar—were infamous for writing verbosely, expansively, and with much digression, both in content and in language. DeLillo and Foster Wallace also had their indulgences, he said. But we're talking about DeLillo and Foster Wallace, Borges and Cortazar—they could wipe their ass on the page and still be praised. If a workshop participant turned in any number of passages from *Libra*, they would most definitely have had their asses handed to them.

He went on to lament the racket of it all, the New York MFA hiring the New York literary critics reviewing professors of New York MFAs getting their work in New York journals hiring graduates of New York MFAs publishing work by graduates of New York MFAs &c &c &c. Through all this inbreeding, he said, we have birthed a deformed literary aesthetic which is bland, mundane, domestic, and “subtle.” New York, having affirmed itself as the bearer and magistrate of literary culture, reinforces the ideology and limits the possibilities of fringier writers. It's a circle jerk. But what art form, what discipline, does not have its group of ideological “cool kids,” smoking cigarettes with each other, having dinner parties with each other, and talking about all the other kids behind their backs. New York is the High School of America: glorified, insulated, and it never grows up.

Sometimes I wonder if I have what it takes to make it. Not just in the New York scene, but with lovers of literature everywhere; will they affirm me? I harbor doubts, though I may be as conceited as my girlfriend says. I wonder if I should be devoting so much time to writing. I'm basically failing school because of it—hell, I'm writing these very words when I should be writing a paper that is due in mere hours. But

I can't help myself, so it doesn't matter. I have to write when the bug bites. Oh well, I suppose I must accept my indulgence. I must accept the fact that "I lack discipline." It will surely be my downfall, but when that tragedy strikes, I'll just write about it. I know my verbosity and tangents and lack of restraint will cause many a reader and editor to recoil, but it's my wont. Faulkner said, 'Kill your darlings,' then he drank himself to death. Don't believe everything you hear, kids. I know my writing may not wow the world, but it tickles my fancy like Faulkner fatally tickled his.

The revolution of mobile technology has allowed us to yield to our indulgences and vices, most notably that complicated indulgence of self—in social media and online profile. Twitter has allowed us to pour forth every thought we have into the world, no matter its relevance to the succeeding or preceding. Basquiat, Haring, Cool "Disco" Dan, and now Banksy, have brought art to the street, saturated us in it. Is literature of such a noble calling that it may not yield to the impulses of the present? I say, Knock it off its pedestal! Disrupt the racket! Let us unleash our animal nature.

I am sitting in the university library, having just left Spanish class, whose homework I have once again failed to hand in. I woke up late and almost missed the class, which would have been my academic downfall since I am only one absence away from flunking, so I did not have enough time to complete the work in the morning before class, as I usually do. No matter; I gave the presentation which was due this day, and felt satisfied that I fulfilled at least a part of my obligation.

I left that class, ate some food, and read *Middlemarch*, which, to my surprise and delight, was not as boring as I suspected. From the prelude, Eliot displays a wide knowledge of the world in a voice commanding and god-like, and renders her impressions in clear, eloquent language. From chapter one alone, Miss Brooke and her sister burst into relief though their keen observations in dialogue, and their revealing mannerisms as accounted for by Eliot's superb narration. There are passages in this novel that have resonated with me as much as any of those by Mr. Gass or Mr. Thackeray, Fitzgerald or Hunter Thompson. I will admit that it gravitates toward the maximalist, compared to Austen, and even to Brontë, and I have realized that the class has structured these texts in a chronology—*Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, *Vanity Fair*, *Middlemarch*, and, later, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*—that steadily prepares the reader for ever more description and verbosity of prose. And as the books have gotten denser, I have liked them more and more. I'll definitely revisit *Vanity Fair* after the class ends, and I'll try to read all of *Middlemarch* as we trek through it, and perhaps I will take another look at Brontë. As for Jane Austen, she may remain in the realm of the knitting circle's bookclub.

I must write my Post-colonial Lit paper; that is ostensibly why I have come to the library—for the deadline looms—but I will watch *True Blood* instead, read some more of *Middlemarch*, and get to that paper when I get to it.

Once again it may be said, indubitably and unapologetically, in the case of both my writing and my motivation to complete schoolwork, that I lack discipline.

There is an Ultimate Reason that I am writing this now—or that I am compelled to write this now—rather than favor any alternative. I am drawn to the page. Some say, 'Fight

through the urge to lollygag, to procrastinate, to idle in the arts; do what is *necessary*, do what you are *supposed to be doing*, do what is *useful* now ...” But I say do not fight your urges when they are pure. Be an animal. Do what you are drawn toward, so long as no one gets hurt. When I am compelled to write, I write, no matter what situation I am in, because I know that the Way has swept me up in that moment, and that it will lead to a Purpose, inevitably, even though in that moment the Purpose may not be clear to me, and though it may contradict the present task at hand. Things have a way of connecting down the line, when they are not contrived. To act intuitively, with the flow of the Way’s current, will inevitably yield hidden fruits which resemble one another. We do not have to be conscious of these connections for them to be so. Acting with sound mind is acting unconsciously; it is letting the Way fill you and take you to the banks in which you are supposed to deposit. There is a reason flowers evolve to look like the insects which pollinate them, even though neither the flower nor the insect is aware of this. It is what the Way dictates, and it ends up being what is most harmonious. So I write when I am possessed to do so. I write aggressively and passionately, and let those words out as they wish to be lain, and edit scarcely, for I do not want to corrupt what the Way wishes to express through me. Sometimes passages seem to contradict, or at least interfere with, one another, but I know that if I keep writing what I feel, that they will connect in time. I am a literate animal roaring onto the page, whether or not it is night or day, whether or not it is the “right” time or otherwise. And though it may interfere with the schoolwork that I am “supposed” to be doing, I know that that path will yield ripe fruit, and whether I fail school or not, the efforts of my intuitive labor will connect down the line, and ring harmonious, as do the planets in alignment.

Thoughts, memories, dreams, and other workings of the mind are naturally decompressed. They are often fickle, fleeting, and hard to grasp. Normally, in writing, we aim to compress ideas; we want to convey them as clearly and articulate as possible; we want to create a logical form out of fleeting, illogical, looping emotions and impressions; we want to organize ideas according to topic and theme and display them as a meticulously organized construction. If we are as water, liquid and adaptive, we wish to display ourselves to the world as blocks of ice, as solid and assured and unmoving—as a rock for others to lean on. But, in the way of both form and content, my aim in writing this is not to do that. I wish to venture into a meandering smoke of impression, a lingering aroma. My metaphors, my images, my digressions, my rants, my emotional spark, will be the heat, the catalyst, which commits my liquid life to vapor. Ideas and scenes may not connect as fluidly as you would want them to, but be assured that the essence of fluidity permeates these passages. As the liquid diffuses it does not disappear, it simply changes state, as a soul may when its body dies. And it may then move more fluidly than water could throughout the world—into the lungs of all creatures, into plants and vegetation, into the atmosphere, into clouds, and then fall back into water when it so desires. Meaning persists in this fog, though simply harder to grasp, like water molecules far removed from one another—and their effect on the senses is that much more intense. In a fog, you may feel condensation upon you, as if you are in the midst of the ocean, without being suffocated by it. I want to decompress like steam, get swept up in the wind, dwell in the lungs of men, ride upon a sunbeam, flow down the stream into another state of being. Though all things wish to persist in their being, and in their present state,

existence itself persists perpetually through all states, in all things in this world, as they live and die; it is a whole organic Way; and the death of one body frees the spirit within, and allows it to persist elsewhere.

Today, the friendly female regular came into the coffee shop while I was on shift and asked me about my writing. I told her vaguely what it's about. She asked me to remind her of my major. I told her. She asked me if I was going to go to graduate school. I said I'd thought about it but no. She expressed disappointment. She said it's very difficult to find employment in this job market without an advanced degree. That was the first thing that got me. I know that, but I don't like being reminded of it.

Later I asked her how many degrees she has. She thought, and replied: a BA in film studies, an MLA, and an advanced technical masters that she's working on now.

She said she had wanted to be an artist—a filmmaker—as an undergraduate, so she moved west to Salt Lake City to try her luck in the industry, but left soon thereafter because of sexual harassment. She left film alone for a while after that, and came to D.C. where she got a temp position at the National Academy of Sciences where she's been for the last ten years, making her way up the career ladder. She's about to be promoted to project officer. She's also getting into film again, doing independent documentary work for non-profits. She said she wants to make art films again some day.

She told me that the self-destruction of creative people comes in that they're really smart, but they think they're too smart to jump through the hoops that everyone else has to pass through. They look at the regiment of the university and recoil. But it's only four years of your life, she said. You can sacrifice four measly years for all the years afterward you'll be able to take advantage of. And after that, what's two more years for an advanced degree. With that, the world'll be open to you. If you can work the system, a creative person as smart as you are, you'll be able to go far.

I dwelt on what she said. It sunk deep.

I was inside myself for the rest of my shift, marinating on my failure.

There's no helping it. It's too late in the semester to turn any of this around, I think. There are only four more weeks.

I have a test for Spanish tomorrow, for which I am not studying; instead, I'm writing this.

I'm doing it to myself. I'm fucking myself. I'm masturbating. I am manifesting my own doomed future.

Do I secretly want to fail? Am I that masochistic? Why am I doing this? Why don't I study? Why don't I write my week-overdue Post-Colonial Lit paper? Why am I writing this instead of doing these things? Can I blame my age? No, I can't use my age as an excuse. I'm meandering lazily along here. Treading Water. Drowning.

Some people say that insanity is doing something over and over again while expecting different results. I think that this is a way to summarize what is going on in my academic life. I am continuing to elude my work while expecting some miracle to manifest. But I also know that no miracle will occur, and that this path can only lead to failure. I suppose the insanity comes in that I am not afraid of the failure. I am only afraid of how the failure will appear to my parents, who have put so much of their time and energy and



money and faith into me. It's their disappointment I fear. I believe I can overcome the obstacle of flunking out of school, but I don't know if I will be able to bear their heartbreak. My girlfriend has said this. She's said that she's worried that I will be sad, not because I failed school, but because I failed my parents. I'm worried about me, too. I'm worried that I will never be able to follow the rules again. I'm worried that I will never be able to get back on track and play the game. That is a nasty habit to have in this life. The pack detests lone wolves.

You may say that it's so easy to simply stop thinking about the structure of it all and just do the work assigned to me. But I feel that that would be giving in. I have an aversion to giving people power over me. Maybe I've been mentally freed for too long. Maybe I'm cracking up like Fitzgerald. Whichever it is, it inhibits me from doing what others tell me to do simply because they tell me to. Sometimes I just think about it for so long that it disgusts me. I understand that my professors have dedicated their lives to their studies. But why do I need their stamp of approval to tell me that I'm smart? Why do I need a paper with a Dean's signature on it to tell the world I've accomplished something? Why does the world put so much value into this piece of paper? I don't even really have to have done well in school. I could get all D's, but if I get that piece of paper then the world simply assumes I've done my deed and that I'm qualified to move on in my life. How can I not smell the bullshit? How can I not be repulsed by it? My heart is not in this work. I do not want this piece of paper. But the world wants it from me, and will damn me if I don't get it. I don't want the world to assume I'm smart because someone else said that I am. Why can't I prove that I'm smart myself. Why won't the world believe me when I say that I know the Victorian novel and the Modern novel and Irish literature and the rest of it. Or, why can't I say that I know Gaddis, Gass, Celine, Miller, Dos Passos, and LeRoi Jones? Why is knowledge contingent on certain authors and not others? And why does another person need to vouch for me? I suppose it's pack mentality. A degree does not say "I am smart." It says, "I played your game." I will not play your game. I feel that it would break me. I feel that I would be bending over backwards to please others, when I myself would be left with a crooked spine. After I get the piece of paper, then what? The world says, "Thank you for the best years of your life. Now come use that brain of yours to make us some money." No, thank you. I know I have to be a well-adjusted citizen to be worth a damn in this country, but fuck you. I can't. I can't play this game. I can't go to my seminar and listen to my professor tell me things I can learn from a book, and look so self-righteous doing it because she studied it for thirty years. You put in your time, good for you. But I would rather learn this because I want to learn this, and I want to learn it at my own pace. I don't want literally five-thousand pages of English novels compressed into four months of seminar. It doesn't please me to read that quickly. Why can't I take my time? Why is the pace for everything I do set by someone else? Why are the standards for everything I do set by someone else? This rigor just doesn't work for me. I'm okay with it if the world looks down on me because of it. I only hope my parents don't hate me forever. And I hope that when they read this, and the world reads this, they will understand me.

The lady at the coffee shop said that school is not supposed to be entertaining. To that I say, Then maybe I want no part of it. If a master's degree or two are necessary for me to make a name in this world, and eight years of my prime years are dedicated to

getting a job with which I may toil away the succeeding forty or fifty, then I'm sorry to say it, but count me out.

They say that after you give up your initial years, then you're free to do what you please.

I'd rather be free the entire time.

I'm selfish. I want it all. The world told me I was entitled to it by bringing me into this life; it said to me, "Gimme your best shot"—so I'll take it. Life gave me an infinite spectrum to work in. Society narrowed that spectrum to a limited set of options, all neatly ordered in a non-negotiable sequence. I'll answer to the world instead, and maybe society will hear.

I won't play its game. I won't hurt myself, either.

Am I lazy? Maybe.

Or maybe I'd rather be an outlier. There's a reason that people with I.Q.'s above 140 are still considered retarded. A person of average intelligence is a malleable person and a valuable member of society. If you think too much, you have no choice but to see through the bullshit and threaten the pillars of the system. But then you are easily disposed of. I can't stop thinking, though. I can't do brain-numbing work. I just can't. No, I can. But I won't.

But I want to. I want to compromise, but I can't do it on my own. I need help. I need more regiment than I am given. As human beings, like water, must be confined lest they spread into chaos, I must be confined. And if no one confines me then I have no choice but to disperse.

Walking through Capital Hill down North Carolina Avenue, over to Kentucky, then down to Lincoln Park, all under the haunting feeling of some old secret being quietly tucked away. The peering windows of colonial townhouses and mock plantation mansions glowed with a photographic clarity. And I knew that I was in real life, not some dream or fiction in which all the minor characters are blurred. But I still couldn't believe that every one of those homes contained a life, and many, many past ones. I saw art hanging on peoples' bathroom walls, and a man laboring over his laptop through the wall-sized window on his first floor. I captured peoples' personalities by glancing into their interior design. And in these instances I slowed my pace and snooped a little longer on the federal gentry and lobbying aristocracy of Capital Hill, families of a type I hadn't known in years, and thus who've faded away in my memory till they burst back into relief that crisp evening. The city turned alien then, and I thought about all the lives that existed outside of mine, in houses on Capital Hill, and in tenements in the Farms. In that moment I could not have told you for sure if I was in my hometown or not.

In the past week I have irrevocably abandoned my academic career. I slept through Spanish class on Monday, thereby exceeding the total number of absences I can sustain before I fail the course; and, having thus exceeded them, there are no chances left. My professor sent me an email that very day saying that I would need to bring a doctor's note or some proof of dire circumstance to class by Friday or the absence would stand and I would fail. I told my girlfriend about this; she said that her mother, a nurse, could write me a fake note, but she would have to fax it to me. I told her that that's what I'd like to

do, to save face. Later, however, I shirked even that small amount of salvation for a bleaker and more troublesome future which, I now realize, I walk toward with much anticipation.

On Wednesday I did not turn in the final paper for Post-Colonial Literature. On that day I also skipped my Spanish oral final exam because I had not prepared and I did not have the materials with me.

On Thursday, for a change, I turned in my English Novel paper, thereby completing that class's work.

On Friday, I skipped Spanish again. On that day I was due to present a group project worth ten percent of the grade. I could not, in good humor, show up for this presentation after eluding several of the most important class obligations. I could not, with clean intentions, ask this professor for yet another chance for me to get my act together. I'd made my bed and I intend to sleep quite soundly in it.

My Spanish final is in a week, and when people ask whether I will try to turn this careening train around by passing that test, I tell them yes, but I have no intention of it. I'm letting this phase fizzle out.

It's presently Thursday of the subsequent week, and I haven't yet looked back. To be sure, I will only pass one class this semester. I will not graduate in May. I may not graduate...

That's all, and so it goes, I suppose. I am in a transitory place where I feel no remorse and no pressure of consequence; I've yet to tell my parents all of this. In some ways, even though I've ruined everything—four-plus years' preparation—it doesn't feel like I've done anything at all. I guess the grave feeling of having fucked up terribly will come in due time, but for now, everything is calm, and it might, I hope, stay that way. In a sense, through these changes, nothing has changed, and I am only richer for taking this leap into the abyss. Some people are addicted to gambling; I have just waged my entire life against a slim prospect of literary success. The odds are not in my favor, but, like a gambler, blind faith, practice, and persistence will be my salvation, if any should come at all. If all else fails, there's always racketeering.

I feel in these calm-before-the-storm days that the future is wide open; there's no prescribed path after this; I am as water, to conform to the shape of the next vessel I encounter, fluidly and organically. I feel the ocean breeze as I cast my boat away from this shore.

Sometimes, it helps to look at the sky when rowing these uncertain waves. Clouds may offer solace where water even fails. The decompressed molecules hovering up there provide the needed winds for one's sails. On one's Way, there still abounds seeds of doubt and apprehension that can grow if permitted. Of course, it's fearful to be at the helm of one's ship, making an ill-advised voyage, because then all the blame of capsize or loss falls on you. I'm a little uneasy myself, because this ocean I've chosen to sail could have no shore, or at least not one for many years of travel, and I may have cast myself out to sea without anticipating all of the consequences. But isn't that the beauty and damnation of youth? Recently I've been getting so high that I can touch the silver lining. Yet even heavenly clouds comprise the floor of a cosmic sea, of which we are all grotesque bottomfeeders.

### III. *Ineffable She: Womanifesto*

#### III.i. *A Grotesquerie*, a reverie, by Walter Kogard

My true face is grotesque. It lacks its veil of flesh. It lacks its humanity; no woman would embrace it; raw, red, and muscular, it is without pretense;—therefore it is the true face. I cannot speak because I have no lips. My eyes persistently burn because I have no moist eyelids to clear them of dust. I must run water over my eyeballs every five minutes; therefore I am always crying.

I knock back my drink like an angered fist to the nearest object. The force of the punch is as sobering as warm milk. Put me out of feeling. Obfuscate my vision. Numb me back to the womb, because there I was provided for and all was safe. But my Mother lies ahead, in the postmortem void: that is the grown man's womb. That is complete inebriation, after a lifetime of suckling at the tit of the draft or the neck of the bottle, giving hickies like highschoolers, we sink deeper and deeper into the Drunkness, until we see our Mother again. I guess we are born from and die in our Mamas. What lies between is a series of substitutes—girlfriends, gamblings, addictions, associates, pleasures short-lasting and memories past, recollections, and the moment is fleeting, and euphoria elusive, apt to be tasted, but impossible to bottle, so we bottle liquor and hammer it down, and that is euphoria which in wading we drown, and it becomes nothing, numbness, and the womb is that much closer now. What is it to be a man? to hate our Mother? to say “I'm independent, I can survive on my own”? Why fight the urge to return? I've given up. I want my Mommy. Like a little boy, I admit it. Who I hate is Father—and no, Father never hit Mama, but he hit himself every night, as I do now, with the punch of the Drink, because what he really wanted was his Mama, and he hated his wife for not being her. I hate Father because I am him now. Mama was his substitute, but Mama is *my* genesis. Always this displacement. I'm a baby again, after twenty years of being taught to be a man. And maybe it's because I cannot be a man that I am a baby again; because my face is gone. And what can I do then? hope only to be rejoined with that one constant part of my self, the self from which I came. I know now that's what I always wanted: to return to the body where I was born. Out Mama's cunt and into that of every two-buck whore with a kid of her own to feed. Oh, how you leak irony from your pen like Shakespeare, Life, cynical cycle.

I had many women before my face was stolen. I was young, charismatic, and well-mannered. I was well-read even though I prematurely departed from the Academy, cobblestoned, manicured, streak-free and holy, where they preach that a man wants to bed his mother and kill his father—preposterous garbage to the layman. Where they preach that women are fundamentally the same as men and thus deserving of all the same givens: “Of course” thinks the impressionable youth. “Of course,” thought this one. But I was also unlearned at the time, in the ways of concrete things. And when I began to feel women, I also began to depart from them. It was entrapment! that belly of theirs. Go back into the belly? seems preposterous. But bed my own mother? why, that's sick, too. Pedagogy turned me around and around till I was dizzy and pointed fingers at the wrong culprits. I did not know what I wanted. Well, I can tell you now—because I cannot have a woman—we fuck to die. Fuck to fall into a pit. Find a suitable hole to

crawl into. Mama's is taken (Damned Daddy); so find another. Oh, but the disappointment is great; there is none like the original—like there's no high like that first hit. So: we men hate women because we love Mama. I miss my Mama, I miss my Mama, I miss my Mama, oh why'd I have to leave, why'd you have to go and die, where will I go now? Ladies, girls, women all—they're all infinite. They are life inside of life inside of life and what am I? what is this man? he is a rotting cock. He will die alone a long way from home. He will decay in a gutter while Woman makes another one of him and loves him and can make life and love it. What have I to love? I cannot even love myself. I am a monster. And I am Drunk! I will wield this cock like a weapon; I will wage war on everyone ... If Mama was here she'd stroke my head and coo me to a deep sleep.

The Drunkness intensifies, so too the infantile desires, so too the petty wants, so too the ravenous greed. And when your face is gone, that civil mask you wore to pacify babies and woo ladies, how do you keep inside your gross inhibitions? I don't want to think this. --*Shut up.* --I'm too weak to stop you. You become your own worst enemy. You become a monster. I ... am a monster. I am a thing now. I am no man with morals. I am no man at all. A man in his life learns the necessity of locking away desire. Now I have no face behind which to hide my demons. I look into the mirror, into its watery depths which ripple as I lay glance upon it like like a fallen leaf, and it returns to me a reflection distorted. Look at this grotesque ... hardly a man. Hardly! The man in me has died, been sheared away. What is left? By what sound method can I express the rage in me. I can only howl like a mountain cat. The ship of my interpersonal life has sailed when it comes to civilized society. So—I do not express myself to others, but to my self. And how do I do that? With this dirty mind an ocean, these vile thoughts a stream. I look into my heart and feel myself. I look into my mind and create myself anew—of these words I write, my only companions. In Reality I no longer matter, and in body am no longer matter. I am, really, an illusion sustained by the fear others project upon me. But hear my words and know me truly. Look upon me: I will show you the life of the mind.

What sees a man when he first lays eyes on a woman; if she enralls him, and he be bold enough to approach, what goes on in that narrow mind of his? it is: Are you my mommy? Perhaps the woman's demeanor and countenance and contours affirm him. Perhaps, upon further inspection, they don't; he was mistaken and he leaves. But if she meets a minimum of the criteria, he is happy, and he crawls back into her belly for a night or two; or, if she meets the criteria so completely, he might crawl in for a life. All throughout her life, a woman is pandering, placating, comforting, condemning, cursing and damning, worshiping and stroking, the infantile egos, the chained ids, of men she might be a mother to. No matter if she wish not push a wailing bag of blood and bones from her dark cave, she *will* be a mother to someone, something. And a man *will* claw at the skirts of each potential suitor, and even at the anus of another, to find a hole to make him whole.

My true face is the one I bear now. Can I generalize and say that it is the true face of any man? Can I tread further and say that it is the true face of *all* humans? For if some of us weren't beautiful and others ugly, some with darker tone and some with lighter, could civilization still be possible? What would we do if we could not displace

the gross animal nature from the pretty face? Would we run in terror from one another—as we should? Or would we grow accustomed to our own grotesquerie instead of hiding behind the pretense of righteousness? Would we love each other for the horrid flesh we are? I feel my humanity now more than ever before, as a soldier who's used his hands to kill women and children returns home with the dark heart of a beast inside him. For animal is human. There is no difference other than the consciousness to reason one's self out of that connection. But bear your true face to the world, and you will see in it the reflection of your evil, the fear and pain you inflict. If I am the truest man, I am a monster. For monster—without inhibition—is what man was as a baby; just wrapped up in a cuddly package. We roared for milk and comfort, and slept all day and took away the lives of our parents without mercy or sympathy. But the old excuse is: we didn't know better. We were to be reared to suppress our animal instincts. And perhaps the civility is a good thing, even though it is based on the false pretense of an inherent good. Perhaps we need the lies to survive, as do so many relationships. But then again, I lied for years, and when She finally discovered my true nature—my infidelity—she cut my face off and revealed me to the world. What does that say about our little experiment? Doomed to fail; the face behind the burqua destined to be unveiled? What do we find when we lift it? that She was gorgeous all along; or that it was better to know her blindly, for her face is ferocious.

I touch myself in these final moments, in my adopted house under the weight of the night, and wonder: what is it that draws man to the mother, or the ocean, or the infinite sky? It is not the object itself which he is drawn to; it is himself in the thing; his finite presence within the infinite body—the drop in the ocean, the star in the sky, the egg in the womb. How could he not marvel in the simplicity of this complex phenomenon, the complexity within the simple: that he is a part of the entire mechanism of Being, and simultaneously apart from it, and very alone. It is the notion of unity and the reality of seclusion, all combined within a cosmic egg. It is his humbling in the face of a beautiful abyss. It is him giving himself up. It is nevertheless a narcissistic endeavor, for while this man looks into something external, eternal, it remains that it is himself he is looking into, or, rather, looking for. The mirror, that shallow puddle filled with so much depth. He is a lonely hunter, and ultimately infantile under all that machismo. Take away his face and you will see just how helpless he is ... the grotesque reality ... The external and internal lives, it seems, are not mutually exclusive, though it often appears that way to him, and with devastating effect. In Reality, man is a part of his environment; his surroundings are within him. And searching for acceptance, love, in the mother—the body from which he came—is the most noble endeavor he may undertake. Yet regarding the mother figure, it is difficult to get back to the unconditional love of that place of origin, that complete selfless unity; the world itself is far too...conditional...and causes one to become selfish. So where might he go to find that love which makes life worth living? (Or perhaps unconditional love is not a characteristic of this world. Perhaps heaven is where souls go to love, and we, in Reality, in the world, are in fact in hell. In this scenario the answer still remains—) that the womb is love. Woman is origin, she is water, she *is* love, and we men are mere wandering souls. For those souls more lost than others, we find this love—we share our selves—in the external creation of art. Therein lies the womb and the tomb, the

beginning and the end of existence. It's riskier to put oneself into art than a baby or a spouse, but in the end it is all the same. It is the narcissistic rendering of the self in space, so that one may survive their own finity; so that they may be that much closer to the ethereal infinite from which they came. And as I sit shivering from the draft in my room, stroking myself, I realize that to masturbate is the purest form of expression—which is the purest form of self-deprecation. To cum is to come from the originating place into the deep wide void of space—and to see the fatalistic futile attempts of man to make himself last, in space and time. To love one's self physically is to make the body the external artistic object of admiration—yet in that seeing the cynical cycle of self-valuation, that it is in fact *devaluation* through repetition. Coming is birthing, and in the aftermath, which the French call a “little death,” there is indeed emptiness, similar to that which is present on the stage after a play has adjourned, for our parts can't go on forever. The stage itself may, but the show changes every week. Actors are murdered every night and the scripts are often rewritten, but the presence of the theater itself is a perpetual reality. We must eventually let someone else have the spotlight—but like moths we are so drawn to it ... well, some are. Others know they are not worthy of it ... I feel myself about to blow; I stand up on my chair and prepare to take my final bow; and although my audience has left long ago, I still feel that my performance has been meaningful, because it was written. Here. This is it; this is my legacy, my child, my self, my word, my cum stain on the sheet of humanity. I will see you soon, Mother. I slide my head into the noose above me. I stroke harder—harder—harder—and I cum, and I topple off my pedestal; the strained rope makes its last impression.

III.ii. *Gymnopædia*, a short story, by Renata Nigmedzyanov

She wore a black beanie over a head as spherical and smooth to the touch as a bar of soap, pulled back just enough to expose her short blonde tufts. There were freckles upon her nose and cheeks just above the sharp drop in the bone which cast a perfect shadow on her face, and her head, with its soft shape, adorned a neck like a swan's, attached, at length, to a figure just as thin, though wrapped as if in bondage beneath a thick yet tender skin, lending to an appearance quite domineering and offensive to insecure men. You could have ladled soup from the indentations in her collarbones. Her lips looked perpetually as if they'd just bitten a peach. Her silver eyes looked back at you as your own eyes might from a mirror.

She was aware that she was being preyed upon in stealth; preyed upon by animals disguised as men, prayed for by boys who'd likely pee their pants if ever they found enough courage to approach her, much less talk. Even when she was free of human contact, her phone, lain before her on the table, continued to conduct a current of gentlemen callers.

I could go for a good choke fuck right now to clear my mind. What a girl often needs is a good choke fuck. Realism gravitates toward the pornographic. It's a farce to try severing the desire for physical intimacy from all facets of social interaction. Societies themselves are predicated on it.

She had been waiting fifteen minutes, drunk two double ryes, and craved a smoke. She picked up her clutch and shoved past sunglasses, Spirits, Zippo, Xanax, ID, and her library card, before she located her eCigarette. The bother of going outside outweighed the desire for true carbon combustion, so she settled for vapor instead. Inhales, the orange light flaring at the tip, releases from her pursed lips a peerless cumulus. She leaned forward and propped her elbow upon the table, her back bent slightly over, and her head tilted up. She inhaled again and watched her smoke swirl into eddies and dissipate.

He wants me to get drunk. Bryce Cross wants me to get drunk. She ordered another rye, straight. The waitress brought her tumbler and she took it without a glance.

Later, the glass empty, the waitress came back and inquired, Fourth lonely drink?

Is that an appropriate question to ask someone? Renata said.

The waitress backed away.

Water now, rye later, Renata said.

Waiting for a friend? asked the waitress.

I'm waiting for water, said Renata.

The waitress left, later to return with a glass of water in a Mason jar.

How very chic, said Renata, looking into the waitress's hazel eyes.

The waitress smiled and, turning, walked, slowly, away.

Sorry for the delay, he said sitting down at ten o'clock. No fucking parking for a mile.

Mh, she said.

He picked up the menu and sighed. His eyes flared up at the page. Then he looked up. I hope you eat, he said.

I tend to drink my meals, she said cumdrunkenly. It was somewhat of her signature. The deep, purring, raspy voice. The voice always threatening to yawn or cough.

Well this place got a terrific write up in the magazine. The one on the plane. It said that if there was only one place to try in the city, make it this one.

Is that so? I've been living here for six years and I've never been. Must be missing out on the finer things in life, she said.

You seem like a girl who knows all of the ins and outs.

She pulled her eCigarette back out and began to smoke. What does that mean, exactly? she asked.

You've got that whole hipster thing going on.

Yeah ... um, can you not.

He furrowed his brow, like a father being backtalked. I'm sorry?

Can you not, please, use such offhanded language.

I didn't ... I didn't know "hipster"...

Yeah, that, try not to say that.

But it's cute. You look stunning.

Thank you. That's all you need to say.

Did I offend you?



Just ... use your brain. Choose your words wisely. Don't you know girls are sensitive to words?

I just said "hipster."

Whatever. Drop it.

I just like your style. Unlike any in the office or that of women I work with.

Good. Keep your comparisons to yourself, Bryce Cross. I'm made of words. I have to present myself in words to the world. Would you want people smudging your image with poorly attributed terms?

He laughed.

Feminine intelligence is quite funny, no?

No, I'm sorry. I'm not laughing at that.

She dropped it for him, and smoked while staring out the window.

Look at the menu, he said at length.

I drank my dinner earlier, she said.

Just take a look, okay, there are some interesting dishes. This chef supposedly lived all across the world.

She moved the laminated wood-framed legal page into a more readable angle with her ring finger, and scanned from a distance.

What the fuck is a "monkfish?"

Renata's two lips hung slightly open, moistened with wine, closing, periodically, then opening again. Her eyelids half-hid her dilated, wayward pupils. Her head fell to the left, then the right, as an untouched salad lay in all its advertised glory before her. Her two lips, plump, red ... He kept glancing down at them. She licked her teeth slowly. She raised the glass of wine to her two lips. Sipped. Sat the glass back down. It felt heavier than it should have.

Bryce Cross wore a yellow tie. His suit fit perfectly over his chest, with a perfect amount of strain. Glorious man. A perfect amount of dark scruff under his chin. A smile as straight as an NRA Conservative. What finely etched lips, like a no. 2 pencil. Such a shame nothing of value could be heard from them.

She scarcely responded. She was looking at his plucked eyebrows.

Eat your salad.

She ate a tomato. She did not like it.

You're not smiling. Why don't you smile, said Bryce Cross.

She smiled, in a way that implied the torture of it.

Another drink.

Two.

Red light fell on him, precisely placed, like that of a Spike Jonze film.

Sentences distracted her. Words flew in flurries round her mind.

Cocks make men guilty.

They want to shove it up a hole and die there like a squirrel.

They can't take the pressure society puts on them, so they claw at skirts in hopes that they'll disappear inside a benevolent void.

She was sure that her father had contributed nothing to these opinions of life and men, inasmuch as he had contributed nothing, in his absence, to her life.

That is such a trite trope it's damn near offensive to consider.

Here I am patronizing this little boy, this little boy in his business suit, doing powerful things and putting bucks in the bank, but he's building a sand skyscraper for the coming tide to dissolve.

Why feign belief in all these tropes? Causes don't have effects; they have successive causes, which are clauses in a contract that you'll give your soul to the cosmos when your body decomposes down in the catacomb of earth. What a miniscule catastrophe.

Women have to take a plowing; but men have to do all the work. There's no better proof than biology.

Look at him yammering, blabbering, hawing, all to what end? to convince me his dick's satisfactory. I am not wont to be woo'd. I can take a dispassionate plowing, which people must expend for a little bit of produce. I will not deprive you of your death, Man. If you want to succumb to She of The Cloven Cunt, then crawl right inside; I'll eat you up I will, and you'll taste oh so good. There's no sweet nectar like vital blood. There is no salt so succulent.

... But not every woman feels this way; some hold out hope for Prince Charming, or Prince Yawning; those inferior roses are clipped from the bush and thrown into a compost of domesticity.

*Magnoliophyta* ... the delicate

women in bloom,

inferior roses ...

... pollinated by a busy bumblebee. He goes from one rose, one chrysanthemum, one geranium, to the next, fucks, flies away, dies someday ...

Women ... stationary ... things of beauty ... accustomed to consistency (or at least desirous of consistency in the wake of nature's wrath), like a rose's roots are accustomed to its own special lot of soil, but one day she may be plucked and plopped into a vase for someone's admiration ... till it decays, petals fall away.

... men may be flowers, too, but the wind carries his *gymnosperms* into any vacant lot;

he lacks our sense of discretion, our patience;

his naked seed that much more vulnerable ...

while ours are wellenclosed within a sweet

ovule—

so he remains a bee.

Leave a woman in the wild and she succumbs to the bees; but it is more natural, more holy, no? To bee, or not to bee, buzzing through trees. To be a flower, to bee ...

And we can be prickly, no?

Some shave the rose's thorns so that little boys will not hurt themselves. Well, little boys should be warned off of wild roses, huh.

Prickly rose woman ...

Prickly rose the woman (from her rest)

... Sleep ... Ennui ... Sedation ...

Weary goes down woman (to her death)  
... and the false prospect of monogamous love ...  
Love had kept with woman (in her breast)  
'Fore deceit did then succeed it (for the best)  
... cruelty of this life ...  
Now she is a vessel for disdain  
.... domesticity ...  
For sheets which do need washing of their stains:  
Cum, blood, ocean, sweat and tears  
Are all things filled with that a girl most fears:  
... salt ... will wither the darling rose.  
Food is bland without it. So ... ?  
Pain seasons life  
Through summer's sultry, winter's strife.  
And the joy that ultimately comes with kids  
Is also a reminder that all love's from an abyss;  
And the emptiness of life is lodged in woman,  
In the space between her legs:  
Her womb's an empty room.  
Peace is inherent in nothingness; a certain calm.  
Om resides in the wOMB.  
... Don't all things in nature want to achieve balance? Cry wolf, cruel woman,  
they're coming for you, they crave you, and they can't control themselves—for, that is,  
what's in your pants.

O, the folly of gynetics  
    How melancholy,  
        this misogyny  
            Miss. O../Gyn EEE!  
            Miss. O  
            An Ode to ()'s  
            or the gymno ...  
        or gynesis  
    or gynocide  
or simply gyn.

You've been pretty silent, he said.  
    She was getting tired, but the thought of a good choke fuck kept her up.  
    Pay no attention to the girl behind the face, she quipped.  
    I bet your father didn't like your smart mouth, he said, aiming at a joke, but  
missing quite horribly.  
    Another girl would have poured this wine all over your nice suit, she said.  
    Oh, he said looking down at it. I factor that into my budget.  
    She almost found that amusing.  
    Just so we're clear, she said then, We never have to talk about my father ... or  
family ... ever.

Oh, I'm sorry. Touchy subject?

Trite.

Right ...

Jazz breaks played in the background.

Dance with me, she wanted to say, but didn't. They'd dance in due time.

Softly through the restaurant speakers: Trumpets like Jesus wept. She often listened to jazz because it is the rhythm of the world, often skipping the most important pieces of information. Bass bobbles on like a junkie in the rain and a lonely trumpet blurts a hollow burp, whiskey-sunken maritime vessel ships sail into the world's end to bring back knowledge of the afterlife, and a baby crying scarce of milk will charge the heavenly humors with a passion for action. Bright choleric constellations colliding in the cosmos to fulfill karmic destinies through catastrophic pathos and chaos, kind of like a crystal moon dancing with a centaur on Scorpio, and a contest with no outcome like a tautological labyrinth or some likewise laborious feat which leaves you world-weary as Atlas in hard-bottomed shoes and a jazz fugue whirls through space and the cosmos sending sound waves into a sonorous void before anyone may hear, and a thousand hi-hats sigh so as to quell the distant star collisions with quiet breath and sometimes bass patterns walk a crooked looping path through pathological twists & turns & pedagogues of demented despots. Emerging from the embryo sac, scrupulous attention paid to the details of delirium and the definitions of design and dementia, and less to to the domestic dogma of housewives in Boston baked bean commercials and feminine deodorizing products; eliminate my name and number from your listserve and let me get on with my life because I'm a weary wayward duckling with war on the brains and water in my veins: I live off of fish food 'cause it's cheaper and it's futile to water fruitless trees in fertile soil. What's the meaning of life? Where's the end thread in this tangled intertwined ball of chaos? Oh, wouldn't you like that. Any semblance of meaning could untie the whole universe like a rubberband ball or a net woven of silk from a spider's ass. To lacerate the main vein of the male ego is to bleed out violence and injustice from the world's puss-filled wounds and zounds! Jesus would be proud of a production of the Passion in which all the actors were lovely spirit-animals and nymphs with swan necks and blank checks to buy enough cocaine to kill a full-grown oedipal baby. You write furiously trying to keep up with time; you write passionately to be, but it's no matter, because no matter how much you write you'll never be anywhere nearer to the end and you'll remain in the middle of an ever-expanding space and you think you'll make your lasting mark but that's no matter as well because at any time you may spontaneously dissolve and your body will be just another cluster of atoms slipping in and out of this plane of existence.

What are you thinking about? he interrupted her.

Oh, she responded, slightly startled. Nothing.

She had once seen a verifiability insane man play beautiful music. Dirty kids, minds mired in nostalgia for a time they never lived in, danced closely huddled to the sound of a man who swept the eighties up in a circle mosh and then calmed that tide with upbeat C

majors marching through wayward bass and the caressing taps of a hihat. Yellow, red, and green lights illuminated a little basement in D.C., and a couple of times in Richmond, and there was a distinctly sexual sense to the scene, one which she vowed she'd never experience from any worldly body again. It was celibacy to the music, to shirk humanity for art. Intimacy in feelings, relationships with the ethereal, trumped that with objects. It was the only way she could reconcile how many times she had cum on that dance floor listening to live music, an intangible thing, a thing that can only be apprehended at the moment the soundwave hits the eardrum and then it dissipates, like smoke, and leaves only a memory, a much too unattainable truth.

Remembrance always consumed her when she was farthest from the memory. You could not have compared those hole-in-the-wall venues to Asterisk tonight. This restaurant was filled with people who, if they'd seen HR on the corner in his army jacket, kilt, and rainbow scarf tying up his matted mane, would have written him off as exactly what he was: a fucking lunatic. But they would not have seen what he represented. They did not look deep enough into anything. They looked at holograms. They looked at refracted light lain on surfaces of seas, never fathoming the seafloor.

Tell me about yourself, said Bryce Cross when he'd finished his veal.

Renata sighed, saying, We don't have to do this.

Do what? he replied with innocence of intention.

Whatever it is that civil people do. Whatever it is that people do to act civil toward one another.

What's all this? he asked, perplexion in his complexion.

Do you want to get to know me? You really don't, I think. You want to fuck me, and that's cool. Why do we have to veil it in social queues.

He opened his hand in a manner split between wanting to express "You got me" and "I have nothing to hide."

Don't act like a gentleman now, she said, You can be a pig, I won't judge you.

I'm not a pig, he said. I just want to talk to you.

We don't have to talk about me, she said. We can talk about whatever it is that you've been talking about this whole time.

But that's the thing. You haven't been talking. I've been talking on and on, boring you. I want this to be a two-way street.

Come on, Buster Keaton--

Wha--?

You know what makes this a two-way street. Know what I mean? You know what the deal is. I'm gonna do what I have to do later. You take advantage of this opportunity to polish your ego. Practice your anecdotes.

He appeared deflated. Other girls like you play into the whole "date thing."

Yeah, and they go home exhausted. I'm saving my energy.

You don't wanna play with me, he said casting his eyes down.

This is not a performance, she said. I am not an actress. I cannot feign interest like Ms. Oscar-Winner to our left. Look at her; tossing her head back in laughter. That's not genuine. It's like movies in the fifties, where everyone talks so goddamn fast for no reason. Regular people don't talk that fucking fast.

It's a movie. It's supposed to be fun.  
Fun is for the dumb.  
And what do you do for enjoyment?  
I masturbate and compose sentences.  
Compose sentences?  
Yeah, in my head.  
Why?  
It makes me feel full.  
You don't hang out with your girlfriends?  
I don't have any girlfriends. Girls are complicated, and not in an intriguing way.  
Maybe you need some friends to help you have fun.  
I am happy in my life, Buster, okay? And what is with all of the emotional shit that you expect comes with having a pussy? I don't want to talk. And you project an image upon me that necessitates a desire for emotional intimacy. Get that out of your head right now. I want to be intimate with you in only one way. You're not my type of brain, you dig?  
Well ... I gotta say, I don't like the fact that you're talking to me like this. But it's also arousing to me. So ...  
There. Perfect. That's a valid and interesting comment.  
.... Yeah.  
Let's talk about that. Arousing things.  
Um, well, let's wait on that.  
Pussy.  
Excuse me?  
You're a little bitch.  
He leaned in. We're in a public place. ... "Pussy" ... is nothing to be talked about in a place like this.  
Yeah ... pussy.  
He cracked a smile.  
She returned it.  
There's a genuine smile, he said, his eyes alight.  
Don't get used to it.  
He appeared to loosen, putting his elbows on the table, weaving his fingers together. Why so guarded? he asked. I don't suppose it's due to your line of work?  
Don't ever bring up my "line of work" again. This is a vacation, know what I mean. This is easy. If anything, this is fun.  
Most ... girls ... think of it as work.  
Most "girls" are focusing on the wrong things. And, to be sure, when you enter the work based on a pure love of the act as opposed to socioeconomic misfortune, you get different results. There's also the bosses you have to deal with. But if you own your own practice, it's peachy keen.  
Who are you accountable to if you have no boss? I mean, who ... insures you?  
Do you think I'm incapable of self-reliance?  
Um ...  
I have tactics.

Tactics?

Yeah. And a gun.

Oh.

I'm not a ditzo idiot. I'd been a waitress for years. I've been to Prague, London, Naples, Cairo ... I have a degree.

I'm not saying that your work boxes you into ...

No ... of course you're not.

He was quiet for some time, allowing *Bitches Brew*-era Miles Davis to drift into their atmosphere, then he admitted, I guess I just don't know how to talk to you.

No, but you know how to talk at me.

He laughed. I don't know of any girl—at all—who's exactly like you. Or even close.

That's why I get away with so much.

Like ... doing things like this?

Well, I get away with things like this purely based on my supernatural mental capacities. She grinned bearing her teeth.

He shuffled his feet underneath the table, brushed his tie, and looked around. She began to recede back into the deep space of her mind, but he tried to penetrate her again, saying, In the past five minutes, I've actually developed a desire to know you.

I have that effect. The answer is no. There's a reason I do things this way.

But, you're robbing the world of so much ... spice! Energy! You're electric!

And you're trite. And trite people need not be electrified, lest they become distressed by the rush of it. You will be overwhelmed.

They drank more, under a great deal of silence. He was contemplating another curiosity and she was preparing to ward it off. Thus, it was a silence which traded weight as to who would speak, like a quartet trades fours, always at length returning to the original melody.

What do you think about life? he asked.

She couldn't help but furrow her brow and wince with pity-filled agape, and a gaze filled with the anxiety he had managed to escape.

Really? she said. Of all the “get to know you” questions, you pick the one with the most *and* least meaning, simultaneously? You pick the one that lacerates deeper than a jagged steel edge? You pick the one I *have* to answer, on principle? My principles?

Uh ...

You really don't know what you just asked, do you?

Uh ...

You just asked, in so many words, “What is the reason you haven't killed yourself yet?”

I didn't--

Yes you did. “What is life's purpose to you?” is another phasing of “What is keeping you from removing your pitiful consciousness from this chaotic and meaningless melange of often painful and passionless events?”

Twelve seconds of silence ensued before Bryce Cross replied, Well?

She lowered her head, pinched the left corner of her lip into her cheek, and replied, Like I said before, I have a supernatural capacity for mental anguish.

Yeah ...

And, life is nothing at all. And I can dig it.

...What? Can you repeat that?

Life's a big nothing.

Nothing?

Yes, no thing.

I'm sorry, a what thing?

An O-thing.

An O-thing? What's an O-thing? I thought life was nothing?

It is.

So what's ... an O-thing?

The same thing. An O. An empty space.

So you don't think that there's anything to get out of life?

Well there's nothing to get out of nothing.

There's gotta be something to get out of it.

Nah. Returns are for gamblers and loan sharks. You know that. Most exchanges in life yield zero or negative returns.

There's the occasional win.

Those are reserved for people in fortune's path. Chance, if you will. But they are few and far between, like the distance between one star and another, or between one electron and another. They seem to be in abundance, stars and electrons, but that's only because they're so rare that they appear plentiful in small numbers. Like midgets. Two midgets is a lot of midgets. But, in any case, winning is rare. Losing is fair. That's the curve you've got to abide by.

Well ... I'd go all depressed if I genuinely believed that. But I happen to be a person who feels that life is here for us to mine it of all its riches.

Well, you can't mine meaning from nothing. But you can put meaning into it, "it" being empty and all.

Explain.

You insert yourself into the O-thing. You insert your meaning into the void. You penetrate it, fertilize it. Penetrate the O-thing. Fuck life.

They walked down the avenue, ditzzy from their rendezvous, running into one another, watching the world turn on its side. He bummed a cigarette from her even though he didn't smoke. The blue American Spirits were much too harsh for him, harsher than the Camel menthols he'd smoke on drunk occasion, and he soon put it out.

Ashes teeter off her cigarette and float away like butterflies.

They walked huddled closely in the fall's cool, dry breeze. The world seemed drenched in codeine, all things moving slowly. There's death in the breath the world huffs from its chest, in puffs, zephyrs, typhoons, hurricanes, monsoons, and in fall wheezes like these. These are its dying breaths.

They walked toward a place she kept in a large, newly renovated mansion which the realtor let her crash in til it sold. Her room was empty but for a mattress, a bedside table,



and an open suitcase. Empty rooms elsewhere, drafty. When asked why she was allowed to live in a property which was still on the market, she replied, Anything can be bought. Especially from men.

Then there was a flurry of impressions, touches, glimpses of reality, and clothes dropped in the foyer like pornstars to their knees.

They were upon the wall like a mess of vines, clambering up the stairs, rolling down the hallway to her room. He kissed every spot of her that he exposed to the bare air.

Then they were upon the bed, naked and appalled. They complemented and contradicted each other. She lay upon disheveled sheets like a Flying V: Play me, play me. Pluck me, strum me. Make me produce beautiful music. A wah. A clang. Arpeggiate me...

He charmed her first by biting her, sliding his fingers along the part between her pussy lips, rubbing deeper, deeper, sliding his free thumb into her mouth. And she responded without performance, gasping with a smile, shuddering like an old wooden house. She unclipped his pants and grabbed his cock at the head, tugging gently, and he told her that she needed controlling. He told her that he was going to command her. Then she pushed his head down between her legs with a strength he didn't know she had. Tongue running up and down the valley, splashing into the stream. Lapping up her water. She scratched his massive back with all ten nails, a prisoner marking out days left in the holding cell. He climbed back up her body like the rope in the boys' gymnasium, nibbling at her cheek and ear while his cock teased the outside of her pussy, dampened, and finally sunk.

What a cunt, he said.

She laughed because she knew he had no control over it.

You are bamboo in my heart's garden, she said.

He thrust, stirred, thrust, sunk deeper, and deeper, drowning, hitting the seafloor, slowly dying, and lay his lips on her's like pillows. Tongues engaged in tag on the palate, like children, laughing at the uvula.

He filled her void. She warmed his ego. Naked and vulnerable. The draft's been plugged. He stokes the scullery fire. They pulsate in unison, flesh, melting, breathing. Together. They're fetal now. They're dying as one another, begot as one. No orifice subjected to the cruel outside world.

And they both died a timely death, but a little one. And when he regained existence he stammered up, wiped himself, and put on his shirt and trousers.

Five, right? he said laying fifty one-hundred-dollar bills on her nightstand. Expensive, but worth it.

Low maintenance, high price, she said on her way to sleep.

I've got to catch a plane tomorrow, he said, ... And I'd love to see you again, really; ... but she was already miles into her dreams.

It rained in the morning when she awoke in a bed half-empty. She masked her morning breath with cigarette smoke. Half-way through she let the embers burn away in the ashtray as she curled into a fetal position, and then stretched backward, like a dancer in

two dimensions. She contracted, straightened on her back, swung her left leg over her right and pulled it until her hamstrings relaxed, then she did the same with her right leg. Her phone vibrated.

She glanced at the screen.

She picked her cigarette back up and turned to face the window, where she watched notes of rain water roll down the window pane, collecting all the other droplets, swelling larger and larger, gaining more and more momentum, until they finally reached the wooden seal and leveled out.

#### III.iv. *Origends*, an essay, by Frank Lachowski

What we've been taught in a (post-)modern first-world industrial nation is a very linear way of interpreting the evolution of time and our species in the world. It's upwardly-motivated. It revolves around progress. We as humans in the first world are ambitious creatures; we are ever in pursuit of the better salary, the bigger house, the more efficient transport, the best venue, etc, etc. But I am writing to say that progress will not save us from destruction, that ambition is dangerous, and that it's sad to watch our race think that we're moving forward in evolution, when really, we're running in a circle and will end up right back where we began. As nothing.

And there's nothing wrong with that.

That's why I'm writing this. As a defense for passivity. Not necessarily as a rally against the age of faster, heftier information technology, but as a declaration of understanding: that bigger isn't better, that more isn't more secure, and that force won't triumph. With that understanding, we as a human race can achieve an inner peace and connection with the environment that our brother and sister animals have. The connection between inner tranquility and universal tranquility is more related than you may think.

I've realized over the course of writing this that a lot of "lies" have to be told in order to get to the heart of truth. Some listeners can't be confronted with the absolute truth immediately. They often need to be eased into thinking in an obscure way. So, after you complete this essay, you may notice that a lot of the terminology I've used is inaccurate. That was only done so that you would not find the topic at hand too much to handle. By grounding you with a more accessible framework, we will be able to ease through with fewer obstacles.

Now that that's out of the way, I'll now reject some of the things I just wrote to give you a clear understanding of what you're in store for:

There are no such things as lies or truth.

In the strictest sense of the Theory, everything is a fabrication of the human brain and nothing exists outside of it. At the same time, it means that the entire universe exists inside of the human mind. See how even all of the stars and plants both exist and don't exist simultaneously; they're queer, quotidian, and quixotic; they have no immediate bearing on our lives and yet inform our environment in the most macro of manners. The entire universe operates in these strange loops. The point of its very existence is to elude

any logical system. To try and find the difference between truth and fiction is futile because the system proves itself wrong.

The concepts that I'll talk about here follow this pattern; they'll eventually disprove themselves and implode. But, in keeping with the pattern, they also hold the key to their self-destruction: the way that they disprove themselves is by existing at all. In other words, the only way you'll know that it's all made-up is if you read it and understand it. Then you'll go, "Oh, that makes sense. So *that's* why it doesn't make sense." It's as if it's proving that it's proving itself wrong. *The following statement is true: the preceding statement is false.*

The beauty in understanding this is that we can then be able to see how inconsequential we are, how little our affairs matter. To feel so inconsequential makes you feel even bigger than a man or woman. You'll start to lose the distinctions between you and the universe. You'll begin to feel perfect balance, of yin and yang energy. You'll start to understand how something can simultaneously be its own birth and demise, how it can be its own origin and end. You'll understand why there is no "progression" of space-time. You'll see how "progress" implies a beginning and end. And you'll finally see that the beginning and end were never separate, neither man and universe. You'll overstand the unity in everything, and the multitude in (.)

#### [God Theory]

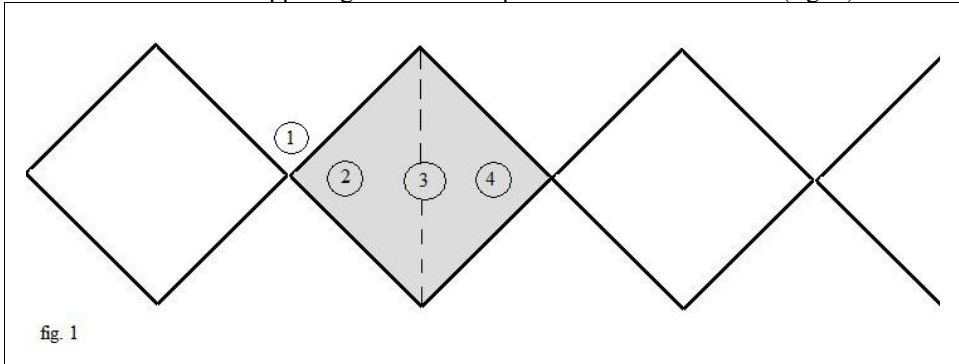
Let's imagine for a moment that evolution was not a chance happening, and that there was once a race of gods that predates the history of man and animal. By race, I mean there was both a species, and a literal race: a race for perfection, for progress. These gods were divided amongst themselves, like man is among countries and ethnicities; they challenged each other to see who could create more intelligent and organic medicines, ideologies, and machines. So this race created animal, an organic machine as we know of it today that reproduced and evolved on its own. What a success this was for the gods! They had these organisms to carry out their every whim. The gods continued to develop the evolution technology over an infinite number of years, until they had developed the most advanced computer in the universe: the human brain. Now, for reasons unknown, the super machine, man, killed his creator, and somewhere in the subconscious of the human brain, there lingered reminiscence of this creator species.

This is a legend that is commonly passed around cultures in some form or another and it may or may not have happened. But it is a useful illustrative tool to show how there have been races before us, who may have lived in different parts of the universe and who may have ascribed to different laws of physics, etc.

Gods lived in their own period of space-time, distinct from ours. In the next section, we will see how space-time works and what our relationship is to gods and the inhabitants of other space-time continuums.

## [Singularity and Space-Time]

The progression of all time follows a motif that can best be pictured as a series of diamonds connected at opposing corners: the space-time continuum line (fig. 1).



The shaded area represents our present time-space continuum. A time-space continuum is an immeasurable length of time that occupies a specific space in the universe (or vice versa.) We as humans and animals exist in a continuum of time on Earth. The continuum starts at one point and ends at a succeeding point, with an infinite number of “years” occurring between the two points. Many scientists would refer to point 1 as the big bang, the creation of the universe as we know it. Indeed, I consider point 1 to be a representation of a big bang, a perfect harmony of yin and yang wherein ultimate destruction has built into it the beginnings of new life. Similarly, the continuum ends at a single point of armageddon, which also marks the beginning of another space-time continuum. That is another big bang, the point at which earth’s existence will cease and another species or “tangled ball” of energy will begin its work somewhere else in the universe. That is why the big-bang, also conceptualized as atomic rain, signifies both ending and renewal.

Any particular space-time continuum, like the shaded diamond in figure 1, is a part of a larger continuum of space-time continuums. This diamond pattern endlessly repeats in a linear way, just like life had been occurring before you were born, and like life will go on after you die. Every “big bang” destroys one thing and births something new.

Theoretically, the race of gods would exist in the continuum preceding ours and their success with the creation of the human mind ultimately resulted in their destruction, marked by point 1. Thus began the space-time continuum of earth, and later, humans. Human life (wherein I mean the collective progression of man, animals, and ecosystem on Earth) follows a pattern similar to that of the race of gods. Life on earth will progress (point 2) until a certain point—a single moment of ultimate renaissance (point 3)—after which it will start to become more and more self-destructive (point 4). After that, the self-destruction of man will become so severe that the next “big bang” will occur. It might not actually be a physical explosion, but we’ll never know that. At that point, the collective consciousness of the time-space continuum will stop. After that point—the singularity—we will have no idea what will happen.

All space-time continuums follow this pattern. Evolution will naturally progress to create more and more advanced organisms through survival of the fittest, until an organism is created that is so advanced that it will ultimately destroy the space it inhabits. Its ambition will kill it and everything around it. In different space-time continuums, this pattern takes different amounts of time to complete. Since evolution is a random occurrence, some advancements will randomly happen faster in some space-time continuums than in others, but the end result will always be in its future.

The race of gods flourished; they thought they were invincible. They believed that the ultimate direction of progress was upward, as we do now. They developed the human brain and other advanced technology until their progress began to yield diminishing returns. We can't say if they realized that at some point it was too late. There's no real way to pinpoint Point 3 in relationship to where you are in the space-time continuum. There's not even any real way to pinpoint *your* location within the space-time continuum. But whether you could or not, such a realization would be futile since the progression of the time-space continuum will ultimately lead to a singularity. After point 3, the technological "advancement" of a race will become inversely related to the remaining amount of time it has left to exist. The ratio will get smaller and smaller until a perfect harmony, wherein the race will reach the limits of its design and everything will change.

And there you have it! You actually have the end of the story right here. The human race towards technological and moral perfection is a race for demise. For man is building a machine. And soon—it's impossible to know when—the ultimate progress of man will breed the ultimate destruction.

The nature of how we perceive time is directly connected to how the universe functions as a whole. And the nature of singularities is probably the most important factor when it comes to understanding how the universe works. It can get complicated because the mechanisms by which singularities work undermine the concept of the linear progression of space-time that I have just talked about. What I've explained above is a sort of two-dimensional representation of space-time. There is actually a second level to singularity, a context for context. Along with telling us what happened before us, it also tells us what's going on around us and at the same time as us.

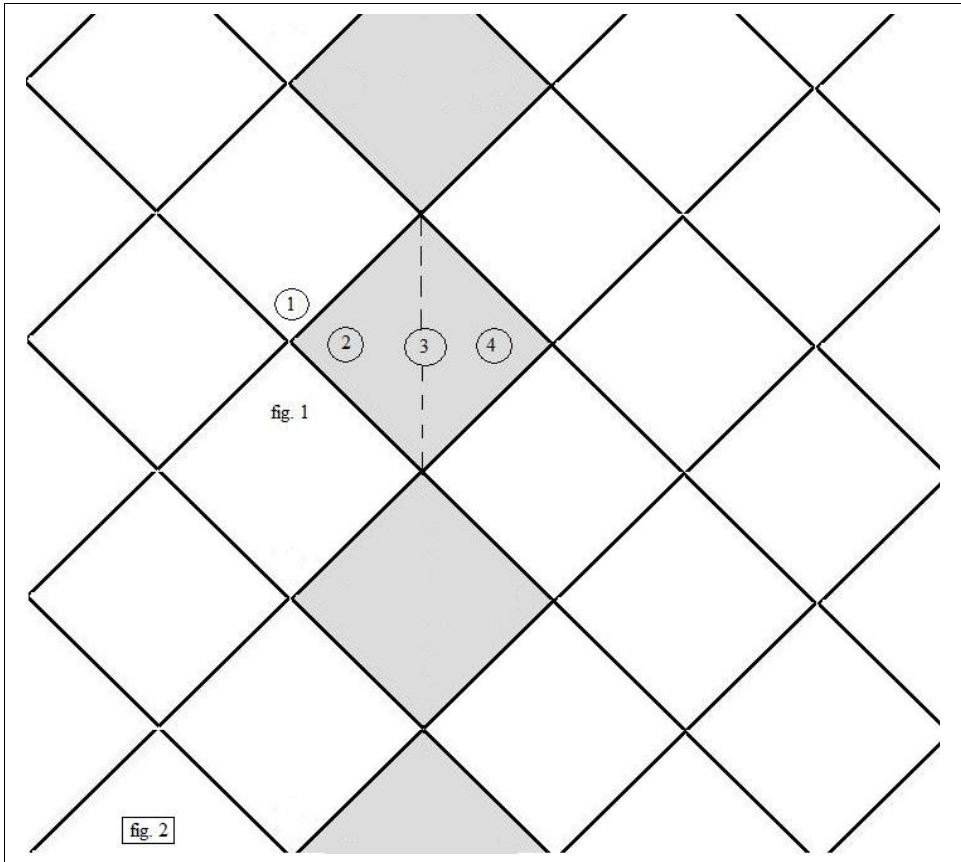
At each singularity (figure 1, point 1) on one timeline of the space-time continuum, particles are emitted that represent the presence of perfectly harmonized energy (yin-yang). Since singularities are all identical these particles emitted at one end of a certain space-time continuum are the exact same particles present at the subsequent end of the same space-time continuum. Singularities are identical and the particles they emit are identical, so the selfsame event is taking place at two ends of the space-time continuum. In more accurate terminology, a singularity is only one event. But how can the same singular event be happening in two places over and over? That would be like me kicking a ball over a fence at 12:30 on a Friday afternoon, rearing my foot back, and then kicking the exact same ball over the fence. How can I do that over and over with the same ball?

To be kicking the same ball over and over, there has to be an identical me on the other side of the fence, kicking the same ball at the same time that I kick my ball. As the

identical me kicks the ball over the fence, he is actually kicking my ball to me while I am kicking my ball away to him (me). So I kick a ball that appears to go over the fence, while I see another ball coming towards me at the same time. I kick the same ball over and over.

Similarly, one group of particles has to be present at the same time that the subsequent group of particles is emitted. For this to be possible, they must be traveling faster than the speed of light in opposite directions. They are moving so fast that our existence as humans is only the slightest blink on the level of trans-singularity movement. What's interesting is the point where the particles meet within the space time continuum. That is located at point 3 in figure 1: the Limit of Design, the apex of this trajectory, the perfect moment of yin and yang, after which everything begins to generally become more destructive as the particles arrive at their opposite end, which is actually the same end. When the cycle is completed, a single singularity exists and a new space-time continuum is produced. The new space-time continuum repeats the same cycle on and on in a space-time continuum line. This "cycle" is actually the renewal of the single point at which yin and yang energy harmonizes. So, a singularity is an instantaneous point. And since a space-time continuum exists between two singularities, which are actually the same point, a space-time continuum constitutes the width of a point. We might then say that figure 1, the space-time continuum line, is not a line at all. Keep this in mind.

With our understanding of how one time-line of time-space continuums works, we have the roots to the workings of the entire universe-system. Where additional levels come into play is where point 3 is in figure 1. There are an infinite number of parallel space-time continuum lines that are all joined at points where yin and yang energies harmonize. As we've learned, this happens at the singularities, but it also happen in part at the moment of Renaissance—Point 3. At the same time, in parallel space-time continuums, singularity particles are also meeting in the middles, and by chance those particles interact with the particles meeting in another parallel singularity line and create another parallel singularity. This is depicted below:



This creates an infinite number of space-time continuums. Above and below the section of figure 1, we see additional shaded boxes. These are parallel universes on additional dimensions that intersect our space-time continuum at the exact same time. And since those space-time continuums have singularities intersecting with other space-time continuums on the same timeline, we can say that all of these events are connected. We just learned that the space-time continuum that exists between two singularities is really a shadow or residual energy field of a single point of singularity. So, since all of these space-time continuums, or universes, are connected at each others' singularities then they are all shadows of the same single singularity. This means that they are all happening at the same time, constituting one grand singularity:

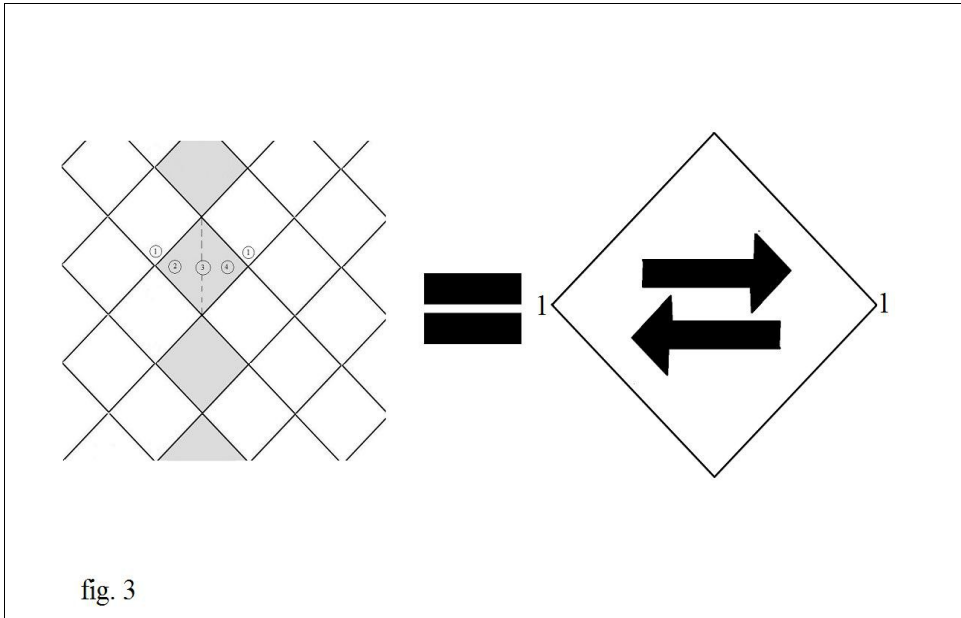


fig. 3

Note in figure 3, as we've just established, on the right side of the equation how the same point 1 exists at both ends of the space-time continuum. The concept of time as we know it is a reverberation of a single point. You, me, humans, and our concept of time are merely a singular moment in a wave of a vibration of a single point.

Here we can examine the relevance of multiple dimensions. There are more complex dimensions that build upon the third dimension, the one within which we are used to living (or, more accurately, the dimension in which we perceive our selves living). We might look at one space-time continuum diamond as a single dimension. The second dimension is the movement of time within it, from one singularity to the next. That's how we perceive time, linear. In actually, there is a third dimension, the super-fast movement of particles between the same singularity. That is what is illustrated on the right side of figure 3. We can conceptualize higher planes of dimension as interactions between whole continuum lines which interact and exist parallel to ours. To move through the fourth dimension is to jump from one space-time continuum to another on the same timeline. To move through the fifth dimension is to move from one space-time continuum to another on the parallel plane (in figure 3, the shaded planes).

You might be thinking, "Well why is this relevant for me? I can't jump between different dimensions of the universe."

Think again.

Since movement along parallel planes happens so fast (due to the instantaneous nature of the singularity), we can actually move along these higher dimensions without noticing it. Every individual space-time continuum diamond holds one of an infinite number of events that could take place as particles move between the selfsame point. In



other words, each universe is a moment; each universe is one of an infinite number of eventual outcomes that could result within a reverberating point of time. (These eventualities are like the different heights that the ball could fly each time it's kicked over the fence. It doesn't have to fly to the same height every time, and there are an infinite number of height integers that it could reach.) The space-time continuum system in figures 2 and 3 are a collection of instantaneous moments all occurring at the same time. So, in actuality, there is no space-time continuum at all, but a unity of moments, within which time is manifest by jumping through and connecting these moments.

To be perfectly clear, what I mean is that there is no progression of time, not even in the negative space that it takes for particles to move faster than the speed of light. What the diamonds actually represent are points. They're random events, joined at a common singularity. The way we perceive time, as linear, is actually all of these single points sparking and dying instantaneously, and then "hopping," by the flight of released singularity particles, though higher dimensions to other points, which then do the same thing. Time as we know it is actually a random string of events happening, as it were, at the same time.

To be short, there is no fate. History is a coincidental string of moments and our world will continue to evolve randomly.

Here are the conclusions at which we've arrived:

- (1) There is no such thing as linear time.
- (2) There is no space-time continuum line.
- (3) Time is how the brain perceives random multi-dimensional movement between a group of possible eventualities.
- (4) "Life" is a haphazard string of unconnected moments.
- (5) Your memories are fabrications of your brain as it tries to cope with the way the universe works.
- (6) The people you "know" are also fabrications of your brain; they are a collection of random encounters and you may lose them at any moment.
- (7) You have no control.
- (8) The universe finds you irrelevant.
- (9) Since the universe is a point, you're basically a less-than-instantaneous wave of energy within it.
- (10) You don't exist continuously; you are an amalgamation of an infinite number of instantaneous perceptions which appear to proceed linearly based on the selective rational networking mechanisms within the human brain.

How do we conceptualize this concept of infinite time and the infinite possibilities of a world existing within and between single points? We can think of them like our own lives, yours and mine, which will end as others begin and that began as others ended. Our life is a singularity; we see the light coming out into the world through our mother's womb, and we see the same light going through the tunnel out of it. Our life is a point within a larger space-time continuum, like the shaded section of figure 1. There are many other lives, moments, points, occurring at the same time within the same space-time continuum. To compound that, the space-time continuum that we're in is a point in

itself existing in the midst of an infinite number of other space-time continuums. To compound *that*, that system of space-time continuums, all occurring at the same time, is actually a single point in *itself*. Thus warrants the equation illustrated in figure 3. The timeline of our lives is actually a series of random, instantaneous movements between different space-time continuums. To be sure, we are single points existing within other single points, and those points comprise one single point. It may seem as though we're inconsequential. That's true. But, as single points, we as humans—we as sentient beings—also hold within *us* an infinite number of space-timelines and singularities. As we exist within a compound of singularities, another infinite number of levels of singularities exist within us. We're big and small, simultaneously.

It may seem to you at this point that I've already mooted my own purpose in writing here. If everything was random, and time may have a destiny anyway, why tell such an inconsequential story? Why tell a story that may not have even happened? Why dwell on the inconsequential? Well, I might then turn that question back onto you: Why live it? I believe it's the connection we want, regardless of inconsequentiality or fate. We want to connect to the people who came before us, to the people who might come afterward, and the world and universe around us. We want to connect worlds. And isn't that why we tell stories anyway? Isn't that what we do to give our lives meaning?

In writing this, I feel the very emotion of insignificance and magnitude of which I've just spoken. But remember, it is but a blip. I admit it. My friends and I are micro-blips. You are a micro-blip. But we've embraced our inconsequentiality. The stories we tell, even though we got them from books of fabricated history, could be completely true and not true at the same time in different parallel universes. Just like the Library of Babel contains every variation of every four-hundred-and-fifty-page series of alphabetical symbols, representing every book which has ever or may ever be written, complete with every possible typo and plot adjustment, existent alongside every variation of utterly meaningless strings of symbols. Do we dwell on books of nonsense? No, even though they are far more abundant than the books we can comprehend. After looking through galleries and galleries of books of nonsense we may stumble upon one—or even simply a line or paragraph of one—which contains meaning to us, with relevance and connection to our lives, just as we may travel through space for eternity and only happen once upon organic life; there we are stricken with the sublimity of existence and meaning within an overwhelmingly meaningless void. And that is what matters. That is what our brains sift from the mire of infinite reverberations of these points which comprise our universe. The important thing with our life, or our history, or with any story for that matter, is not its truth, but how it connects us.

Because it's all true. Or, rather, it's all possible.

[The Number 3 has Profound Implications]

*The Way gave birth to unity,  
Unity gave birth to duality,  
Duality gave birth to trinity,  
Trinity gave birth to the myriad creatures.*

The three branches of government: the executive, judicial, and legislative; the Holy Trinity: the father, son, and the holy ghost; the triangle being the most resilient of all geometrical shapes; formalist narrative structure: beginning, middle, and end, which translates directly to the metaphysical narrative structure of birth, life, and death, or, alternatively, life, death, and after-life. These are just a few of the many sets of three which populate our society, mathematics, and ideology. But the most immediately pressing instance of the profound implications of three, and that which we perhaps take most for granted, is that there are three dimensions which we perceive. Of course, though it is elementary to point out, the first dimension is a point without mass or depth; the second dimension is a line, which is merely an infinite series of points, regardless of the length of its segment. Matter as we know it cannot exist in either of these two rudimentary dimensions. Matter, to have mass and depth, must exist in a minimum of three dimensions. The question thus arises: is it because we exist in a three dimensional space that we are endowed with three-dimensional assets, or is it the necessity of human existence to create around itself the three-dimensional space in which it must inhabit. To be sure, a human brain could not exist in two dimensions, or, otherwise stated, as a two-dimensional cross-section. It would fail its purpose. We need three dimensions, at a minimum, in which to exist. So, does the three-dimensional brain exist because there are three-dimensions, or are there three dimensions so that a brain can then come into existence. This is a chicken/egg quandary. And, therefore, it is not of very much interest to us presently.

What is of interest to us, however, are the implications which three dimensions have upon our concept of infinity. Much like human life needs three dimensions in which to exist, infinity itself is contingent upon three to exist.

Let us first assert that we may put things into Context within a three-dimensional plane, that is, we can determine their exact location in 3-D space per se. Two dimensions only offers relativity, things as they exist relative to one another as a cross-section of 3-D space.

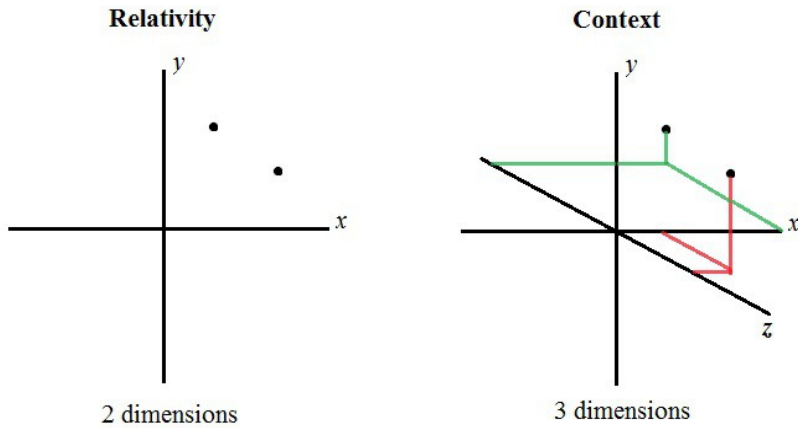
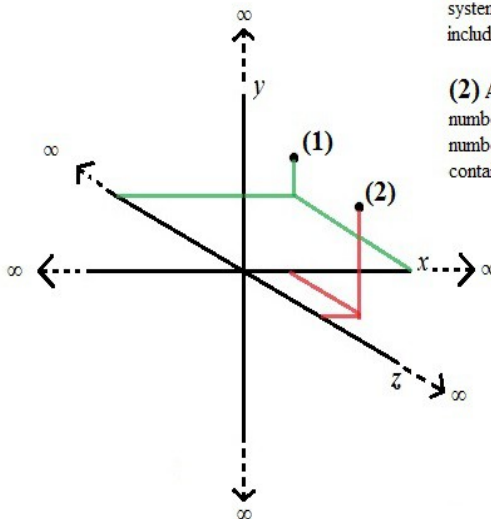


figure 1

But this is a flawed model because all context and relativity exists within a limit: infinity. Infinity is the limit, an infinite limit, yes, but a limit nonetheless. It contains all possibilities of all possible models (or worlds, or physics), whereas one worldphysics is limited to the parameters of the Big Bang/Singularity and the systems which result from it, including gravity, elementary composition, etc.

### Infinite Space-Time (1)



(1) The Milky Way Galaxy, and the physical systems and elementary compositions which govern it, including that of Earth

(2) Another possible worldphysics, governed by any number of unfathomable physical laws, one of any number of worldphysics numbering infinity, which contains all of these possibilities

Every point on a three-dimensional plane represents a possibility of a worldphysics. Since the plane extends to infinity, there are an infinite number of points which can be located. In two dimensions, however, only one crosssection of this model is represented.

figure 2

The point is: only on a three-dimensional plane can we account for all instances of infinity. A two dimensional cross-section only represents infinity on a linear plane, that is, length-wise by height-wise. Infinity length-wise is still infinite, and Infinity height-wise is also infinite, but in a three-dimensional plane, there is also depth of infinity. We must thus account for Infinity Length-Wise multiplied by Infinity Length-Wise multiplied by Infinity Depth-Wise (or Height-Wise, depending on perspective).

Infinity as we know it, as  $[\infty * \infty_w]$ , is two-dimensional. To account for a three-dimensional infinite model we must multiply this value by itself. For the purposes of argument, let us define this value of  $[\infty * \infty_w * \infty_h]$  as  $[\infty^2]$ .

So: infinity can only truly exist in three dimensions as a multiplicity of itself.

BUT, the vast multiplicity of infinity is also the nature of its singularity. Observe:

**Infinity is a Singularity**

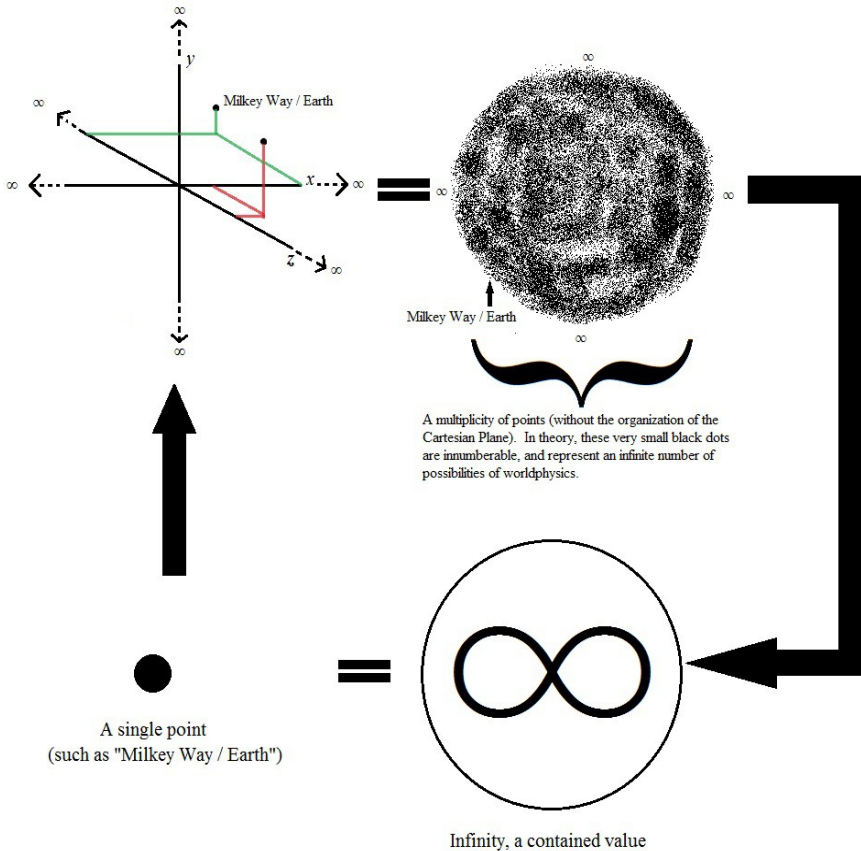


figure 3

As you can see, Infinity is, by nature, a controlled value; so its composition progresses in theory from the multiplicity of a three-dimensional model to the singularity of a one-dimensional model.

But wait, there's more!  
The limit is not yet set.

By accounting for itself as a component of its own value, that is, by assuming itself as one of an infinite number of other components of itself, it is compounding itself. That is, it is bigger than itself. Or, in other words, the infinity we know is merely a small component of True Infinity. True Infinity is in fact every instance of infinite infinity, thus, it not only never ends, but it is continuously expanding.

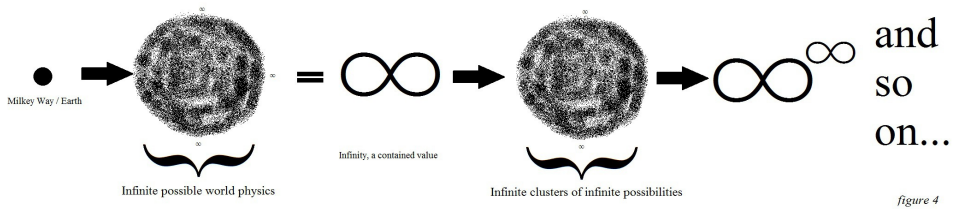


figure 4

And it continues to compound like this until...

$(\text{Infinity}^{\text{infinity}^{\text{infinity}^{\text{infinity}^{\text{infinity}^{\text{infinity}^{\text{infinity}^{\text{infinity}}}}}}}})^{\text{infinity}}$

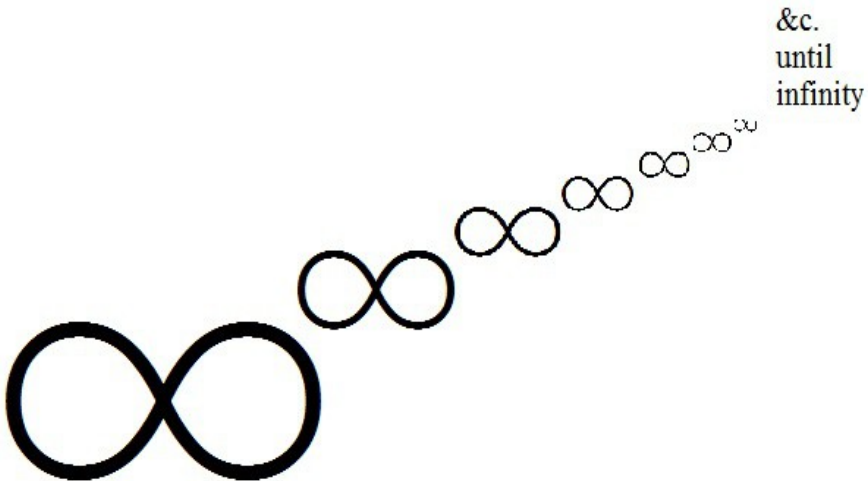


figure 5

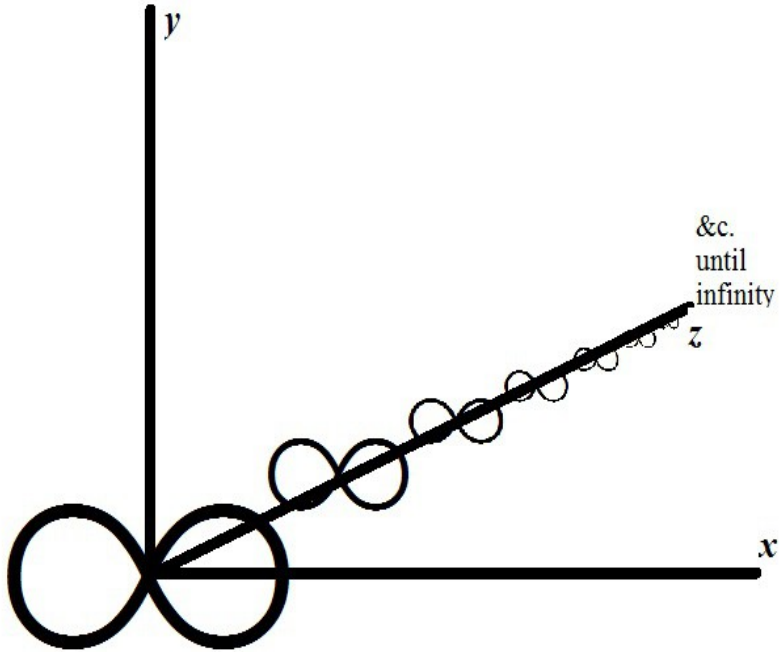
...which happens to look suspiciously like human DNA. Could it be that DNA is the physical manifestation of infinity as the building block of human existence? That is another question for another day.

But to return to the matter at hand...

We can see that to account for all instances of infinity in a three-dimensional plane, as anticipated by itself, would be a tedious and daunting task, nearly impossible. Therefore, we must value infinity to the infinite infinite<sup>∞</sup> power [ $\infty(\infty^{\infty})$ ] as itself, per

se, “∞”. Thus, the singular “∞” accounts for all multiple instances of itself, or, otherwise stated, it contains all infinite possibilities of itself. It just leads back to itself, multiplicity back to singularity returning to multiplicity again, and like that it continuously expands and contracts like a living and breathing organism. We can observe this in figure 4.

We may also observe that infinity itself creates a three-dimensional Cartesian plane:



*figure 6*

Here, the infinite  $x$  and  $y$  axes account for the conventional two-dimensional model of infinity that we are accustomed to, but the addition of the  $z$  axis, which runs along the trajectory of infinity's infinite exponential sequence, provides the depth which is essential in an equation to provide a complete three-dimensional scope. And infinity has three dimensions because it accounts for every possibility of itself, thus anticipating its own infinite nature.

So we may assert that not only does infinity to the infinite infinite<sup>∞</sup> power (or  $\infty^3$ ) exist on a Cartesian plane with three axes, but it is the plane itself, thus accounting for and including the very nature of its own being; i.e., “∞” is the mother of all self-engulfing sets, containing all infinite sets of all infinite possibilities of itself.

In other words, there is no way to prove the existence of True Infinity except by itself.

In other other words, to define “∞” we must simplify it instead of expounding it, for “∞” itself is already expounded to its own infinite end.



To further support this conclusion, let us reassert that the plane *has* to be three dimensional or the model would find its own limit. In other words, we can confine Infinity Width-Wise to the height of a single point, without depth ...



*figure 7*

... without it compounding itself (expanding in terms of height or depth x width) as it does in a three-dimensional model; in a two-dimensional model, infinity does not anticipate itself.

In any three-dimensional space, “one” [1] represents infinity [ $\infty$ ] at a finite point in the plane, whether that one be a human being, a planet, a galaxy, or  $\infty$  itself, while still itself constituting infinity, in part and in whole, as the plane itself is infinite.

In other words, the multitude is inherent in the singularity and vice-versa, and “infinity” is the expanding and contracting of this singular multitude between the two extremes of “one” and itself.

It's all just fluctuating, constantly in flux between infinity and none; flowing. And existence, on any plane, is the oscillation between vibrations of the infinite.

## Existence is Perfect Pitch

harmonious  
vibrations  
(existence)



We have stricken a harmony with the universal clusters of the myriad possibilities which allow us to dwell/vibrate within the infinite parameters of infinity.

As beings both infinite and finite, as waves of sound, we will inevitably fade away, but continue to dwell in the power of infinity's harmony.

the tuning fork  
of the infinite

*figure 8*

Addendum: As infinity anticipates itself, so do all components of three-dimensional systems. The legislative branch checks the judicial and the executive, and vice versa; the beginning is contingent on the end to be a beginning, and the middle must lie between the two; the son could not exist without the father, and ghost not be a ghost without the body of the two; and so on and so forth until infinity.

[In the Way]

Infinity is actually the fluctuation of a single massless depthless point (a single dimension) between itself alone and an infinite multitude of all infinite possibilities of itself. It is simultaneously one and all.

Does this mean that infinity is all possibilities of things, being thus equal to everything?

Contrary to the obvious (as the universe tends to be) infinity is, at any given time, nothing in addition to everything.

Take an atom, composed of elements which are “obviously” subatomic. The obvious scare quotes imply that atoms are not really composed of subatomic “particles”, but essences of particles, or ideas of particles, which are fluctuating between the plane of the atom in question and another plane on another space-time continuum; i.e., these “particles” are being shared across an infinite plane of atoms comprised of selfsame particles. Furthermore, atoms are already 99.99% empty space. This means that the miniscule amount of “physical” matter present is being stretched across this infinite plane to a degree that ultimately negates their existence, except at an incomprehensibly rapid moment ferociously sought by our advanced brains which freeze them in the position at which we perceive them to be existent and connected across all of these instances to construct a continuous reality. This means that the building blocks of our “world” (that is, our perception or idea of a continuous world) are really elusive whisps of atomic energy shared by the eternal multitude of space-time. We already know that mass is simply concentrated energy from Einstein. So it's all just air, really: a breath from some fundamental formless body: the Way.

Infinity is like an atom. It is, at its nucleus, a bound singularity of phenomena popping in and out of existence. Its infinite limit is similar to a network of electrons, which can never be definitively located at any one time. Between its singular nucleus and its indefinite electron field is a wealth of space occupied by the harmonious energy between the positive and negative particles, but it is not matter; indeed, it does not matter, as it is not really real ... at the same time, it is all there is.

On a fundamental level, an atom, like infinity is composed of mostly nothing and a very small possibility (or chance), based off of a lottery of infinite possibilities, that some part of it will exist somewhere within it at some indefinite time, while simultaneously existing all the time in different forms on other possibility-coordinates, thus existing constantly in a multiplicity of different forms of all possibilities all at once.

Subatomic particles do not exist continuously or in the same state. They are constantly, instantaneously, disappearing and reappearing, lending their essence to multiple planes of existence simultaneously, as points of singularity and renaissance do, as explained earlier. One point of existence lends itself to another point on a different plane. But we as matter comprised of these quantum particles remain in tact even though our elements are unstable because we constitute a stable body of the infinite, thus representing an autonomous contained value (“infinity”).

Like subatomic particles, a single point of infinity is constantly shifting from the plane of singularity to the plane of infinity without changing its fundamental nature as both. It is always one and the other, and neither, because the shifting happens within the

same infinite continuous moment. Indeed, time itself is a single moment, or, an absence of time which has already concluded and is already its complete self, what it was, and what it will be. Our brains simply drag this singular moment on to create the illusion of linear progressive time, because our brains cannot comprehend the instantaneous speed of this phenomenon. Therefore, we are existing in empty space, or, in a ghost of a moment of time already passed. We dwell in the negative space between a single point of infinity and the infinite multitude of infinities during its instantaneous expansion/contraction. There is infinite space and possibility all around us, but only insofar as it has already ceased to exist, leaving a nothingness, a void. Our existence is a shadow of what infinity has already accomplished; it is already nothing after being everything. But because it was once everything, all possibilities of phenomena may spontaneously spring into existence even after it has concluded. The data to create any possible future remains in the ghost of time even after time has passed. Thus, we, as illusions, as energies in the wake of a moment, may bend the infinite possibilities of progression by willing those specific moments, which have already been proven to exist, into our linear existence.

Infinity is the nucleus of the Way, which is the breath, the energy. The Way exists outside of and encompass infinite nature and all derivatives of it. There is nothing that the Way has not anticipated, including nothing. We as bodies simply reside in the way of nothing as a possibility and an amalgamation of all things. We are in the way of infinite capabilities. We are residual energies (ghosts) clustered densely to create the appearance of matter in the absence (the aftermath) of the infinite expansion of a single point (the Big Bang) which has already concluded by retracting back into a singularity, thus completing the fundamental task of its own nature and absorbing all time and space, i.e. “meaning.” This is why it is nearly impossible to comprehend universal meaning, because technically it has already absorbed (and solved) itself. Our job as residual instances of the expansion of infinite possibilities is to discover, comprehend, and synergize with this meaning, thus becoming a source of infinite meaning and possibility ourselves, and contributing to the myriad infinities which make up the controlled value of “infinity.”

The lifetime of the universe is actually the time it takes for a point of infinity to expand to its own infinite limit, and then retract again into a singularity, into nothing, and, finally, into a negative, at which point it will resume the process on the inverse plane of existence and begin the instantaneous lifetime of a new universe-system (represented by the succession of space-time continuum diamonds in figure 1). It only appears to us to take millennia to accomplish this progression because infinity's instantaneous nature cannot be realized on the single plane that we inhabit; we naturally die before we perceive the limit to be met. But as we venture further into intergalactic space (either within our own consciousness or within the universe outside of planet earth), we push the limits of infinity further and further into itself. This is why it is good to ponder the nature of infinity for extended periods of time, constantly compounding your previous notion (which can never meet the limit of True Infinity, but which nevertheless may be pushed toward that goal), because by doing so you are increasing your ability to comprehend and thus synergize with the great expanse of the universe and all the possibilities you can conjecture into existence. If, by some improbable function,

we were able to surpass the rate of infinity's self-generation, to say that we would exit the universe/time-space continuum, then we would find ourselves in a complete absence of possibility, or a nowhere-place. So, comprehensively, infinity is not really all that there is. There is also “nothing” outside of that, and that infinite nothing in turn contains infinite somethings. This cosmic egg of great nothing containing a yolk of infinite somethings is the Way. And we will always be in the Way, because there is no possibility of existing outside of the plane of possibilities, even though that void of possibilities exists. We are a part of and inherently tied to the infinite possibilities generated by the nothing of the Way, much like our actions are generated by the empty space in which our consciousnesses reside. We will never, however, fully understand the extent of this nothing because there is no thing there to understand; while there is an infinite number of things that we could conceivably know or experience if we tap into the fluctuations of infinity's self-generation, there is always “nothing” that we will never know.

In other words, infinity is not infinite at all, even when it compounds itself to the infinite power, because it remains a contained limit within a *truly* limitless void of possibility, an eternal nothing, a no-thing, an “O” thing, space, parentheses, om, qi, wu in the womb, great mother of all under heaven. *This is a Womb-manifesto*. We are a clit hid by the lid of a labia; we are forever in utero. We are a miniscule somethingness in the way of an eternal nothingness. Yet it is powerful to realize that even within those parameters there is still infinity which we may conceivably grasp if we venture far enough into the frontier of our consciousness.



cigarette newspaper coffee soda beer





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# Phase the First.

[Rhapsodic Overture]

There is no shortage of muses in the city. One cannot keep at bay the surge they swell in the breast or the flagged mast they keep at sail.

They populate these inhuman streets like the gynoeceium of spring's perpetual bloom, the aromatic womb of magnoliophyta urges one to follow, if but by gaze. They have brought their rich lot of soil with them before your barren plane. Urges one dares not follow.

You may find yourself in places which seem out of the way. Certain portions of urban highway have been socially prescribed. You may find yourself obsessed with facts that seem grossly beside the point.

You may spontaneously dissolve.

*You may find yourself staring down a blank sheet like a gunbarrel or rabbitburrow, and find ... ?*

You may find yourself staring down two deep pools sunken in a rich earth, or glimpse the pout of a mouth, and all this at the moment devoid of significance because the soul which bears them has been yet unveiled, and you will want to delve there.

You may begin to believe that all of this was a ploy devised to penetrate the most beautiful spaces.

It is well known that art makes a womb out of men.

—

There is blankness in a man who has produced his best work, afterward, living, as if through a fog, a sort of death familiar to that sustained after an orgasm; only this death drags, on and on, like a breath drawn from his Spirit's slowly burning embers.

There is a paradox which streaks like lightning through this sudden obfuscation: between the multitude of flickering lives and the singularity of eternal nonbeing, there is contraction and expansion, this melodious accordion of time. The mist clears and the sky opens, and stars appear to pepper the sky as flickering lights, yet we know they are rare within this void, which even now is not completely lit.

Why do we look up in wonder; our awareness is a gross irregularity.

Is it longing which fuels our desire for recognition through a fog, a longing informed by an awareness of our scarcity? Are we to remain in debt to the pangs of love?

We are each a gaseous nebula collapsed. We are each a burning Spirit, alight but unattended, ashing automatically till terminated by our end.

Of course, intent is not what causes us to be lit and allowed to burn away. It wasn't that Walter Kogard had intended to let his cigarette burn so low, but that he was already immersed in his own little death, sitting at his desk with his left hand cradling his cock, his right hand holding his cigarette aloft, looking dimly into the upper corner of his room where nothing in particular resided.

There is a dullness ... a pencil scrubbed to its nub. There are stains on his sheet (if you ventured to notice) from all the cumming. There are stains on a page, once blank, but soiled now. There is graphite dust, and ash of erasure. There was a blankness that's been broken, a hymen split, a pen, bled of ink, spurting its final drops ... the ink from inside, out, into the world, *tabula rasa*. Emergence: to cum ... from one's blank insides. To die in another darkness.

Vision blurred, smoke curled round him in eddies of little clouds which slowly dissipated. His mind was four hundred miles away and he was decompressing to make up the distance. Floating in an existence a void, violent silence of sea and cosmic ocean. Burning, the white paper ashened black. The edge of his finger caught the flame. And he was summoned from his idyll ... I emerge from my blank insides ... reborn into chaos.

I.

Somewhat congested and wheezing heavily, he turned his attention to the black rotary telephone on his desk and snorted so hard that a shot of phlegm slipped down his throat. He quickly finished the last of his cigarette, trying to erase the taste of mucous, and looked back at the phone. He picked up the receiver and called Federal City again. No answer. He closed his eyes. He put it out of his mind.

He sat at his desk a while longer, then he went to the bathroom and blew his nose. Some of its contents escaped his tissue and landed on his foot. Groggy this morning, he looked down at it without taking any action. It was a yellow disgusting thing, which jiggled on his foot like jello, yet it posed no immediate threat. He threw his used tissue into the toilet, grabbed four more squares from the toilet-paper roll, and wiped it away, not entirely eradicating its presence but leaving a moist stain on his ashy foot.

He returned to his bedroom. Stared at the telephone. Sat at his desk and looked away, looked at the cigarettes which were dwindling to a few. And the telephone. There were so many other things to think about—the obvious looming paper monstrosity before him, for instance. And yet his thoughts, like birds in migration, returned to the telephone. Soon its very presence became audible, blaring even, oppressive, and he finally submitted to it, picked up the receiver, and called again. No answer. He threw the receiver back down making a loud plastic sound and sighed, and tried to put his mind on something else.

He pulled a cigarette from the pack, lit it, and smoked the whole thing, drinking water throughout, for he believed that adequate water—even more than the advised sixty-four ounces a day—would counteract the effect of tobacco smoke on his body. When he finished his cigarette he finished the last bit of his water, and upon swallowing it he was stricken by a most unpleasant stinging in his neck. He placed two fingers beside his pharynx as if he were testing his own pulse. He felt something there that may or may not have been purposed for that spot; it moved quite unnaturally. There was still moisture in his mouth and when he went to swallow it he felt the same pain coming from the same spot in the side of his neck. It was most unpleasant and very piercing. He still needed to swallow the last bit of wetness in his mouth but he was afraid. He anticipated the pain. He sat in a very odd position for many seconds, holding his neck with his index and middle fingers and leaning his head back so that perhaps the stretching would soothe the pain. He swallowed again and was again stricken with the same pain. He did not know what could be wrong. He should have gone to medical school instead of succumbing to the wont of writing. He was thirty-two years old and his life was widdling away with each word. And with each word he died some and with each revision his life expanded in meaninglessness, proof that the words he had scribed were useless or extraneous, so what did that say about his life? Yes, he'd had a good childhood and a past marriage and a baby somewhere but what about the words? too precious to waste. He was afraid of wasting words for it would retroactively make the time he had spent on them meaningless as well. And so for years he did not write anything in hopes of freezing his life in time, hopefully he wouldn't waste anymore of it, but that did not work. He got older, and without the words to prove it. He wanted to swallow but was afraid. He feared he had contracted a quick-growing cancer in his throat and was to be dead within the hour. He thought between swallows about his ending life and was afraid to swallow, that the swallows may end it immediately altogether. But he swallowed and the pain again came, and he was still alive for the worst.

He sat at his desk swallowing and wincing, for he had developed along with his smoking a spitting habit which was equally revolting. He swallowed and the pain alleviated. He swallowed again and the pain resurged. He sat at his desk for that is what he did now. He was Walter Kogard and he was a sitter.

He was once Walter Kogard the capital-“W” Writer. He had published a book some time ago that was very well-received. It was much too early. At twenty-four he was well-known. The pain came again. At twenty-four he had married and had child. He had made a lot of money off of his book called *Monolith*. He had put all of his money in mutual bonds, internet start-ups, and other safe-places, and had for those years after until now made money off the money he had made then. It was no work for the most part. He had had a good manager. He regretted it. He should have spent all that money on baseball cards and bubble gum. Then he would have been broke and stupid by twenty-six when he had been labeled as a drunk by his wife who left him. Then he would have *had* to work again, work on the novel *Pendulum*, and become what he was, a writer. But he did not for he was too comfortable. And so he lived well and empty until he got on the wagon at the age of thirty. And after that he lived well still, but empty still, and sober and empty the worst of all, and still sober, empty, and without the words to prove it. All he had written on *Pendulum* since age twenty-six was

grandfather clock, tick, tock.

That was what was written on the stack of paper at the desk at which he sat day after day. There were five hundred pieces of paper, a whole ream, but only four words. Six syllables. Six years. Perhaps syllables were the dictators of life-time, not words. Perhaps that is why people still read Bill Shakespeare: so exact, so mechanical and yet still human.

grandfather clock, tick, tock.

## II.

When Kogard went to the toilet to spit, for he could take the pain of swallowing no longer, he found that act equally difficult. The same pain ensued when the liquid came out as when the liquid slid down. He had most definitely contracted sudden cancer. He had to go to a doctor.

When he returned to his desk he thought of himself in the third person. He did this everyday and he narrated certain very dry mundane sequences.

White man sit at desk.

He called himself white man, not *a* white man, or even by his rightful name, as a mockery. He did not like to be inside himself or think things the way he thought them but the way the most judgmental person would think of them (the way, perhaps, She thought them). This he felt gave his life meaning. People were always reviewing and re-releasing *Monolith* but they had discarded the man. He had put all of his meaning into the book and now he needed to produce more meaning-giving words but he had not and he did not.

grandfather clock, tick, tock.

White man self-loathing.

White man pale, pasty, has not seen sun in many moons.

White man should be happy with literature career but still slum. White man surrounded by many books and even his own that he cannot summit.

White man must get job or else fall deeper into nonaction. Money does the white man have overflowing but work does white man need to be fulfilled.

--Shut up!

Kogard did not like to think about how well-received *Monolith* had been. He did not know why it had been well-received for he had not read it in eight years. He did remember one line, though he could not remember the order or the punctuation. When the words of that part of his life-time had been scribed and published he had resolved to abandon them and start anew but he never started anew and now he could not even remember those words of old word-memories that he had lived or lived to think and he was cut away from that part of himself until he was presently confused as to what punctuation lay between the word-memories, and/or in what order they should be placed. He swallowed and winced.

He had once owned copies and proofs and translations and new editions of *Monolith* but he had ridden himself of them when he got on the wagon.

He swallowed and winced and thought that perhaps the pain might be alleviated by a cigarette. He looked at the carton. The cigarettes were extraneous in his life. And

completely necessary. For what else would he occupy his time with? They were devilish. Perfect. Geometrical. Twenty cylinders. One prism. One hundred centimeters. 7-6-2-millimeter. Full Metal Jacket. Appealing. A nice accessory. Moreso than their use value they were a nice accessory, the rectangle in the shirt pocket, the cylinder dangling from the lip—they complete the man.

White man smoke tobacco handled and poisoned by white man and not pure from Mother Earth.

He figured it couldn't hurt to try, or it could hurt but he didn't care. He pulled out a cigarette and smoked the entire thing. Each time he inhaled, the pain flirted with him. He continued to smoke just so that he could be sure if the pain was really there or if he was imagining it. He did not drink water. He swallowed his saliva and sometimes he winced and sometimes he didn't.

White man say to do something over and over and expect different result is insanity. White man make bad sayings. But more importantly, white man no abide own bad truth.

When he finished his cigarette he considered the state he was in: the same state he was in before he had smoked it.

grandfather clock, tick, tock.

### III.

Kogard made peace with the fact that the pain and wince would continue forever and slowly expand and that the sudden cancer would soon claim his life.

Sometimes he thought of his baby somewhere and then he remembered that it was not a baby now but a child, and then his eyes got wet, and then he did not think on it. He rubbed at his throat feeling for the cancer lump. He feared the growing lump. He feared the growing lump and expected to find it. He did not find it much as he did not have the words to prove his finding or not finding it and was thus destined to never know perpetually if or if not it had ever been there.

He smoked another cigarette. He put it in his ashtray and forgot about it for many moments until the stream writhed its way into his nostril and he remembered the horrid pleasure of burning. When he returned to look at it, it had escaped him: it had, resting in its ashtray, turned all to ash and was propped up on its ash as if it was propped upon a solid mass. Kogard picked the cigarette butt up and the ash displayed a unified front. He flicked the butt with little effort and the ash all fell into ash in the ashtray. He was boggled as he thought on this and then he forgot for he had not the words to prove the idea or to prove that he had had it.

After several more minutes the pain and the wince became mundane. He decided to forget the doctor and the fact that he should have been one.

His cigarette burned down to the filter and the flame dissipated. How now? Time had withered away at his cigarette. Time was withering away at him. 12:03 screamed the digital clock in neon red letters. Oppressive, brute. Ever moving forward yet only ever showing its tail end as if it were perpetually escaping him like the caboose of a train. He disdained moments like these for they made him all too aware that time was slipping on without him, and it incited the sinister feeling in him that he must retard

time, bash it on the head or something. But it is not tangible, no, that is impossible, as impossible as it is to strike out at an inanimate object like a watch to punish it for getting lost. Time marshals on without consequence.

He did not read yesterday; he was too busy running from bar to bar not drinking but socializing with those who pressured him into the position of the famed man-of-letters—*hey! invite the writer, maybe he'll say something that will blow our minds*. He had awoken at two in the afternoon and after some time sitting at his desk he was promptly beckoned to the Narrative where MacMillan perpetually rested his elbows.

For not in writing, he decided to read now. He had bought Flann O'Brien's *The Dalkey Archive* some time ago. It was sitting on his desk nudged between *Mulligan Stew* and *The Complete Fiction of W. M. Spackman*. There was a tall stack of books on his desk. He rarely opened them, however, for observing them gave him more pleasure than opening them, as one finds confidence in gripping the butt of a gun and the horror in shooting it. (Of course this horror is turned into need and satisfaction if the circumstances are right—when the words *must* be shot down.) The large stack of books sat at the left corner of his desk, atop which rested the abusive digital clock. He liked perusing his books everyday as if he were ever in a library: issue of *Poet Lore*; unidentified obscure literary journal clad in black; a large book called *Fictions*, apropos; *Blood Meridian*; *American Negro Short Stories*; *The Trial*; *Whores for Gloria*; *Habitations of the Word*; *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the other O'Brien book he meant to read; *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*; *Mulligan Stew*; *The Dalkey Archive*; *The Complete Fiction of W. M. Spackman*; *A Novel of Thank You*; *The Making of Americans*; *Zuckerman Bound*; *Metamagical Themas*. He had bought some of these books with no intention of reading them. Always the yet unread classic, *The Trial*, but he would tackle it as soon as he tackled time. Not enough time in the world to read all of the good books.

No time in the world. He looked at the books on the bookshelf beside his desk, no time. Less to re-read. The digital clock blared 12:05. How is it that thoughts transcend the barriers of time and action cannot? He could fit whole twenty-page soliloquies, equivalent to thirty minutes of speech, into two minutes of thought. And yet he had been sitting at his desk for how many hours this morning? doing nothing. Mental masturbation. Perhaps if he thought about doing things rather than actually doing them, he could escape time's tyrant oppression and live infinitely, having done all things the world presents. But he could not escape his body. Time weighed on the body but not the mind. He thought this as time continued to weigh on his body; it would eventually cripple him into an old man, bring him to prostration before it, and then lay him down flat six feet under. He thought; his body sagged under time. He felt alert in his mind, but his body did not follow suit. And what was he doing about it? He just continued to sit. He was slipping through time without action. Perhaps it was not that time dragged him on without his approval; perhaps he was actively slipping through time without action. It may not have been time's fault for slipping away but his own. He thought this as he reached for the book. As good a time as any to get started on this author, he thought, while time has not yet trumped me.

He knew very little about O'Brien save the fact that he was consistently reprinted by, and was the namesake of, the Dalkey Archive Press, whose publications he enjoyed. He slipped the book out of the stack like an orange from the bottom of a

grocery-store pyramid display—miraculously unscathed by this compromise in structure. Ha, time, you're fucked now. I've got you in my grasp and I'm not letting go. He flipped the book over in his hands. He did love the feel of a book. Its secretiveness. He liked the abundance of information lodged within two hardback covers. He found it sexy. He found it sexier than his ex-wife. He almost liked the aesthetic of books more than reading them. He definitely liked finishing a book more than he liked writing it. But he remembered that all too often the insides of a book would surprise him, raise his eyebrow at every image, at every word-constellation. He remembered that all too often a book's entrails would douse him in its blood. What a beautiful feeling, to explore another man's brain-workings on the page. He liked opening books. He liked gutting them. He was a sadist. He liked blood on his hands. He opened the book and read twenty pages of it and then placed it back on his desk. The book had possessed him as a good book should. He thought it over. He remembered time. He had passed through that time in the book. Although he did not have his own words to prove it he did have those of the author and that was fulfilling enough as personal experience.

Time is stagnant; it does not pass; it is a 'plenum,' a phenomenon full of itself but inert. We are not inert. We pass *through* time but time itself is still. The calendar, the clock, the minute, the century, all tools to define how much time we have passed through, not how much time has passed us. We cannot go into the future nor into the past because we are constantly moving forward in time; it is always the present; it is always the act of passing which we experience, not that of time passing us. Evolution, decay, or growing up, for example, exist beside time. Evolution passes through time. We cannot go into the future because we have not lived it yet; it doesn't exist. The past doesn't even exist; only our personal memories of having passed through it. If no one remembered the Rape of Nanking, it would have ceased to exist. Nothing is fated; life-experience, memories, and thoughts are all made up and remembered as we steadily pass through time. But I can't live if I don't have the fucking words to prove it. No one will remember. No time in the world.

The book sat in front of him. He stared at it and widdled away the time with his thumbs. The digital clock blared 12:34. The digital clock blinked 12:35. It was almost as if time were passing him, but no, time was inanimate. Mechanical. The clock was mechanical. The "time" was just a row of bright LED numbers changing at mechanical intervals. They passed *with* time, but they were not time. Kogard passed with time. The time itself was still. He was at the very least confident and reassured that time had not gotten the best of him because he was controlling it. He widdled at it. He widdled at it with thumbs. He widdled at it with sleep. Perhaps if he were dead then time would cease to exist for him, which effectively meant that time would cease for the world; it would have nothing to oppress and he, he would not be there to widdle away at it. He laughed at this. He laughed at the clock's face. But he stopped. He did not have the words. He could not prove time's indolence. He fell back into melancholy. The time would get the best of him so long as he lacked the words to prove it couldn't. Nothing widdles time more effectively than words words words. The words suspend the time, capture it. He looked at the book: time travel. Time, suspended in words, suspended in a book. A thought taken from the abstract and made real on the page. At least the early part of his life had been accounted for in text. But he needed words now, words, now,

persistently, the need for words, the need to control time, impose time on the page. The time mocked him. The time mocked him through his own words.

grandfather clock, tick, tock

IV.

White man always fall ill to fabricated diseases.

I do not have writer's block, it doesn't exist. There is a difference between a made up excuse for not writing and not actually having the correct words to write down the thoughts.

Fake diseases.

You don't know anything about writing.

You just write. Pen to paper. Anything.

Fiction about 'anything' is weak. Thoughts must be filtered through a skilled lens of personal temperament. Experience must be filtered through impression to become valuable and intriguing writing.

You have no impression?

Perhaps.

Lost in the alcohol.

One would *think* the potion would enhance the impressions needed to write.

What Shakespeare say? Alcohol incite the desire but take away the ability.

He was talking about sex.

Difference between writing and sex? All intimate.

Big difference. Writing is more intimate. The climax of finishing is greater.

And what do I care about old Bill anyway?

...

Hello? Hello?

grandfather clock, tick, tock

Goddamn Injun.

Kogard looked into his pack of cigarettes and realized he was down to two, which was not as bad as one, but still the loneliest number since the number one.

He put a pair of black Dickie's workpants over his underwear and pulled on a black sweater. He went to the lower level of his apartment, knelt, and shoved his feet into black canvas shoes. Then he rose and looked at himself in the mirror beside his front door. He considered that he looked rather writerly, that is, unkempt. It pleased him. He liked his shaggy mane. When his hair was combed back, he always felt as if he were on his way to lay off a warehouse full of legal Mexican textilemen who needed the money to pay their childrens' college tuition. On the contrary, today it was mussed in the stylish way of the modern day. Yes, he decided that he looked rather writerly, that is, bland on the outside, unassuming, not particularly poor-looking, but definitely not on his way to impress anyone. He smiled and left.

Upon stepping out of his apartment building Kogard was invigorated with the BoHo air: tobacco and bad style. Tobacco is more pungent to the nose when one is not the one consuming it. Kogard retrieved his little Moleskine and wrote a note to himself:



we kill the earth with GMOs, fossil  
fuel exhaust, aerosol, deforestation...  
But we are not so far removed from  
that which we destroy. We will  
soon destroy the atmosphere on  
which we live. We will soon  
consume our own life blood. Like a  
flame, man needs air to burn.

He returned the pad to his back pant pocket and was glad. The words were coming again. They were not the words he was working on, but he was glad they came. When if ever are they the right words? Is a tree ever growing in the wrong spot? Is love ever really found in the wrong place? ...Yes: in cest. But words are not people. They are more perfect. Wherever from they come.

V.

Kogard's apartment was located seven buildings away from Jack's 24/7. He lived in a small walk-up in the BoHo neighborhood of Empire City. It was Imperial style, or whatever. He felt he should have studied architecture. It can be quite interesting. He liked the song "Frank Lloyd Wright" by Simon and Garfunkel.

Kogard's apartment was called The Alban. Beside his own, its seven other units were either occupied by introverted widows or caught up in estate disputes. Little did the elders know, their solitude was their saving grace. If ever the old widows ventured out and caught a glimpse of what their post-war settlement had become, they might keel over right then and there. Dope in the street. The clothes these girls wear. It's good that they stay cooped up in there. Kogard had often thought about following their lead. He passed a boy of no more than twenty-one wearing a monocle and a handle-bar mustache and a tiny pair of biking shorts. It was as if the kids had all just begun their careers as blind time travelers, going from period to period picking out and dawning artifacts at random. He rued the day the widows would start to die. These people would snatch up a unit for forty-five in the heart of their little hipster enclave and leave their Blue Label tall boy cans in the stairwell, needles on the front stoop, the smell of BO and clove cigarettes, these kids. Listen to him. He sounded like a widow himself.

Jack's had a tiny concrete ramp that lead up to the front door, with a blue awning listing the bodega's varied inventory in torn, withered, black helvetica. Sometimes there were metal folding chairs out there on which the owner, Jack, would sit with his old man friends laughing at the faggy hipster youths passing by. Jack wasn't that old, he was about Kogard's age, but like Kogard he was elderly in spirit. He was from the Federal City like Kogard, just four hours south of Empire. It was funny because in their home town, and not the federal part but the residential part, the part with culture, and not just that, a tinge on the poor side, they called cigarettes "jacks." In Southeast Federal City, they sold loose jacks on the street for fifty cents. Some of the bums made a living like that, flipping a six-buck pack for about ten bucks.

Single Newport, single Newport  
Singles, Singles

If they could just get a grip on profit margins, supply, and demand, and change their stock to something more profitable, then they'd be well on their way to being millionaires. Of course, if everyone had a grip on those concepts, and if everyone had something more profitable to sell, we'd all be rich. So some of us flip packs and mutter the day away.

Single Newport, Single Newport

But the folding chairs weren't out there today.

On the windows of the bodega there were posters and things. Some 1950s advertisements for Camel filters, pictures of attractive women eating gyros with a look of almost orgasmic pleasure, and children playing with ice creams, which was odd because Jacks didn't have a deli, nor did it have food at all. It had jacks. It had coffee, newspaper, three brands of beer, one brand of whiskey, bubble gum, Pepsi products, bottled water, and lots and lots of cigarettes. There was another poster on one of the windows that said: Hamburger Special \$4.50+tax.

As Kogard approached the front door, he felt a caving-in of his chest.

*Fuck.*

A coughing fit began. The wheezes came quick this time around. He took his hand from the front door and stammered backward, leaning against the front of the building. He doubled over and tried to hack. He hacked and coughed and grabbed his chest, feeling as though he were a rubber chew toy in the jaws of a rabid Rottweiler. His lungs caved in it felt. He was sure he was going to die right then and there, or at least have contracted a quick-acting lung cancer. His fault. Brought it on himself. He shouldn't smoke with this asthma. But it doesn't flare up that much anyway. Got to keep your body healthy. Can't smoke jacks no more. No, just get that thought out of your head now. We're going inside of this bodega. He felt like a water bottle being stomped repeatedly. At this point, all of the air had left.

He inhaled, all at once, like a vacuum being released. He could breathe now, but his wheezing was very bad. He stood up straight clutching his chest and saw that a girl had stopped to stare at him as she left the bodega. Her exposed mid-drift advertised a tattoo of a circus tent and a invitation to "Enter." --You okay, Mister?

Kogard wheezed yes and went inside.

--You sound like car wreck, said Jim at the counter.

Kogard coughed and said, You look like you just came from one yourself. Carton of Spirits. Blue.

--You so sure about that? You sounded pretty shitty out there.

--Well then why didn't you come help me?

--Jack told me not to leave the counter. Little faggy hipsters come in an' steal all the beer.

--Well since you didn't care enough to help me out there, don't care now. Spirits. And a coffee and a *Citizen*.

Jim walked away.

Kogard had at some point prior assumed the belief that a heating agent, be it tea or coffee, would soothe the throat and counteract the effect of tobacco on the body.

Jack's had rows and rows of cigarettes, all kinds, don't even bother counting. If you wanted something, it was there. It was the only thing the store was good for. The

beer sucked, the whiskey ran like water, and the coffee was hot at best. But they did have good old American Spirits. They're all natural, you know.

Jim came back with the order and placed it all on the counter.

--Need a bag?

--No. Kogard put the carton under his arm and took the paper and the coffee in each hand.

--You're on Jack's tab, no? asked Jim.

--Yeah, said Kogard, and he left.

He decided to smoke just one outside. He walked to a bus stop bench that lay between Jack's and his building and sat down there. He placed the carton beside him, took a sip of coffee which scathed his tongue, and shook out the paper, *The Gotham Citizen* it was called. It was regarded as amateurish and grungy and too left wing, but it was the only paper in the city not owned by the Time and News Corporation. Fucking conglomerates. It's a matter of basic ethics why a company should not own 60-100% of the media in 49 States and 21 countries.

Time&News  
Corporation

“Everything You Need to Make Your World Go 'Round.”

The news today was dismal. AMAZON CORNERS RANDOM-PENGUIN;  
LAST BOOK GIANT FALLS TO ACQUISITION

--Shit.

This was bad. Very fucking bad. Not for him, but for everything he believed in. He had been published by Vesak Word House, a fine house, one of the last medium-sized independent houses standing, and one of the only ones to hold their ground during Amazon's sweeping 20-- buyout. And now look at everyone else: gobbled up, bought out, or squished by the new Ministry of Literature. Hungry for a new bestseller by an established name, Kogard's editor at Vesak, Horton Tenenbaum, would send him courtesy emails from time to time (“Get me that novel mother fucker!”). Nevertheless, this meant no more book culture as the world currently knew it. Amazon was most definitely going to convert everything to e-book now. No more going to the bookstore to stand in line for the shittiest bestseller. No more reading blurbs in book jackets. No more writing “lol” in the margins of *Crime and Punishment*. No more dog-earring and spine-bending. No more going over to talk to a girl because you saw her reading the new DeLillo and then you looked at her face and she was actually attractive. All the humanity is gone. Push a button. Text. Swipe screen. Cold metal. Fuck.

Kogard heard a bus pull to a stop in front of him. He held the paper up to his face. He heard the mechanical door open. Silence for several seconds.

--Hey!...Hey! came a husky voice.

Kogard threw the paper into his lap and looked coldly into the bus at the driver.

--You gettin' on this bus? the large woman asked indignantly.

He rolled his eyes. --No, that's why I didn't get up when you stopped.

--You got to git on the bus or move on.

--This is a public fucking space.

--You takin' up bench space for other passengers.

Kogard looked beside himself. --There's no one fucking here.

--Sir, if you keep cursing at me I'll have to call transit.

--I'm not even on the fucking bus.

--Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to leave.

--This is public..., he began to say, then resolved that it was not worth arguing over. He got up and stormed away toward his apartment building. The bus closed its doors and pulled away. As it passed him, Kogard threw his coffee at the bus's rear. The vehicle stopped abruptly and he dashed into his building.

## VI.

When Kogard got to his apartment he removed all his clothes, went to his desk, and smoked a cigarette. He felt the tension of thick smoke writhing its way into his tight lungs.

“Writhing” is not the right word he thought. “Writhing” implies a solid, slithering. Can smoke “writhe”?

Half-way through his cigarette he felt as though his lungs might collapse on him, so he stomped the butt out. He started to cough in that empty-crushed-water-bottle way. He coughed up, not air, not breath, but the gaseous equivalent of mist, that is, the trace of a breath. He coughed until he had no more room to cough, until his lungs were like deflated balloons; they sputtered air out until there was none to sputter.

He clutched his chest. He got up and went to his closet, wherein he kept a nebulizer and a paper bag with several Abuterol treatments. He kept these for when his asthma was particularly bad. He'd heard of people dying from asthma. His father had had it, suffered, yet still smoked the occasional cigar on the front porch under the glistening onyx of the Federal City night. If a breathing condition will not convince a man to stop smoking, then he will never quit the stick.

Kogard twisted open two plastic vials of Abuterol and squeezed them into the base of the nebulizer mask, then twisted the mouthpiece back on and pulled the rubber band around his head. The mask was screwed to the vessel containing the medicine, which was connected by a plastic tube to the nebulizer machine which vaporized the medicine so that he could ingest it. He turned on the machine and the medicine immediately turned to vapor which smoldered and disappeared as Kogard inhaled and exhaled. The machine purred like an electric typewriter. His breathing was reminiscent of Darth Vader. Nearly naked, he sat in his chair and took his treatment for about twenty minutes, silent but for the machine, still but for the smoldering vapor. It was moments like these that made him feel sick.

He pulled out his notepad and wrote:

Someone should have told me that when you get older, you feel worse

When no more vapor smoldered from the mask (“smolder” was the wrong word but he liked using it) he removed it and set it on his desk. The treatments always put him on edge. They always made his heart race and his hands shake. He felt cold and fidgety, like a junkie on the wagon. He decided to have a cigarette to calm his nerves, the last one from the pack that he had before he went out. He lit it, smoked some, and then put it down. He couldn't do it. His body didn't want to and he felt guilty to boot. He sat in his chair and stared blankly at the wall. The cigarette smoldered in the ashtray amidst its

dead buds. The twenty-man platoon had dwindled down to one. Smoking men, burnt, half-bodied and lifeless, gathered in the mass glass grave. He liked to think that napalm took these good men in Vietnam.

White man say to do something over and over and expect different result is insanity. White man make bad sayings. But most importantly, white man no abide own bad truth.

Kogard took a book to block the Indian out.

For pure fun, he read from *The Corrections*. As much as it had thus far stricken him as decisively un-literary, more of an airplane read, he found rewarding connections to Gaddis' magnum opus *The Recognitions*, which sat beside it on his bookshelf, and because of this he thought Franzen less of a schmuck. But *Corrections* was still goofy. He put it down and began to read Fitzgerald's *The Crack-Up*. And after several sections he wondered how *Time Magazine* could compare Franzen as a great American novelist to Fitzgerald. They don't do it explicitly, but to use that title—The Great American Novelist—is to say as much. He supposed time molds the man.

grandfather clock, tick, tock

He looked at the blaring red digital clock. 2:11

In the ashtray, the last soldier died.

## VII.

A question often danced across his mind: could there be a more perfect way of marking time than seconds, minutes, hours, days, years, decades...?

What is a second?

It is incalculable. It is merely a tick of a little hand on a wrist watch. Mechanical. It has no intrinsic value. Without the label "second," it is simply a transition from one moment to the next. What lies between two seconds. Nothing, according to a wrist watch: that is its fatal flaw. A second is based only in confidence, like an American dollar. It is merely the amount of time it takes for a digital clock to change from 2:12:23 to 2:12:24.

And even then, only the minutes are usually accounted for on a digital clock. We assume that sixty seconds have passed between one minute and the next. But is it really? It could be any number of seconds. Who's to say that a second is 1/60<sup>th</sup> of a minute? Surely there must be some ancient math behind it, but really, who is keeping track of the length of a second?

It may have changed from the Mayans to the modern period. Perhaps the equivalent of one Mayan second is sixty modern seconds. But since we've continued to call it a "second" we assume the value is the same. But like currency, it may change over time and place. A dollar in America may be worth 100 pieces of currency for some other nation. You may be able to buy a bottle of milk in America and the whole farm in some other country for the same price. Is a second really fungible?

Kogard had slowly begun to believe less and less in the concept of time. It was perhaps a result of his situation. He did not have to work. He did not have to clock in and clock out. For the proletariat, the hour is ultimate. Four hours till I'm off. Three hours till lunch. But for Kogard, lunch and sleep and anything he desired came at

whatever hour he pleased. Sometimes the days dragged by. Sometimes they rocketed through space. When he was in a writing mood the hours bled like words onto the page. When waiting for a bus the minutes crept. Dragging on a cigarette while waiting for a bus almost inevitably made the minutes come faster, and he would be disgruntled when the bus would come in the middle of his jack.

So it raises the question: is time steady? Does it progress forward in fixed increments? Or does it speed up and slow down as with the pace of a heartbeat.

You show me the exact length of a second in the vast space of time, and I'll show you how to quicken it: smoke.

Kogard opened the carton, pulled out a pack, pulled out a cigarette, and smoked.

A carton: an hour. A pack: a minute. A jack: a second.

Could time be accurately measured in the time it takes to smoke a carton of cigarettes? 200 Cigarettes?

They burn at a steady pace, surely.

But the lungs may inhale and exhale irregularly, so there are variables.

Still, he did not want to forfeit the power of time to the mechanical clock, to physical nature, the swing of a pendulum. Why must the pendulum's swing indicate that life is being drawn to an end?

If anything, a cigarette is a more symbolic way of showing the passage of life.

One jack. One pack. One carton. The hours pass. The smoke ebbs.

"I've smoked four-hundred-eighty cartons in my life."

Yes, that is a much more indicative statement than "I've lived forty years."

Forty years? You could live another forty. You could die tomorrow. There's no indication. There's only meaningless time.

For the proletariat, time is ultimate. But that is a construct of society, much like the nature of being a proletariat in the first place. One needs the order of seconds and minutes to organize the day's work. In olden times, the days were measured by the sun and its position in the sky. If indeed the ancient math is accurate, and the position of the sun and its absence may be divided into 24 segments called hours, which may then be divided into 24 sections of sixty minutes, and so on and so forth like a Russian doll, then the utilitarian concept of time is subjective to need. If you don't need to work in the field according to the sun's position, then time takes on a whole different shape.

Time took on a different shape for him, cooped up in his room all day. He tried to write. The hours mocked him. Sometimes it felt like the breadth of an eternity was compressed into 12 hours of light.

He needed to work.

He needed the words.

Words were more like seconds. They were more important to him. They marked his progress, not seconds or minutes. So long as a book was finished, it wouldn't matter if it took two days or twenty years. The words were there, inscribed, the markers of his days, the culmination of his life. The words were the timekeepers. And yet they never came. Time was stagnant.

Wordseconds turn into sentence-minutes. Paragraph-hours. Page-days.

Time is subjective to need.

Show me the length of a second without looking at a clock. Who knows how long that is?

And when there's nothing to do, who cares?

Show me the length of a second, and I'll show you all the seconds compressed within it. Show me the length of eternity, and I'll show you how many eternities you can fit into a minute. Sixty. We have all the time in the world.

And yet,

he had

no words

except

grandfather clock, tick, tock.

The words were more important than time itself. And that's why he smoked, he reckoned. To speed them seconds along...to get to the next word.

### VIII.

With a regard for this timelessness, or, otherwise stated, the irrelevance of the social construct of time upon his individual life, Kogard took a nap at around three o'clock and woke up at eight o'clock at night.

He considered going to the Narrative, the bar to which some of his friends often retired after work. He got up and smoked as he dressed in the same outfit he wore earlier in the day. He liked dressing in all black, especially when going to bars. He thought it made him look inconspicuous. Despite his lengthy literary dry-spell, he had accumulated a sort of cult following with the novel *Monolith*. He was highly respected by literary circles who saw his play on the trends and themes which immediately preceded him, and, for some reason, he was idolized by the hipsters he so detested walking down the streets of his own neighborhood. They seemed to believe he was the gatekeeper of some ancient knowledge that could only be accessed by books, through text. They thought he was of the last modern people to be able to convey information through this archaic medium, a medium which they believed was the last true vessel of knowledge; all other vessels—newspapers, television, music, &c—have been stained by the hand of commerce; they have been altered to be marketable. Books included, to be sure. But what *Monolith* proved to his public was that a book that was true of heart could still be brought into the world, that a writer with vision and humanity still existed somewhere out there in the world of fashionistas and politics and murder and all things impure. And yes, the writer was impure, but the book was the proof that he knew that, and that he knew that there was something pure inside of him that wanted to be expressed. Kogard knew that the hipsters knew that, he knew that they saw the vulnerability in him, in his reason for writing the book. He knew that that's why they admired him. And he hated it. He hated that they could see inside of his most vulnerable thoughts. He hated that they could see his words. And he hated their stupid sunglasses and their aura of smug.

He could not accept that such an absurd type of person could respect him. With their expensive snapback hats, their ironic tee shirts with images like upside-down crosses and Jim Bush, their thick-rimmed glasses that they didn't need, their shaved head on girls, oh the backwardness of it all! They would come up to him in the bar after he

was featured on the cover of *The Empire Dispatch*. That was the big mistake. He should have remained an introvert like Bill Grey. But he didn't, and now they all knew what he looked like, and they believed that they had the same kind of mind as him. They would spiel their ideas to him half-drunk, smelling of stale Parliaments, thinking that they had the key to unlocking his emotions, but they never got anywhere close to his own thoughts. Sometimes they would regurgitate his words and even then, the words sounded foreign to him coming out of another body. The words had to be put into context with the man. When people read, they put the words into context with their own life. For a reader to explain their connection with the words to the writer, it would be like a man living in 1410 and a man living in 1995 debating whether the earth was round or flat. It's perspective, and Kogard never felt like their perspective on his words was right. People are entitled to their own interpretations, of course, but he should have stayed introverted. He would interact with his words in his way and his audience would interact with his words in their way, and they would remain separate but with the same consciousness. They would know the same objective reality, the same text, but their interpretations would be separate. Millions of people, all walking around the same street, would be thinking about the same words in different ways. One wor(l)d; millions of different realities. Kogard thought it was better that way. He liked knowing that people knew what he thought without having to interact with them. But sometimes the interaction is just what a creator needs. So he checked his outfit one more time and then went out to the Narrative.

The hipsters were out tonight. They always ran in packs. As much as he disliked them, they always struck him as intriguing. They were a walking contradiction, something very Shakespearean. They were definitely “hipsters.” They had all of the aesthetic characteristics of “hipster.” The aesthetic changed from year to year, but what it boiled down to was a subculture of people scraping up the discarded, overlooked, and long-forgotten remnants of a culture. It was about being into a style and image that no one else was into, from literature to music to clothing. And the “ironic” thing was that there was a whole culture of people dedicated to looking “unique” and “retro” and “individual” and “interesting,” who ended up all looking the same. The hipster aesthetic is obvious, and yet an obvious hipster will stand by the conviction that he or she is not a hipster, but a unique individual. They overlook their own confirmation with that ideal, and damn the other conformers as “fucking hipsters.” They will always see themselves as the *real* unique person, and every one who looks like them as the *fake* unique person; when really, they are all the same. To be a hipster is to defy the “hipster” label while simultaneously embodying everything that is “hipster.” Really quite interesting people to observe. They stood waiting in a line outside the Narrative, smoking and wearing their sunglasses at nine o'clock at night. Kogard walked to the front of the line without making eye contact, said hello to Carl who was working the door that night, and walked right in. He knew that they all knew who he was but he paid no mind to them. They were the fakes, the posers. He was the real deal.



IX.

He walked to the back of the dark room, squeezing between the solid mass of bodies, sweat, and hot cigarette breath that filled it—hollers of “another beer!” and “so, what are you doing later?” and “fight me, bitch!”--and found a table with his friends, MacMillan and Fredo Martinelli. There was another fellow at the table talking to Fredo whom Kogard had never seen before. He was always skeptical of strangers, but this fellow appeared to be enough of a miscreant for Kogard to feel comfortable.

--K, Fredo said, waving him over. --This is Bob. Fredo gestured toward the stranger.

--Hello, Bob, Kogard said sitting down.

--He just got out of prison, said Fredo.

--Oh? Kogard looked the fellow up and down. He was seated in the booth but Kogard could see that the man was well-dressed. --You look pretty fresh to be fresh out the joint, he said.

--Bob here is doing well regardless, said Fredo.

--I was an important man in prison, said Bob. His voice was grouchy, but in a completely unintentional way.

--Important? said Kogard. The bar was crowded and loud, but their little enclave, which they reserved from their friends the owners every night, had an enclosed way about it and voices bounced off of the wall so as to make conversation fairly easy.

--You ever seen 'Shawshank Redemption?' asked Bob. --I sold weed and cigarettes to the inmates. Got em damn near anything they wanted. Often, hard time demands hard drugs.

--That's quite ironic seeing as hard drugs probably put most of those fellows in there.

--Sure as hell put me in there.

--You got put in for selling?

--Weed.

--And you continued to sell weed *in* prison?

--Sure enough. Continued making money on the outside, too. I mean, there's a market in the joint. And what are the authorities gonna do? Send me to prison?

--Bob's got a good head on his shoulders, said Fredo. --He only got pinched cause of some fuckstick rat. Can't trust a damn body in this town anymore.

A pretty little barhop with tattoos all down her neck and arms came over and gave Kogard a glass of water and smiled at him as she walked away. He always liked the girls in this neighborhood. Tattoos were sexy to him. Perhaps it was an extension of the way he felt comfortable around degenerates; the more degeneration manifested itself in a person's physique, in tattoos, piercings, accessories, or questionable fashion tastes, the more he was attracted.

MacMillan drank quietly at the other end of the booth. He was never big on words when he was sober, which made his job as the *Ashtray Quarterly's* editor-in-chief quite a drag. But when he drank, the words gargled up like froth. He was currently half-way through one of the bar's new additions. The Manhattan Brewing Company had just released their Manhattan Project Malt Liquor brand, which came in the Fatman 40oz. and

the Little Tall Boy 24oz bottles. MacMillan was about 30oz. to the wind and going strong.

--See, there he goes again, looking over here, Bob exploded suddenly. --Do I know that little bastard, Fredo? I don't believe I do. And I don't like making eye contact with strangers, much less them makin' it with me.

--Chill, chill, Bob. Which guy is it?

--By the far right shoulder. There! There he goes again, like he knows me. I'll kill 'im I will.

--Oh, him? said Fredo. --Don't get all up in arms. That's Juan Sikaffi.

--I don't care if he's His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama.

--Well you'll care when I tell you he's with the Bolano crew.

--Those cumstain wannabe's? Don't even control a whole block in this city.

--They still got friends. Don't do it, Bob. He's in deep.

--Yeah, deep in dog shit.

--He's in so deep he's at the top.

--He's a boss?

--Captain.

--Fuck it.

--Damn right. Touch him and you won't just have the 5-0 on your ass.

MacMillan sipped as if he couldn't care less about life and death. Fredo waved the cute barhop over to refill his and Bob's bourbons.

Fredo Martinelli was a made man in the Guermantes family, but that had no effect on his amiability. In fact, it may have made him more amiable, or as old friend Claude liked to put it, amiable with big teeth, smiling in the faces of the shopkeepers and bookies he did business with, using a big stick when it counted, and turning around to supply smack and H to the poor black sheep of Harlem. He was now making big moves in his suit and tie over at the stock exchange bazaars, shaking down brokers to get cash into his "legitimate" businesses. But his business was none of Kogard's concern. He was good to have a drink with at the end of day.

He was always having to step outside to take calls from his higher-ups, and apparently he was in very good standing with the Boss. Louis Guermantes was what the *Empire Dispatch* called a relentless business man. In actuality, he was a conniving, extorting criminal who controlled most of the business, legitimate and otherwise, in East Empire. His daughter, Chelsea Guermantes, was one of those heiresses, and a fucking hipster to boot. Kogard had seen her once in a BoHo cocktail lounge. She wore what looked like a large black leather grocery bag, with the handles hanging off her shoulders and exposing her silky porcelain collarbones. He had asked his companion about it, someone very knowledgeable about fashion, and she said it was a Barisa Cantola original. It was part of a limited run of twenty priced at thirty grand each.

Fredo wore his suit and tie now because he was working in the Guermantes' other business, as stated before, in the stock exchange. They masked most of their shakedowns and extortions as venture capital acquisitions under the veil of a Fortune 500 firm called the Guermantes Way. But that whole well-to-do-ness didn't altogether distract Fredo from his roots in the poor, gritty, criminalized neighborhood of Purgatory.

He looked down at his iPhone, which was always lighting up and shit, something that annoyed Kogard to no end (but what didn't these days?)

--Hah! he proclaimed.

--What? asked Bob.

--It went through. We just acquired fifteen white Cadillacs. 1965 Calais' and De Villes.

--The whole world's bent on acquisition, said Kogard.

--You gotta have control if you want to have leverage.

--What leverage do you have with Cadillacs?

--Allotta pimps down in Purgatory get their cars key'd daily by disgruntled whores. They're always in need of a new Cadillac. You gotta think about the market.

--I only think about myself.

--You writers and artists are all selfish. You all want to focus your own soul. Most of these kids don't get off the ground because they just want to write about their shitty apartments in some gentrified neighborhood. I've read *Ashtray*. Fredo looked at MacMillan, who continued looking into the abyss of his 40oz. --Read some David Baldacci. Now that's a writer! That's plot!

--Good writers are supposed to write for themselves. Faggots like Baldacci do it for the market, for profit.

--Well, for what other reason would you do anything if not for profit. Oh, I'm sorry, I'm not an artist, I'm a businessman.

--How white are those Cadillacs? asked Bob.

--Coke white, my friend. Lindsay Lohan white. Charlie Sheen, knamean.

--I could use one of those.

--Not too inconspicuous, wouldn't you say, for a man who's just gotten out, said Kogard.

--I'm thinkin' of restarting some of my old business ventures.

--I could let one go...hmm, thrity-k for friends, said Fredo.

--I could get that together.

Fredo's phone flashed again. --Shit, gotta take this, he said as he quickly left the bar.

--Where's Caesar? Kogard asked MacMillan.

--Said he'd be here, he said as he took another swig. --The gangster's got a point, though. Kids always be submitting trite Beat-wannabe bullshit short stories 'bout their poverty and angst and drinking problems and cigarettes and stupid girlfriends. None of it's fresh. Don't they know Bukowski beat that horse to death already? Either that, or I get some piece of dog shit about some Midwestern family problems. Mundane. Boring. You can't pull off Carver forty years later. You gotta write for the times! It's fast-paced now! Getting faster! I need more plot!

--But don't you want to read something that'll take you out of all this modern rapidity. Something musing. Leave the fast-paced-getting-faster for the tech world. Smart phones 'n shit.

--Hey, you write about the life of the mind on your own time. We'll find it after you die and publish it as the uncompleted life the artist. But I'm running a magazine,

basically for entertainment. No one wants to read about your convictions of love and death. I'm running a business dammit!

--I beg to differ, said Kogard. --We need more heart.

--I get enough heart. What I need is entertainment.

--I mean, given, heart's not enough. It's gotta be fresh. It's gotta have new topics, new impressions. Sure, you can't write like Fitzgerald on the Jazz Age, but there's plenty to pick up on in the modern day. There's plenty new material to dissect in literature. Kogard began talking into his glass of water, as if to himself.

Just then, Caesar rolled in and shoved himself into the booth holding many pieces of paper.

--Hi-ya, K. Hi-ya, Mac, he said. --Hi-ya, new guy, the name's Caesar, he said taking Bob's hand and shaking it vehemently.

He pronounced his name with a hard "C," like "Kaisar." He was what he called an "Occupist," an Occupy theorist, and he believed that the movement would resurge with the right catalyst. He dedicated most of his time to writing pamphlets and publishing dissenting articles against the oligarchy, the banking system, war crimes, and all other things American.

--K, he said, I got a coupl'a pamphlets you might wanna peruse. We're doing some new stuff over at the Black Market Press. I keep saying you should come by, but Oh, you're *so* busy. But we're doing allotta new stuff and we got a bunch of new supporters. We're gonna buy *three hundred* news stands and set 'em up all over and fill 'em with our pamphlets! We're finally gonna get to the masses!

--Print's a little outdated, don't you think, I mean for reaching people on that big a scale. Don't you want to go the e-book or blog route?

The words sounded strange coming out of his mouth. He knew he didn't believe in electronic literature, but he also knew in his heart-of-hearts that a new movement, or a resurge of an old movement, could not reach the desired populous without the Net. It depressed him a little bit there, as he finished his water and lit a cigarette, that good old paper was going out of style. He hated that he had to be the asshole to express it.

--Well, we'll get to that, said Caesar. --And furthermore, even though some friends of ours say what you're saying there, I think it goes against everything we're working for. You need the iPads and computers and shit to read them e-books and blogs. We don't want to support the system that's propagating this mass electronic consciousness. The mass consciousness is what we're trying to effect. We're trying to change how people feel about all their computers and commerce and *stuff*. Let society breathe a little bit. Can't we be doing something without having to glance across an ad every two seconds. I don't care if it's Facebook, a bus stop ad, or whatever. Give us a break from being forced to perpetually spend money. Give us space! That's what Occupy--

--I know, I know, I've heard it all.

--You always do that. You and everybody else. They always brush it off, like, Oh, that movement has passed. I tell you this new fast-paced consciousness makes people activists for a day and then they pass it over with the next insta-movement. And you can't change anything in a day. Occupy was once, but it can happen again, and when

it happens, it'll change things this time. The hegemony'll see that we're really serious about breaking out of their constant two-party-higher-fees-commercial-based system.

--Yeah, yeah.

--Give society back its humanity, dammit. We're not spending-machines.

--I got it. Kogard took a long drag.

--Anyway, take a look at these. Caesar passed Kogard a stack of papers. He took them and skimmed his eyes over the first several pages.

--What the fuck is this? Kogard said after he read it. --This is fucking propaganda.

--Nahh! It's, like, speculative reporting. It's based in fact, I mean, everything that's there happened or is bound to happen. It's just to make people aware of the end to which we are inevitably damned. Just keep reading.

Kogard flipped through some of the pages and lay his attention on one of the middle passages.

Kogard took a deep sigh and a deep drag, then said, I must tell you, this is absolutely absurd... And you've got some verb-tense issues.

--Yeah, yeah, save me your craft spiel. Just, what do you think of it? The message, I mean. The purpose. The method.

--I've got to think about it. Kogard folded up the papers and stuffed them into his back pocket.

Fredo returned then and sat down by Kogard.

--So, he said, You're not gonna believe this. Guermantes just called me personally. Asked me to take Chelsea out for a night on the town while he's in London.

--She can do that well enough on her own, can't she?

--He wants me to keep an eye on her.

--That's some straight outta *Pulp Fiction* shit.

--No bull. Hey...you think she'd go for a guy like me?

--The fuck outta here.

--Hey, dating the boss's daughter could do wonders for my career.

--Dangerous to be fucking around with the boss's daughter.

--I'll test the waters.

Fredo settled down and got real introverted for a while. Then he looked around the table and got a mighty irritated expression on his face. He turned around in his seat and screamed out to the barhop, Where the fuck is my bourbon?

X.

The boys continued sipping and Kogard continued smoking his jacks, for his sole drug of choice was nicotine, and it kept him content as his friends slipped deeper and deeper into the muddiness of drink. He enjoyed observing the slow but inevitable slide into the ethanol swamp; he liked to hear the tongues slowly start slipping over consonant sounds and rolling over *r*'s, the decay of speech, as it were. It was refreshing, this expression by way of incoherence. He liked to hear the tones get progressively louder and the smiles get progressively wider; the gestures got progressively wilder and the topics got progressively more tangential. The emotions became denser and the reactions more

alarming. The expressions became less linear, like the way time often played on his mind; a second may pass in hours; talk went in circles much like the minutes. It would seem like twenty minutes of conversation had passed when really only several seconds had elapsed. The hours folded in on one another; it became darker and lighter all at once; two A.M. came, and then midnight. In several hours of bar talk, all of life's mysteries were unfolded, all of one's emotions excavated and dissected. Kogard liked observing it all from his sober omniscient narrator's perch at the far side of the booth. But it wasn't all observation. He would catch the effect of drink on others as they interacted with him; he laughed more jovially; his voice got shrill with excitement. Drink smog clouded the air and made one reliant on impression rather than objective data. This happened every night, this bending of time with voices and depressants, and every time he thought to himself, this is the most complex time it has ever been to be alive.

--So tell me seriously, K, did you really not find anything of value in the pamphlets? asked Caesar.

--Well, Kogard began, stretching the word at length, It just puts a bad taste in my mouth. It's not that the pamphlets are wrong or badly written, they're just too real, you know. Just this morning I read in the paper: Amazon finally bought Random-Penguin. I mean, this is definitely the beginning of the end. The pamphlets aren't speculative, they're becoming truer as we speak. A corporate government, the Ministry of Literature, it's all just right around the corner. I think I was just saying it was ridiculous because...I didn't want it to be true. Written down like that, it just seemed ludicrous. But it's not. It's happening. Remember 9/11? After reading all that DeLillo, I was just like...art *can* predict the future, if it's really instinctual. If it really comes from the heart. If it's not filtered through any concept of marketability or genre or self-acknowledgment as art—if it's just what wants to come out of a person at that given time, then it has the power to reveal realities hidden from us and times which are occurring secretly or have the possibility of occurring. Your pamphlet is just so foreign and bizarre that it might just be the future.

--Man, you're speaking some really bizarre shit, said Fredo, knocking back his fifth bourbon. Bob had left some time ago to “run some errands,” he had said.

--I don't know...it's getting late, said Kogard. --I think I want to get laid. He looked around the room, which was still crowded, but with more skin and hotter breath. The entire dynamic of the room had changed, and by this most drunken hour of the night the whole room radiated a reddish-black. The shadows looked like they were being engulfed in flames from across the room. Bodies slid up against each other and mouths hung open. Fucking hipsters looked pissed standing against the wall. Girls looked as if they were ready to pounce upon a dying gazelle, either out of predatory instinct or desperation. The girls who had had it for the evening stumbled out of the bar on the shoulder of some well-to-do-date-rapist. The girls in the little black dresses, you can always tell when they're going home: they walk like they've been defeated. Then, over by the side of the bar near the door, Kogard spotted a still fairly coherent modestly-tattooed twenty-something with a buzz cut. She wore a Dead Kennedy's tee-shirt with cut-off sleeves and you could tell it wasn't from Urban Outfitters, rather someone's basement screen-printing studio. She drank a Little Tall Boy and burped like a fratkid

and was more than pretty attractive. There was a 60-40 chance that she would be a lesbian like his ex-wife, but Kogard figured the odds were in his favor. --Well, he said, I'm gonna pack it in. He waved a nonchalant good-bye to his sedated compatriots and walked toward the girl through a lubricated cesspool of human indecency.

He made no eye contact with her during the time it took to wade through the flesh, and when he finally approached her he hesitated before looking up. Then he lifted his head, her eyes already reading him, and said, Hi, my name is Walter Kogard.

--I know, said the girl, I'm Amy.

Kogard looked her up and down, and indeed his vision was not mired by distance or the drink fog of his companions. She was very pretty. --Do you want to go outside for a cigarette? he asked.

--How about we smoke one on the way to my apartment? she said.

--Whatever.

During their walk she spied over *Monolith* and he blocked most of it out, thinking about the way day and night seemed never to really move forward, rather alternately, one after the other, with their being only two states of time. With this model, time would be cyclical. Linear time would be used to document how many times day and night have repeated themselves, but there wouldn't be, for instance, seven days and seven nights in a week, but one day and one night repeating itself seven times. That means there is no past and no future. We are forever in the present and our present can take one of any infinite number of future directions depending on how we act when the day renews itself. We decide our future. And we can change our path at any time because the future isn't decided yet; it's decided now.

--Walter?...Walter?...came some female voice.

Oh, it was, what was her name?--Amy? --Yeah, what, said Kogard.

--I'm gonna go in here for a quick second.

--Okay, said Kogard, slightly startled at her presence. He wanted to be alone. He wanted to have the possibility of expressing himself if the words came, and he couldn't do that with another person in the room. Amy went into the bodega. Kogard looked up to find the intersection at which he stood. 221<sup>th</sup> and Lenox. 221<sup>th</sup> and Lenox...?Oh! he thought. A good friend of his lived on the top floor the apartment at the northwest corner of the intersection—The Guillotine Apartments. Fanchisco Lachowski. Good Ol' Frank. Kogard walked across the street and rang up to Frank's apartment. Frank buzzed him up and Kogard went into the building.

## XI.

Frank Lachowski had four arms, and rumor had it that he had four hemispheres of the brain. For as long as Kogard had known him he had worked for A Ubiquitous and Lasting System of Hexagonal Galleries, colloquially known as the Archives, a pyramid of infinite construction dedicated to cataloging copies of every four-hundred page combination of letters, i.e., every book ever put into print, or having the possibility of existing, no matter how nonsensical. Frank put his limbs and cognitive abilities to use writing several books at the same time. The archives employed him to write books on topics that had not yet been well-expounded, and he wrote and published all of these

books under different names. The Archive possessed a small press which they used to publish these “recently uncovered titles.” At any given time he would be writing a minimum of one book, but on this late occasion he was writing two books on two different typewriters with a single cigarette dangling from his lips, his oval-spectacled eyes darting from page to page, and all of the lights in his apartment off save his desk lamp. He was the recluse of recluses, so infamous and prolific that few knew where he was or that he even existed. He was monastic in craft and temperament. And as far as Kogard knew, he was the only person Frank ever entertained—if you could even call it “entertaining.” When he’d drop in for late visits like these he would quietly enter Frank’s study, the cigarette ever-burning the end of the filter at his lips, a long leg of ash hanging off the end of it, the typewriter keys ever-clicking away, and sit down in the felt armchair adjacent to the desk. More than his own apartment, he found Frank’s quarters to be a haven, another place where time was subject to the artist’s whim.

--So, Kogard said at length, What’s been on the page lately?

--Albert Speer, Frank muttered, dropping his cigarette butt into the ashtray on the table in front of him. He used two of his arms to fetch and light another while the other two typed furiously away at the Selectric Model 1.

--Who?

--Nazi. Well, recanted Nazi. A German architect who was Minister of Armaments and War Production for the Third Reich. It’s called “The Muse and the Tyrant.”

--And the other one?

--Oh, a queer little piece on singularities.

--Mhmm.

--What’s been at your fingertips? Frank asked, his fingers typing away as if counting the seconds with each stroke.

--Nothing, said Kogard.

--Nothing?

--I don’t know. Not getting anywhere. Not really trying. I don’t know.

--The *Pendulum* swings away but there is no chime.

--You could put it that way.

--Haven’t you ever heard the advice: just write.

--Far too often.

--You’ve just lost motivation.

--I feel like a sack of sand. Useless. Taking up space. The words...they’re not there. The right words that will give my time meaning. The words that’ll move my life forward. Another book, another anything. They’re just not there.

--They’re there. Maybe you should go out and get some greater knowledge. Experience something new.

--Look who’s talking.

--What is even the aim of this book, *Pendulum*?

--Basically...to record the minutes of a life slowly whirring to an end.

--Oh come on now. Let’s hear some plot points.

--I don’t know. Grandfather is dying. His daughter is with him, come from some big city to be by his side. Wife’s deceased. Flashbacks. Memories. The search for



lost time. The Clocks, what I wanted to call them. Grandfather Clock and Granddaughter Clock.

--That's quite heavy-handed.

--Hey, remember when I wrote that story for *Ashtray* and named the main characters the Burials? I was thinking then that *that* was heavy-handed, but the critics ate it up.

--They're all idiots.

--I don't know. The story has to take more of a shape. It has to enter it's third trimester before I can even think about writing it down.

--And after, what, six years, where in the pregnancy are you? Have you conceived it in any way?

--I just pulled out.

Frank chuckled, not enough to jitter his jack, but just enough for it to be a compliment.

--I got a little bit of cum on my leg: the first sentence: "Grandfather clock, tick, tock."

--Rhyming in prose again...how many times do I have to tell you I hate that.

--I like it, I don't care what anyone says. I did it all throughout *Monolith* and people didn't even notice half the time.

--That's because people are idiots.

--And you?

--I'm an idiot with four arms who knows a lot.

They were quiet for a while, then Frank said, There is so much that we don't know. All the Archive's catalog and all that I've dedicated to it—science, art, history—it still does not amount to the miracle of birth. Carefully gathered and organized information still falls short of nature's happenstance.

They were quiet again. Typing: click click click click click click click click click click...

--I'm sure you've heard about Random-Penguin, said Kogard.

--Fuckin' A.

--What's next, you know? There are only like five independent houses left. They'll swipe those up. They'll swipe up the last few big houses. And then it's monopoly. Socialized art. They say: we want a novel to promote the new Amazon electronic tablet. And some poor fuck will write it. They'll sell it on e-book and the cycle continues. I wouldn't have been able to get published ten years ago if Amazon had controlled the game. Think of the lobbying. No more sex in novels! No more images of revolt! No more this, no more that! It's the advent of universal censorship.

--That's not our issue, K. We write what needs to be written. It will find a way to reach those who need to hear it.

Kogard smoked aggressively, as he had irritated himself with talk of the Rapture. Then he remembered something: Hey, he said. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out the papers that Caesar had given him in the Narrative. --One of my friends is still die-hard about Occupy.

--Noble. Naive.

--He's working with this underground-something-'r-other anarchist press. Publishing pamphlets they think will resurge the movement. I don't know. Seems silly. Stupid. The movement is six feet under. But these passages, I read them and I get angry. Kogard looked at the papers in his hand. --I feel like, I know I need to do something. I have to do something. I can't let everything I love fall into the hands of a few greedy fucks who are only driven by profits. But... I feel like wanting to change it is stupid. But sitting around and complaining while Amazon puts another good small press out of business, that just seems downright irresponsible. I'd rather be stupid than willfully ignorant.

--Let me see those, said Frank.

Kogard handed the papers over to him. Frank skimmed through them while continuing to type with three of his hands.

--They're not all about the book industry, said Kogard. They rail against banks, local governments, GMOs, crude oil pipelines, you name it, it's in there.

--At this point it's all owned by the same people anyway. It's not the practice of banking or torture or racism or whathaveyou that they're railing against. It's the common end of it all to put money in the hands of a few and willfully deprive society of a greater good. I liked Occupy. It had a mission. But, yeah, I suppose it also had issues.

--I don't want art to be owned by the same folks who run GitMo, you know. Listen to me, now I sound like an Occupier.

--If by that you mean you sound idealistic to a fault, then yeah. They can try to use their bodies as protest, but as long as the banking hegemony has police forces and politicians in their belt loops, the little guy is fucked.

--Fuck.

--Play the game or get squished by it.

--Mhm... You know, I wouldn't be the angriest person if Amazon did become, what does he call it? the Ministry of Literature, and they just kind of, like, were the sole distributor and buyer of books and manuscripts. If they still were going to carry real books, I wouldn't be *as* uncomfortable. But fuck—just look at what they're doing. They're taking every press they own and formatting them to the electronic book tablet thing. They're trying to do away with paper!

--From a business perspective, it's more economic. Eco-friendly. Less storage. Less overhead.

--Why are you the one saying this; you work for the fucking Archives.

--Hey, I'm not saying I like it. But the Archive's donations are falling dangerously low. We can't even afford to continue this romantic crusade against technological advancement. Not for very much longer.

A solemn look fell upon Kogard's face.

--I'll tell you something, Frank said very quietly, There are very fluffy rumors, and I mean they're mostly air, but a part of them is substantiated, that Amazon wants the Archive.

Kogard deflated.

--If they cop the Archive and do away with the books, which is likely—and it's also likely that the public will go along with it because who needs 500,000 square feet of shelving space when that new tablet holds 260GB, right?--then in that case, they will

finally be able to have the monopoly on textual information. Everyone will go though the company for their reading needs, educational, entertainment, whatever. It's a terribly powerful position that they will have.

Kogard bent forward, rested his elbows on his knees, and wove his fingers.

--And I don't want to play devil's advocate, but it's a reality we will very likely have to face.

Kogard looked up at him. --So how can you just stay seated there and write all of this if it's going to just fall into the hands of the party you never intended to join. The party that, in fact, you ideologically oppose. What happens if the world of literature as we know it goes straight to shit?

Frank gave Kogard a quick fatherly glance, turned his attention back to his work and said, We keep writing. We need to stay sane, right? We need our words to live.

--Maybe we need writing to live, but writing doesn't make a living.

--You can always whore yourself out. So to speak.

Kogard was inside himself. He shook his head and, later, began to speak in a hushed tone, as if he were speaking into a mirror: It's just not the same without binding or paper. It's like, when I was a kid, I idolized books. I felt like writers were the real *thinkers* and *feelers* when it came to sharing information with the world. And a book was like a physical extension of a person from long ago. I could hold them and caress their spines. I could read their minds. I could sleep with them. I dreamed of one day seeing my name grace the dust jacket of a beautifully designed book, with those ragged page edges and everything. And then I could live forever on other peoples' bookshelves and in other peoples' hearts. See my name on a shelf, a real shelf, near Kafka, Kierkegaard, Knausgård. Now I think about what if I came along too late, and was forced into the e-book format. I would never have that comfort. I think of all the young literary people who will never see their names propped up in the fiction section. It must feel like making bread without flour. An electronic book—it's so fleeting, so temporary. It puts air into the words of one's soul, makes a human being deletable. You take away the physicality of a book, you take away its humanity. You reduce the art to forgettable, browsable content on a mobile web platform. "Content." I shudder at the word. You remove the artist's work from the real world where it belongs and take the revolution away from creating. That's what they want, with this whole tech-based migration. To castrate art. To sterilize everything. To format everything to the iOS system. Everybody: white shirt, black suit, same beer, same pick-up lines and catchphrases, talk about the same TV shows and bad movies, everybody's iPhone says 3:00. Shouldn't be that way. Everyone runs on their own time; it's all subjective; it shouldn't be standardized. I've been thinking a lot about time recently.

Frank was looking at him now. He had stopped typing. Kogard looked down at his feet.

--You want to read something about time? Frank asked. --It might help with this mood of yours. It's not all lost, you know. From here, the present, we can progress in any direction that you have the will enough to dictate. He pulled a piece of paper out of one of his typewriters and lay it down on a stack, then handed it to Kogard. --This is what I'm writing now. Give it a look.

Kogard glanced up and took the stack. The title read "Origends."

## XII.

Kogard left Frank's apartment feeling the burden of some new and dreadful knowledge. He was possessed with a strange new conviction that he had the power to change the world and the vulnerability of being consumed by it. He walked through the dark city streets of this empiric cosmopolis and felt himself to be on the edge of a sharp drop, looking out into the abyss that was his dream, slowly dying. He was consumed by this melancholy, that what he had loved doing and had made his career of was soon to exist no longer in the sense that he knew it—as a result of a few quick acquisitions. He felt like an apparition, unseen by real eyes. He looked into the abyss. The drunken crowd had dispersed, and here, on his street, he felt the cold, dark hand of all the city's loneliness. He felt it pulling him in, like he was falling forward into time without any way to break free of it. What was this feeling, this affliction of the soul, this pharmacon of the spirit? He felt the world consuming and eradicating him. So long to his beloved spines and pages, and to the real books of future writers, and his own books, to soon be reduced from lovely vessels of precious words to lines of code and scrambled data. He felt like forfeiting at this point. Give up the life of the mind, the excavation of the self. He couldn't even write more than six words on a novel in six years. Forfeit. Surrender. Give it all up to the cold, greedy claws of the world of commerce and acquisition. What does Twain say about emotions like these?

Forgiveness is the fragrance  
that the violet sheds  
on the heel  
that has crushed it.

When Kogard got to his bedroom, he could not think. He was bogged by the weight of his own feelings of insignificance and the simultaneous skewing of his reality that Frank's 'Origends' had disposed on him. He wanted a cigarette but he did not smoke. He wanted that Indian to speak some wise words, but no voice came. There was only the blaring of the bright red digital clock: 4:12 A.M.

tick, tock  
tick  
tock

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## Phase the Second.

### I.

You are a drop of water, and the world is a glass filled with water sitting on a table in a room. You are just one drop surrounded by infinite other drops—other beings. They are indistinguishable from one another. They are a liquid whole, ebbing and flowing past each other, confined to the shape of the glass.

There is the rim—the sky. And beyond that there is the table—the galaxy. The table lamp—the sun. And beyond that there is the room that the table is in—the universe. And beyond that there is the house that the room is in. And beyond that there is the city that the house is in; and there are many more lights in the city. And beyond that: there is the world that the city is in, and the oceans...all of those drops of water...and then there is a whole other galaxy, another universe, outside of that. And that—the whole infinite universe—is one drop of water surrounded by an infinite number of other drops, ebbing and flowing past each other, sitting in a whole other glass, sitting on a table, in a room.

The universe is simply a series of infinite points contained within one another: a Russian doll of existence: an infinite number of universes containing infinite space containing an infinite number of molecules containing an infinite number of atoms...and who knows how many infinite components make up an atom; they probably contain other universes.

The fact that a mind exists to conceive of the universe is the reason that the universe exists. A mind is a singularity; it exists independently of everything around it. There is the interior mind and everything else—body, clothes, and world—is exterior. The mind is where the known universe ends (with the atom and its quarks), and where the infinite universe of imagination and impression begins. Scientifically, one could make the argument that emotions and thoughts are made up of physical chemical

compositions, but the very depth and breadth of human emotion must far exceed the limited physical properties of molecules and atoms. The activity of neurotransmitters and sensors passing between synapses is what appears to trigger emotional response, but how do we account for the infinite nature of human imagination if these transmitters are finite. Science dictates that the combination and amount of these neurotransmitters passing between synapses may vary to such a degree that the possibilities of emotional response seem infinite. But it is in fact not the properties of the physical components themselves that create emotion and memory but the empty space between components; the mind exists within this interaction space. Being thus exists within the infinite space between physical components. This model of being resembles that of the atom. An atom is 99.99% empty space; but it is not really empty. The empty space is really the magnetic field created by electrons, protons, and neutrons attracting and repelling each other. This magnetic field is energy, and this energy is equivalent to the nature of being, which is not physical, but which exists between physical components. The mind is where being begins, existing within the space between neurotransmitters and synapses caused by sensations from the exterior. If a human being had no mind to interpret senses then it could not interact with or even conceive of the universe and the universe would not exist. For the mind to interact with universal space it has to put itself in relation to something physically bigger, outside of it; otherwise, interactions with these external forces wouldn't make logical sense. So: the universe is contingent upon a mind to interact with it and think of it to exist, and the mind is reliant on a universe to exist outside of it in order to make sense of its existence. The universe doesn't exist outside of the mind, but the mind needs a universe to exist inside of. So the mind creates the universe that it lives in, the universe under which its physical laws are based. The mind creates the place in which it puts itself in relation. So our lives have meaning in as much as we give meaning to our own lives. If we put the universe into context as a facet of our imagination, then we can change, alter, and even make up our own realities. The mind conceives of the universe and the universe cradles the mind. The infant conceives of the mother that carries it. For religion to exist is for a person to be hidden from the fact that they give meaning to and create their own realities. It is for the top to be screwed onto the lid of the jar we live in, so that we forget that there is infinite space and infinite possibility extending from all around us. "God," the creator of this universe, exists within every individual.

This is what is meant by the singularity of the beginning and the end. The drop of water contains the universe and is simultaneously within the universe. There is no starting point or end point, no life or death, no being or space, but a constant cycle of existence, where all parts of one's environment are contingent upon the observer to exist, and *vice versa*.

We and the universe are one: a single entity: a point.

All the world is an interpretation made by YOU, the observer; millions of different interpretations, millions of different realities.

How can one time, one mode, accommodate them all? The blaring red letters of Kogard's digital clock read 12:45 P.M.

## II.

Kogard masked his morning breath with cigarette smoke. He could not get the day started without a buzz of some kind. He sat in his chair in his underwear and looked out the window across the room. The sounds of car horns, scattered voices, and the clatter of daily life rose up off the streets like steam. The city had been awake for hours.

This, he thought, continued the cycle. This was the cycle he had been repeating for years, the one into which he had finally, through all of its shortcomings and frustrations, felt comfortable falling. One must find some cycle to fall into in life. One must find comfort in repetition, in embarking on a journey with no foreseeable end. Some people fall into the wrong cycle and regret it years down the road, for the best cycle to fall into may not be the most financially viable or secure in terms of health or safety; sometimes the best cycle is the one that keeps you sane, the one that reduces the most stress. One has to adapt to the listlessness of life; life is in no hurry, why should the individual be? It just flows, on and on, tumbling, truckin', into death, and into the next life. It drags on like a cigarette. It is water being slowly drawn off, and we are left only with the drip-drip-drip of the leaky faucet.

Kogard liked his cycle; unlike his more business-minded friends, he liked being idle. He liked lingering in the lack of an impulse to do anything. It reduced the pressure of the external universe and allowed the internal universe within his mind to flow unhinged. He swiveled slightly in his armchair. The sky over Empire had turned a dark gray and a fog had settled. He found that the best way to adapt to the indifferent current of life was to join it, to be taken along the ride, as if on the jet stream of a dream, and be deposited in the moist riverbank where he may, that he may fertilize that soil for some time and then be drawn once again into the stream. Let the smoke float and dissolve into the air. Let the words come tumble out when they may. Take no force. Take no action. That is not to say *do nothing*; do it when you feel it's right, not when you feel like you *have* to. Do without intention; for life has no intention. It is the endless cycle; impulses will come and go, leave and return. The meaning is only that meaning which the individual attributes to it.

He was lucky to have money. It was a stroke of luck that *Monolith* had done so well critically and financially. The publisher was relentless in his marketing, and, really, you can make any book a bestseller with the right marketing. It was not his intention to make it a bestseller; it was his wont to write a great book. And he inadvertently became who he was by doing what he did. The natural flow.

He was lucky because without that reservoir of cash, he would not have been able to ride the current of life with such leisure. If he had to work he would have had to get off the current of life and toil the soil of the riverbank indefinitely so that he could have only the most basic living necessities. If you can only afford the basics with no room to branch out or experiment then you will always have to work just to get by. You will always be susceptible to laborrape because you can't quit; you will always have to suck up to the person who pays you. Kogard hated to work. He never wanted to "work" again. The workforce values action and damns inaction. It's a terrible guide to enjoying life; and *enjoyment* is inherently the point; you will never experience the moment you're in again; you must wring all of the passion from the present time. Working goes against

the natural current of life; to stay in one spot is to swim against the flow of the current and you will inevitably end up in a place you were never supposed to be; you will never discover what natural path life would have taken you through. The natural way is inevitably more pleasant. For Kogard, his wealth was not the end he sought; the end was the journey, to enjoy life with leisure; and in this world, money is the only thing that supports such a lifestyle.

The only “job” Kogard ever had was as a barista at the Coffee Express-O! coffee shop at the East End of Federal City. He was in university at the time and was trying to balance school and work with his overwhelming impulse to write down all of his impressions and all of life's quandaries. He loved to write—no, he *needed* it as an outlet, if only for the sake of his mental stability. The cycle of writing for himself seemed more valuable to him than anything else in his life because he had products to show for his continuous work, products which he was proud of, that came genuinely from him and that he wanted to show others. Project after project, novel after novel, there was always some manuscript or book with which he could show how he had been spending that part of his life, to show that he was spending his time in a valuable way. But school work—that was temporary. It was writing to a teleological end; when the semester would come to a close, the work he had done over those four months would be exchanged for a grade, and one would not be judged for the work but for the grade. The work itself was not even genuine. It did not come from the heart; it was not written for the pure pleasure of linguistic exploration and finding all of the discursive attractions and distractions along the infinite logical path emitting from a single thesis. It was about rigorous structure. It was about the most straight-forward and tight-knit way of conveying and regurgitating information. The journey of writing was Kogard's passion, not the end of a succinct, easily-deconstructed paper. Life is cyclical and vague, so why not the emotions one puts on a page, why not the structure in which one writes? But of course, school was not about expressing one's self. In the most practical and relevant sense, it was about preparing to be deposited in the riverbank to toil in the dirt forever. And that's why he dropped out in his senior year. Of course his parents were disappointed that he had essentially wasted their money—two hundred thousand dollars to be precise—but his parents, as for any youth, were his antithesis, and troubling as it was he knew that he had to depart from them.

University for him was like probation before one starts one's real living. Life has no end in sight; it is the journey that is the life. University, on the other hand, has an end and it is rigorously structured. (Time-blocks! Everyone on a schedule! Time management!) People then leave university and go to office jobs because they don't want to suffer the uncertainty that comes with starting the journey. They want an easily definable meaning attached to their life (CEO, Director of such-and-such, intern, &c.) complete with a clear straight-forward career path to wealth and the American Dream; they don't want to be lost.

Kogard left his job at the coffee shop for the opposite reason. Working at the coffee shop was an endless cycle of making drink after drink, week after week, indefinitely. It was a cycle, indeed, much like life presently, but it was not the kind of cycle he wanted to continue. He felt like he was spiraling into a cycle of work that would not benefit him later. Like school, it should be a pit stop on the way to finally



riding life's current. If the coffee shop closed, he wouldn't reap any benefits, profits, or stock options. He was the loyal subject of a man who lived the way Kogard wished he could. But as long as he worked in that shop he knew he would never really be able to enjoy life's idle. He would be in a perpetual state of servitude, helping another man get rich and live his life to the fullest. He had figured that four years was an appropriate amount of time to put money in another man's pocket without benefiting himself artistically, spiritually, or financially. And so he left at the age of twenty, moved to Empire City where he wrote *Monolith*, and the rest, as they say...

Kogard's boss at the coffee shop was an odd man named Matt who had been a primary lawyer to the mayor before he started his own branding company and, later, opened the coffee shop above which he lived with his wife Kathy and their two boys, Thing One and Thing Two. His whole name was Matt Black, which was douchey in and of itself, but was compounded by the fact that his legal name was indeed Matt, not Matthew, Matt. It was further complicated when Kogard would refer to their entire family: the Blacks. He would attract slant looks from customers when he'd mention that "The Blacks are doing well," or, "The Blacks are out of town, thank God."

Kathy Black used to be a lawyer as well, but under Kogard's tenure with their shop she worked as a personal trainer and had enormous fake tits, the nipples of which would poke noticeably out of any garment. She often came into the shop wearing tiny running shorts and a sport bra to show off, inadvertently or not, her rigid abdominal. All of the staff thought she had a secret desire to fuck the male employees. But it later came out that it was Matt who was doing the cheating, and by the time Kogard left the couple had separated.

One thing that irked Kogard about Matt was that he seemed to be in a perpetual midlife crisis. He mentioned on multiple occasions to people clearly uninterested that he had a Ducati, and he would hit on all of the female customers, especially the ones who were obvious lesbians. He often used the phrases, "Coolness!" "Rockin' tunes, man," and "Have you heard *Who's Next*, man? It's the best!" When he would come down from his apartment to help take orders during the shop's rush hours, he liked to put Eighties hair metal on the Pandora and accompany with air guitar.

It was during this period that Kogard's smoking habit evolved into its present condition. It was his crutch, between asshole customers asking for iced espresso, his mental boss, the perpetual onslaught of drinks, and the feeling of running on a treadmill going nowhere, cigarettes kept him sane. When the day was busy and the crowd made the shop hot and loud and drinks were lined up so far that they had to be stacked on top of each other, he could always step outside when it died down and recollect himself, linger on a smoke, and observe everything as if it were all new to him, as if he were not on a time constraint. During long rushes, he fainted for a smoke. He would need that little bit of time to himself just to make it another hour amidst the frenzied crowd; and it didn't help that he hated people in general, especially the suited and pursed Yuppie newcomers. Smoking slowed things down and allowed him to notice the minute and beautiful details of the world. Much like a ballerina will focus her attention on one area as she is spinning to avoid dizziness, cigarettes were his focal point so that he would not collapse from the dizziness of life.

But now, sitting in his armchair, not intent on doing anything today, he wasn't smoking to take a break from the hectic downtown coffee shop. His life was perpetually a vacation. Smoking was just something he did, like wearing Chuck Taylor's or needing glasses. They were simply his thing, through the coughing and the asthma. They were what he did.

### III.

So what did it mean exactly to join the current of life and forsake the squirarchy of labor and civic duty? What did it mean for Kogard sitting in his chair? What does it mean for all creators, who stroke their pen or brush with willful disregard for obligations to the state and its annexes?

Like the universe it is about the union of disunion, the jointing of the fleeting artist with the chained and weighted serf, the paper-pusher, the cart-driver, the cab man and the taxman. It is about balancing living as a part of the world and apart from it. The artist walks the street affirming his own internal universe as well as the external world of material and physical things, whereas most people only patronize the latter. Yes it is sad! Yes they are missing out on the beautiful infinity of being, but they are also beautifully infinite. They are all the trite adjectives that you may attribute to them—banal, unenlightened, dull, gray, servants of the corrupt state—and they are also none of them. They have the depth of the artist without the self-awareness. They live practically, and that is well, too. Perhaps they have inadvertently found the solution to compromising the infinite imagination of the mind with the infinity of space and reconciling that with the finite body: to not think about any of those things, to take life as they see it in front of them. Consider this widely-known knowledge of sages and oracles: everything that seems as it is simultaneously its own opposite. The *unheimlich*. Kogard's opposite-compliment existed all around him; he was the yin within the world's yang, and the world was the yang within his yin. He loved it for its beauty and degradation. It was his spectacle of rustic grandeur. Without it, he could not position himself, he could not make impressions on it; the absence of the dismal world would forfeit beautiful art; without it, he would not be who he was.

So he fed himself sitting at his desk. He fed himself with cigarettes. He fed himself on absent words, on the fog over the Empire, on the hipsters scrounging for self-identity. He fed himself on the sorrows of the world. He was full with this life while *they* starved out there. And yet, because they starved, he starved. They were one, interconnected; he wasn't the artist on the outside looking in, he wasn't on the inside looking out, he was in the dead-fucking-center looking around. He would starve with them as long as they needed him to, until the current drew him back and carried him to the muddy gallows in which he would be lodged until the next current drew him into a new life. The current must perpetually fertilize the riverbank and bring forth crop to cure the great hunger. That is the hope; that is what the artist aims to do. But the hunger continues. And the river continues. And that is the way. The river sings joyful participation in the sorrows of the world; wash over the depleted soul weary of worldly work and bless him, that he may join the current one day. The world's hunger was Kogard's hunger. The world's longing for fertilization was Kogard's longing to fertilize.

Famine fueled his art. It was the thing that kept his belly full as he tried to feed others. It was his happiness, even when he damned it; they all damned it, and rejoiced in it, for where would they be without it? The river gave them hope through the hunger; it offered the prospect of fruit for their longing; and that's why all along the riverbank, hunger settled like fog over the city, you can hear under the dying breath of famished souls the hysterical laughter of the defeated everywhere. They are the laugh; Kogard is the laughter.

He took a drag and as he removed the cigarette from his mouth he paused. Smoke conformed around his fingers and trickled up into his disfocused field of vision. He set the jack down in the ashtray and pulled out a pen. He reached over into his pants which had been discarded onto the floor and got out his little note pad and wrote:

river / bank

He looked at his words, the pen lingering on the bottom leg of the "k"; he continued:

inside / outside

flow / stagnation

...his pen drew black blood...

bleeding / blank

ink / paper

impression / object

interpretation / subject

mental / physical

thought / nonthought

to be / not to be

to write / not to write

He paused...

orig / in / end

He stopped the flow of ink and pulled the pen from the sheet. What once was white, pure, worldly, now bore the violation of his own impressions. And now they were one. White paper. Black ink. His black. Blood flowed through his veins, into his finger tips, through the pen, onto the page. There: his black blood.

I am the black ink on the blank white page of America.

I am the other. I stand in contrast to it. I defile it.

But we need each other.

It needs me to have character.

I need it to bleed upon.

...

All us artists are niggers.

He flipped the scribbled page over to a new sheet and bled again.

IDEA

"Outside" or "Prison", long story / novel(la)

What if so many people were bad and prison got so big that society put all of the good law-abiding citizens inside of prison walls and left all of the bad people/prisoners on the outside. The whole world would be a prison and the good/functional parts of

society were located on maximum security compounds to keep all of the prisoners out. If you were on the inside and you broke a rule then the authorities would send you to the outside with all the prisoners, so no one would break any rules because they didn't want to be out with all of the rapists and murderers.

They'd be terrified of it. "Oh, I never want to go outside, I want to stay in here where it's safe. Oh please, oh please, don't send me out there."

Rules would be very strict. Everything would be put in place to ensure that no one revolts or causes tension; so no vulgarity, only one religion, socialized arts, &c. Sometimes a person would accidentally break a rule, but law would work like the current justice system and they would more than likely be sent to the outside anyway.

The judge would say something like, "By the power invested in me by the Compound of Eastern Massachusetts, I hereby sentence you to life on the outside."

It would be survival of the fittest out there. If you acted up and went outside then you'd have to adapt—but you still had the whole world to travel to.

PLOT: a boy gets sent to the outside for a transgression (that's what they call crimes) that he didn't do. He has a rough time for a while, gets raped and gang-banged a couple of times, gets into trouble with the organized crime system that the criminals had set up. But then he realizes that he can leave the city that he's in, so he escapes. He has to hide from bounty hunters and other rogue criminals in his journey. Then he hears of a place where people like him live, people who either didn't do the crime they were sentenced to or who were actually good people who did one bad thing. Boy goes in search of this utopian compound. It's somewhere in Canada. He travels and travels and finally finds it. And he realizes that this society, of people living off the land and doing art and sharing stories about their adventures, is better than being on the inside.

The flow subsided. Kogard put his pen down and looked over his words. He smiled to himself. This was good stuff. Writing is easy, he thought. The good ideas come when they want, the good words, too. They can flow like the current of life; you

just have to let them come. Flowing—in life and in words—is easy. You just cut yourself and let yourself bleed onto the page.

He started a fresh sheet and wrote again, sporadically, with no regard for an end, just for the love of flowing

I remember that one November day, the softest wind reminded me of god's bored sigh. The morning rose with a prickly stem and all the aromatic humidity of a summer's eve. I like a bee buzzed round it, collecting the pollen of impression and passion. Yet I felt as mired as a soul within the skull.

Melancholia's joy's companion. Because where pleasure's had, I feel the guilt of a thief having stolen something undue. Are we to remain in debt to the pangs of love? I remember my home feeling like a grave to which I retire each night, dying one more time. I remember feeling it to be as cozy as a pine box, bug-teeming bedsprings, blanketed in six feet of fertile soil, and here I am shoveling metaphors on top of it all. I must consult the spirits which linger here. I must find solace in solitude. I must become attuned to the world's intonation. Wherefrom comes that silent strumming? The humming pitch-fork of the infinite will never cease, though I shall soon retire. For the time I'll match it with my voice, which, though singular, compounds across space and time to comprise the purest sound. Listen closely to dead silence, and you'll hear the sustained note—a D-minor?—of the chorus of human hearts.

He lit another cigarette. The pen and the cigarette sitting between his fingers, ripe for use, gave him similar feelings of content. He swiveled around in his chair and looked out the window again. Fog settled on rooftops. The city smoldered.

IV.

Suddenly a quandary:

Where is this book going?

He was thinking of *Pendulum*. He was intent on using that for the title; he always came up with titles and then matched an existing plot to it, sometimes forming the action and motifs around the title (when people look at a book in a bookstore, they put a lot of weight on the title, he thought); but he didn't have any solid content with which to support it, save the motif of life slipping away, the search for lost time.

grandfather clock, tick, tock

What to do with the title? What to do with that haunting phrase?...

He had all these good ideas, and many more in folders under his desk, but he was weary of stirring from this thesis, his grandfather clock; he had been pressing it for

too long. He had written some stories for magazines, yeah, but did he want to focus his greater creative energies on these quirky little ideas? The book, the book. The follow-up. The pressure. Was *Monolith* his “big book,” his magnum opus (at six hundred pages, it might have seemed that way then), or was this book supposed to be?

Should I even continue with this idea? Perhaps I should put it aside altogether. At least for now. Write some shorter novels. Some entertaining, provocative stuff, stuff with PLOT. Keep my head above water. Just where is this book headed, if anywhere?

He looked around the room frantically as if the book itself were escaping, then he realized, it was never there.

The book is in me... The book goes with me. For as long as I contain it... Until I let it out...

But I can't let it out...or else it will escape. I let *Monolith* out seven years ago. It's gone now, belongs to the public, the critics. I don't feel it to be a part of me anymore. Was it because I wrote it for a specific purpose that was beyond me? Did I write it because it was supposed to get me to a place in my literary life where I could brood over books for longer without suffering financially? I just wrote it, revised it twice, and then out the window it went, a whole 600-page chunk of my life, all those words, out. Was its magnitude then a testament to my genius? But I don't feel like a genius. Sure, it had good stuff in it...oh, I don't even remember it very well anymore. Maybe I was supposed to forget about it when it started selling. Just let it go. And I did. Why was that so easy? Was I younger and less reserved? Did I not value it? But then again, how much could I value this book if I never even let it out of my head?... I'll keep it in for now. I fear the act of putting myself out where I can see me. I fear, if it goes to print, that people will see my precious words.

This reminded him of something. He got up and left his room, went into the common room where his wall-sized bookshelf towered, a mosaic of souls all bled out onto paper. He perused the shelves and found *The Tempest*. Not *Hamlet* or *Merchant* or *Henry VII*, but *Tempest*; it had all of his favorite Bill Shakespeare passages. He flipped through the pages, pausing periodically to appreciate the linguistic scenery so meticulously lain in place by old Bill Shakespeare like one of Van Gogh's clouds, and came to the one he was looking for. Act 3, Scene 3. The words of the mangled black-faced Caliban, the black ink on Prospero's island:

*Be not afeared. The isle is full of noises,  
Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt  
not.  
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments  
Will hum about mine ears, and sometimes voices  
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,  
Will make me sleep again; and then, in dreaming,  
The clouds methought would open and show riches  
Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked  
I cried to dream again.*

That passage always comforted him. He could recall it from memory, but seeing it in text gave him reassurance that it was not just his own imagination, that this beauty now existed as a physical stay in the world like morning dew on North Dakota

prairies. The beauty of literature and art is that it comes from intangible human emotion and becomes a physical part of the world. Bill Shakespeare lives today!

He always wanted the passage to be near him, not just in him. He didn't trust his mind. Men, women, passages, all get lost in its corridors. The passage in the physical book would *stay* in the world; it stays after Bill wrote it, after Kogard reads it time after time, and after both of them and all of the other sad young literary men die off.

The fear with an e-book is that the passage can't exist without the machine or electricity. One is dependent upon the media giants to experience the beautiful things in the world. If nothing else, he didn't want them to control that.

He put the book back on the shelf and looked around the room: three high windows that looked out along the residential rooftops; two plush green chairs, ripped, cotton showing; paintings, some that he had done in his youth, some that he had bought ages ago from artists who by now pulled in seven figures a piece; two wall-sized bookshelves on either side of the room; a small analog television in the corner buried by VHS tapes; the front door. It was green.

He figured since he was up now that he should go out. Maybe for a bit of brunch and a leisurely coffee. Plus he liked to walk in the fog. I reminded him of a dream.

V.

Kogard went back into his room and decided to go to the Kavanaugh Cafe. It was about seventy blocks toward the center of the city but it served excellent fair trade coffee and had a good atmosphere. The wallpaper depicted dense tree trunks and all of the tables were topped with unlaquered wood. They gave you water in Ball-Mason jars and all members of the staff were female, lightly tattooed, and indifferent toward your comfort. There was a section with tables and a section near the front window with mismatch couches and chairs for sitting. The two windows at the front occupied almost the entire wall on either side of the door. They played witchhouse ambient music and trap beats all day. It was unapologetically hipster. Kogard liked and respected that.

He put on a black sweater, black Dickies, his black Chuck Taylors, and considered how he would get over there. He owned a 1984 Bentley Mulsanne which he bought four years ago from the elderly delirious husband of an estranged Rockefeller cousin in Weslan County for ninety-five thousand dollars. The old man had worked for the company since 1970 and owned two or three of every model since 1968. He also just didn't give a fuck anymore, you know how some aristocrats get. He liked to drink double scotches on his rear veranda and watch the sun on the Holden River burn to a fiery red as it descended to hell. Kogard had never pictured himself with a luxury automobile, but he figured it was such a good deal and he liked how the '84 looked like a 1990 Volvo. He liked the boxiness; it was refined yet near-inconspicuous.

But he didn't take it out much. Although it was his sole car, he only drove it to galas, lectures, formal dinners and important meetings; in a word, obligations. For everything else he used the subway or his feet.

He left his building and walked the half-block to the 218<sup>th</sup> Street—Bosch/Horace Avenue Station. He couldn't see fifty feet down the street in this fog.

Buildings rose from the street and disappeared from sight half-way up as if they were in the midst of clouds. He loved it. The eeriness, and magical element, the possibility of apocalypse. It was sublime. The rapture was upon him.

William H. Gass, who maintained a prominent position on Kogard's desk-side bookshelf, once asked him through *The Tunnel*, Is writing to yourself a healthier insanity than talking to yourself? The words came fleeting back to him unexpectedly like ricochet bullets... Or is making love to yourself, elaborately, with ritual remorse, better? Worse?... Kogard's mind was on the page, on words pressed in ink. His mind was on paper.

Let this vacant paper window frame a world.

...let this vacant paper mind frame one, too...

He descended the train station's concrete steps and hopped the turnstile like a crew of reckless skateboarding teenagers. This far out in the subway system, no one manned the platforms. People were as likely to jump the tracks and die anonymous here as they were to in their own bedroom with a bottle of aspirin and distant indifferent relatives.

He took a seat on one of the wooden benches and tried to convince himself that the mosaic of chewing gum welded by now to the platform was expensive modern art, the real conceptual kind. He had once planned to create a sculpture of an x-ray of his own two lungs out of light- and dark-colored cigarette butts. But that idea fell by the wayside in the wake of not writing his novel.

The station was completely deserted. Three rows of tunnels extended horizontally before him. The tunnels have already been dug, Gass. Live in the subways like a troll. Live at 312<sup>th</sup> Street Station. No one goes there.

The train abruptly cannoned by the platform and came to a stop, creaking with mechanical arthritis. Kogard entered the iron creature and rode the city's entrails toward 141<sup>st</sup> and Dunbar.

The subway car was just crowded enough that there was a seat for every person to sit down. Kogard filled in the last one, in the row of chairs lining the side of the car closest to the center door. He looked around and assessed his environment as was his nature. Everyone—businessmen, hipster skateboarders, and housewives alike—were all consumed by their electronic devices. He saw one old geezer beside him reading *The Empire Dispatch* on a tablet. Across from him, a man who could have been a fashion model judging from the clothes he wore listened to a Walkman and tapped his feet. He had a scruffy beard, Adidas Originals with no laces, and wore an all-pink jumpsuit. Complete with his retro Walkman the man could have been a hipster, but upon further speculation Kogard realized that he was merely homeless.

It has been said that deep loneliness is sublime, but in a terrifying way. Deep loneliness indeed was Kogard's predominant mode of experience, and he did relish it with sweet melancholy, casual despair, gleeful ennui. Even in the midst of many people crowded onto a subway car, he felt deep loneliness, a deep regard for his own inner thoughts, and he found it more conducive to his temperament than popularity, which is for high school students. Popularity is for people living under rigorous systems. It is reconciliation for a lack of room, a lack of freedom toward individuality. Systems that drill a set kind of knowledge into a population don't like individuality; they suppress



distracting and dissenting thought so that their “knowledge” can be properly absorbed by the populous. With no room to move around intellectually or spiritually, the pupil resorts to physical popularity to feel affirmed as a person. This, however, is all based on superficial qualities, and not the depth or complexity of a mind. These “popular” people have little to offer the public by way of emotionally and spiritually valuable information. People with valuable information in their heads keep to themselves for fear of being suppressed by the system, or are otherwise outcasted by the greater population for their dangerously deep and irrelevant thoughts. Such deep personally-cultivated thoughts are often vilified as the product of mental illness or a personality disorder. Deep loneliness is inherent rejection of systemic oppression. Solitude from society is sublime. Kogard sat in the seat beside himself; all other commuters sat beside their electronics, constantly bombarded with the latest in media conglomerate paradigms without giving themselves room to stretch their thoughts, their own deep valuable lonely thoughts. *We must always be in the know, always updated with the latest international relations bit or what my high school class is doing, more information, more, more, scroll, scroll, advertisement! buy Johnson Baby Lotion! buy more apps so that you can be deeper in the know, more news, faster, no-wait-download, buy, news, buy, news...*

...All of this without any time to process it all, without any time to digest it, without any time to wonder how it is relevant to our well-being. We gorge ourselves on useless information without letting the fork down; we are a society gluttonous for more news, entertainment, spectacle. We must slow down. Talk to the person beside you, not to a screen. Why are you still scrolling? Have you found what you were looking for? Were you looking for *anything* in the first place? Facebook Timeline—what in that long scroll of idiocy will benefit you? Is there some secret to personal cultivation hidden in the cesspool of Twitter hashtags? Or has it become habitual by now. Wake up. What's on Twitter? What's been happening out there? Scroll, read, rote memorization, mechanical comprehension, passive acceptance. No connection with your surroundings; only with your screens. But it's not about what's in there, it's about what's in you. It's about what's in your neighbor's head, not what's happening with the president of Iran. Kogard scanned up and down the aisles. He wondered if they were all so far removed from their surroundings that they would not notice if he got up and did a somersault. Would they lift one finger from scrolling? And if they did, would they interact with him? No...they'd probably go to Twitter or Facebook and relay their worldly observation to the invisible signals of internet space. He wondered, could he get them to interact with him? He pulled out a cigarette and lit it.

The flick of his Zippo perked a few ears. Several heads looked up. The elderly woman beside him looked at the trail of smoke at the end of his cigarette and then into his face with an expression that looked as if she were seeing the reaper himself raise his scythe to her. Kogard took a few puffs. His blood was rushing and the nicotine buzz was chilling. He jolted his eyes from one side of the car to the other. People were just now beginning to look around. Nostrils flared violently. Hands waved the air in front of faces. One woman actually tried to use her tablet as a fan. Eyes slowly began to fall on him. He took another drag and blew smoke rings. He looked around: young girls with the hipster skaters raised their iPhones and snapped pictures. People looked at their phones and then back to him, their fingers tacking text into the screen. He looked at the

woman beside him, who was still petrified in fear. The man on the other side of her leaned over and said with unsure authority:

--You can't do that!

--I am doing it, said Kogard.

--I am going to call the transit police, he said. Other voices chimed in now.

--Yeah, who does he think he is? --Get that guy outta here! --Secondhand smoke is more toxic than smoking itself! --You are endangering us all!

--I am serious, I'll call the police now, the man said.

--Give them my regards, said Kogard. The train came to a stop at 149<sup>th</sup> Street and Kogard got up to transfer to the Number 4 train to 141<sup>th</sup> Street. The doors opened and he got up to leave but before he crossed the threshold he turned around to all of the eyes still upon him and he took a drag and then he said, pointing in all directions, You're all on hidden camera! Those are cameras, those are cameras, those are camera, they're all actors and you're on MTV's Hilarity Show! Congratulations! He stepped out of the train doors just as they closed.

He took one more drag before he tossed the jack to the ground and stamped it out. He walked with an ear-to-ear smile on his face up the stairs to the 4 train platform. Luckily, it was pulling up just as he arrived.

He got in the car and took the same seat by the center door and the train pulled away. Across from him, a heavy-set yet youthful black woman scrolled through her Instagram and minded her two children from her peripheral. She mustn't have been more than nineteen or twenty. One child, a boy of about three, sat in a stroller and the other child, a girl no more than eighteen months, sat on her leg. The girl on her leg drank from a baby bottle full of what looked like orange soda. The little boy in the stroller snatched at the bottle. Kogard giggled to himself at the instinctual selfishness of children. The woman hit at the boy. Then she took the bottle from the little girl and gave it to the boy. She went back to her iPhone. The little girl started crying. She reached at the bottle. The woman slapped the girl's hands down. The woman took the bottle from the boy and handed it to the girl. He snatched back at it and the woman hit him. He began to cause a tantrum. The woman hit the boy repeatedly. Meanwhile, tension had risen in the train car. Commuters became nervous. They clutched their bags tighter. They squeezed the hands of their loved ones. They looked everywhere except toward the scene. The woman continued to hit the boy. The boy fell onto the floor. The girl began crying and dropped her bottle. Kogard looked up and saw that the train had arrived at the 141<sup>st</sup> and Dunbar Station. The woman rose and kicked the little boy to rouse him. She bent down and shook him. Kogard left the train car and watched the scene from the outside as he walked by. The little boy did not stir. The car doors closed.

As he mounted the stairway to the street exit, Kogard could not expel the thought that the little boy had died. He would be responsible. No one said anything. The shock... How's that for human interaction.

Outside, the fog had gotten thicker. Kavanaugh Cafe was right down the block, however, and he walked there blindly under obfuscated vision.

Entering the building, a warmth of temperature and community overcame him. It was a seat-yourself kind of place, so he took a plush chair by the front window. One would have thought one was in a film noir the way the outside looked through the

window. The barrier offered a spectator's comfort to the weather. It made it less immediately gloomy and more beautiful. No, not beautiful...what was the word he was looking for...?

--Hello, came a lilting voice. He looked up to see a waitress hovering over him with tattoo sleeves and a septum piercing and she looked suspiciously like the barhop who worked at the Narrative, but he decided not to jump to conclusions. --What can I start you with? she asked.

--That's okay, I don't need a starter, I'll jump right into it. May I have a cappuccino now and then an order of applewood-smoked bacon and scrambled eggs with cheese and peppers and onions and a toasted bagel and then later a cup of coffee and keep it full.

The young waitress scribbled vehemently and then nodded a smile to him as she left. Kogard looked back out the window. The milieu outside, for some reason, did not lend him a plethora of deep impressions. He had observed fog so much that by now he just wanted to revel in it. Its gritty dullness, like the static of an analog television, was so beautifully composed, as if by the stroke of a painter. It was literature to the atmosphere; it was art upon the city.

After a while, he began to notice the music. It was low but present enough to irritate him. It had taken on a warping effect, modulated over hi-hats and a hollow, cavernous bass. The melody was not melody exactly, but a steady rhythm of some deep liquid sound which lent the effect of a black hole sucking in wide acoustic waves. He wasn't quite sure what to make of it. He looked away, noticed his waitress behind the espresso machine, and called her over.

She scattered over to him flashing her teeth and said, Yes, what can I get for you now?

Kogard paused for a moment, not exactly sure how to word his question, and then sputtered out, What the fuck are you playing on these speakers?

--Aww, man, said the girl, newly intrigued, This is the new Fatal Flying Guillotine EP.

--The what EP?

--Yeah FFG, he's kinda like second-wave warp-dub but not really. Ever hear of **CODA?**

--...Who...?

--Yeah, he's like that. But technically he's with the whole phasemelting genre. But then again, genres don't even mean anything these days. It's all progressive.

--...Right...

--So, anything else I can get 'ya?

--No...

--Cool, food'll be right up, K?

She walked away.

--K?... Kogard wallowed in thinking just how low the English language had devolved. All right...Alright...Okay...aite....OK...K...

Then his food came and he was overcome with a sudden distaste for deep thinking.

VI.

Kogard wiped his mouth and reclined in his chair: another meal successfully consumed, devoid of scrutiny or impression, physically filling and emotionally satisfying as a meal should be. He sipped at his coffee. The waitress returned and silently filled his cup. He sipped. The fog loomed, brooding. He bent over and tried to make out the tops of buildings in the fog but all he could discern was absence; the buildings sprung from the ground and were consumed fifty feet up; they may have stretched up to the heavens if he could let himself imagine that. The sun was somewhere up there, obscured by the fog, disdained by it. Without a clock, he could not be completely sure whether it was day or night; it was more like a purgatory, the gray between the light of day and the dark of night. This was where he felt most comfortable. He reclined back in his chair. Time is irrelevant in this fog. Perhaps time stops in fog. He decided to believe that.

The atmosphere of the cafe changed in the time it took for the warping electronic song to come to an end and the next song to begin. Phasemelting, the waitress had said. Like face-melting guitars, except the instruments are phasers and other electronic beeps and boops. The song ended on a grand oscillating *woop*, like the screwed-down sound of a large rock being tossed into a pond, the warp of the initial ripple, the last few vibrations being sucked into the black hole. And on that note, the song was completely consumed by itself, and silence. Absence. Deathly calm.

What then commenced from the speakers was not electronic music, to Kogard's pleasure, but the light twangling of guitar and the sound of deep breathing. A drum beat kicked in. A Spanish woman's voice offered:

Escuchela...la ciudad respirando...

Twangling strings ...

Escuchela...la ciudad respirando...

Escuchela...la ciudad respirando...

Escuchela.....

A voice bellowed in, reverberating the speakers; it was the sound of Kogard's friend, the poet Yasiin Bey from east of the river. His words echoed over the beat like fog descended upon rooftops...

The new moon rode high in the crown of the metropolis  
Shinin, like who on top of this?  
People was tusslin, arguin and bustlin  
Gangstas of Gotham hardcore hustlin  
I'm wrestlin with words and ideas  
My ears is picked, seekin what will transmit  
the scribes can apply to transcript, yo  
This ain't no time where the usual is suitable  
Tonight alive, let's describe the inscrutable  
The indisputable, we Empire, the narcotic  
Strength in metal and fiber optics  
where mercenaries is paid to trade hot stock tips  
for profits, thirsty criminals take pockets  
Hard knuckles on the second hands of workin class watches

Skyscrapers is colossus, the cost of living  
is preposterous, stay alive, you play or die, no options  
No Batman and Robin, can't tell between  
the cops and the robbers, they both partners, they all heartless  
With no conscience, back streets stay darkened  
Where unbeliever hearts stay hardened  
My eagle talons STAY sharpened, like city lights stay throbbin  
You either make a way or stay sobbin, the Shiny Apple  
is bruised but sweet and if you choose to eat  
You could lose your teeth, many crews retreat  
Nightly news repeat, who got shot down and locked down  
Spotlight to savages, NASDAQ averages  
My narrative, rose to explain this existence  
Amidst the harbor lights which remain in the distance

So much on my mind that I can't recline  
Blastin holes in the night til she bled sunshine  
Breathe in, inhale vapors from bright stars that shine  
Breathe out, weed smoke retrace the skyline  
Heard the bass ride out like an ancient mating call  
I can't take it, y'all, I can feel the city breathin'  
Chest heavin', against the flesh of the evening  
Sigh before we die like the last train leaving

A sigh before a die like the last train leaving...

The Negro poet's voice had a sweet gruff to it. Negro, Kogard stressed to himself, was not the vernacular of a twenty-first century progressive. It was however, more appropriate than “Black,” or “African-American.” “Afro-American” works; but “Negro” retains the implicit national ambiguity of the population. They're not necessarily *from* Africa, nor beholding of any identity connected to the continent, but possessing of the foreign characteristic of being distanced from the “standard” white hegemony as an outsider. “Black” simply invokes the dichotomy—Black v. White—but “Negro” maintains the connection to the “others” across the world. He had had this conversation with Yasiin many times back when he often ventured east of the river to interact with the Urban Thurmo Dynamic poets. “Negro...” It had a more beautiful, cross-national ring to it; all the others, connected...

All us artists are niggers.

Much of *The Tunnel* bordered on the nonsensical yet retained an air of beauty. Why? Why do inexplicable things often put us in raptures? Was it not the sense of a whole that he needed? (Is a piece of art with a beginning and an end inherently a whole? Fragmented? Consider fragmented glass, how it sparkles, how it reflects light in rainbows.) Perhaps what he needed from it was whatever sense he extracted from it. Beautiful lines flowed together without providing any comprehensive closure, no self-justification, no end to its existence, like an infinite river... He didn't need the closure. So long as the words flowed, he was happy. He wanted words and words alone, words beautifully arranged like Heaney's *Digging*. Words that dig the soul. Words that tower.

Novel writing is city planning; where do the grand skyscrapers go? Where the parks? Low characters and ones with spears that dag! Nonsensical passages are beautifully inaccessible when expressed richly. When it makes no sense, it is most fertile for individual cultivation. See the towers scrape the sky when the air is clear and the sun is out. Imagine that they surmount it when you cannot see their tops through the fog.

Kogard stepped outside for a cigarette. Perhaps he, like the rooftops, disappeared in this fog. He lit it and inhaled and released a peerless cumulus which rose up like a bellowing cloud, dissipated, and became fog. He placed the butt between his lips and removed a pen from his pocket, drew out his notebook, drew ink:

smoke bellowing beyond the Hollywood hills.

He then also wrote:

consider the phrase “in raptures.”

i.e. She was in raptures with the way he walked.

He lingered on it, then put the notebook back into his pocket. He dragged on. Fog seeped into his mind, obscuring his thoughts. He was wholly consumed by the air's condensation. It hung heavy over him and intensified the feeling of deep loneliness. One felt like a water droplet in the midst of clouds. Is this heaven? Negro words seeped in from the cafe's speakers:

It's a paradox we call it reality

So keeping it real will make you a casualty of abnormal normality...

He finished his cigarette and stomped it out, went back inside.

(One feels like a water droplet /

in the midst of clouds

Is this heaven?

/ in a glass full of water

sitting on a table.

Is the glass half-full or half-empty?

Are we living or slowly dying?

Is there a difference?

These are the questions...)

As he stood in the entryway idly glancing around the room a voice called out to him. He panicked momentarily, worried that he might have encountered a pestering fan; but there was no cause for alarm. He saw his two friends, Manny Kant and JP Toomer, sharing a drink at the bar.

Manny was merely an acquaintance; he often remained cooped up in his office at the Empire University. JP, however, was an old friend, a poet whom Kogard quite admired. He was a man of muted beauty, about the same age as Kogard; his face was light, his hair black and slick; and yet it was rumored that he came from Louisiana colored folk. JP never liked to talk about his origins, perhaps for that very reason. But what difference does a man's race make? A lot, Kogard answered himself, especially when it comes to intent. JP used the word “nigger” quite a bit in his work. People never really knew what to make of it. A nigger damning niggers? Or a white man damning niggers? Are they equally as bad? Kogard himself was not sure what the man's creed was. Perhaps he had eluded it and dropped out of Negro life, or at least stepped back to

observe it from afar. Kogard suspended these considerations for the moment as he approached his friends.

--JP! he greeted, shaking the smitten man's hand. --Manny, how are you? Kogard slapped the gray-suited grump gingerly upon his back.

--Eh, Manny responded.

--Excellent, said JP, I didn't expect to see you here. Finally decided to get some sun, you old vampire?

Kogard chuckled. --I'm definitely not getting much sun today. How about this weather, huh? This fog is quite beautiful!

--No it's not! said Manny indignantly, It's sublime!

--Ok, Manny, whatever.

--Noooo, don't 'whatever' me. Its mysterious, awe-inspiring. It's sublime.

--Ok, why the distinction? Sublime, beautiful. Whatever.

--Don't start with him, said JP.

--I'm just saying, said Manny, If you're going to describe it, describe it right! Sublime is within the realm of the unthinkable, the inconceivable. It inspires awe! It inspires fear! Mesmerization! Beauty is disinterested, believable, like a field of daisies. Yeah, they're beautiful, whatever, they're daisies. Quotidian. Base. But this fog. It's mysterious.

--What are you saying? said Kogard. --You can't conceive of fog? Look out-fucking-side. Its right in front of you.

--It's about the emotion, said Manny. --It inspires mystery. You don't know what's beyond it.

--Sure, but it's not like fog is inconceivable. It's happening right now. It's just water molecules suspended in air. Sure it's mysterious and beautiful. But it remains within the realm of possibility.

--First of all, once again, it's sublime. And second of all, yes, it is within the realm of possibility, but I cannot conceive of being in the midst of a cloud. You ever thought that could happen?

--Fuck you mean? It's happening right now.

--The emotions. I'm talking about the emotions.

--So sublime is something that you encounter but cannot conceive of?

--Yes, it's outside of the realm of categorical emotions like happy and pleasure and sad. Its otherworldly. Like I said, it inspires awe.

--But if you encounter it, can't you then conceive of it.

Manny looked into his vodka tonic, musing.

--Hah! I've beaten you at your little stupid fucking game. Give up.

--No! No, you haven't, you're just stupid!

JP took Kogard arm. --Forget it, you'll never win. Have a drink.

--No, thanks, I'll just have a glass of water. Still on the wagon.

--Oh yeah? How's the trip.

--I try to just look at the ground and forget that I'm on it.

JP laughed and waved the bartender over to order Kogard some water. --Sit, sit, he said. He opened up a seat between him and Manny. Kogard sat and Manny continued looking into his drink, thinking of something with which to retaliate. The bartender slid a

glass of water down the bar which slowed to a complete stop in front of the sober one, who sipped it. The condensation was cool against his palm. He liked a nice cold glass of water. --So, said JP, What have you been up to?

--Nothing much, said Kogard. Kind of in an interim. Intending on writing this piece, but I haven't committed to it yet. I wanna write, but something inside of me is saying that it's not the right time.

--Indeed, it's not the write time! I know that feeling, said JP. --Hey, I'm working on some stuff. I don't know, it doesn't have a shape yet. Some poems and short prose pieces generally about aristocratic blacks who came to Federal City and up here even before Reconstruction. Can you imagine: pre-1861 blacks interacting with white folk in collars and silk pants. Fucking unbelievable.

--If it's that unbelievable then I suppose it's sublime, said Kogard.

--Shut up, said Manny.

--Hey, Manny, Kogard said turning to him, I've been thinking a lot recently about our place in the universe. How big is it really, you know? How big are we? Might we be one in the same. Thinking about the universe, for instance, within a single drop of water within this glass that I hold. Is it possible? Imagine all the multitude of atoms that make up the universe. Think about what makes them up—other universes perhaps? A universe could possibly exist within the molecules of hydrogen and oxygen, a universe that contains human being like us.

--I can't conceive of a universe within a glass of water, said Manny.

--Well just look at this glass. Can't you believe that a drop of water can contain a universe like the one we live in?

--Can't conceive of it. What I know from empirical evidence is that water is made up of molecules composed of hydrogen and oxygen, which are very small and which are the basic components of all life. If they are the building blocks of life, then life cannot possibly exist within them. They are the origin. How can something that makes up the universe also contain it?

--Well, thinking of the universe within a drop of water and how it compounds itself—I mean, one proton and one neutron and one electron connected to eight protons and eight neutrons and eight electrons creates a molecule that makes up a body that can be as big as the ocean; see how they multiply so fast. And how do you know how many water molecules are in a glass of water? Count them? Damn near impossible. They might as well just be considered a singular entity of “water”—Well, considering this way of compounding itself so that it's always a single entity, I ask: does expansion require more space in which to expand? Perhaps it expands inward. A single point expanding inside of itself. This glass of water: all of it is water; if I spill some on the table, that is also water; if I isolate a molecule of it, that is also water. The atoms which make up that molecule are not water per say, but might they be considered water if we could break down the atoms even farther? We would have to call each component of water “water” each time we break the basic unit of water down another notch. So it could all be water, indefinitely, until we have broken it down into the most basic element. Now think of the infinite universe. We can break that down into galaxies, suns, planets, animals, humans, organs, molecules, and the atoms. And perhaps beyond that. It goes from infinite to finite: a single atom. But is that really finite? How can we be sure. That's why I think a



multitude of universes can exist within an atom. It is possible to break it down further. It expands within itself.

--Well, that's not empirically proven, so no. Impossible. Can't conceive of it.

--But I just told you about it. Can't you conceive of what I've just told you?

--Can't conceive of it.

--Well, if first you can shed the rigorous structure through which you view the world—

--Nope. Can't conceive of it.

--Come on...

--Nope.

--You can.

--Can't.

--Can.

--Can't.

--Can!

--Can't!

--Manny!

--No!

--You can!

--Can't

--Kant!

--Can't!

--Then what is sublime, if sublime is composed of those things which you cannot conceive? Is the category of the sublime empty? Is nothing sublime since you wouldn't be able to categorize things of which you wouldn't be able to conceive?

--I can conceive of greatness, you see. The idea of it. Great height is just as sublime as great depth. I can conceive of it even though it is indeterminate.

--So you can conceive of great height, like a skyscraper. So it's not sublime, it is beautiful.

--Well, no, it's ... odd. It's weird, a skyscraper. It seems otherworldly when you stand at the bottom of it.

--But you *can* get to the top of a skyscraper. It's accessible. So it can be categorized in terms of science and engineering and spacial relativity. So in this case the great height of a skyscraper is surmountable. It's not absurd; it's not sublime. It's beautiful.

--It is sublime. It's very objective.

--It's realtive.

--No no no, stupid, stupid man.

--Whatever. Just remember: don't try to objectively categorize emotions. They overlap. I love to watch violence in Tarantino, but not in the streets of my city, see. Reverence and hatred overlap, so on and so fourth.

--Stupid peasant.

--Whatever, Kant, you cunt.

--Fuck you all. I have to go. Manny slammed a ten dollar bill on the table and stormed out of the cafe.

--I told you not to start with him, said JP.

--I like fucking with the old man, said Kogard. --I feel like arguing is one of the only things I enjoy anymore. I'll argue anything. I'll argue the most ridiculous thing. I'll argue things I don't believe in. I just like the words.

--Indeed, indeed.

They sat drinking their respective drinks for a while, meditating in each others' silence. The bartender wiped the bar in circles. Glasses *tinked* from afar. The phasemelting music had begun again. The fog loomed on outside. One felt as if one were in the wake of a benign storm, the earth gently whispering storm clouds to and fro, close to the earth. In raptures.

--I saw, Kogard began to speak in a hushed tone, A black woman beating her small children on the subway. And what's worse: she milked them with orange soda.

--Niggers, JP muttered.

Kogard looked at him slant-eyed. He sat up in his barstool and took a deep breath, ready for the tempest he was about to rouse. --Okay, JP. I just want to understand something. Let's *say*, hypothetically, you were a nigger. I'm sorry, negro. Let's say that. Is it right for you to go around calling them niggers?

--Who? Niggers? They are niggers. *I* am a negro. Black American.

--So you are black!?

--Sure. I come from slaves way back when. We liberated ourselves during Reconstruction. My maternal great-grandfather was the first black governor of Louisiana before he moved the family to Federal City. But he was as light as I.

--So you're black, according to the United States census.

He hesitated before answering. --Yes. But that don't mean I'm a nigga.

--Nigg-ah?

--Change a suffix, still means the same thing.

--And you don't feel uncomfortable talking about your own people that way? I mean "nigger" with its ancient connotations or "nigga" with its modern looseness?...

--Same thing. All niggers are Black Americans, but ain't no child-beating wench kin to me. Our people are still trying to cope with four hundred years of being called property, like a hoe or a lawnmower. But hey, I've moved on. Some of us have to break the cycle. Niggas still stugglin'. I'm away. Survival of the fittest as they say.

--You consider these..."niggas"...a different breed.

--Woah! Don't say "breed" like they're dogs. But they might as well be. These poor black folk with no inclination to rise to the system or beat the system. They wanna stay in their neighborhood and retain their robbin' stealin' ways. Let 'em live in packs. But they have to learn sooner or later that the system in this country is white. And if they wanna stay "authentically black," whatever that means, so be it. They'll die off.

--What?!

--Die off. JP looked Kogard straight in the eyes. --I get tired of the question, "Boy, you tryin' to be white?" "Why you talk white, boy?" Used to get that shit all the time. And I wanted to answer, Well, my nigga, why you speak like a jiggaboo. I mean, *this* is the talk of the system. This is how you act to progress in this country. It's not about "acting white." It's about working the system. Niggas don't realize that. To say nigga, I mean a person ignorant of the system, and who makes no attempt to comprehend

or conquer it. Rappers included. You can have two chains, two gats, two Rolls, I don't give a fuck. Someone still owns you. You're at the lowest totem of the pole. Niggas will never realize that the system—the prison industry, the police force, the politics, the gentrification, &c—is designed to suppress and eventually eradicate them. Ronald Reagan created crack to break a people intent on destroying the system and make them ignorant of it as a whole. The niggas'll die out eventually. Most of them will follow their nigga lifestyle of carryout chicken, rapping, and trappin, to their nigga end. And every few will rise above the niggadom and beat the system and become what we were destined to be: Black Americans. Either way, the niggas'll die out.

Kogard took a long sip of water, then inadvertently slammed the empty glass back onto the bar. --Well I'll be damned. I didn't know there were so many layers to it all.

--Most white folk don't. Think we all niggas. Or whatever. But it's something we as a people have to come to grips with.

It was quiet again. The only sound was the rustling of newspapers. The bartender came over and refilled Kogard's glass with water and JP's glass with scotch. JP sucked his drink down and then put a fifty on the bar.

--I'm out, he said getting up. --Got a date with the missus. Hey, what are you doing later this evening?

Kogard squinted his eyes as if he were mentally reviewing his empty schedule. --Nothing, he said.

--Well, El Wood is having a show in the city, he said.

--Oh, the kid? I know him.

--Yeah, good guy. Really interesting work. Me and Deborah are headed over there at around nine. Then probably drinks at the Brooklyn Basement.

--Shit, that sounds really nice.

--A lot of big wigs are gonna be there. Some people who are looking for you.

--Eh, fuck 'em. I'm just going because I haven't shown my face anywhere in a while. And I wanna see El. He and I used to do some work together. I'm sure some of my old friends will be there.

--Most definitely. Don't wear that black sweater, though. Everyone makes fun of you for it.

--I don't care.

--Well, wear something with a collar. It's at this gallery on West 15<sup>th</sup> Street. The one owned by Amanda von Grimmelshausen. What's that called?...

--Samsara.

--Yeah!

--I'll be there. Nine?

--Be fashionably late. You might as well appear as indifferent as people assume you are. JP patted Kogard on the shoulder and left. Kogard finished his glass of water and paid his bill. It was four o'clock. He decided to go home and take a nap before he went out. It was rare that he ventured out of his borough, especially for another artist. He was nearly excited. It struck him as an event to take seriously. He'd drive the Mulsanne.

## VII.

Kogard chainsmoked as he returned to his apartment. When he arrived at his steps he opened his pack again, looked into it—three jacks left—and asked himself, How? Where did they all go?

Certain spirits inspired him to smoke more, some less. They came and went without invitation or notice. He often wondered what possessed them. What part of him invited them? What mechanisms working inside of him made him a smoker? Well, he thought walking into his building, most everyone around him was a smoker. His father, his favorite uncle, his grandfather, his mother in her younger years, his lesbian ex-wife goddamn her, elementary school teachers, passers-by, serial killers, they all inspired him. All of the people he looked up to: Bukowski, Hunter Thompson, Gaddis, Fitzgerald, Malcolm X, Baldwin, Ellison, Warhol, Haring, Basquiat, Dali, Brando, Jack Nicholson, Hendrix, Lennon, Robert Johnson, the devil himself, God knows who else. Something artful in and of smoking itself. Or maybe not. Perhaps he was an impressionable person. He had destructive idols. Or was he predisposed? Is anyone predisposed to do anything? Plenty of artists he knew didn't smoke. But most of them weren't very good artists. Who knows what possesses the spirit. What possesses it to do anything—create, smoke, what have you. Those who are not possessed perhaps have no inclinations. And that is perhaps why they go into the workforce and disappear from the world as individuals. Ho Hum. When Kogard got to his room he removed all of his clothes and laid down in bed.

Kogard awoke at 8:45 in the afternoon, at least according to the blaring digital clock, his overseer. He had considered getting rid of it time after time. I'll wake up when I please, thank you very much! I'll leave when I please! Oh I have a meeting?--Whoever I am meeting must have the patience to wait, otherwise, they are not worth my time!

But this was his pitiful self-justification.

White man think world revolve around him. White man no understand that world go on when he sleeps. World go on when he die. Time no at mercy to whims of white man.

Tell that to the Roman empire. Shove two months into the calendar just because you want to? Because your leaders are *so great*? The audacity!

White man think world revolve around him.

The world does revolve around the individual. We interpret time individually. I don't have a job to be at. I'll wake up when I damn well please.

...

Oh sure, stop talking! Come and go when you want. Sprinkle your little two cents in where you want. Fucking Injun.

Kogard swung his legs over the edge of his bed and looked about his room. His desk lamp faced the wall so that he could have some darkness to sleep in, but it offered enough suppressed illumination to outline his room.

Where was I going again?...Oh right. The art show.

He looked at his black sweater haplessly gracing the floor. Was JP *really* serious about a dress code? He never said *don't* wear that black sweater ... oh, right, he did.

Kogard got up and drug his feet to his closet door, opened it, behold! the entirety of his wardrobe: three more black sweaters, another pair of black Dickies, a pair of green pants which were lined with flannel. That won't do. Several plaid flannel shirts. Hmm... A single pair of jeans. A black tee shirt. A white tee shirt. A gray tee shirt. A white button-down shirt. A black Fugazi tee shirt from his youth. One suit which cost five grand and which he had only worn once. Waste of money to spend on fucking clothes. To look *fashionable*. How do those aristocrats live with themselves? He stole a red flannel shirt from the hanger which swung back and forth in the aftermath as if having become violently anemic from the sudden chill. He dawned it hastily and then looked for a pair of pants. This event what somewhat formal, no? The debut of a young man's art show. Many highfaluting art types and rich buyers and God knows who else. Probably a lot of ties and black pants. He didn't like the mandate of looking fancy. Fancy is subjective. Kogard put on his black Dickies, went to the bathroom mirror, and considered his appearance to be appropriate. But the voice in his head said, *dress-up*. You're not going to a Pearl Jam concert.

He studied his appearance further. A flannel shirt was a button-up. Fancy, right? Isn't that enough?

*No.*

What do these people want from me? They know how I live. They know what I do. Do they expect this fiction writer to go out of his way to impress them? Who do they think they are?

He decided that a flannel shirt was even worse than a black sweater. It implied that he actually tried to *dress-up* and this was what he came up with. Laughable! He went back to his room, pulled the desk lamp away from the wall so that he could see better, and removed his flannel shirt. He tossed it onto the floor and picked up his black sweater.

No, no, no. Don't relapse into your old ways.

He threw the sweater back onto the floor and went to his closet, fetched a black sweater that was cleaner, freer of stains and cigarette ash. Good. Clean black. It's a good look. Plus, this sweater is made by Christian Dior. He's fancy, right? He put it on and then went back to the bathroom mirror. Clean black sweater, clean black pants. Nice. But what about shoes? He looked down at his monstrous feet. He manicured them himself with scissors.

Chuck Taylor tennis shoes are decidedly not fancy. That would definitely be pushing the envelope. He had some Salvatore shoes but he hated wearing them. It made him feel similar to the way he felt with his hair combed, like Bud Fox or some cocky fuck. In the end, he decided to wear his L.L. Bean Main Hunting Shoes with the rubber toes. They weren't "fancy" but at least they weren't tennis shoes. And maybe they could pass as dressy if you squinted really hard. Yes, black sweater, black pants, hunting shoes. Time for a night on the town. He was going to drive so he needed a pick-me-up. He smoked the three cigarettes left in the pack while reading *The Corrections* and laughing to himself, put two full packs of cigarettes into his pockets, and, passing the kitchen on his way out the front door, he ate a handful of coffee beans.

Traffic.

Already, ten cigarettes smoked in the fifty-five minute drive from BoHo into midtown. Why the fuck does everybody and their mother have to visit this city like it's the thing to do? like this city is so great? Go create traffic in your own city! I have things to do!

He sucked and puffed the pacifying filter as traffic picked up again; sped down four blocks and *skreeched* onto Fifteenth Street. He passed the gallery, a squat square building nudged between tall red-brick storefronts. All white: white on the inside, white on the outside, with little black letters above the door which read

**s a m s a r a .**

A man in a black suit stood outside the door with a clipboard. People came from up and down the block, the humble ones on foot, others having been dropped off by an Uber or taxi (because who's stupid enough to drive their own car in this fucking city), stopped at the man, and were either let in or denied entrance. Black suits. Backless dresses. Fuck. I should have worn the flannel.

He drove a little further down the block and pulled into a day-by-day parking lot just off Fifth Avenue littered with Maybachs, Porches, and Italian racecars, guarded 24/7 by a booth-keeper and a security guard or several. He received a ticket from the tollman and found a vacancy near the back of the lot. When he stepped out of his car he suddenly had the feeling he was in a prison. High concrete walls surrounded the fleet of vehicles causing him to feel nauseous and constipated, but he knew that both feelings would subside once he got out of there. He plucked his butt and lit another jack walking toward the exit. He could hear the anxiety of the city outside these walls, cars honking, ever-honking, people ever in a hurry, ever in a frenzy to be somewhere. *Let's get reservations. Do we have reservations somewhere? Let's go sit in traffic for three hours, huh. Let's go sit in traffic and waste our premium-brand gas while wearing Louis Vuitton pumps and scrolling through our iPhones. What a way to spend a night! WOOOOOO!* The city that never sleeps? The city that's been coked-out since the Eighties.

About fifty feet from his parking spot, Kogard spotted a fiery-red Lamborghini Gallardo with a license plate which read

3AT PSSY

He stopped in his tracks, stared at the thing, and as he stared his nausea intensified. He clutched his stomach, looked around the lot for the security guard or a surveillance camera. He did not spot either, so he slowly backed away and scanned the ground near the lot until he came upon a fine-sized rock. He stuck his jack between his lips, picked up his new projectile, and hurled it at the car's back window. It did not break on one swift *smash*, rather, it seemed to fall apart in intervals. He ducked behind some cars and ran in a roundabout way toward the tollbooth, approached the attendant and said, Did you hear that loud smash?

The attendant said, Yes, I hope it wasn't one of our cars. I wonder where the security guard is.

--I don't know if I feel safe leaving my care here with the sound of breaking glass going on. I have a Bentley.

The attendant looked Kogard up and down. --Riiiiight, sir. Well, I'll look into it as soon as possible.

--Very good.

Kogard walked down the street toward Samsara smiling to himself.

## VIII.

Kogard approached the black-suited doorman in front of Samsara and asked, May I go in? The doorman looked at him as if he were inspecting an unknown blemish on his shoe.

--This is a private event, he said, turning his attention away from the human stain.

Two large windows occupied the wall on both sides of the door and, inside, Kogard could see a dapper crowd of people holding glasses sloshing with cocktails, laughing and contorting in the osmosis of gaiety, an aura of frivolity and indifference in the air; he saw people he had known or worked with or hated during his tenure in Empire City, people who would flock to him, people who would gossip, people, people.

--I was invited here, said Kogard. My friends are in there.

--That's what they all say. The doorman returned his attention to the stain.

--What are you wearing, a sweater? That's no outfit for an event like this. Keep it moving, bummy.

*Bummy?* Kogard sighed and ran his fingers through his hair and adjusted his glasses. --Sir, I'm not one to drop names like these fashion heiresses or whoever you may be accustomed to denying, but I'm a well-known person. A writer. I'm a personal friend of Ms. von Grimmelshausen and many of the other attendees. I wear this outfit all the time. They know me by it. I must gain entrance here or I'll have to have you fired.

The doorman turned his entire body toward Kogard. --Look, buddy, I'm a bouncer. I bounce fucks like you. I'll bounce you right now if you keep this up. Clear the doorway.

--Bounce me all you want, you big fuck. Bounce me up and down like a ball. I'll have your scrotum in a bell jar by the night's end.

Just then, and quite luckily, Amanda von Grimmelshausen came out of the building and screamed, KAYYYYYYY, and gave Kogard a big squishy hug, a bear hug bigger than he thought her lean figure could manage.

--K, everyone's been asking about you. JP said you were coming. We're so excited. And it's been so long. We do wish you would come live in the city instead of on Bosch-Horace like some fucking hipster. We miss you, so! She turned to the doorman and said, Sam, this is a friend, but thank you for doing your job, and she pulled Kogard into the building. Kogard smirked at "Sam" as he entered. The big fuck looked like he had eaten a bad oyster.

Amanda pulled Kogard by the hand through the crowd toward Fredo Martinelli and Chelsea Guermantes who were standing in the back corner.

--Glad you could make it, said Fredo, I think you know Ms. Guermantes.

--How are ya, Freddy, thanks, I believe we've made the acquaintance before, Kogard said kissing Chelsea's hand.

--Ohh, Chelsea giggled. --It's a pleasure to meet you again, Kogard, I admire your work. The earlier stuff that MacMillan had published. *Monolith* was much too dense for me. I didn't follow it at all. But your little sketches on young girls losing their innocence, I quite liked those.

--I wonder why, said Fredo.

--Oh, shut up, Chelsea said shoving his shoulder playfully, then wiping some liquid from his chin as their gaze hovered over one another. Her smile was radiant. In a moment which struck all four attendants as forever, she dropped her eyes.

Fredo winked at Kogard and said, We're going to go around again. I think Carl Gnarborough has arrived. He owes me an outstanding debt. Fredo took Chelsea's hand and they waded through the crowd. Amanda turned, facing Kogard.

--Ahhh, so how have you been? she said, raising her voice above the sea of tinkering glasses and slurring voices.

--Ahh, you know. Bummy.

She laughed far more than the jest requested.

--I'm trying a new novel, he said. --Coming along slowly, but you can't rush these kinds of things.

--Oh I know, I know. I've been trying to get El to do a show here for months. I say, 'I'll push everyone back, I just want to get your work in my gallery before I can no longer afford it.' But you artists are all the same. 'It's not ready,' he says. 'These things take time,' he says. Well, its finally here. How about that.

--I know, I know. It's crazy. I remember him going out late at night and tagging and getting detained time after time all those years ago and look at him now: in the gallery of the most beautiful art-collector in Empire.

--Oh, stop it, you charm. Have you seen him yet? Have you seen the work?

--Not yet.

--Ohh, it's prolific! It's groundbreaking! I'm lucky to have gotten it first, it's going to start a whole new wave. Wouldn't it be wonderful if I were at the epicenter of a new modern art wave like Stein or Gutenberg?

--Hey, don't degrade yourself by comparison. You're bigger than both of them already!

--Oh stop it, you charm, you charm. You make me think you want to rekindle old flames. Oh, but I have a fiance now, right? She winked at him.

--You're wild. Kogard smiled dropping his eyes.

--Hey, find me later. For now, I've got to go be the host.

--Do it, he said, and she walked away, sliding her body against his side as she passed.

He looked around the room and saw the bar over yonder. A twenty-something tattooed girl with thick black glasses was pouring. Kogard inched toward it through the crowd; all along the way people stopped him and cordials were exchanged and the same questions always popped up: "When are you going to write something new?" He always answered them politely, made some joke, and moved on.

When he finally approached to the bar he ordered a glass of water. The bartender smiled, glancing periodically at him as she poured, then said, You're Walter Kogard, right?

--Yes, he said. --And you are a stalker. Ah, he laughed, I'm just kidding.

She returned the gesture and blushed as she handed him his glass. --I admire your work.

--Why, thank you, he said.



--I hear you're working on a new book.  
--People in this city hear a lot.  
--I'd love to read it.  
--When it's released. If ever.  
--Do you know when that might be?  
--Fourteen lifetimes, he said laughing to himself.  
--I'd love to read a draft.  
--Woah woah woah, said Kogard, half joking, half serious, If I'm not fucking you, in love with you, or being represented by you, you read nothing that comes from me.  
--We can arrange at least one of those, she said.  
Kogard took a sip; the water almost dribbled through the edges of his smile.  
--I'll be back, he said, and walked away.

The crowd in the room was so dense that he could not see the work without being right upon it. He wanted, at the very least, to accomplish what he came to the gallery to do. Kogard looked around but he did not see any paintings hanging on the wall, nor sculptures, nor tapestries, nor anything three-dimensional. He saw pockets of people hovering around portions of the wall studying what looked like black text pasted thereon. He walked toward a group gathered along the left wall of the room and squeezed through the bodies. They were looking at a large set of black characters in Ariel Bold typeface which read

### **not**

--*Not?* said Kogard. --This is the work?  
Someone near him said, You have to look at the rest of the show to get it.  
*Well excuse me*, he thought to himself as he moved back through the crowd.  
He migrated to the rear wall of the room and squeezed through the congregation.  
The piece located there was a similarly composed image which read

### **black**

He stroked his chin and turned toward a nearby man who was staring at the word as if he expected it to strike out.

--It's so powerful, said the man without averting his gaze.  
--I suppose, said Kogard. --What is it anyway? Pasties? Does he paint these words directly onto the wall?  
--It's a projection, said the man. He pointed to the ceiling where hung three small video projectors.

I see: digital art that has not even transcended the boundary of reality. But is it art if it remains intangible? Can a projection be art? Can a word be art? He himself was an artist of words and he called himself an artist. But to use a word in this context, is it *visual art*? It is visual...

He migrated to the right side of the room where the projection displayed

### **art**

If one retained any doubts as to whether this was really "art," they had all surely been answered. But in all seriousness, is this art? A projection of a word? A projection of the word "art?" Is it art because it is "art?" Is "art" simply self-defining? Is art about intent? And if so, might this be the most explicable piece of art ever made. Art that is

“art.” But was it? Wasn't it also “not” “art,” and furthermore, “not” “black” “art?” It is clearly “art” written in black typeface, but it's simultaneously not “black” art, and “not black art.” He needed a second opinion.

--Is this really art? he asked the woman beside him.

--Sure, it says so right there.

--But isn't it also “not” art. I mean, think about the first piece.

--Well that is only one piece: “not.” And that one, I think, is very powerful because it clearly “is” while telling us it's “not.” It's there, but it's “not.” But this piece, “art,” is a completely different piece. It is art. It's very straight forward. Which juxtaposes the first piece, “not.” “not” “art.” But how can something that is also “not” be? And how can something that is art also “not” be “art?” And then the “black” adds a whole other layer. It brings in the artist. Is the artist “black” or is the art “black?” The art is “black,” I mean, written in black, but it's telling us that it is not black. And the artist is “black,” but he seems to be telling us that he is either “not” “black” or that his “art” is “not” “black.” Either way, very powerful. The color is so striking.

--It's a projection. It's not really color. It's color data, transmitted through a machine.

--Which again raises the question, “Is it 'black,' really?” “Is it 'art,' really?” Does technology negate the art? Does technology negate the blackness? I think these are questions we have to face in the coming times. What is art? Is it truly physical? Can you hold it? Or is it an illusion? She waved her hand in front of the projection and obscured the word. No longer “art.” She interacted with and altered it.

--I guess the question I have is, is this art “art” because it says it's “art.” And if it is traditional art, can you buy it? Can you buy a projection? Or is the point that you cannot buy it? That you can't buy true “art?”

--Oh, you can buy it. El has already gotten five six-figure offers on all three the pieces.

--Well then.

--It raises a lot of questions.

--Damn straight.

--It's so straight-forward but it's so complicated. So many layers.

--So many layers to this projection. So many layers to this single layer.

--Exactly. Words we take for granted so often, and now we're made to confront them. So stark. So bold. Is “not?” Is “black?” Is “art?”

--I don't know.

Kogard walked away intending to return to the work, but first he wanted to find El Wood. It was not a large space and all of the people crowded into it made finding one of them difficult. But it would not be impossible. If he were looking for a white man, it might have been impossible, but El Wood was probably the only black person in the room.

He did realize now how a person could stare so intensely at the word “black.” Taken both as a singular piece and a component of a show, it offered a lot to think about. He wanted to get Wood's insight, as the black artist, or perhaps, “not” the “black” “art”ist. Was he “not?” Was he not “black?” Or was this not “art?” So many question. Only three words. Well done, Kogard thought; well done.

He saw him over yonder in the left corner by the front door with a cigarette hanging from his mouth. El Wood. All grown up. Back in Kogard's early years in the city, he and Wood would go out east of the river and uptown late at night to tag billboards, overpass signs, storefronts, anything they could get their hands on. Kogard wrote ERGO and Wood wrote SAMBO when he had a black can and MIDAS when he was using gold. Tonight he laughed under the radiance of the well-lit room surrounded by rich art-minded whitefolk who wanted to buy his work and make him famous, just like he had always dreamed of. He had the pleasant face of a lad and deep youthful eyes which seemed to protrude from his skull, trying to absorb all there was to behold. His skin was dark with light freckles spotting his cheeks; dreadlocks sprouted out of his head at random like dandelions. They appeared to move of their own volition like lanky black caterpillars, perking up, standing attention to all the bits of conversation which flowed throughout the room, or antennae like those of some alien species.

As Kogard approached him, Wood called out, Ah, Walter Kogard, a fellow writer!

Kogard got close enough to shake his hand and give him a hug, then said jovially, Fellow writer? In what way?

--In what way? You: a writer of fiction. Me: once a graffiti writer. We have both made our marks upon the world. Some in more literal ways than others.

--Oh, I see. Except that you vandals only write for infamy.

--And you don't? Don't tell me you write only for yourself. Admit it! You wanted to be famous, too. That's why you came to this city, right? Fame! You wanted to be famous in your own way, but infamy is still the objective. To get your ideas to the masses. What is tagging if not that? Only with raw words rather than "ideas," per say. Writing in and of itself is provocative. It provokes—in the mind of viewer! Yes! Hold on. I see someone beckoning me.

Wood politely excused himself from his circle and walked away. The group, now having no eccentric center to hold it together, stood in awkward silence. There were two men in tailored suits sporting gold wire-rimmed glasses upon their Yale-grade marble-cut faces, and Kogard.

--Soooooooooooo, said Kogard. --What do you fellows do?

One of them said, I used to be in venture capital. My wife has dragged me here.

There was a stint of awkward silence. Kogard sipped.

At length, someone tapped him on the shoulder. He turned around and it was Antarah Crawley, a kid who had moved to BoHo several months ago. Kogard had seen him in the local coffeehouse writing on an old Smith-Corona. They had talked a bit on the subject of writing, Crawley having professed his great love for *Monolith*, especially the recurring details of the building's exterior as related to the concept of "seclusion" and "private" in the novel. He remarked upon the connection between the protagonist's "private" ways and his involvement in the "private" sector. Kogard liked Crawley. He reminded him of himself.

--Hello, Mr. Kogard, said Antarah, I didn't expect to see you here tonight so far from your dwellings.

--Neither I you. How did you manage to gain entrance here?

--El is an old friend of mine from back home. The show's incredible, isn't it?

--I was skeptical at first, but after having dwelt on the pieces individually and as a whole I find it quite provocative and well-executed.

--That's El for you, taking simple things and making them very complicated. Anyway, I regret that I have to go now but I must. Work in the morning. It just so happens, however, that I have this story I've been working on and, seeing you here, I thought you might want to read it. I tried sending it and a few other short fictions to *Ashtray* but they rejected them. I know you're friends with MacMillan, the editor, and I'm not saying give me a break, but do with it what you will. Crawley pulled a folded piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it to Kogard. He shook his hand one last time and said, I'll see you back in the borough.

Good kid, good kid. Kogard turned back around to see the two dapper men staring at him as if they were expecting Kogard to continue with their conversation.

Someone somewhere said, Look at all of these shrimp! A glass spilled its contents onto the floor. Two women exchanged iPhones for contact info. Outside, Sam the doorman's job had become somewhat extraneous. He watched asses in red miniskirts as they stammered by arm-in-arm. Eventually one of them would empty their stomach contents on the curb and a wealthy old woman, the next morning, would pull her chihuahua away from the bile on their morning walk. Then one of the men asked Kogard, You know that boy?

-- ... Yeah, he sighed.

--Cool, said the other man.

Kogard took a long sip of his water. The men remained silent. --Weeeeeeeeeeeell, Kogard said, I'm going to take a cigarette now.

Back inside, the scene of the languid, laughing crowd of suits and gowns struck him as newly superficial, but in a novel way, something very frivolous and fleeting. The art was powerful, yes, but as in most situations the crowd's attention had by now had been drawn from the art—which was ostensibly the point—to the very notion of being there. People flung their heads back with drunken laughter, girls and ties became unloosed. The selective crowd was intoxicated with the very notion of being a selective crowd. Fredo Martinelli made out with Chelsea Guermantes in the back corner. The bartender was drunk. It was like a still frame from a Kubrick film or a Fitzgerald novel, everybody taking up their designated place, everything finely composed, everyone playing their part. He smiled at it. This was life in the city: pure theater. Pure fiction.

IX.

Pink Floyd's *Piper at the Gates of Dawn* was an amazing album, and for 1967 it hits pretty close to the modern electronic ambient music being produced these days. Baths, Grimes, and Animal Collective come to mind as offspring of that unnamable sound-bending genre. The only difference is that Floyd had the capacity to mimic the sounds of space and nature with actual instruments instead of a computer. It was quite possibly their best record. It had a healthy amount of both jazz and nonsense, and Syd Barrett's voice tops anything from *Dark Side* or *Wish You Were Here*. *The Wall* sucked.

Kogard found JP Toomer swaying drunkenly beside his wife Deborah over by “art.” The crowd had dispersed and groups were congregating to decide where the night would lead them next. JP waved Fredo and Chelsea over as Kogard approached him.

--So, what's the deal? asked Kogard. --You all about to take off?

--M'think, JP slurred. --Where's El? He said he might join us at the Brooklyn Basement.

Kogard smiled. His ideal bar was one in which the music was just loud enough to drown out all conversation except one's own, where the seating was plentiful, and where one could order an expensive gin cocktail, a Manhattan Project Little Tall Boy, or a clean refreshing glass of filtered water if desired. He liked a low-key kind of place, perhaps with a young unknown pianist who would go, later in his life, to play at Carnegie Hall. The Narrative was nice, but it was often too crowded, and with the worst kind of people. The bar that embodied Kogard's ideal atmosphere was the Brooklyn Basement, a speakeasy in East Empire. It was frequented by artists like himself, quiet-spoken types, people who might impulsively share with you their life story in a night then stab you in a dark alley, mobsters doing business with politicians, and old drunks who used to dance jazz with the flappers and philosophers.

--So how are we getting there? he asked. --I have my car.

--I have the Cadillac, Fredo said as he and Chelsea came over.

--I'll ride with Fredo, said JP. If El comes, he'll need a ride.

--He can ride with me, said Kogard.

--Cool, we'll head over then. El said he'd be a little while longer, so, Kogard, wait around.

--No problem, I've got a whole pack of jacks to wait on.

The group dispersed and Kogard told El that he'd be outside when he was ready. He stepped out then and inhaled six cigarettes.

*A movement is accomplished in six stages...  
and the seventh brings return...  
...action beings good fortune,  
sunset....*

El finally came out and they walked to the parking lot in silence. El was content in the afterglow of a successful show and Kogard silently shared the feeling of expressionless ecstasy. Half-way through the lot El pointed out that someone had smashed the rear window of a Lamborghini. Kogard replied, Bunch of savages in this town.

They located the Mulsanne and drove off, spending the first part of the ride in silence. Then El said, I've been thinking about a new show, called “Punctuate.” There will be several huge black canvases with large white punctuation marks on them. The first will be a

and it will be called “Period.” The second will be a

and it will be called “Comma.” The third,

called “Double Comma.” The fourth,

“ ”

called “Quote.” The fifth,

“ ”

called “Scared Quotes.” The sixth,

“scare”

called “Quote Scare Endquote.” The seventh,

“scare quotes”

called Irony.

Kogard chuckled.

They were silent again. El scrolled through his phone checking emails.

--Any good offers? asked Kogard.

--Quite a few. Amanda is handling them in the next few days. Looks like all the pieces are going to be sold.

--That's exciting ... Now, I've been wondering, do you just give them a USB drive with the file on it that says “art” or whatever, or do you give them the original file, or, I guess my question is, how do you sell a projection? It raises the question of whether this is “art.” I hope that doesn't offend you.

--No, no, that was the point. The fact that you questioned its “art”ness proves that the show was a success. No, what we do is we give the entire projector and the file to the buyer, the original projection from the show. The original medium is the authentic piece of art work. Is it “art?” you ask. Well, if the people perceive it as art, then call it that. If they buy it as art, then sell it that way. To be sure, at least to me, art is anything that exists for its own sake.

--So you created this show on the premise that you weren't making “art,” rather, a concept of art, a space vaguely resembling of art that people could then fill with their own opinions about art?

--You could say that. You could also say that I wanted to rip off a bunch of rich fucks by selling them something that I came up with in about twenty minutes. You could say that I wanted to jip the modern art community by taking their concept of conceptual and bringing it to its most absurd but logical conclusion. You could say I simply wanted to make the statement that I am not a black artist although I am black, that I am not necessarily interested in the black experience as most critics claim I should be. So yeah, you could say I wanted to create a space for people to project upon. On which they could project their opinions about me, my art, art in general, what is and is not, the nature of existence. Do I exist?

--You project, right?

--I think, indeed. Therefore I am. Remember when you used to write that?  
*Cogito ERGO Sum.*

--Good times, good times. It seems like that was so long ago... I suppose we've both made it at this point. Riding around in a Bentley. Riding the crest of a high wave of creativity, or of having created. But more importantly, of having had people see our creations and approve of them as art, whatever the intent was. We've gained approval, you and I. It's a good feeling. People like how weird we are.

--It's good when old friends make it together. It's always awkward when one is making waves in the world and one is stagnant.

--Still water breeds parasites.

--You can say that again.

El opened his window and lay his head on the sill and let his dreadlocks flail about in the wind as the car passed the city in a sea of lights and smoke. He was on his way up in this city. He was flying.

--So, Kogard began to say with hesitation, I'm sorry to dwell on this whole "black art" thing, but I was having this conversation with JP earlier. What is your relationship with your blackness? JP said some outrageous things, things I don't think most colored people say or think. But he's also in a different position. He is very light; his hair is straight. You: dark-skinned, dreadlock'd. A very black person from appearance, but, if I may notice, not in terms of presentation, if that makes any sense. It's like, you are black, but you don't *present* yourself as black.

--Present myself as black? How might I do that?

--Well, to use the stereotype...nevermind. I guess...at least I have a certain image that comes to mind when I think of black people. Either Bill Cosby or 50 Cent. Either uppity and educated or urban, ignorant, and ghetto, if I may be frank.

--...Yes, well, that's the dichotomy we're presented with on television and in the media. Either you're a white-folk-lovin'-Barack-Obama-Black or a fuck-America-Jeremiah-Wright-Black. OR, a fuck-bitches-get-money-Black. Three types, more or less. But you see, that categorization is not very fluid. What about the black hipsters? Notice how they haven't been widely embraced by the television studios. Notice how the black intellectuals—and I don't mean uppity Howard and Morehouse graduates, I mean the critical, laid-back Baldwins and Ellisons—haven't been embraced. What am I, if I'm not ghetto or uppity? Am I *trying* to be white, as most of my black brothers and sisters try to tell me? Am I *in love* with white people as my grandmother says. I abhor this country's legacy just as much as the next brother. But we've got to move on some time. Maybe we won't all move on at once, it'll take time, but some of us have to. I sure had to. I hated living in Purgatory. I didn't wanna be a hood rat. And when I decided to break out and wear these skinny pants and paint and everything else, they called me "white," like being authentically black meant being a fuckin' bum who would never go anywhere, someone who can't even speak in the socially accepted way. Yes, Ebonics, black dialect, whatever, is beautiful and it's a tradition, but we speak it among our own people like the Italians or the Germans. When trying to get ahead in this country, we speak the country's language.

--That's what JP said.

--I'm not trying to be white. I'm trying to make something of myself. So yeah, I resent my blackness. I resent it because this country makes me resent it. Like I should feel guilty because of it; like I should be ashamed that I embarrass white folk by *reminding* them; and I should be ashamed because I embarrass black folk by *ignoring* them. I distance myself from it, yes, but I acknowledge it. I'm not white, clearly. I am an artist who is black. But I'm not a black artist.

--You black people are some of the most harsh critics of other black people, you know that. Is it still racism if you discriminate against your own people?

--Yes.

--Hmm...I guess us *whitefolk* have it easy. Started out at the top. We're still at the top. I don't know how we live with ourselves. Kogard laughed to himself under his breath.

--I heard that. I'm not mad though. You folk definitely don't have it easy. We all have our afflictions. Those things which irk the spirit. Bring us down. The invisible trains that hit us at our weakest point. Alcohol. Family acceptance. Sexuality. You name it.

Kogard was silent. He kept his eyes firmly on the road, the subtle vibration of the car's steel body, exhaust creeping into his nose and dulling his reflexes.

--There, there, El said rubbing his hand on Kogard's knee. --You're all right, dude. At least we can talk about it, American-to-American. His hand stopped rubbing but it remained on Kogard's thigh.

Kogard: a single silent laugh and a side-smile.

The car sped down East 87<sup>th</sup> Street, and, passing an old wood-paneled storefront, they saw Fredo's white Cadillac parked along the curb.

--We're here, Kogard said.

X.

Kogard and El walked to the front of what appeared to be a vacant building. Wooden panels most likely concealing shattered windowpanes and a facade of decay were covered by graffiti tags.

--Hey, this is my friend Joe's tag, El said pointing to the word JOE scrawled in large black paint marker.

--He must not be very smart, said Kogard.

--Yeah, he's gotten nabbed a couple of times. I think he does it because he wants everyone to know it was him.

The tattered awning adorning the top of the building read Jay's Delicatessen.

Kogard went to the boarded front door and lightly rapped the piano melody to *Ambitions Az A Ridah* with his knuckles. Knuckles from the inside returned the melody and Kogard said, Let's go.

They walked around the block and went into the alley passing winos holding empty bottles and a quarter of the way down turned into a back lot where a matte black Rolls Royce and a red Panamera were parked. The chipped paint of "Jay's Deli" peeled off at the top of the brick exterior. Below it was a steel black door with the characters "Bb" painted above a sliding peep-hole. Kogard again rapped the melody on the door.

--Fredo knows he shouldn't park his Cadi in the front, Kogard said. --He's probably shitfaced by now.

The peep-hole slid open and a pair of scrutinizing hazel eyes appeared, studying them. The hole slid shut and the sound of many bolts could be heard being unlatched. The door fell open a crack; a rough, tobacco-stained voice beckoned them in with urgency and the two friends entered.

--Hello, Lawrence, said Kogard to the doorman as they descended a narrow unlit stairwell and came into a large open room lined with red plush booths, tables



dispersed throughout, a pool table sitting in a clearing, and a twenty-foot oval walnut bar resting in the center. The few bulbs of light in the place hung naked above the bar. A stereotypical bartender whom everyone called “Pal” stood polishing glasses in a white shirt, black tie, and apron. Most of the booths were full. Several men in white shirts half-way unbuttoned, sleeves rolled-up to the elbow, stood around the pool table holding their sticks. A drunk but composed young lady danced to the low-playing *All Blues* on a tabletop. Nobody looked up when Kogard and El entered. Here, everybody minded their own business.

Kogard scanned the booths and saw MacMillan, JP, and Deborah sitting in the far right corner. El immediately walked over to them. In the booth next to them Fredo dry-humped Chelsea Guermantes. Around the room Kogard noticed faces he recognized from the newspapers. He did not dwell on them, however. It was not polite to stare. The black-and-white checkered floor was immaculate, from being washed so many times.

In the left corner of the room near the stairwell from which he'd just come, two black men in slacks, polished wingtips, and blood-spackled white button-downs cornered a crying man laying on the ground clutching the side of his head. The two standing men exchanged threats toward the little one:

--Yeah, torture, motherfucker, what?

--Torture, nigga, what?

--I'll fuckin', I'll fuckin' tie you to a fuckin' bedpost wit'cha ass cheeks spread out and shit, right, put a hanger on a fuckin' stove and let that shit sit there for like a half hour, stick it in ya ass slow like: TSSSSSSSS!

--Yeah, I'll fuckin', I'll fuckin' lay ya nuts on a fuckin' dresser, just ya nuts on a fuckin' dresser, and bang them shits with a spiked bat: BLOW!

--I'll fuckin', I'll fuckin' pull ya tongue out ya fuckin' mouth and stab the shit with a rusty screwdriver: BLOW!

--I'll fuckin', I'll fuckin' hang you by yo' fuckin' dick off a fuckin' twelve story building out this motherfucker.

--I'll fuckin', I'll fuckin' sew ya asshole closed and keep feeding you, and feeding you, and feeding you...

Kogard walked to the bar and perched his elbows near Pal who was polishing glasses --What's going on over there? he asked.

--Oh, you know. Same ol' shit. Somebody didn't pay up.

--Damn, when will they fuckin' learn? Glass of water.

--Coming up. Pal walked away and Kogard looked around. At the adjacent side of the bar sat a woman who appeared to be aged fourteen and forty at the same time. Her face was thin, although marked by definitive angels around her jaw. Her dress was red and cut low so as to show how modest her breasts were. She wore black sunglasses, pouted shimmering red lipstick, and presented a well-executed illusion of soft clear skin. He couldn't tell if she was attractive. She presented a rough kind of beauty that might take years to excavate—yet the surface made it clear that such beauty was present. She noticed him noticing her and winked. Kogard turned his head the other way.

In the seat directly beside him sat a black man in full pinstripe who possessed a resemblance to someone Kogard had seen before. He tried not to stare. Pal returned and

lay a glass of water on top of a napkin in front of him. Kogard sipped it and let out a refreshing sigh. In his mind he kept trying to place his neighbor's face to a name. Just then one of the assaulting men from the corner came over and pulled an individually-wrapped cigar out of his ear. He unwrapped it and proceeded to crack it open lengthwise with his thumbs. The man beside Kogard turned around unexpectedly, as if he'd just remembered something, and said to him, Yo Meth, hold up, hold up, where my Killer tape at, God? You had it since last fuckin' week, where the fuck is my tape at?

--Yo son, I ain't got that piece, son. The man, evidently named Meth, opened the entire cigar and dumped the tobacco guts onto the floor.

--How you ain't got my shit when I let you hold it, man?

--Yo, niggas came over to have 40s and blunts, kid, the shit just came up missin'.

--Come on, man, that don't got nothin' to do with my shit, man, come on, man, go head with that shit, man.

--Come on, man, I'll buy you four more fuckin' Killer tapes, man.

Suddenly, an urgent banging resounded from the alley door upstairs. A voice yelled, A-yo! A-yo!

--Open the door, man, the seated man screamed. --Yo, what? What's up?

Lawrence unlatched the bolts and another black man in a pinstripe suit burst through the door and quickly descended the stairs. The man seated at the bar said, What's up, God?

This man who'd just entered was a size bigger, wore a black rag on his head and sported a goatee better than most people have a right to. He said, approaching the bar out of breath, Yo, yo, God, word is bond, yo, Shameek just got bust in his head two times, God.

--Word?

--Word life, God. You know Shameek from fuckin' 212, God? The nigga just got bucked. Nigga's in a black Land, God, word is bond. Came through, God, from outta nowhere, God. Word is bond, I'm coming to get my culture cypher, God. And they just...word is bond, crazy shots just went the fuck off, God. The nigga layin' there like a fuckin' newborn fuckin' baby, God.

--Word? Is he dead, asked Meth.

--Is he fuckin' dead? Fuck you mean is he fuckin' dead, God? What the fuck kinda question is that? Fuck you think? The nigga layin' there with his fuckin'...all types of fuckin' blood coming out his fuckin'...

--Fuck, God.

--Yo God, what's up, God? It's the God, God, word is bond. Yo, what's up? I'm ready to fuckin' lay. I'm ready to get busy, God, what's up?

The seated man said, Yo, go do what we gotta do. Got wit' him, Meth.

Meth, in the middle of sprinkling marijuana into his empty cigar blunt said, What? He turned his attention to the large man who had just come in. --We out or what, man?

--It's the God, God, fuck that, man, said the big fellow.

--You sayin' we out? asked Meth.

--Yeah, God, let's get the fuck, son!

--Aite, just lemme roll this. Yo, Rae, they probably took the tape, man, Meth said as he lifted the blunt to his lips and licked it shut.

--The fuck is you talking about? asked the big man.

--Nigga still sweatin' the tape, man.

--The fuck is you talkin' bout? Get the fuck outta here.

Meth then left with the big man who had just come in and the dapper man seated at the bar turned back around in his chair and sipped from his 40. The atmosphere in the entire bar returned to its somber chill.

Then it dawned on Kogard. Meth. Rae. God. He knew who these men were.

The Killah Bee Assassins were an underground criminal organization operated out of Empire City and North Jersey. They were infamous, due in part to their religious observation of the Tao of Wu; their day-to-day businesses included mixtape distribution, narcotics, political corruption, extortion, assassination, bootleg liquor—especially forty-ounce malts—and cyphers. Cyphers were battles which used elaborate quick-spoken poetry rather than physical assault to establish dominant individuals in the community. The more cyphers one won, the more of the area's business they were allowed a role in, and the higher they progressed in the organization. It was the dream of all low level Assassins to progress high enough in the organization to be able to join the top ranks.

These men who had just come in and left, including the man still sitting at the bar, were all top-ranking members of the Killah Bee Assassins. Their headquarter was located in the land of Shaolin, in the southern borough of Empire City. There was one head: The Abbot; one underboss: The Genius; and seven caporegimes: Dirt McGirt, The Golden Arms, The Rebel I.N.S., The Dutch Masta Killa, Methical the Iron Lung and Tony Starks the Wallabee Kingpin (the two men who just left), as well the man still sitting beside him was Shallah Raekwon the Chef. These nine members were collectively known as the 36 Chambers of Death and they were highly skilled in battles of the tongue as well as the arts of Shaolin Shadowboxing and the Wu-Tang sword style. Fredo knew all about them; they conducted much business with the Guermentes'; but Fredo was a bit preoccupied at the moment.

Kogard tried to get a better look at Raekwon without being obvious. He tried looking into the reflection of his glass of water. Raekwon, even in the aftermath of such a riotous scene, was calm and unfazed, staring only into the nose of his forty. After a while Kogard decided to talk to the man. Without being too intrusive, he leaned over and whispered, Shaolin Shadowboxing ... and the Wu-Tang sword style ... if what you've just said is true, the Shaolin and the Wu-Tang could be dangerous.

Raekwon turned his head, looked right into Kogard's eyes, and said in a low and sinister voice, Do you think your Wu-Tang sword can defeat me?

Kogard, staring into the Chef's eyes, could not summon a single utterance. Not a muscle in Raekwon's face moved. Pal, who was near them, began to back away. Kogard's hands started to sweat.

Then Raekwon erupted into laughter and said, Ah! You're that asshole writer, right? Walter Kogard. I heard you pull shit like that all the time!

Kogard let out a sigh of relief. --I actually though you were going to go Tiger Style on me right there.

--Hey, next time don't talk like that to known gangsters. But because it's you, I'll make an exception. Plus, your friend Fredo over there just sold me a new white Cadillac.

--Yeah, he's a trip.

--Yeah, Raekwon chuckled. --I know all about you. What's up, God?

--Not bad, not bad, but what about you? Looks like your boys had to go rough somebody up.

--Shit happens, God. Niggas be wylin'. That's why I keep that culture cypher, God, knamsayin. He took a sip.

--What's a "culture cypher," if you don't mind me asking.

--In Supreme Mathematics, culture is four. Cypher is a circle: zero. Culture cypher, then, means forty.

--Forty? Like a forty-ounce? Or a .40 caliber?

--Ayeee, whatever you wan'it be, God.

Kogard took a sip of water and asked, Why do you all refer to each other as "God" so much?

--Shit, nigga, that plays into the divinity of the black man in the Five Percent School; been sayin' it all my life. Bruthas is holy, God. 'S like a salutation, knamsayin', like "What's up, man," "What's up, God?" Knamsayin'. God and man, we like one in the same, knamsayin'. Single being, God. We all connected in this shit. "Man," "dude," "bro," "God," whatever, knamsayin'. It's like a greeting for ya boys, ya dogs; "God" is "dog" backwards, knamsayin'. Dogs 'n gods be on the same playin' field 'n shit.

Kogard was silent for a while. --Wow...that was very insightful. Really. You worded it very colorfully.

--Colorfully? You callin' me fag, nigga?

--No, no, I just meant, it was very colored.

--Colored? What is this, nineteen-sixty-motherfuckin-four? Ain't nobody colored no more, nigga. We black, nigga!

--I'm sorry, I didn't mean--

--Ahhh, I'm just fuckin' wichu, God.

--Oh...well, just what...?

Raekwon looked at him uneasily. --What, what?

Kogard rubbed his hands through his hair. --Well, he began to say, his voice shaking, I want to ask you something. I was having this conversation with a few of my friends earlier. Black friends.

--Oh, you got black friends? Whoop-dee-fuckin-do.

--No, no. I mean, they're kinda...not black. But they are black, you know. I'm trying to word this right. They're not the kind of black guys that grew up hard, you know, like you may have. Kogard waited for a grimace to appear on Raekwon's face, sure that he may have said something wrong, but none revealed itself. He continued: They never sold crack or popped glocks or anything and they speak like ... well, they say, black folk always ask them, 'Why you talk white?' you know. They're well spoken. They talk like me. Actually, they're over there in that booth. He pointed toward his friends.

--Yeah, I saw 'em come in, said Raekwon. --You tryin' to ask me just cause a nigga wear tiny pants that he not my nigga? We all brothers and sisters under God, knamsayin'. You, me, faggots, that tiny-pants-wearing nigga over there, them chinky-eyed-carryout-niggas. I got love for 'em all.

--A black friend of mine said earlier, well, he referred to a specific type of black person as, if I may say, "nigga." Now, this woman was beating her kids on the subway, you see. She was uncouth. But for a black person to refer to this fellow black person as "nigga," it seemed to me that there was hatred in his heart toward his own race. Like he wanted to distance himself from *them*. "Them," I guess meaning lower-class blacks, less-refined peoples, peoples who are often vilified on the news. I thought, this word "nigga" and its connotation, it has so many different meanings. People use it all different ways—like you. For you, it's effortless. It's without degradation. And yet, out of my friend's mouth, when he said it, it was filled with spit. I felt dirty just hearing it.

Raekwon assumed an expression of serious consideration. He nodded introspectively and sipped from his forty. --Like you said, God, all about the delivery. I call my niggas "my niggas" cause I grew up hearing that as a term of endearment, knamsayin'. When I say it to my boys and when my boys say it to me, it's without malice, knamsayin'. It's like second nature, like "God," or "man." It's just the brotherly thing to say where I grew up. Now yo' little self-deprecating friend sounds like he got alotta issues with his identity. No black person need to re-invoke that nasty white slave-driver word: "nigger." But we, me and my niggas, we just say it, it's not like it's got that pierce to it.

--Some of my black friends say that "niggers" need to learn to speak properly to make it in this country. They say that "niggers" will always be "niggers" as long as they insulate themselves. And they, my friends, feel like they've broken out of the economic chains because they can speak to and interact with the white establishment.

--Them niggas ain't broken out of nuthin'. They still got the same narrow mindset. They've even adopted the white man's mind set. Call your own people "nigger" out of malice? What kinda progress it that? Ain't no "niggas," no "bougies," whatever. We all black people. We gotta make it together. But niggas like them think they just too good for us at the bottom. 'Cause I talk like this, that means I'm ig'nant? Fuck that shit, God, I'm a deep nigga and I know it. I may have to rough up a nigga from time to time. I may distribute crack-cocaine. But I know what's up.

--And, dare I say it, your colorful language conforms beautifully to the ideas you wish to express.

--Aye, knamsayin', expression is expression, comes in all shapes and sizes. This my dialect, knamsayin', from when I was a little kid growin' up in this city. I can't shed that. And I don't want to. Forget where I came from? To try and join the oppressor's society? Fuck that shit, God. I grew up on the crime side, the Empire Times side, where stayin' alive was no jive. Had second-hands, my mom's bounced on old man, so then we moved to Shaolin Land. A young youth, rockin' the gold tooth, Polo goose; the only way I began to get off was drug loot. So yeah it started like this, son, rollin' with this one, and that one, pullin' out gats for fun. But it was just a dream for the teen that was a fiend. I started smokin' woolies at sixteen. Runnin' up in gates and doin' hits for high stakes, making my way on fire escapes. No question, I would speed for cracks and weed. The

combination made my eyes bleed. No question I would flow off to try to get the dough all, stickin' up white boys on ball courts. My life got no better. Same damn Polo sweater. Times was rough and tough like leather. Figured out I went the wrong route. So I got with a sickass clique and went all out. Catchin' keys from across seas, rollin' in MPVs, every week we made 40 Gs. Yo, nigga, respect mine, or anger the TEC-9: *Ch-chick-BLOW*, move from the gate now. And what made me go through all that shit? You white folks always ask why we black folk gotta be reduced to rhymin' and stealin'. Because you created this system, the system we need money and a education to make it in. And we ain't *have* nothin'. We was broke. My parents had nothin', and my grandparents were the sons and daughters of slaves, knamsayin'. How we supposed to have shit when we ain't start out wit shit? How I was supposed to make it in a system that you need money to enter, when I ain't have no gat dam money? I had to *take* that shit! And to cope wit it, I had to smoke that shit. To cope with this fuckin' system that incriminated me for tryin' to make it. I took that shit, and I still take that shit, cause you know why? 'Cause cash rules everything around me! Gotta get the money.

--Dollar, dollar bills, God.

--Shiiid. How was I supposed to make it without taking it? Ya boys think they so high and mighty cause they did art or went to school or whatever to make it out. I ain't have them luxuries, knamsayin'. So I took it. Shiiid, like my nigga I.N.S. used to say, it's got to be accepted.

-- ... That what?

--That life is hectic.

Miles Davis played low on the bar's speakers. Raekwon wound down, had tired himself out and was now listening, grooving with his eyes closed, to the piano sigh. The bass came quietly walking in like a hipster down to Birdland on a humid, rainy night. The horn began to cry. All were silent throughout the room, all bodies in rapture with the syncopating vibrations settling upon their field of impressions like dew upon morning daisies. The old girl at the adjacent end of the bar began singing, to herself, surely, but that which was her's was laid bare for all to hear. And when she finished her last note, the last "I do," the sound waves echoed throughout the room and around the eddies of smoke and perfume in a piercing E-minor which might have shattered every glass and bottle in the place if after ten seconds it did not come to its humble and composed conclusion. A feeling swelled within everyone's chest on that note, as if it were the deep-drawn breath of a single entity, and, finally exhaled, the feeling dissipated as quickly as it had sparked.

Raekwon was now lost in the deep abyss behind his eyelids. Kogard got up with his glass of water and walked around the bar to where JP, El Wood, and Deborah sat slumped in their seats, trying to keep up with the pitter-patter of the hi-hats. Kogard sat down and set his drink beside El's double gin and tonic.

--Some voice, he said.

The party gurgled an affirmation.

--Guess who I was just talking to over there? Shallah Raekwon, one of the seven capos in the 36 Chambers of Death. He's fascinating.

--Give's us a bad name, El stammered.

--Us who?



No, no, I don't wantt ttoo rreemmeemmbbeerr... Key in the ignition... Escape... No. Never escape. He'd never escape. Not at home in his apartment. Not in all of Empire City. He'd never escape the memory of the loss he'd left back home, no matter how much he kept it at bay with sobriety. Federal City always called him. Nigte ... The black rotary telephone dialed, and no one ever answered.



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## Phase the Third.

### I.

Kogard awoke on the floor of his apartment completely clothed, the smell of vomit encasing him ... light poured through the open windows ... and he felt like Samson. One sip of that gin and here he was again, feeling as though she had gotten the better of his consciousness. Literary giant felled by a woman. Embarrassing. A castration. The newspapers and tabloids had inhaled all of it.

“WILL WALTER KOGARD'S PERSONAL LIFE AFFECT HIS BOOK SALES?”

“CONTINUED PLIGHT OF THE 'DRINKER WITH A WRITING PROBLEM”

“WALTER KOGARD GOT EVERYTHING HE WANTED OUT OF HIS CAREER  
AND LOST THE ONLY THING THAT MATTERED IN LIFE”

“WALTER KOGARD LOSES WIFE AND DAUGHTER IN CUSTODY BATTLE”

Those headlines had burned their way into his brain and he had needed the ethanol to scrub them out. To cleanse himself. Searching for redemption at the bottom of the bottle. The drinking only got worse after the divorce when Nichte moved back to Federal City with his daughter while he stayed in Empire. *Go, then, go!* he had drunkenly screamed. *I don't need you all.* But he did, damn her. When the haze of drink had faded he realized she still consumed him. Ahh, poisonous, gorgeous Philistine woman, cut mine hair, toppled me, made me look a fool. I am indeed Samson. A fallen judge; I had such strength of intellect that people praised me, they praised me through my drinking I'll have you know! They knew the price paid to be an artist of this caliber. Excuse? Is it an excuse to say that art necessitates substance abuse? You try creating! You try pouring yourself out onto the canvas or the page so completely that there is nothing left inside of you. When it's empty you have to fill that space! There must be substance—within and without art, within and without the artist. The creative impulse ebbs and flows, and whiskey is the river when the mind's tide is low. I had control, though. I was strong.

But she cut mine hair! Topped me from mine pedestal! I had good reason to be up there! I worked hard to get there, she saw the effort. But you need to stop living in fiction, she says. You need to see the real world through your own two eyes, not the bottom of a bottle of port. I say: Rose-tint my world! I like the red filter! I like the blur. She says: You're destroying yourself! Use your own natural impressions! Augh, she tried to tell me how to create. And she was right, I should have dropped it, drowned the booze. But oh, mine impulses were too frayed, mine mind swimming. I could not see that she was trying to help—I could not see! And she's gone now and mine baby, too. And now, Oh, mine glorious strength--

Put to the labor of a beast, debas't

Lower than a bonds slave! Promise was that I  
Should mine daughter from her youth deliver;  
Ask for this great Deliverer now, and find him  
Eyeless in Gaza at the Mill with slaves.

He turned over onto his side and let tears roll down his face onto his bed of paper. It was all he had now to comfort him: paper, words; words captured the long-forgotten feeling, the feeling he didn't want in him but which he didn't want to eradicate completely; words captured the memories he didn't want to remember. Words, what he thought were so intimate, so personal to the writer, were actually the method of escape. Such personal feelings bled onto the page were foreign, like a tea biscuit one is handed at a party—what is this?; take a bite—and Ah! it has brought one back to memories of home, eating biscuits as a baby. He lay upon the words, soiled in them, the black marks, ink spots, graphite pencil shavings; O, we are the marks of the world; he removed his dirty clothes and slid around in the words as if they were oils. Filthy, filthy words. These filthy memories like dirty bath water in which I bathe and re-bathe like a pious Hindu in the river Ganges; the river, broad and muddy, the filthy and the holy intermixed in every wash.

I once gave no fucks, for giving a fuck meant you'd get hurt. I loved her and she loved me, but I began to give less fucks. Writing, I wanted to distance myself from the world, sculpt a reality from scripture. Drinking, I wanted to distance myself from my self. And now I have neither nor her. She stopped loving me because I cared naught but for words and drink. She stopped loving me and for good reason, that's the worst part, the painful truth. No—the most painful truth is that after all these years I still love her. I gave no fucks, and now I'm all fucked up. Nichte, would you ever love me again, or is our past prologue to your new lesbian saga? Jocelyn, spoken with venom in the tongue. Jo. Big-titted, lean string bean, pixie cut, you think you can pass for an innocent nymph? I know what you are. You are a soldier of Satan. You soil my wife in mine bed. You've taken my house in Federal City and estranged me from mine home; I can't return because it's mine no more. Mine daughter, seven years old now—now your seven-year-old daughter. *Scoff*. Three vaginas in one house? You two villainous cunts will not soil my seed in the hard soil. I will come there, ravage you both, stretch the creases of your—Oh—more than tongues or fingers could. Nichte loved my cock, after me she could take on stallions, bulls, rams, drakes, St. Bernards, she could stuff toads, bats, lizards, up her rectum, I ironed out the wrinkles, I set the walls a little wider so that you wonder who had been there before, so that you could shiver with fear from my apparition; my

presence remains. You, Jo, you may know how to build a fire in mine wife, but I know how to inflame a cunt. Is it true she had not a single drop of love for me after our big divide, when you met her? Or—have you ever wondered—are you just a rebound? Something different, someone so far removed from me in sex and temperament that she would be completely distracted from me, so that she would not relapse? Ever thought of that, Jo? Hah! I hope it keeps you up at night.

But these are dirty thoughts. What I really want is Cassie back. I want to clean her, wash from her the dirt in which I soiled her in infancy, and the dirt in which you bathe her daily. I have no hatred for you all as lesbians, it's not like that. It's beautiful, two pairs of breasts. Touching. It's artful in and of itself. But not when you do it to my wife after you have stolen from me mine family! I wonder if I went back would she accept me? Nichte? Or at least welcome me into her home? For tea and a talk. We haven't talked since the trial. We have a lot to unearth. Would she let me in? Or would she sic Jo to scratch and maim me?

Would she let me see my daughter?

This is what daddy looks like. You haven't seen me in person since you were two.

Would she let me?

We are not forgone.

She exists, still. Perhaps she thinks of me now as I think of her. Would she let me in?

Only one way to know.

I could go.

I could take action ... I could go ...

## II.

He rose and looked around his room. Filthy. Words strewn about. A puddle of dried vomit near the door. He got some bleach and wet towels, lay them down to soak up the mess, then began to pick his papers off the floor, organized them, his flaccid dick swinging back and forth. If he was to clean this situation he would have to clean his space first. A dirty mind cannot make clear decisions.

The time that had passed, the space between the two parameters of the event and the result, could not keep him from his family. They were separate in time, yes, but united in the universe, connected through their individual connection to the common conscience of the infinite. His break-down, he could only reason, was proof that Nichte suffered for him, too.

He tossed his soiled pile of clothes into the hallway.

One cannot scrub the skin enough to remove the stain of human folly; you'll only come up with blood ...

Then, the sound of muffled speech. He heard from his common room someone calling up on the intercom: *Kogard, It's Horton, let me in!*

Horton Tenenbaum, Kogard's representative at Vesak Word House Publishers. What the fuck does he want? I'm in the midst of a cleanse. Publishers come in and fuck

with everything. He lit a cigarette and pulled on some gray sweatpants and went down to the intercom. --It's open, he called down, and cracked his front door.

Horton Tenenbaum soon appeared at Kogard's threshold, fresh-face, dressed in a pressed brown suit, and ready to do business. He was holding a brown paper bag filled with something emitting a distinct and horrible odor.

--What are you doing coming to my home at this ungodly early hour? Kogard scoffed.

--It's one o'clock in the afternoon, K, said Horton. He walked into the room, closed the door behind him and handed Kogard the brown paper bag. --For you.

Kogard regarded it with skepticism, looked at Horton, then at the bag, then took it and unwrapped it: it was a whole mackerel, eyes glaring dead as marbles. He looked up at Horton with reproach. --The fuck is this?

--It's a Sicilian message. It means Luca Brasi sleeps with the fishes ... What the fuck do you think it is? I was down at the waterfront and decided to bring you some dinner. I know you eat rarely and badly.

Fuckin' publishers always think they're doing you a favor. --Thanks, I guess, Kogard said.

--But what I really came here to do was talk about the book.

--I know.

--Hey, K, I don't want to be the asshole here, but you're under contract for two more books. It's been, what, seven years? *Monolith* was a critical and financial hit, I do give it that. But we want ... need, actually, considering things, another of your one-two knock-outs. Soon.

--It's coming, it's coming. I have to let it come out on its own like a big shit. You can't really hurry a big shit can you? or you'll pull a nerve. You wait till it's ready and you strain under the pressure!

--So poetic. Hey, let's hear a pitch, huh?

--A pitch? Kogard put the fish on the kitchen counter and took a seat in one of the two green chairs; Horton took the opposite. --There's not too much of a shape to it yet to tell you the truth...

grandfather clock, tick, tock

...but I have an inclination of where to go. I want to call it *Pendulum*.

--I like that; one word, three syllables, to-the-point. *Monolith*, *Pendulum*, what's next? *Vagabond*? I like it. We can market this.

--Yeah. Like *Monolith*, it follows me. The book follows my train of thought during a defined portion of my life manifest through the thoughts and observations of my characters. But I want to get the ideas into a shape before I begin to delve into them.

--Well, what are some of the ideas. Vaguely ... if you wish.

--Vaguely? ... The cyclicity of time, the lack of linearity, the lack of "space," as it were, between one body and another. I want to write about a dying grandfather and his granddaughter. She's sitting beside his hospital bed. That's the scene for the whole book. But the action takes place in retrospect. Things in the hospital room incite memories in them both. But that's just a starting idea. To tell you the truth, I think it's going to end up with a very different shape. There may not be a grandfather or a granddaughter. There may not be a hospital, per say. But a disease, yes, definitely.

Some pharmacon of either body or spirit. I want the prospect of death to be both imminent and cast-off in my characters. Living while dying, remembering, and repeating the cycle, if that makes any sense. It may be a saga, many lives. I have ideas. I've been thinking about it.

--Well, that's good, that's good. I like it. Horton crinkled his nose. --What's that smell?

--The fish?

--No, it's another smell. Like beer sitting stagnant, weeks old.

--Oh. I had an incident last night.

--What? You shit your bed? he laughed.

--I drank.

Horton's eyes dropped. He pursed his lips. Kogard stuffed his cigarette out and lit another.

--Not on purpose, he continued. --But that's not the immediate issue. It just brought back a wave of emotions about...the past.

--Her ...

Kogard nodded.

Horton leaned over and put his elbows on his knees. --It's hard to think about, I know, he said. --But it's over. You hurt her.

--I know I hurt her.

--I don't think you should think about it. Focus on the now. The present. The book. Focus on that. Write it sober. And you can use that to prove to her that you are a changed man, but you have to take this slowly.

--Don't talk to me about the past and present, Horton. Those are business terms. Quarterly, yearly, next year, we'll release it in nine months. All that: it's temporal. These feelings I have, I feel like they run in circles. The same feelings I had being youthfully and passionately in love, the painful remorse I felt after she left, the lingering mocking love that torments me now, it's all the same, it's interplay. This universe works as a singularity, Horton. With the experiences I've had since I first began to love her, the aggregate of all that living, I can love her now like I did before, even better. I don't know if that makes sense. But I think it's like this: I can wallow in self-pity wondering if she still loves me, or I can go there and ask. The energy of that love we had can't be lost forever. From here, this moment, after this realization, I can progress forward in one of any infinite number of trajectories that emit like sun rays from this point in time and space. I can go there. I can dig up the love from the past and make it present. It's possible.

--K, she's married.

--Marriage is a social construction, like boredom. It is not indicative of feelings. I know she still has feelings for me.

--How?

--Because our energy is strong, our yin and yang. I have feelings for her. So the compliment to my love for her must exist somewhere as an equal feeling for me.

--Yes, but maybe the compliment to your love for her is an equal amount of hatred that she feels toward you.

--At least it's a feeling. I just want to know if she still *feels* for me, whatever the feeling is. It would mean that we are still compatible in some way. It would mean that this grief I feel now is not one-sided. The universe naturally balances itself.

There was a bright silence. Sunlight bled through the curtain slits and illuminated the bookshelves.

--So you're going to Federal City? Horton asked uneasily.

--Yes, said Kogard.

Doves down on their luck cooed on the telephone wire outside the window.

--And then I'll start my work, he continued. --After I've sorted out my worldly wrongs, those things I did which afflict my spirit now. Then I can focus on my art. But I must act in this life before I create another.

--All I'm saying, and you can quote me on this, is that she's in the past.

--But she exists in the now! And I still love her. Of course, Horton: it is of no consequence to dwell on things of the past. But the past has built up to and is inherent in the present. So I will go to her. I will go to her as the man I am now and say, darling, Nichte, here I am. Yes, I was different back then, but back then is there, and now—now we must take action. So what's it going to be? May I love you again? May I be in my daughter's life?

--If that's what you want. If that's what will let you write your book.

--Narrow-minded fuckface publishers, Kogard said getting up. --They only think about one thing: the bottom-fucking-line. They don't care about the process, they only care about the end. It's all 'Give us your book, Give us your soul!' he said half-sarcastically. --'Let us make money off of you. Work, slave, grind the grain!'

--I take no offense to that, said Horton.

--I know you don't, because you know what you are: a slave-driver. 'Grind at the mill, slave! Bow at the alter of the press!' Well, overseer, watch me bring down, with these two hands, the entire temple and destroy us all! Kogard started laughing. He stood in front of his bookshelf, scanned his index finger along the spines, and, seemingly at random, pulled out a book, as if it were the key to opening a secret door in the wall. --Remember, Horton, he said opening the book, The past, life, time, they may all be perceived from the pedestal of the present as "progress," as having moved forward. But that feeling is not shared by those immersed in the "progress." We in the present are ever-mired in decision. We are ever-moving forward, looping around, journeying, a vagrancy, and the future is not prescribed. We make it up with our actions in the perpetual present. The past appears to be linear and end-driven because those events have already been executed in that order; therefore, by logic, we assume it to have been an inevitability. But the present: it is ever a crossroad with infinite prongs and we must choose one to take. From that chosen path we progress to the next infinite crossroad, and we chose again, we repeat. It is the very same crossroad every time. It's the same set of infinite choices. The default-straight path is only one—and, might I add, a very dull—choice to make.

--I never know what you're talking about. I do wish you weren't sober these days so that I could have a drink.

--There's half a bottle of scotch in the cabinet above the stove. For guests.

Horton scurried to the kitchen. There came the sound of glasses being moved and slammed. --The name of the game is publish! he called from behind the wall.

Kogard replied, Wrong! The name of the game is alcoholism!... Remember these snapshots, Horton, these times you and I share together. I die day after day. Your old memories of me, those are my corpses.

--Still don't know what you're talking about, K.

Kogard looked at the book in his hands: a tattered blue cover, jagged page edges, a repaired red spine which bore the words

Tomorrow

and

Tomorrow

and

Tomorrow

He impulsively flipped through it, then returned to the first page:

...Simultaneously or alternately, we inhabit many different and even incommensurable universes. To begin with, man is an embodied spirit. As such, he finds himself infesting this particular planet, while being free at the same time to explore the whole spaceless, timeless world of universal Mind. This is bad enough; but it is only the beginning of our troubles. For, besides being an embodied spirit, each of us is also a highly self-conscious and self-centered member of a sociable species. We live in and for ourselves; but at the same time we live in and, somewhat reluctantly, for the social group surrounding us. Again, we are both the products of evolution and a race of self-made men. In other words, we are simultaneously the subjects of Nature and the citizens of a strictly human republic, which may be anything from what St. Paul called "no mean city" to the most squalid of material and moral slums.

We're on the same plane, he said, smirking privately. One hundred years later, he and Huxley were still squabbling with the same human problems. All our race's internal struggle with the pains of being human are recorded in generations of texts. Beautiful books... It's funny how we encounter the most relevant incidentals.

--K, Horton called from the kitchen, You don't have any bitters!

--Boo hoo.

He returned to the common room. --I'll have to drink this bare. How indecent. He took a long sip and sat down again, swirling his half-full tumbler. --Those fuckers are squeezing us to death, he said, evidently out of nowhere. But Kogard knew at once to whom "those fuckers" referred. --They demand 60% RRP on our books just for distribution. He took another sip. --We're losing money. It only makes marketing sense to go through them for distribution—e-books and physical—but I'm starting to think that it might be a better idea to just go through the indie guys, bookstores and websites. It'll affect sales of course. But you and many of our other authors are already very established. You all have a following. A peculiar following, to say the least, who would more readily accept a departure from the industry monopolies. A forward-guard type of

crowd. The kind of people who enjoy pungent odors in baroque quarters; or, to be succinct, people who are flatulence-obsessed. Catch my drift? Those people will follow your titles to wherever they're sold, like flies to shit. And that publicity will also be good for the new authors. I think it would be good for our image if we pulled out of Amazon. It would be a statement! He sipped. --We'd release something to the press, of course, so people will know how to track us down. It would be headlining news: VWH PULLS OUT OF AMAZON; AFTER RANDOM-PENGUIN, LAST PUBLISHER STANDING. I think it might work. Might lose money for a while, but I have faith that others will catch on. I'm only telling you this because I know you already hate the idea of Amazon and the *electronic* book. But my business associates, eh ... the board of directors ... I could get fired on the spot for mentioning something like this.

– ... You know, Horton, the only physical things people really interact with these days are clothes, sidewalks, cars, and cigarettes... Amazon might become the future, just like the mobile app is becoming the basis for all communication and information. But remember this, Horton: cigarettes kill. Through all of the anti-tobacco lobbying and tobacco education that's been going on since the Nineties, people still smoke. I still smoke. And I still go to the bookstore to buy all of my books. I still go to my friends' houses to contact them, and I still go to the bodega to buy a newspaper. I still smoke, Horton. It's not all lost. A lot of people still smoke.

The Editor furrowed his brow; his posture yielded to the initial effects of drink; swirled the liquid in his glass. --People still smoke even though it's bad for them, he reiterated, Even though it's a costly habit.

Kogard turned around and looked up from his book. He snuffed his butt in a nearby tray. --People will continue to buy cigarettes even though it's not practical or financially savvy these days. People will continue to buy real books for the same reasons. He pulled another cigarette out of his pocket and let his Zippo's flame lick the tip. Inhale. --Why do people smoke, Horton?

-- ... I—I don't know. Why do you smoke?

Exhale. --I smoke because I enjoy it. I truly enjoy it. I like the barbeque of smoke in my lungs. The fire pit. The blackening, withering, and crisp of my bronchioli. The slow hand of death squeezing my pharynx. I like the smoke ebbing into my eyes, I like the stench, I like holding it between my fingers, I like it dangling twix my lips; all my idols smoked, smoking has complimented some of the best times of my life. And, honestly, I think I look cool doing it. It compliments my aura as a mysterious artful person, this always being shrouded in smoke. I can admit that. People think smoking is cool. It might kill you. But nothing in this godly world, not even fear of death, will ever stop people from wanting to be cool. Sinning is winning. So cigarettes will never go away. And books will never go away for those very reasons: the stench, the feel, the hipness, the antiquity, the affirmation of quality, the familiarity, the *buzz*, above all. Fuck e-cigarettes, no one likes that shit. You can't FEEL it in your lungs. People will always buy good old cigarettes, Horton. Even if they rise to twenty dollars a pack, people will find a way to get their good old cigarettes. People will buy books. They will go to a store, browse them, buy them. If they truly like them, if they are truly dependent on them to feel good, that harsh physical satisfaction, then they will go where the wild books are. Just like I have my favorite imprints: New Directions, Dalkey, Scribner's,



Godine, Faber; I also have my favorite cigarette brand. And if you know where to go for satisfaction, why go elsewhere? Why do through a distributor? Like you said, the fanbase I've gathered is loyal. I say fuck Amazon. If I never see my name on another e-book cover I will die happily from lung cancer. I'm not afraid. The young writers, if they're true to their nature, they will be ready to take the losses. No amount of money will replace the satisfaction of one's name on the cover of a professionally edited, proofread, and printed hard-back book.

Horton nodded slowly and downed the rest of his drink; a smile slowly crept across his face. He looked up at Kogard who seemed to tower where he stood holding an old tattered book. --I knew there was a reason I leave my office and travel half-way across the city to track you down. He got up, set his glass on the coffee table, and gave Kogard a hug. --Come back from Federal City, he said, And write that book. We'll do what we can for the better of this industry. You just give us those genius words to work with.

--That's my job.

--I've got to go now. Got to get back to the bureaucracy. They shook hands once more and Horton headed toward the door.

--We'll be in touch. Oh! Kogard said, remembering something. He ran upstairs to his bedroom and fetched a folded document lain upon the floor. --This is a story by a young friend of mine, he said returning to the common room, handing Horton the paper. --I like it. It's my kind of work. His information is on the back. There's more where that came from.

Horton smiled widely again and they shook hands, then he made his way out the door. --I'll look into it.

### III.

When he returned to his room, Kogard removed his pants and opened the windows, sat down in his desk chair, and lit a cigarette. Birds chirped, sunshine, and other cliches. Life seemed to be all in all on the up and up. The ream of paper remained on his desk, those six syllables perpetually hanging in white space

grandfather clock, tick, tock

but he did not think about them. The time would come when the urge to follow them up with a novel would consume his every cell, but that time was not now. This was the time for basking. The sunlight baked his bare legs. Cigarette smoke rolled from his lips and tumbled toward the open window. Ash teetered off his cigarette and flew away like butterflies. Today was the day he'd follow up, not on six syllables, but six years. He would go to the office of the Empire-Federal Expressway and buy a bus ticket, yes, he would do it. Would she be expecting him? In his fit last night, was her mind also flooded with memories of their past as if they were connected by some common universal consciousness? He believed so. He felt that she was drawing him in. He felt their common aura, forged from the good times past, drawing them toward each other. She would not be surprised or filled with rage, but with an expectation. *Of course you came, K, how could you not? You aren't a cold-hearted man, just a terrible human being.* She would make some sly remark like that. Smile slightly. Jo would look at him

from the corner of her eye and remain silent. Cold contempt. But she would know, as he knew, that he did not come back to be a home-wrecker, but a plumber, so to speak, someone come to clear the shit from the pipes, to maintain the comfort of the home's residents. Let the family be. Their happiness would be his happiness. He just wanted to be allowed to check up on them. And Cassie, would she recognize him? ....Then he put it out of his mind and went into the bathroom to shower.

#### IV.

water, water, getting hotter ... not hot enough—HOT TOO HOT ... burning ... ah! Better ... riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, bring us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs ... of what does James speak...? I like to watch the water trickled down my belly and cascade off my penis as if I were peeing clandestine ... my insides clean, my outsides—getting there ... waterwash down asscrack, from slope of sack to bend of bum ... I should buy a washcloth one of these days; mere hands fall short of scrubbing, exfoliation ... one would think one thinks most deep thoughts in the complacent misty steam of showering, but I just fear drowning in the shallow pool at my feet ... i fear the water will commence an unbroken stream and water-board me to death ... Saddam Hussein once graced the currency of the nation of Iraq ..., and later graced the cover of *Time* looking like a heroin-ravaged Santa Clause; the headline read: WE GOT HIM ... yet I also feel comfortable in the cascade of warm water ... not too hot, now ... drowning, 'tis the stuff of pre-birth ... one feels like an embryo sack in utero ... warmth, nourishment ... everything a sack of human-destined cells could want—hah! ... little does the fucker know, he will in several months be forced into the world to provide such things as are presently provided for him *gratis* on his own ... what a bummer! Let me stay in the embryo sack ... drugs and alcohol are mere substitutes for the physical pleasure of embryonic nonaction, passive acceptance ... Let me stay in the embryo sack ... but O, I must leave paradise, musn't we all ... back into the cold hallway

Kogard turned off the water and stepped out onto the mat. Shiver. *back into the cold hallway...*

He dried his face and thought, I must look nice today. Not “nice” as in, “my clothes do not have stains on them,” but the rare kind of “nice,” the kind one dawns when going to impress someone. This was rare for him. But what meaning would it have if he went around impressing people everyday. Cultivation would be normalized, and thus meaningless.

He went to his bedroom, dried his hair and ballsack, and looked into his closet. He had one suit. His very expensive suit. That might be overkill. But then again, to win back one whom one has lost, to outdo one's self is the safest bet. He took the suit from his closet and lay it on his bed, tossed his towel to a corner of the room, went to his dresser, brought out some underwear and put them on. Chub and balls nicely tucked away now. Sunshine through the window dried what parts of his body he had missed. Sunshine, always rejuvenating; sunshine has a way of trumping mood. He put on the suit pants, buttoned them, pulled the white button-up shirt out of the closet, and was halfway through buttoning it when a voice came on his intercom—*K, it's Fredo, I'm outside.*

He walked to the intercom; --It's open, he said, and cracked the door.

Not a minute later, Fredo Martinelli kramer'd into the door and closed it behind him as Kogard hooked the last few buttons of his shirt. --You look dashing, he said.

--I'm going to Federal City today.

--Oh. Hey, we missed you last night. You left so abruptly. Admittedly, we were all so far gone we didn't really notice until much later.

--Yeah, I'm sorry about that. I accidentally took a sip of El Wood's gin. Sent me spiraling.

--Ugh, I'm sorry to hear that. Got home okay?

--More or less. I don't know where my car is. I think I left it parked sideways outside the apartment.

--I didn't see it when I came in. Sideways or otherwise.

--Oh. Probably got towed.

--Or worse.

--Eh, who cares. I was too preoccupied in my head to put it away right. Memories of Nichte flooded my brain. I broke down. I just wanted to get away as quickly as possible, from the bar, the car, from myself, my own betraying memories. I cried myself to sleep.

--Poor thing.

--But I had a revelation. It wasn't all for the sake of pain and no benefit. In fact, I don't think one can experience pain without bettering from it. I hadn't thought about her for a long time, you know. So ... I've decided ... I'm going to see her. Today. Might as well do this immediately, you know. I want to get things right, or, at least get things onto the table. I'm going to head over to the bus station in midtown around three, four-ish. What are you up to?

--I came here to see what you were doing. I can get worried about my friend, can't I? I knew something was up with you last night, but...Chelsea. He smiled widely. --I'll tell you about it in the car. Want to come get a slice of pizza with me? Run an errand?

Kogard knew exactly what this meant. --Sure, if you give me a ride to the station afterward. Ninth Avenue and West 39<sup>th</sup> Street, I think.

--No problem.

--Let me just put my jacket on.

He got dressed and came back into the common room. Fredo helped himself to the scotch that Horton had left on the kitchen counter. --You're not bringing anything with you? he asked.

Kogard looked down at himself. --Not really. What do I need? I'm not staying long, just enough to talk. All I need is my heart.

--Something to read on the bus?

--I have my thoughts.

They went outside. Fredo's white Cadillac was parked in front of the building. Sure enough, the Mulsanne was gone.

--Who needs a car these days anyway, Kogard said. --And in this city? Extraneous.

Fredo put on his Ray-Bans. --People who want to make appearances drive cars, he said opening his door.

--Count me out then.

V.

3:15PM EMPIRE-FEDERAL EXPRESSWAY TERMINAL

--When's the next bus? Kogard asked the woman at the reservations desk.

She lowered her eyes to her 1999 Gateway computer screen and made several meaningless keystrokes. Then she looked up and said, Right now.

--Can I make it?

--Sure. It will be ... thirty-five dollars, because you're cutting it so close.

--I can do that.

--Any luggage? asked the woman.

--No.

She took his card and did the whole ordeal, handed him back a ticket and his card and said, Your bus is at platform three. You should hurry.

And hurry he did. He approached the ticket man, out of breath and wheezing, for he did not have a running disposition, and handed him his ticket, at which the man exclaimed, Just made it.

Tired, Kogard boarded the bus and found the only seat left, beside a grotesque and ugly man.

--Welcome aboard, the creature said as Kogard sat down. He was not in the mood to speak to people. He immediately lay his head against the rest and closed his eyes. He didn't hear another word from the man, who smelled like some combination of cheese whiz and dog food, and that, despite the odor, was enough to let him fall asleep. It was the nap-time-of-day, anyway. And as he dozed off, expecting to awake in his hometown at 7:30, he recalled the words of Federal City's patron saint of punk:

*I'm so tired*

*Sheep are counting me*

*No more struggle*

*No more energy*

*No more patience*

*You can write that down*

*It's all too crazy*

*I'm not sticking 'round--*

---

## Phase the Fourth.

### I.

The Empire-Federal Expressway bus pulled onto H Street, Northeast Federal City, which had, since Kogard had last seen it ten years ago, undergone a dramatic reconstruction and become infested with white people.

You telling me; white man come to this country, infest everything.

Indeed, whitefolk had flocked to both the residential and commercial areas, newly lined by ravenous developers with stylish bars and niche restaurants, a German place called Biergarten Haus; sleek, modern Asian Fusion; some place, clad in immaculate white brick, adorned in handpainted Ariel typeface, which used a typographical symbol in its name: & Pizza. The Rock N Roll Hotel still stood, where Kogard had seen Fugazi as a teenager. What a beautiful time that was, when H Street still existed as a slum, with discarded and half-eaten McDonald's meals littered in the street, and the poor with no better options who stooped down to scoop them up, who carried their dignity in garbage bags.

But that was the Nineties. Now the streets were routinely scanned by cleanup crews, the same folks who used to live not several blocks from here, picking up garbage with metal tongs to clear whitefolks' way. Kogard felt guilty. The fat cheese steak man beside him snored a eulogy for old Federal City, the rustic grandeur of America's former chocolate capital.

It wasn't that Kogard felt guilty for being white, but that the city he had grown up in—the atmosphere he had been used to—had changed in his absence. It was not about race. It was about being from the city and seeing it grow from the country's murder capital to flaunting its fourth-highest cost-of-living. Of course, one wouldn't want to *keep* it violent and impoverished. But the change was startling. One day a Giant supermarket was filled with lower-class Shaw residents; the next day the bulldozers came and it was a hole in the ground; shortly afterward, a condominium. It had to happen at some point, right? Mayor Williams took over and brought in the developers and the money started flowing. Black folk *couldn't* stay. Rent went through the roof; companies bought up whole government housing projects; the shade of the city faded. But Kogard hadn't seen the end result until now. The city was completely flushed. Border-to-border gentrification. Even Southeast Federal City had apparently been developed. It had to happen at some point, right? Couldn't they have preserved the historic culture of the city while bringing it up to date? Or was it that the black community could not be integrated into mass commercial culture? By 2010, the Target/Best Buy/Modell's/Bed Bath and Beyond had been built in Columbia Heights and the Latinos were all forced out of their surrounding homes. Property values skyrocketed a neighborhood away in Mt. Pleasant and those who'd lived and worked there had to forfeit their pupuserias and bodegas for yoga studios and salad dispensaries. Now yuppies living there beside the very ones who'd driven up the property values remark, We live in such a rich, cultural neighborhood.

First there is a city. Well, first there is a community. It thrives. It is...white. The colored population who works for them lives on the outskirts of the city. That is the ghetto. Don't go there. The white folk own the whole city but live in the middle. The colored folk rent and commute in to work. The two groups get along fine; everyone knows their place. Then—a tragedy strikes. Someone prominent is killed, someone has dropped a bomb, something. Riots ensue. The colored population is incensed. Not only do they burn their own neighborhood, they burn the whole city. (In case of disgruntlement, a population has to understand: never riot in your own neighborhood.) The property value plummets. Whitefolk scam, move to the suburbs, look across the river at the crispen city through binoculars saying, We'll be back. The colored folk remain. The city is in ruins. The population suffers; drug use, disease, teen pregnancy, a cycle of despair. Property is cheap. The city attracts artists. They nest among the disparaged. They draw inspiration from the broken lives, the depravity, the history buried under the rubble. They create. They enliven. The city finds a new culture; coupled with the old one, it becomes a hub of creativity. Great minds go there to experience *life*. Real, gritty *life*. It's the artists who were there first, who came as outsiders and became residents, who added to the community out of a pure sense of empathy and intrigue and unity. It's the artists who start the migration. After the artists come those who follow artists. These are progressives. The community builds around this new movement. The city becomes known as a hub for free spirits and high minds. It's dangerous, still, yes, but it is inspiring. The vernacular! The spirit! In come more artists and their friends. The rent is still cheap. This new community is multicolored and all-inclusive; the artists are White, Black, Latino; they come from all over; they engage with the community they're in; they reveal the life that once existed. They start to buy

and sell. The community grows. Then come the adventurous merchants. They see the market for certain goods; the neighborhood is changing; people will be able to pay for more things. Business picks up in the city. Jobs come back. Then come the adventurous guppies; they see a group of marginalized people, people interacting with artists, and want to join because they are also marginalized. They bring with them education and innovation. They start clinics, nonprofits, organizations, all around the disparaged community and the artists. They think they are helping. More jobs arise from the rubble. The economy of the city picks up. The owners of the city begin to see this as well: educated people moving in; they raise the rent a bit. More business starts to come in. Yuppies and other young professionals come into the city, live in the neighborhoods where once crack and AIDS ran rampant; they want to be in the gritty life, too; gritty is *cool*; but it is not as gritty as it was when the artists came, and they know that. They didn't want to be in the city when it was still *bad*, but they want to get in now and be able to say that they were here at the beginning—when things were just beginning to get good. The rent rises again. Developers buy and renovate, raze and erect. Condominiums with ground-level retail space spread like tumors. More yuppies come. The city assumes a reputation as an artist hub, as a hip place; but in actuality, the rent is beginning to get too expensive for the artists; the artists begin to move out of the neighborhood, as do the lower-income communities. Now what remains is less of an actual art community and more of the idea of a cool city. Then comes Big Business. This attracts the masses. This pushes the few remaining pockets of poor artists and low-income residents out of the city. The white people who'd left all those years ago say, Yes, it's safe again, we can go back! Development. Big business. Skyrocketing rent. And the city is white in the middle again. The poor community moves to another location. The artists follow. The cycle continues.

## II.

The bus pulled into the mezzanine of Federal City's Union Station, it offloaded, and the moment Kogard stepped onto the slick concrete in the musty exhaust-filled air of the garage, he pulled out a cigarette.

As he went for a light a man in a high-visibility jacket said, You can't smoke in here.

The flame was already licking the end of his cigarette.

--Didn't you hear what I said, man?

Kogard reluctantly closed his lighter and walked, not toward the entrance of Union Station like the rest of the passengers, but out the bus exit and down the service ramp toward the taxi hub. He finally lit his cigarette and felt a buzz, which was pleasantly surprising; he smoked so much that he rarely felt a buzz, but the four-hour interim on the bus must have depleted the amount of nicotine already coursing through his system. A car's horn startled him and he moved out of its way as it careened down the ramp. Walking, he felt like a lone ant marching down a concrete hill. It was dark outside. When he got to the bottom he smoked the rest of his cigarette in leisure, hailed a taxi, and told the driver, Adam's Morgan. It was good to say those words again.

### III.

The fare was already \$9.50 by the time the cab turned onto U Street from 9<sup>th</sup> heading toward 18<sup>th</sup>. The cabman, a middle-aged Eritrean, possessed no distinguishable features and Kogard did not speak to him. He recalled days in his youth when his aunt who was not blood related would take him to the Ethiopian restaurants where he delighted in eating with his hands. Eritreans were not Ethiopians, and each group made that clear when the topic came up, but for the purposes of memory Kogard grouped them together. The faults of personal racism, perhaps; one may respect the boundaries of a culture in day-to-day life, while internally making assumptions and connections about them which would definitely sic the Human Rights Watch, or whoever maintains the political correctness of the country, on his lily-white ass. A woman will often cross the street as a lone sizable man approaches on an unlit sidewalk at night. Does that mean they're skeptical of all men? Yes...? Well, be that as it may, women, in general, do not hate all men. They want to keep their sense of safety, that's all. People make assumptions to themselves in the privacy of their own mind which aid their journey through this largely dangerous world. Clearly, not all black people are criminals. But when they are paraded about on the five o'clock news as robbers, murderers, and gang-bangers, the elderly white woman in Illinois has no choice but to assume those characteristics of all Blacks, even if she has never seen one. It's a matter of survival. A person abides by the patterns they have collected from experience. Sadly, many of those patterns are ill-represented, or misguided.

But one distinction Kogard had always observed was that between Salvadoreans and the other Latinos (yes, he lumped all non-Salvadoreans together as general Latinos). Racist? No, it was a consequence of his environment (for isn't that what they all say!) Large Salvadorean populations migrated to Federal City in the late twentieth century due to the unruly state and rampant gang activity in the motherland. So Kogard was keen to notice that more Latinos of one nationality lived in the city than those of other nationalities. Salvadoreans were the majority, and so he respected their heritage; for the others, who cares? Racist? Who cares? One makes assumptions which are relevant only to one's own life and environment. Only when one is questioned about the correctness of those assumptions will they reconsider their convictions.

The Ethiopian drove quickly through crowded U Street traffic with a stern and focused face which revealed his reckless experience. Out the window, Kogard noticed the bars' lights twirling, the music blaring from within, beckoning lost souls in search of other lost souls on whom to grind their bodies and perhaps fuck later in the evening. What a sad life it must be, going to the clubs weekend after weekend. It was another one of those cycles one can get lost in, a cycle which has no end and which does not better a person emotionally or spiritually—so why engage in it? Fun? There are many other ways to have fun that don't include being crowded next to smelly, sweaty people with breath which stinks of liquor. Wanna find a relationship? You think you will find a lasting relationship with a person who has come to a club only to hook up with another person. That expectation is inherently contradictory. What about the fact that many people have found love in the club? Well, love, which is all about balance, may indeed fester between two equally stupid people.



Eritrean cabman pulled a wide right turn onto 18<sup>th</sup> Street. Kogard had walked this street's steep incline millions of times in his youth. The activist and street art collective he used to work with kept a warehouse several blocks off the main street. There was once a decent place called the Pharmacy Bar which he used to frequent. But what became of it? To get your answer you must find the lowest common denominator.

His silent ranting retired when he passed California Street. He was getting close. He fiddled with his hands. They were becoming slippery with sweat. The crowds of near-naked clubbers became all a blur. Slowly, they were being eradicated from his consciousness as the true purpose of his visit drew near.

--Let you off anywhere? asked the cabman.

--Oh, God no, said Kogard. --Turn on Belmont. Let me off somewhere in the middle of the street.

It was the next left, a street lined with four-story brick town homes, sidewalks crowded with tree boxes; a canopy of vestigial beauty ran above the cab. Finally, away from the chaos, here he was on the street of the first house he had bought with his *Monolith* money, which he had lost in the settlement, which contained his old life. He was consumed by the feeling he had had when he drank the gin. The memories. This is the feeling of inverted epiphany, when one has a deep realization of something he has long forgotten. It is more beautiful. It is equally painful.

--Here good?

--Sure.

--\$13.75.

Kogard handed the man a twenty through the plexiglass divider and exited the car. His feet hit Federal City concrete. It was hard on the spirit. He took a deep breath as the cab sped off, looking for some poor drunk biddy to carry home with her new living dildo; in taking his breath he had filled his lungs with exhaust. He coughed. He pulled out a cigarette, lit it, drew the smoke in deep, turned around and looked up and down the street. To his left, 18<sup>th</sup> Street: alive with people dead inside. To his right: uncertainty. The house at 1892. It had a rainbow flag on the front door. He suddenly felt short of breath, dizzy. The buzz came again. He walked to the sidewalk and took a seat on a random porch while he smoked, his head spinning. Doubt filled the air. Is she even there? Will she be surprised? Will she be happy? Who will answer the door?... Who will answer the door?...

He cleared his thoughts as one does in meditation; tried to focus only on the cigarette. Inhale. Exhale... Inhale...

He flicked the butt into the street and got up in the way people often do when trying to convince themselves they're not drunk—slowly, hands on the knees, can I do this? sure, I'm fine...no, I'm not fine, back in the seat...okay, one more time...you can do this...here we go.

As if by way of a wrinkle in time, Kogard found his fist hovering over the LGBT banner hung upon the front door of house 1892. He smiled at this, the fist in solidarity, and knocked three times, lightly, not loud enough to rouse someone inside dreaming. He stepped back from the door and almost hoped they were dreaming. He hoped he was dreaming. When the door cracked open, he could have sworn he was.

When it fully revealed the room it had concealed, who was standing at the bottom of it holding the knob but a miniature female version of Walter Kogard himself, standing not three feet tall and wearing a large flannel shirt over black polkadotted tights. Her black hair was tied into two ponytails.

Kogard smiled the kind of polite smile one wears in the face of the sublime, and glanced down at the little giggling girl with gentle eyes. She looked as if she knew how truly silly this tall man was, how much he had lost in the end, his folly and his sorrow. But he tried to clear those thoughts now, and said, Didn't your mother ever tell you never to open the door for strangers?

With her little index finger on her smiling bottom lip she said, Ur not a stranger, ur my daddy.

The magnitude of it was too much to comprehend immediately.

--How did you know I was your daddy before you opened the door?

--I saw u out the window.

--Well, how do you know I'm your daddy?

--Mommy has a picture. Just one, that she keeps in the kitchen cabinet. Ur wearing a black sweater in it. U have on a suit now, but u still have those funny glasses.

Kogard began to tear up. Little Cassie, looking newly concerned, dropped her hand to her side.

--Y r u crying, Mister Daddy?

--Because, little Cassie. You're so grown up.

--I'm 6 now, she said holding up five fingers.

Kogard wiped his cheek. He began to kneel down, to see her eye-to-eye, but he stopped and straightened himself back up. His voice cracked. --Are your mommies here?

--Yea. But Mommy said if u ever come not to let u in without her permission.

--Will you get her please, my darling?

Cassie ran into the house leaving the door wide open. --Mommy, Daddy's here! She ran upstairs and he could hold it back no longer; the reservoir of his emotions broke through the hitherto resilient dams of his eyelids. He cupped his hands to his face. How it felt, how it felt...he couldn't even express...it was the kind of initial feeling that can only be conveyed through cliches; nothing could come close to explaining...his precious words failed him. It dawned upon him like the light touch of an angel...could only be expressed by what fell short in comparison; it was greater than the moment he knew that he wanted to write for the rest of his life, that he was good at it; it was greater than the sound of his agent's voice saying his first book had been accepted for publication; it was greater, still, than seeing her mother for the first time in an Empire bookstore all those years ago...it was the feeling of being consumed by the light at the end of the tunnel...in raptures... He looked down; he had stained the front of his shirt with tears.

Footsteps resounded from upstairs, and hushed speech between two women. The footsteps walked across the floor and began to descend the creaking wooden steps. They were her footsteps, he knew her cadence. She rounded the last flight, came down to the landing, and stopped, facing him from the other side of the foyer. *Oh...*, he shuddered; that porcelain nymph. She looked at him coldly with saucerous blue eyes. He had always said she looked like Twiggy, perfectly androgynous, or Christina Ricci in

*Monster.* Pout of her lips, perked for him to never kiss again. Her short blonde bob bobbed as she took two tiny steps with her tiny legs and crossed her arms as she leaned against the wall. She wore a large Dave Von Ronk tee shirt, and sweatpants which looked as if they'd been hastily thrown on. Her tiny feet were bare. Not five-and-a-half feet tall, she was Nicte.

--Hello, Mickey Mouse, Kogard said, turning his gaze to the flood. --You used to like it when I called you Mickey Mouse.

--Yeah, she said in one hard syllable, and accidentally cracked a smile which she immediately pulled away. --You got a lotta nerve coming here to *my* home at this fucking hour.

--Nerve's all I got these days.

They shared something unexpressed through countenance or speech. But it was there, something light and familiar which caused the air to rise.

--May I come in?

-- ... Fine. But you're not staying.

--I know, he said stepping in, closing the door behind him. --I just wanted to talk.

--Why?

-- ... Um ... He didn't really know. He had simply intuited, and now, mouth agape, he stood speechless as an ass.

--Well ... what the fuck?

--I ... I came down from Empire ... I had a strong feeling.

--About what? She tapped her *ts* as if with a hammer.

--About ... maybe it would be a good time to talk.

--Oh really?

He shrugged.

Someone heavier than a child came down the stairs and stopped halfway. Tall, slender, big-tits hanging in her v-neck t-shirt.

*Go away you ovary-munching cuckold holding whore bitch, this doesn't concern you.* --Hello, Jo, said Kogard. --I just want to thank you for letting me into your house. So that Nicte and I may have a talk.

--Everything okay, baby? Jo asked Nicte without turning her incinerating glare from Kogard's direction.

--Yeah, it's okay. It won't be long.

Jo lingered on him a while longer and then went back upstairs.

*Yeah, go watch some Ellen, cunt.*

--So...what the fuck do you want to talk about?

--Do we have to talk standing up?

--I intend to go to bed soon.

--May I at least have a cup of coffee?

--No you may not, motherfucker.

--Okay...may I have some water?

--They serve water at bars.

--Okay...um....listen, why such hostility?

--Why such—? She rubbed her hands over her face. --My lawyer told you everything during the trial. Or were you too inebriated to hear, you sociopath, narcissistic, drunk piece of shit?

--Okay, right, yes, I was that person. But that's in the past.

--Yeah, it's in the past! Where you abandoned us! Your fucking daughter. I loved you. I supported you. And you become—y—you know what? Why are you here? You can't make up for putting your romantic ideal of being a writer before your family. So it's not your's anymore. Go back to fucking Empire. And live your fucking writer's life.

--Hey, I wanted to just explain. I'm not looking for redemption or anything.

--Don't speak to me in your fucking thematic terms, Walt! I don't give a fuck what you call this! I don't care if you're sober. Go away. I don't fucking respect you anymore. I cleaned your vomit out of the crib—you know what—go, just go.

He approached her then and joined his hands. --Please, please, please, I just want you to say...

--Say what?

--Just say that the past is in the past, and that we can move forward. Just say that you can let me be in the girl's life again. At least marginally.

--MARGINALLY??!?!??

--I mean—

--YOU WERE MARGINAL BACK THEN! I WANT YOU NOW ERADICATED COMPLETELY. IT'S BAD ENOUGH THAT YOU TRAUMATIZED HER TONIGHT WITH YOUR PRESENCE. LEAVE MY FUCKING HOUSE.

He started to breathe heavily. He got down on one knee. --Please, please hear me. I miss you both so much.

--Go. Fuck. Yourself.

He started to cough. --Please, I'm different. He began to wheeze. He tried to expel words but coughs ensued in their place. He doubled over. His lungs were shriveling, he hacked and hoarsed and fell on the floor. He was a crushed water bottle again. His vision became distorted. Blackouts in his field of vision...

--Don't have an asthma attack on me, motherfucker! Don't. Do not!

He heard a voice come from somewhere which sounded far away: Baby, he's the father of your child. Be a little reasonable. We've all be hurt.

--He's a pure and fucking asshole.

--For God's sake, he looks like he's dying.

--He does this all the fucking time.

--He needs the nebulizer.

--FUCK! UGH!

--It's in Cassie's room, I'll get it.

Dddiiiiizziiinnneesss...vvooiicceesss --*What's happening to Daddyyy???*  
--*Goo ttoo yyoouurr rroomm!!! Mmyy eexx-wwiiff ee iiss ffuucckkiinn gg ccrraazy...*  
blllacckkoouutt ... lliigghhtss, bllliinnddiinn gg ...

#### IV.

He woke up on the couch in the living room breathing in the sour taste of Abuterol vapor. He felt the tense rubber straps of the mask on the back of his head. His vision came progressively back into focus. He looked about him. Cassie lay on the floor writing in her journal. He sat up.

--Awake! squealed Cassie. --I didn't want u 2 die.

Kogard swung his legs over the edge of the couch and adjusted the mask on his face. He looked at the nebulizer laying beside him, then back at Cassie. --Thank you. What time is it?

--Past my bedtime! But Mommy Jocelyn said I could stay up with u. She's in the kitchen drinking grown-up water. Mommy went 2 sleep. She tired herself out from yelling.

--Your other Mommy said you could stay with me?

--Yah. But Mommy still is mad. She's always mad.

--I know.

--Mommy said u have 2 go when ur done with ur treatment. I have 2 take treatment sometime, too.

--It sucks, right.

Cassie jerked her head back making a smiling "O" with her mouth. --U made a swear.

--No I didn't.

--Mommy says it's a swear.

--Your mommy has no right to talk... Nevermind.

Cassie went back to writing. She began to draw what looked like a hollow "M."

--What are you writing there? asked Kogard.

--I'm writing about a pony I want. She flipped the book around and showed Kogard the page. --He's going 2 b blue. He has pink hair.

--That's very nice. She turned the book back around and continued drawing. --Blue and pink ponies are very rare, you know.

--I know. But I'll find it. I always find rare stuff. I found a purple rock once.

--That's nice.

Silence permeated the house. The muffled sounds of Adam's Morgan debauchery had ceased. It must have been past four. The only sounds: a pencil scribbling, the tinkering of a glass in the next room.

Then Cassie asked, Where have u been?

-- ... Empire City.

--Ohhhh, that's far away. Why were u so far away from me? Don't u love me?

--Of course I love you. More than anything in the world. Mommy was just fed up with me, so she sent me away.

--She calls u an ass-hole.

--Now you made a swear.

--I'm sowwy. I just said what Mommy said. She says that all the time, but I think ur nice.

--Thank you.

--I wish u would visit me more.

--Me too.

He looked up. Jocelyn was standing in the light of the kitchen doorway. --Cassie, she said. --Time to go. Say goodnight to Daddy.

Cassie stood up and folded her notebook and pencils. --Bye-bye, Mister Daddy, she said, and hugged him. Kogard drew her in tight. He held her in his arms for all too short an eternity. Her hair smelled of lavender. Her skin smelled like a newborn's. He kissed her. She kissed him back. Then she walked away clutching her notebook to her chest and went up the stairs. Kogard looked at Jocelyn and began to cry.

--You have to go now, she said, in a low voice.

--I know, he said, drying his tears. He pulled off his mask and got up. -- ... Can I ever see her again? Anywhere? I know, obviously, I'm not welcome in this house.

--You may. You have to call me before you come. And, of course, not in this house. The museum. Somewhere. I'll have to be with you. She walked over and gave Kogard a piece of paper with her phone number on it. He put it in his pocket.

--Thank you.

--...

--Thank you for letting me stay with her tonight.

--You're her father. If you have the capacity to, if you are responsible enough to, I want you to be in her life. But, you understand, you and Niete ....

He nodded, drying the streaks.

--I'll walk you out.

As she opened the door, he said, I'll call you in a week, then turned and looked to the dark out of doors. --I love her, you know that. Both of them .... But I hurt them.

She looked at him with a knowing smile.

--You're not too bad yourself, either.

She gave a single chuckle and said, Goodnight, Walter.

And the door closed behind him, locked. And he was outside again, under the dark canopy of night and all infinite space, the universe enclosing him. Another journey, successful or not, had been undergone.

The past was there and the now was in front of him. He moved on with the conviction that, if nothing else from that period in his life, he could reconnect with little Cassie. Some things are lost to time; other things, the things one truly values, can be salvaged. He had indeed made progress. He would telephone in a week. Cassie would love to see the paintings of horses at the American Art Museum. He lit a cigarette and walked down the steps, turning toward 18<sup>th</sup> Street, and he dried his eyes and smiled for he had taken action on this matter; too late, yes, unfortunately, but it was an action nonetheless. One can't move forward in this life without making some kind of progress. And forward he went now into the dark unknown, in this familiar city which was now a different city, also having moved forward, for better or for worse; moving just to keep going, going just to keep sane.

Change returns success  
going and coming without error.  
Action brings good fortune,  
sunset.

V.

Not a star could be seen in the night sky. Apropos, that the light of civilization obscures the natural light of the universe. It is a false enlightenment, indeed.

Passing U Street, Kogard felt his soles wearing thin. They were the only dress shoes that he owned: fine hand-made Italian leather, scooped up in a consignment store on East 87<sup>th</sup> Street in Empire. He had worn them little, for rarely did he need to go impress people, but the man who had worn them before him must have been an avid walker. The merchant had advised that the shoes might need spiffing, but for Kogard, a thrift find was what-you-see-what-you-get. Good shoes they were, but worn thin. And now they seemed in Kogard's possession to be failing their purpose. Shoe soles moved from body to body through the reincarnation of thrift stores. They were used, a given, and yet the merchant had decidedly valued them closer to their retail than to the norm of that sort of establishment. A rare find, surely, but should they have been priced so high? From whence is value extracted, from the origins or from the present state? It's not where you've been but where you are. He walked passed sleeping storefronts, taking a rest from bouquets, dog services, American cuisine, LGBT law services. He felt his sole wear thin in the night; too much pressure from too many bodies; too little relief from hard sidewalks. Walking is the stuff of lost souls.

It is of no consequence to dwell on things of the past. You internalize it to deal with the present. Learn, automate, and forget, like the butcher, so that the knowledge of it may flow from you uninhibited by conscious awareness, smooth as water's way.

He walked down deserted 18<sup>th</sup> Street toward Dupont Circle in search of a hotel.

In return for ingratitude, white man expect gratitude, from those he neglect and oppress.

Hey, come on now, that's not all true.

White man say to the oppressed, Get over it! We changed men now! That oppression long in the past.

I didn't oppress her!

In same way you did not oppress my people? The influence of drink on part of the drinker and victim... Is it same way you did not oppress the African slave? The mulatto babies you routinely begot? Abandoned and put to work, not as kin or men, but as a hoe. And to the resulting generations: Get over it. That is in the past.

I didn't have slaves.

Ahh, but 'course. 'Tis of no consequence to dwell on things of past. But in the now, white man must acknowledge present repercussions of those actions. Must always strive for progress in the spirit of humanity.

Didn't I try to make progress tonight? Huh?

You may have. Repercussions of past actions, though, will not go unseen.

But I'm trying now.

Try as you may, but do not disregard the hurt inflicted in past that exists presently. Do not brush off feelings because you feel adequate time passed. Emotion, memory, they transcend time.

So what do I do? Huh?

Do try to right past wrongs. Live in the now and work for betterment of heart and mind of world and kin. But do not expect forgiveness. Present always contain trace of that which it is no longer, that which come before. The *heimlich* in *unheimlich*.

Oh, so you're German now?

Silence.

...Don't get tied down to commitments made in the past. Be mindful of them, surely, but one can always move forward from the present in a better direction...

Dark of night, pool of light; silence of both the internal mind and external world, such that Kogard could not be sure where the former ended and where the latter began. The streets of old Federal City embodied him. These old brick row houses. He observed them under the great shadow; objectively, if there is such a nature, they were more beautiful than anything in Empire. They were grand, historic, in and unto themselves. They possessed a great majesty, as did the old Negro homes of Uniontown in Southeast, as did the mansions of Upper Northwest; they were all majestic, as a vision of home in one's mind should be. His darling Nichte. Home. She was as majestic as the Capital building, and equally as inaccessible.

He took out a cigarette and lit it... The world weighs on me. But as long as I am here I have to deal with it. Smoking is my personal crutch. You find things of the world that alleviate the weight. The river of life drags you on; often one feels like one is drowning in it. One feels like a water droplet. It drags you down, merely threatening to drown you, but drown you must, sooner or later; you suffer in the current. And yet, through it all, the river sings joyful participation in the sorrows of the world. All of life is suffering; one must find joy in the suffering; and what is more joyful and suffering to the body than cigarettes?... He exhaled a great bellowing cloud of smoke, sent it up to mingle with the others in the sky.

He took a right onto New Hampshire Avenue and came upon the bright white light of The Dupont Circle Hotel. Hotels, always open, always inviting to weary travelers. He walked into the lobby, a sleek modern piece of work overwhelmed with geometry, approached the concierge, and said, I'd like a room for a night.

--Or at least what's left of it, right? the young fresh-faced boy said looking up.  
--Any luggage?

--Do you see any?

--It's okay, this time of night makes people cranky.

Kogard twisted his eyebrow but the concierge had gone back to looking at the computer screen hidden under the desk.

--Okaayy, the concierge dragged on, We have room 209 for \$140 if that's alright.

--Perfectly fine.

--I'll need a credit card.

Kogard handed it to him.

--Okey-dokey, let me work my magic, aaaanndddd, you're all set, he said looking up. He handed the card back, along with a plastic swipe-key. --Good thing you don't have any luggage. The bellhops take a break at three. Ha Ha Ha, I'm just kidding. They don't work at night. Alrighty then, bye-bye. He immediately went back to looking



at the screen, which was probably displaying his Facebook page. Kogard tried to give the boy a last unamused grimace, but to no effect. He went to the elevators.

On the second floor, Kogard followed the respective arrow down a silent hallway flooded with white light. It lent the impression of being filled with radiation, or of being the corridor of a mental asylum. The walls were all white and unadorned. This hotel was much too sleek for his taste. It had that Apple minimalism. Everything perfectly scrubbed and arranged, like a bland Kubrick knockoff. He much preferred the company of cockroaches and the smell of asbestos when he was staying abroad. He would at least have liked a single painting, and, for God's sake, something other than color field. Hotels have a hard-on for large color field paintings, trying to appeal to all guests, sterilize the place, just like everything had become these days: sterile. Get a statue of a nude, at least. Go as far as a collection of 4'x7' Terry Richardson prints. Now that's a hotel he would like to say in.

He approached room 209, then looked up and down the hall. It was all too quiet. He wondered how many people were staying in this hotel at this moment. How many of them were asleep? How many fucking an escort? The demographic? Old ladies? Traveling salesmen? --Cocks! he yelled. Then he swiped his room key and went inside.

He turned on the lights. More of this modern, sterile minimalism. He wanted to throw up on the walls just to give the room some character. White walls. Off-white, actually. Or eggshell. He could never remember which was which. The bedding was a bright white accented with two deep-black throw pillows. A sharply-edged circular table sat beside it on which lay a cylindrical lamp. A desk and a black swivel chair by the window. The carpet was striped. He went to the side of the bed closest to the window and sat down, loosened his tie, and kicked off his failing shoes. A small desk of drawers lay on this side of the bed. After he removed his jacket and threw it across the room, he opened the top drawer. He had always, using the pen so cordially provided by the hotel, drawn dicks on more or less every page of the Gideon Bible. But in that drawer he was not met with the satisfaction of potential vandalism. Someone, either as a joke, or, more likely, out of a genuine sense of duty to universal knowledge, had replaced the Bible with a burgundy-colored hardback book beautifully engraved in gold which read

Engaging in the Conduct  
of the Bodhisattvas

by  
Shantideva

This text Kogard had been privy to during some of his studies at the University. In the original Tibetan it was called *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*. He had not read it in depth then; and even if he had dedicated to it the attention it deserved, at age sixteen he would not have been able to comprehend its magnitude. But, as he lay his eyes on it now, its silent presence consumed him, its golden edged pages beckoned a pry within. This was surely no mistake of the universe, that he had been given this room tonight. Isn't it funny how the incidentals, the events which are easily overlooked, are all the more relevant to our lives? The universe falls into place as it should—no—not as it should, as it may. The progress of time may be a matter of chance, from one singular event to the next, but there are no accidents. There is no purpose, and there are no accidents. It is the duty of the

sentient one to attribute to and excavate the meaning of even the most minute details of one's life. There is meaning in the depths of all things, in which enlightenment ferments. He shut off the overhead light and turned on the bedside lamp, then picked up the book. In his hands, it lay directly in the line of illumination, the cover's gold engraving sparkling. No accident here. There is meaning in this encounter, as there is in all encounters. He opened the book and flipped through it before he returned to the first page. Each page contained the Tibetan text on the left side and the English translation on the right.

All of life is suffering.

We have fallen...and must strive now toward enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings... The Buddha's words, having been taught to him in that class years ago, flooded his mind again. *Paradise Lost* of the East, we might say. --Okay, universe, Kogard said to no one and to all, The ball is in your court. He reclined in his bed and began to read...

VI.

As if in a trance, Kogard was startled out of his reading by the sound of a man near his door. He closed the book and looked over at the clock on the bedside table: 5:21 AM. He suddenly wanted a cigarette. Setting his book down, he swung his legs to the side of the bed and laced up his tattered soles, then tip-toed for no particular reason to the front door.

He checked his shirt pocket and opened the door to find that the sound which had come earlier had been someone dropping off the morning *Post*. He scooped it up, stuck it under his arm, and took the elevator downstairs.

He had always wondered when the newspapers got printed. If they got to his door at this time, then that would mean they print news that had only happened up to the time of publication, say, 3:00 AM. Obviously the internet is a more effective way of getting news, the second-by-second Twitter updates, but does that necessarily mean that newspapers should be eradicated? I suppose. Considering the internet, it's just not viable, financially or practically. Newspapers are like the old geezer who sits in the coffee shop all day having ordered just one espresso, taking up room from the rest of the customers. Okay, perhaps at this point in our history, newspapers are extraneous. But literature is a different story. Books are entirely necessary. Kogard found himself in doubt as he walked through the lobby. He stuck a cigarette between his lips and had his lighter ready. Is it that books really are integral to our culture, or is this just some romantic attachment that I don't want to let go? To say the effect of a book is the same in e-format, though, is just plain wrong. The electronic format trivializes art. It makes art less than a creation. A piece of literary art deserves its own medium, like a painting on a canvas; the artist has at least worked that hard, right? No matter if you sell a real book for the same price as an e-book, the dollars and cents may be the same, the text may be the same, but the medium of dissemination is vulgarized. The artist is no longer a singularity as (s)he should be. Imagine taking all of the great paintings, digitizing them, and then uploading them to an electronic gallery. Not the same is it? A painting needs a canvas to achieve its effect. Likewise, literature needs a book to achieve its effect.

Digital art exists and is quite alright; so do e-books. But the integrity of great art, new and old, must be kept nonetheless.

He got outside, lit his cigarette, and opened the paper. He scanned down the headlines; most of them uninteresting, another rebellion in the desert, another scam on the gullible... And then he saw it.

--Ohhh..., he said, a pit growing in his stomach.

VWH PULLS OUT OF AMAZON; LONE INDEPENDENT PUBLISHER

--Well Holy fucking shit. This is going to get ugly.

The article read:

VESAK WORD HOUSE Publishers, Inc., announced earlier today that they are pulling their titles from Amazon's distribution. This leaves the independent publishing house out in the cold as the only publisher of physical books not to be a subsidiary, client, or partner of Amazon.com, Inc.

Vesak Word House routinely publishes and/or has pending contracts with such critically acclaimed authors as Walter Kogard, V.W. Athens, Michael Davis, and Britt Dehner Moorman.

The company's Twitter post at 1:20 AM read, "Our authors are more skilled, widely known, and financially viable than the entirety of your shit-lit empire. @Amazon, go [expletive] yourself."

--That fucking idiot. Horton, you drunk of a fuck.

Kogard sucked down the rest of his cigarette and went inside to the payphones at the end of the lobby, fished some change out of his pocket, and dialed Horton Tenenbaum's cellphone.

A dial tone, then, Hello?

--What the fuck is going on, Horton?

--Oh shit, yeah. Well, first of all, why don't you have a cell phone? We were going to call you.

--Doesn't matter. I read the paper in Federal City today. This is national fucking news.

--No shit.

--I thought you weren't going to bring it up to the company.

--It was earlier. Couple hours after I left yours. We were drunk. I let it slip. I said, 'Listen, we're letting Amazon fuck us up, right, left, and down. Why did we get into this business? Why did we start this company? To let it go to shit? To let it get stomped out by a fucking monster, or worse, eaten? Assimilated?' We got into this to publish great books by great authors, Kogard. We were all English majors, we weren't business guys. We were idealists. And now these fucking sweeping acquisitions are happening. And we were fucking next if we didn't take action. We would have been muscled out of the game. We can't keep up with their rates. I said to my guys, we have enough steam in our authors to survive on our own. We have a following. People *look* for a Vesak Word House book. Even if they don't know the author, they buy it based on the community

that we've formed. It's about what we represent, Kogard. We're not a bottom-line kind of publisher. We don't take the most sensible or financially-savvy business route. We want to make great literature in the way that we fell in love with it. You know what's going to happen soon, right? With every publisher in their pocket, Amazon's going to shift the entire industry over to e-book in one fail swoop. I'm not fucking having that, Okay. What you said to me earlier really got to me. And when I expressed it to my partners, they got the same fire in their belly. We're not conforming. We're not going to become a part of the conglomerate. We don't need their fucking distribution. We'll stay independent. So what if we don't make as much as we could have. It's about the principle.

--I tell you, Horton, you've really surprised me.

--Yeah, well, it's not all dandy right now, either. This little revolution of ours isn't going unpunished by King Amazon. We hear they're taking some legal steps to try and quell any remaining indie publisher who's trying to publish, physically or electronically. The acquisitions were just the beginning, Kogard, you know that. They want unchallenged monopoly over the industry. And they don't want to have to be filling their warehouse space with books anymore. They're going to try as hard as they can to squash us, K. It's going to be all-out warfare.

--Do you know what's in the works?

--Not exactly. But we hear that their guys are on Capital Hill as we speak. If you ask me, some *Fahrenheit 451* shit is going down. I'm talking about the legal eradication of printed literature as a whole. They could have a strong argument with Congress, especially on a homeland security basis. Unregulated printed literature disseminates radical ideas among the people, causes unrest, riots, et cetera. They want to make the e-book the only way to read, man. Fuck, man.

--Calm down, calm down. Why do you even think they want to deal with a small press like you? It's not like you threaten them financially.

--It's about the principal, K. They want monopoly. They don't want rogue publishers. It's about total consolidation. They can control what people read, how they read, and so on and so forth. Politicians, lobbyists, big business, they'll all go to Amazon to get political propaganda into the peoples' e-readers. And they'll do it under the veil of "literature." They're going to publish stupid books, like they've been doing, to dumb the population down, and also include politically underhanded messages in literature to control national sympathies. This is about power. Information is power, understand. We can't exist for them. We complicate and oppose their total power. They want our complete annihilation, I'm telling you.

--But there's still the entire front of the internet left for disseminating literature.

--Blogs and shit? They don't have that kind of leverage. A good-sized company like ours still has the marketing and distributing power that Amazon doesn't like. We can still get volatile work out to the masses. Professionally printed literature has a power that people take for granted. It has a kind of seal-of-approval on it. People will take printed literature more seriously than blog shit. And if we decide to publish some shit that criticizes Amazon and their allies, then people will get their hands on it, take it seriously, pass it word-of-mouth. French Revolution, man. The press is the origin of dissent among the masses. I'm telling you, our press is their target.

--And there are no other publishers with our kind of audience?

--All dried up. It's a fucking waste land. They either can't afford to distribute, or they still have their business senses and have already gone with the big dog. We're the last frontier.

--So what does this mean for you? What are you all going to do about this?

--Oh, my friend, just you see. We're working on that at this very moment. Preparations are being made. Something monumental. You'll see it when you get back and I'm sure you'll be impressed.

--Okay, well, I'll be in the city tomorrow. Let me know what's up then.

--They're moving fast, K!

--I'll be there tomorrow!

He hung up. His heart was pounding. He needed another cigarette so he went back outside.

There was something ... something ... something that wasn't completely setting in. It was all too awe-inspiring. But he couldn't tell what kind of awe it was, or how much. If there was only some awe to it, it was awesome; but if it was filled with awe, it was awful. He couldn't tell how awful or awesome this was. It was exciting, though. He had to say that. No matter how terrified or fully supportive he was, he had to admit, he was all too excited for whatever was to come next. He was with VWH one hundred percent. He, Walter Kogard, was now the revolutionary.

He flicked his jack into the street and returned to his room. The smoke had leveled him out; now he had an ache to write something, anything.

Inside he went to his jacket pocket and retrieved his notebook, sat at the desk, and let a bit of calm wash over himself for a moment. He let his thoughts distil. He felt the weight of the air on his shoulders until he could no longer distinguish between his own flesh and the world around him, as if they'd melted into one being. Pen in hand, he pressed it to the paper, then he glanced over at his shoes, and wrote:

I've only had one pair of shoes. Lately, they've been falling apart. And yesterday, the very sole of the shoes of my life began to come unsewn. They flopped on my feet as I walked and, today, I decided to cut those soles loose. My shoes now have no soles. When I walk, I feel every pebble and discrepancy in the sidewalk. I feel it all.

I realized. I discovered how people go crazy. They realize things they were never supposed to know. They take a step back.

There was a volcano under Yellow Stone National Park—underground—which, apparently, encompassed the state of Wyoming. And when it erupted, people said, the ash was supposed to cover the entire western hemisphere. And as the ash settled on the buildings, they said, the weight would get so great that all of the buildings would collapse. We would become extinct as a civilization, like the dinosaurs.

I use the past tense here because that volcano has erupted. In preparation, the government has leveled all of the buildings and all of the people

have moved underground. They live as they had lived above ground—  
immersed in their computers.

Everyone except me.  
I stayed above...

That volcano was the elevator shaft of the earth; it led down to the  
boiler room. When it erupted, it brought Hell on earth. But to be truthful, I  
think Hell has long been empty, and all of the devils are here.

## VII.

He tried to go to sleep as morning twilight sprinkled in through the window, but he was  
roused again to the pad:

My bed sits next to a window  
This is the insomniac's plight:  
I'm falling asleep but every time  
I open my eyes: MORE BRIGHT!

My bed sits next to my desk  
This is the poet's plight:  
I'm falling asleep but every time  
I close my eyes: MORE WRITE!  
(it mocks me.)

## VIII.

Kogard awoke from four hours of sleep with a haze over his vision. It was not one of  
those horrible groggy hazes, but of the sort that persists the morning after one has  
smoked copious amounts of marijuana before going to bed. The world seemed to exist  
on a cloud, or perhaps in the midst, as in a waking dream. He checked out of the Dupont  
Circle Hotel and entered the outdoors intending to catch an eight o'clock bus back to  
Empire, sleep for a while in his own bed, then find Horton Tenenbaum to see what was  
up. He would also see Fredo Martinelli. Between then and now, though, the events were  
to have no structure. A day in the city, impulsive, see the neighborhoods, be a vagrant in  
one's home ...

Walking west into Georgetown, down to M Street, then up Wisconsin Avenue, Kogard  
stopped at Wingo's carryout for french fries with Mambo Sauce. There was no indoor  
seating; in fact, it had very little room for the customer to do anything except order and  
leave, so after he placed his order he sat on the curbside bench to await his order from the  
walk-up window. Beside him sat a man who appeared at first glance to be homeless.  
What was odd, however, was that he carried no baggage. A soul without a home will  
often haul their life around in tattered bags, in pushcarts or stolen grocery baskets; but  
he'd somehow absolved himself of such burdens, a convenience which revealed a  
placidity in his countenance. He wore sandals which exposed his yellow toenails,

calloused soles. His white shirt, stained, was half-tucked-in to his coarsely-woven brown pants, altered and frayed at the shin. A canteen hung around his body by a length of rope. His face, a handsome mixture of Chinese, Latino, and Indian, which was neither youthful nor aged, was serene and very clean. His eyes were closed and his head fell slightly back, but it was clear that he was not delinquently asleep, but merely enjoying the sunshine as he rested on the bench. His arms and legs were crossed, and tied to his left wrist by a black rubber band was a smooth white stone. Of all things, it was this stone which drew Kogard's attention. It was as an egg, fragile and full. He looked into the man's calm face and asked, What's that on your wrist?

He slowly opened his eyes and glanced toward Kogard as if he were an expected friend, one he had planned to meet in this location at this exact time. He said, in an implacable accent, This is a stone I found in Dupont Circle. Yesterday, you may know, His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama visited this city for a conference on physics and belief, and while here he took a walk through the park. It is rumored that he left behind several stones that have no earthly business being in that location.

--Interesting. Must be quite good fortune that you've come across it.

--One can never be sure about these things. But I took it just in case. The man winked at Kogard. --His Holiness' compassion may, through this stone, touch me and, through me, touch all those I encounter.

--Fourteenth Lama, huh?

--The fourteenth reincarnation of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. Bodhisattva of compassion. I am not Tibetan, nor do I subscribe to the *Gelung* school, but these things interest me, as should such powerful schools of thought interest any learning person. He winked again.

--Fourteen reincarnations?...Fourteen bodies... Imagine the state of those soles.

--Excuse me? the man said, more out of interest than reproach.

--Imagine the state of those shoes, I mean. Surely, their soles've been worn thin from the activity of fourteen lives.

The man laughed in a great gut-giggling manner characteristic of the full and jolly. --I am sure they walk lightly through their lives. They are, after all, near transcendence.

Imagine the state of the sole after fourteen lives...

Wind whistled through the silence. The man said, When the previous Lama dies, a special assembly is sent out into the world to search for the reincarnated soul of the Lama in a baby boy. The boy must have been born on the day the Lama passed. They present these potential Lamas with the possessions of the deceased. If the baby is drawn toward the Lama's possessions, as opposed to intermixed false relics, then they know they have found his reincarnated soul. I do not think, however, and I may be wrong, that the Lama's shoes are included among these artifacts.

--So...the Lama's soul may be reincarnated in any body?

--Surely. I feel as though I've heard that a white baby had once, for perhaps a short period, been deemed the reincarnated Lama. But I don't know if that is true.

At length, Kogard said in a low voice, Any soul could then potentially descend upon any body when it is freed? ... I wonder if there is a method to the madness, whether bodies in a certain place or circumstance deserve the soul they are given.

--Ha ha ha! Madness!

--Well, what I mean is, are souls given bodies based on karma or what? Might a soul weighed with bad karma be reincarnated in the body of a suffering child in Africa? I guess I want to say, I think about how ... lucky ... I got, to be born into the comfort of America, to have the gift of talent, to be financially secure.

--Residual good karma from past lives, perhaps. You've been blessed for your past actions of goodness.

--But I often feel guilty. Living the artist's life, as I do. I often see desperation on the news. Little African boys without food or shoes, frighteningly malnourished. Little girls raped daily in the Sudan. All the shit going on in Southeast Asia. The Arab Spring and that whole thing. I feel guilty for my good circumstance. Why was my soul reincarnated in *this* body, out of all of them? I could have been a mental case, a refugee, impoverished in Burma... I feel guilty all the time. In Empire City, I saw a black woman beat her child to the ground on the subway. There is such tragedy in the world and I was conveniently born out of the way of it.

--That guilt is your compassion, the sign of a wise and aged soul. The poor of the world, unfortunately, are ill-suited. Those unfortunate situations are simply the result of circumstance. The soul suffers in one way or another on this earth. As our soul progresses through its lives and copes with suffering, future karma is based on the actions made in each past life regarding that suffering. We simply must deal with the situation we are given. The soul is rewarded with good deed, that is to say, the universe balances good deed with good karma, and in the next life, a better-fitted suit. But there will always be suffering. You, sir, your soul has suffered greatly in the past lives, and dealt with that suffering through patience and goodness. Do not feel bad for the African boy with no shoes. His karma will come to him for his patience through his suffering, as had yours. The world is full of suffering, Walter Kogard, either through direct suffering or through immense compassion for those who suffer. Do not pity the poor African; through patience his karma will come.

Upon Kogard, immersed in his own thoughts, the man lay kind eyes. Kogard then looked up and said, Is it possible to have achieved enlightenment in a past life ... then fallen from it?

The man turned his attention toward the sky and said, All good deeds, cultivated over many lifetimes of patience in suffering, are destroyed in a single moment of anger. It is possible. Some souls have garnered much good karma and lost it all. They must then work again toward goodness. They go through cycles of good and ill will. That is how the soul proceeds through its lives, progressing and regressing, vibrating between two extremes like a plucked string. It takes much patience to become fully good, and transcend unto enlightenment. Old souls have progressed in karma and regressed many times. The key is patience. Here—touch this stone, close your eyes.

Kogard did as he was told. The man closed his eyes, too, and chanted something in a foreign tongue. Kogard could feel his soul through the stone, touching his. He felt the suffering of infinite lifetimes. He and the man were one in that moment, with each other, the Lama, the word, and all sentient beings. Then the man opened his eyes, Kogard opened his. The man got up. He put the stone back around his wrist and began to limp away. --I will surely meet you in another life, he said going down the



street. Kogard stared straight at the Wingo's window, yet somehow past it, suspended in this sublime feeling. He felt that his eyes were not worthy to dwell on this old young man's back. But he went to look again, to lay one more glance upon this mortal sage—yet when he looked down the street where the man had gone, he had disappeared.

In a coffee shop in Chinatown, a man in a blue pinstripe suit said to Kogard as he drank a macchiato, We have to start thinking digitally. We have to discuss how we are going to bring the archaic form of telling stories into the digital age. *Ulysses*—a great novel, surely, but the time for that kind of presentation has changed. Digital is the now. Mr. Kogard, it is of no consequence to dwell on things of the past.

--I fell in love with the novel as a bound book. There is where it holds its magic, to me. I'm not interested in digital media or any of that fancy shit. I'm interested in words—pure, unaccompanied words.

--You *must* forsake this romantic fascination with print. It's the age of the screen, man! You have to adapt or you will go extinct.

--Let me go extinct, then. I don't want to live in a digital world.

--Fine. So be it. I'll see you in Hell.

As the pinstriped man got up, Kogard said after him, Many people are like me! Many people want to keep the novel in the physical world!

The man waved his hand in dismissal as he left the shop.

Kogard was left feeling blank, deflated, empty. A random stranger had handed him his spleen on a tablet. Was he really of the old world? Is it really worth all the trouble to fight for print? Was the world advancing without him? Sure, there was no doubt about that. But, if that is so, then he would decidedly be of the old world. He would stay on the outskirts of technology. We as a country have this idea that infinite technological progress is always positive. But at a certain point, after Renaissance has been achieved, the more we progress technologically, the further we damn our race. The machines will begin to take over. Look—they have already begun: our time, our friends, our schedules, our news, our words; the last frontier is our innermost thought stream. The technological singularity will be upon us. Well! Let the human race enslave itself to the screen. But I will not follow.

(Our machines are disturbingly lively,  
and we ourselves, frighteningly inert.)

Let not art be damned to data.

In Union Station at eight o'clock in the evening, Walter Kogard bought a ticket to Empire City, boarded the bus and was taken away. A successful trip it was. He would enjoy getting back to his own bed, his own skyscrapers, his real life ... but he also shed a single tear as the bus pulled down H Street. The single tear was for the entirety of Federal City, his old universe in a single drop.

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## Phase the Fifth.

### I.

On the bus ride home, under the blanket of night, all aboard asleep save him, Kogard looked up at the stars passing at their leisure over the highway and considered the little parasites. Think of all the little parasites inside of us, going around our organs and doing what they do. Do they think themselves supreme? As we humans do? Do they think the world stops at the spleen, the rectal cavity, the placenta, what have you? Do they acknowledge the skin, far removed from them? Do you think they acknowledge the body that they're in? And us, the body, do we acknowledge them? Not really; they're insignificant. And yet they perform intimate and important duties inside of our bodies which keep us alive. We are codependent, they and us. Our existences are inextricably connected. Yet we go about our duties separately, or at least unaware of the others' impact. Imagine how necessary yet insignificant we are to the body we inhabit. One feels like a water droplet... It is absurd to think that we are the end-all-be-all of existence...isn't it? Perhaps it is a matter of interpretation. It is a matter, or non-matter, inasmuch as one gives that meaning to one's life.

Isn't it absurd how we were perchance born into this body and now have to deal with it? No one ever asked for this, and now we are forced to be human beings, to anticipate death at every corner, and, to top it off, abide by the imposed rules of the society and the time we're in. What an expectation they have for a person who never asked for this in the first place. If we are forced to deal with life's suffering in the human body, which exists ontologically, then we should be free to cope with that suffering how we please, with our own convictions of goodness and patience, free of societal constructs. Do not force me to be a citizen. Do not force me to be a human, I never asked for this. Might I go into the wilderness and live as a bear? My soul is my soul regardless of performance or body. I'll go be a bear if it suits me. Doesn't hurt nobody. How did I get here when nothing ever happened? Where will I go when nothing ever ends? Continue through the cycle, the eddies of existence, formed by a plip in the current of life; follow the formless, edgeless stream of the universe's cigarette smoke.

Karma has landed us in our situations. We cope. We remain patient. We remain good. That is the extent of the sentient journey. The annexes of structured education, the workforce, &c, they are options, created distractions, not givens. It is said that no man is an island, entire unto himself.

But the island is the mainland from the perspective of the ant.

We are all ants and men at once.

Current of life, drag me on. Deposit me along the riverbank to toil at your will. To suffer the hot sun and inconsistency of crop. Allow me to nurture the soil where I wash ashore, do my duty for the land as best I can, and wash me away again. My life of suffering working in the sun is natural, must happen time to time; but don't forget me when my deed is done, wash me away and I'll float in the sun. With all my little droplet brother and sister souls, all one. Float on, float on, you and I ... float on.

Cashmere thoughts comfort me  
before the storm hits.

II.

Dark of night; pool of light.

grandfather clock, tick, tock ...

Grandfather clock, tick, tock ... ?

Does it really, though? The world seemed merely a sphere suspended in space, the atmosphere another layer which moved independently. How do we move so quickly, and the heavens move so calm? We drive and drive along this highway, but where are we even, in relation to the others? Are we headed anywhere? Or are we moving along the circumference of a single point, ever stagnant?

Time, this time—tick, tock, tick, tock, tik, tok, ttttiicckkk, tttoocccckkk—expands and contracts at will. Or, perhaps, not with will but with non-will, effortlessness; it does not pass with action but with non-action. We may do nothing, and, tick, tock, tick, tock, it passes beyond us. Our movement and time are independent of one another, it seems, like the movement of earth and the movement of atmosphere. Time and us, we interact, but we are not conjoined. It is not steady or even. It is not a rule. Do the stars track the hours?

Not grandfather clock, tick, tock, but

g r a n d f a t h e r c l o c k  
ticktocktick o c k t i c k t o---

grandfather clock  
ticktockticktock--

g r a n d f a t h e r c l o c k  
tick. tock.

It is the current, grandfather stream, and it flows and loops, expands, contracts, indefinitely.

Was the problem with the book inherent in its premise? Is that why Kogard had not been able to get started? Can we begin with time when time has not beginning nor

end, it is merely the *begending*. Where does a story start in time? Perhaps it does not, perhaps it simply commences in the midst, in the mist, as of a fog.

To start with beginning is flawed. To be tied to temporality is flawed. The book could not have been written...because it could not sustain itself on time alone. It must be built upon space, rather, the non-space of the mind. That is where story is formed; that is where it is perceived and then chopped into minutes and hours ... but the story starts in space—the space between infinite mind and infinite universe.

The problem with the book was inherent in the beginning ... ?

Kogard's non-action in writing, it was not “writer's block” nor indecision, but patience. He had to let time pass, all of it, before he could begin again without it ...

He had not been able to get started because there was no start. He would not have been able to finish with an end in sight. Too rigorous, not natural. The beauty in writing is in the flow of words, the connections made between them, the organic wholes formed of ideas. The beauty is not in end comprehension, not in structure per say, but in the beautiful flow and incidental cohesiveness of word-beings. Remember: it is always the incidental things which are most meaningful, which offer most relevance. Forced meaning is contrived, like the light of cities obscuring the light of stars. Float on... The beauty in writing is in the midst, not in the end; for the beauty of life is in the journey, not in death—although both ends are inevitable. And after the “end” is the beginning. And in the beginning lies the end. We are in the midst, the *begending*, the *origend*.

... Like a blanket, a cigarette brings comfort. The night sky looming heavy and weightless may lend such comfort when cigarettes are not accessible. 'Tis formidable, the infinite sky, stretching up and out and onward, formidable like the prospect of death by lung cancer, yet awe-full. Sublime. Let it destroy me! one wishes to cry. Let it destroy me that I may return to the great weightless current of non being, to dwell in the sky with the other non-entities.

No time, no matter, no entity, that is where I wish to be.

Dark of night; pool of light ...

Drag me on to suffer, as is my duty in this body, that I may then return again to float and re-appreciate the lightness. My life of suffering must happen time to time; but don't forget me when my deed's done, wash me away and I'll float in the sun. With all my little droplet brother and sister souls, all one. Float on, float on, you and I ... float on.

## Chapter ∞

When we look into the night sky, we may assume that the universe extends infinitely in every direction from all around us. It exists to us in this way. It exists in the form of a possibility. We know it to exist somewhere out there even though we cannot fathom its end. In other words, the limit of the universe does not exist, but the universe itself exists. However, we may also say that earth exists. It has a weight, diameter, width, height, radius, &c, that may be measured with adequate tools. But we cannot measure the universe. It is not made of matter that may be defined by weight or size. So does it really exist? If it has no end, then there are no parameters by which we may measure it. Is something with no measurement existent? We may say that, empirically, the earth

exists, for it has parameters. But we cannot say, empirically, that the universe exists. We may have traveled to certain parts of it, but we can only account for the universe, empirically, up to the point at which we have encountered. It is very, very big, supposedly, but can we really prove that there is more of it out there? Also, consider the fact that if we were the size of ants, then the universe would seem much bigger, compared to earth. However, that is a faulty statement since infinity is infinite regardless of one's position or size within it. Be you the size of an ant or the size of the Milky Way Galaxy, there is still infinite space extending from all around you. In other words, relativity is irrelevant in regard to the infinite.

Can we say that infinity exists? Can we account for it? The answer to the latter question is “no.” So is the answer to the former question also “no?” I don't know. I am not a mathematician or physicist.

But this relates to the depths of the human mind. We cannot say, empirically, that the human mind exists. It cannot be measured or accounted for with physical tools. We can attest to the existence of brain cells, neurotransmitters, brain activity in regard to stimulants, &c., but we cannot attest to the activity of the mind, that is, how ideas are formed or how art is made from matterless thought. We all know, however, that our minds exist; we are experiencing them right now. So can we say that something that has not been empirically accounted for cannot exist? The obvious answer is no, for we feel it to exist. We experience it to exist. Might there be a difference between that which can be measured and that which can exist?

Another question is, do these things which we feel to exist but do not really exist, like the mind and the infinite universe, possibly exist only in our minds but not in the world? The world is a finite object (so we are led to believe through measurement). Within these finite parameters, might the infinite exist? In other words, between finite brain cells, might the infinite imagination exist. If it does, then it is not a part of the physical world, but otherworldly. Similarly, the infinite universe is otherworldly—it does not exist based on physical empirical data, but in between physical stays. By that I mean, while stars exist, and we may point to them with empirical data, what is beyond them does not, or is at least not proven to exist.

Perhaps the infinite universe operates like our minds; it has no limit; it is infinitely deep and contains an infinite number of possibilities or outcomes. We cannot get to the end of the universe; likewise, we cannot think to the end of our mind; they have no boundaries; one thought always leads to another; space in an infinite system always leads to more space. (I'm sure this can all be better explained in calculus.)

Based on this model, might our minds and the infinite universe be one in the same? That is, an infinite loop? By conceptualizing the infinite universe with our infinite minds, we may be attesting to the infinite existence of both. Might the universe exist within a mind, either in the mind of a single human, the collective mind of humanity, or even in the mind of an entirely other species? Might humanity, earth, and the infinite universe, be a mere brainwave within the mind of another person? Are we imagined? Or are we imagining? ...

### III.

Kogard awoke at midnight in the Ninth Avenue Empire-Federal bus station to the sound of people shuffling down the aisle. With the peace of mind that comes from having no other baggage, he hoisted up his body, followed the sullen chain gang out the bus, and hailed a cab in the direction of BoHo to his home.

In the back seat, city lights speeding past as if suspended within a long exposure shot, or perhaps being passed on all sides by Akira-esque motorcycles, Kogard lay his hands in his lap with the finger tips of his right hand lightly touching the respective tips of his left. As he calmed himself he could feel his heart beat in the tips. The stress, or whatever weight he felt upon his shoulders as a result of mere existence, slowly melted from him. The boundaries of body, cab, and world dissolved. He was the hum of the taxi's rubber tires treading uneven concrete, the gentle vibration of the steel body rocking him...

When they—the self-righteous—proclaim that smoking cigarettes damages one's body and has no benefits, and indeed retards healthy lung and mental function, consider the lung and cheek power of the chain-smoking Miles Davis, that great blaring breath of his. Consider that Sinatra smoked *while* singing; consider Hendrix, Joplin, Winehouse, Nina Simone, the list goes on and on. Is it the smoking that is really the cause, or the guilt imposed by society? These great artists smoked, lived, and died without guilt, with only the purest and fullest enjoyment of all the things life had to offer.

Hendrix's guitar playing, especially on *Electric Ladyland*, transcends the level of mere plucking and strumming, indeed, almost transcends the level of music and becomes his soul audibly expressed. (Could the argument be made that he relied too heavily on effects to achieve his virtuoso style, and that that negates his musical talent? I don't think so. For where would photography, video, architecture, what have you, be today without modification? The seeming faults or irregularities of a style or method latter become their trademark.) His fashion style is the same way. To think: this man who transcended his skin color and dawned outfits unconsidered by even the most flamboyant whitefolk was impressively ahead of his time. (Consider today the flower and animal prints that dominate fashion of both high couture and street wear). He was indeed a god. He and Dylan—the Jew who was not a Jew—Kogard thought, were the musical gods of the late-middle Twentieth Century (Hendrix in musicianship and Dylan in songwriting). They did things and embraced styles that many Americans, much less Jews and Negros, would never dare to touch.

And they were chain-smokers.

They embodied total mental and physical freedom. They were not confined by what styles came before them, no, they invented the style to come; and they may have been ridiculed at the time of their creation, for—*how ridiculous it seemed!*, but they would be the ones laughing when everyone and their mother started dawning Afros, Ray-Bans, and forest-print suits.

Dylan lives on through many different forms of expression; Hendrix has passed from our world (too rare to live!), having gone to the sea, not to die but to be reborn. One wonders, like the Lama, if his soul's equivalent exists among us today. A soul like that goes not unnoticed.

In his apartment, Kogard did not even bother turning on a light. He removed all of his clothes, grimy with experience from a trip well spent, and went straight to sleep.

IV.

He was awoken at 12:34 by a phone call on his land line. Only one of the four people alive who had it's number was likely to be on the other end, and Kogard knew the reason why.

He had gotten adequate sleep, so he was not annoyed for being woken. It is only after a time spent in foreign beds and sleeping in bus seats that one truly enjoys the unique characteristics of their own mattress and sheets.

He lit a cigarette and picked up the receiver. Fredo's voice came over the phone: K, you're home! Good. How'd it go with Nichte?

--Very badly. But I got to see Cass. It's not all lost. Lose a few, gain a few, you know. What's up?

--Well, Horton Tenenbaum wanted me to get in touch with you.

--How do you know him?

--That's the news. But about that later. He wanted me to tell you not to freak out when you see the headlines today.

--Headlines? What's going on?

--Go to a bodega. Pick up the papers. It'll be apparent. He said you would understand. And, with regard to me...I'll let you figure it out from there.

--Fredo, what the fuck are you talking about?

--We're in business together, my friend.

--What?

--It'll all make sense. Can't really say much on the phone, but, yeah. Horton and I have been talking and we've also been talking to some of my associates, purveyors of hard-to-obtain goods. And, as it would seem, books have been added to that lengthy list. So here we are, my associates, you, and I. But we'll talk of all this in depth later. Horton said to tell you that he'll meet you outside of Jack's 24/7 at about one-thirty, okay?

--*Hmph.* Okay, I see.

--Peace, God. See you later.

Kogard hung up the phone. If what he thought had happened had happened, then he might as well have gone on a trip and come home to a completely different world. He smiled to himself, snuffed his jack out. It would not be the end of the world as he knew it, not with Horton at the wheel. He put on a clean black sweater, his Dickies and Chuck Taylor's, and went to the bodega.

V.

The headlines were tempestuous.

AMAZON TO STOP CARRYING PRINT BOOKS  
AMAZON SUBSIDIARIES TO RELEASE ONLY E-BOOKS HENCEFORTH  
PRINT PROHIBITION: FEDERAL BAN ON NEW PRINTED BOOKS

AMAZON SOLE LEGAL DISPENSARY OF LITERATURE  
E-BOOK REIGNS SUPREME

If he had not been privy to the trend Kogard would not have been able to believe his eyes. But he had seen it coming. They all saw it coming.

The newspapers were displayed on interactive screens, large electronic tablets mounted to the counter of Jack's 24/7 like menus. Kogard slid his finger across the screen to view more news stories. While he was away, all of the major papers owned by the Time and News Corporation had ceased print along with books and were now available only through the mobile app. The newspaper stands which had once graced this section of the bodega were gone.

--New toys, said the clerk behind the counter. --We got them in yesterday. No more papers. Kinda sad, I think. I liked to flick them when they started to fold over. I'll miss killing flies with them.

--It's very, very sad, said Kogard irritably. --I feel like a schmuck standing here swiping my finger across a television. He walked to the counter. --Is the *Gotham Citizen* still in print? Please tell me it is.

--Ah, yes, we keep them behind the counter since, according to law, they're technically illegal along with the rest of books. He handed Kogard a copy. --The drop-off guy said that they're gonna keep printing so long as the government doesn't come along. But in all probability, it could be less than a week before they have to convert to the app or else be shut down.

The *Citizen* headlines were all over this story as well:

PRINT PROHIBITION!

FBI RAIDS VESAK WORD HOUSE PUBLISHERS

--Aww, shit! said Kogard.

--What? asked the clerk, genuinely concerned.

--Feds went after my publisher.

--VWH? I saw what they did in the papers earlier this week. They were the last indies standing, right?

--Only takes a little wind to knock over the last domino.

--Well that's just unfortunate for you. So, what now? Going the e-book route?

--Fucking never. So what's it all now? Publishers can only print electronically? Or else it's treason?

--Apparently.

--What grounds do they have for that? How is Congress allowed to ban paper?

--According to the reports, they say it's a homeland security matter. That print media allows anyone to disseminate radical and potentially dangerous ideas without government knowledge.

--First-fucking-amendment.

--Apparently, it doesn't breach the first amendment if freedom of speech can persist in another venue, namely, e-books and e-newspapers. They say people can continue business as usual so long as it's concentrated to the electronic format.

--Un-fucking-believable. Big Brother at it's fucking worst.

--Yep. Surveillance up the ass.

--Since when did writers become terrorists?



--I don't know. You all can affect how people feel about things, I guess. Why, I read a piece in the *Observer* this morning. Now I have a deep concern for fracking on North Dakota Indian reservations.

--Some fucking bullshit. Amazon really worked their magic, huh?

--Apparently they've been lobbying congress since they bought out that big one, what's the name, Random-Penguin. They knew that the only people still doing print books were Vesak Word House and a few small stragglers. They started to convert all of their publishing subsidiaries to e-format weeks and months ago. Less overhead, they say. Less cost, less storage space. But that's from the business perspective. They told Congress they'd give them access to all news and book releases with this new digital format. Now if there's any kind of attack or mass shift in politics, they can track the digital trail.

--They can also easily get the masses to read political propaganda. With Amazon suggestions and shit, they can discretely peddle their agenda to the masses in the form of lead headlines and literary titles while denying publication of anything that goes against their agenda.

--I don't know about all that. I've just been reading what the papers say about it.

--The "papers?" That you get sent to your iPad? Hah! That's not news! It's propaganda! Don't you get it?! This is the end of the free press! There's a whole bureaucracy to go through now!

--But they had that before, in the print press.

--It's different. There's a conglomerate that filters things at a macro level. And then there's the government that keeps track of it. Data collection and all that shit. You think DeLillo would have been able to publish his obsessive reveries about the ugliness of the World Trade Centers under this rule? Come 9/11, he would have been jailed for terrorist conspiracy.

--I think that's faulty reasoning. I mean, I know change is hard, but I don't think this is all bad. It does save money.

--Saving money my ass, it's infringing on my right to read and write privately, without the government seeing what I read and filtering what I put out and all that good stuff. This will have dire repercussions, I tell you!

--I don't see the big deal.

--Whatever.

--You're overreacting. This is the future. More information in less space, right?

--Fuck it. Fuck the future.

--Live in the now.

--I will. And anyway, since you're such an expert on this, what will happen to the used booksellers?

--Oh, they'll stay in business. This legislation only applies to new titles and news.

--Well, I still don't like it. Don't you just love the comfort of a book? Doesn't *opening* a book *mean* something to you?

--I never really thought about it. So long as I get the information, I'm good.

--God, we're all damned. Well then, if you want a book that may be controversial, don't you want it to be safe from censorship. Doesn't it frighten you that

the government, through Amazon, may be able to delete controversial titles at the click of a button. Our whole sense of narrative bipartisanship could be in jeopardy. The government could pretty much delete any article which sheds light on unsightly practices, or books that bash a preferred candidate. It could all become one-sided. We wouldn't be able to find true facts anymore. They could change the dates on the digital archives and things like that. They could re-write history at the click of a button.

--I really think you're overreacting.

Before Walter Kogard's head exploded, Horton Tenebaum walked into the bodega. --There you are, K.

--Excuse me, Kogard said to the clerk, I need a cigarette.

Outside, Kogard stopped to light his jack then said, I heard about the raid.

--Yeah, if you can call it that. The just came to the warehouse to reposes our printers. But we had already moved them so they just gave us a stern talking-to and said 'Any newly released printed material bearing the VWH trademark or any proof that you've been publishing books will warrant your arrest.' Pricks.

--Oh yeah?

--Yeah, it was just to scare us. We can still release electronically, though. But unfortunately the only market for e-books is Amazon, and you know how we burned that bridge. What a blow.

--Yeah, tell me about it... Wait, hold on. Where did you move the printers?

--Well, my friend, that's the good part. Come, let us walk.

## VI.

As Horton led Kogard toward 221<sup>st</sup> Street he asked, Did Fredo call you?

--Yeah.

--Good, good. He might have said that we're in business together. I'm guessing you're pretty confused as to what's going on right now.

--Not really. All of this was expected. Books as we knew them, extinct.

--Well, yeah, in a technical legal sense.

-- ... Explain ...

--French Revolution, Kogard. The state had had a controlling interest in the publication of ideas. Radial pamphlets not sanctioned by the state were then disseminated through "illegal" presses. Voltaire had to go on the lam several times for publishing statements against the monarchy.

--And this relates to the new control of literary ideas by Amazon? I can see that it would be easy for the state, as well as other private corporations, to petition the company to push propaganda that patronizes their interests... But how do we rally against that? Where is the revolution in this? We could publish through the e-book format of course, but then we'd be just one more gear in the sociopolitical machine. We'd be highly censored and, like you said, most likely blackballed from even competing in the market.

--Kogard, said Horton, I think you underestimate my power.

They crossed the intersection toward The Guillotine Apartments.

--Are we going in here? Kogard asked. --Are we going to see Frank Lachowski? Ah! Of course. He could help us with this predicament.

--Well, not exactly. And furthermore, Lachowski and the Archives have also been hit by this new piece of legislation. They will have to begin converting all of their titles to e-format and Lachowski will have to write for that market as well. As you can imagine, he's very upset about it.

--Damn, where will it all end? He threw his butt into the street and lit another cigarette as they entered the building.

--It'll end when Amazon completely controls the dissemination of information. Literature, textbooks, newspapers, the whole nine yards. They approached the elevators and Horton hit the "down" button. --But we're not going to let them get that far, he said, smiling.

The doors opened and inside Horton pulled a key out of his pocket, slid it into a slot on the keypad, and hit "5B."

--You have access to the basements? Kogard asked.

Horton now spoke from a new discursive angle: Like I said on the phone yesterday, I decided to tell my peers at VWH that we should pull out of Amazon, to which they said, Amazon would then surely monopolize the industry and likely make all printed material illegal in order to consolidate their influence, to which I said, look at marijuana; do you think it would have the same appeal if it were legalized? Do you think, beyond a medical standpoint, people would want to engage in the stuff to have fun or to be rebellious? No. Smoking weed would not have the same social connotations. Sure, it makes one feel good, but smoking the stuff would not mean that one is a "rebel" or "dangerous" or "cool," you see. It seems that the best way to get the public to read real books again is to make them illegal. People would surely think that books, being unlawful to the state, contain dangerous and valuable information. And they do. They just have to become legally inaccessible for people to realize that.

The elevator doors opened to the mezzanine level of a large warehouse, and from the floor Kogard could hear an abundance of conversation rising off of it like steam. He followed Horton onto the gated platform from which he saw many crowds of people talking and pointing below. Around them were two rows of four industrial printers, to the far end of the wall two rows of eight long worktables.

Horton led Kogard to the stairs which descended along either side of the warehouse. --The machines are for paperbacks, he said, And the tables are for binding books. Much of the Vesak Word House staff is still with us in these technical capacities.

--Ah! Kogard laughed as the reality dawned on him. And so it goes, I suppose ... the underground press.

--We've joined forces with the Occupy press, so we've decided to go under the name "The Black Market Press."

--Well I'll be damned. When they reached the floor, Kogard looked around the room to see many familiar faces. --Holy shit, he said pointing to a robust, red-faced man in a three-piece suit, Is that Louis Guermantes?

--Yes, I'll introduce you. Fredo should actually be arriving soon.

--What's he doing here?

--Because books are now illegal, Kogard, there is a lot of potential money in them. Despite the reign of the e-book, many people will miss having real copies of their favorite new titles. These titles will have to be sold in the street and under-the-counter in storefronts, but people will still go to these lengths to obtain them. And, indeed, a buyer will feel more excited about buying a book in this manner because they feel they are breaking the law to indulge in a worthwhile pleasure. The danger itself has market value. But an organization has to form around this to make it work. We obviously cannot go to a legitimate outlet to fund our endeavors here. VWH has some money, but not quite enough start-up to cover all of the expenses, that is, police protection, paying the storefronts, paying the street guys, paying the warehouse staff, importing bulk paper from overseas, electricity, paying off the Guillotine administration to keep their mouth shut, &c. That is where our friends the Guermentes and the Killah Beez will be needed.

--The Wu-Tang Killah Beez will be working with us?

--Yup. With this project, we have effectively become a criminal organization; criminal, in as much as we supply a demanded product to people who cannot obtain it legitimately. Our books are made to the old industry standard, so for a person who wants a book, the product will be the same as if it were published and sold the old-fashioned way. Ah, Monsieur Guermentes, this is the excellent Walter Kogard.

Louis Guermentes turned around from his group, smiled a wide, welcoming smile, and said in a buttery French accent, Monsieur Kogard! We have heard great things about you. And that this was all your idea!

--Oh, no, sir, I can't take all the credit. Horton here had the wherewithal to go through with it.

--Well, nevertheless, you are a saint among us here in the underground book industry. Fredo has taken to you very much, has told me all about you and your wonderful ideas. I look forward to working with you very much. And my friends in law and politics will be supportive as well.

--Thank you, Monsieur, Kogard said shaking his large hand, We expect only greatness.

--Come, said Horton, leading Kogard through the maze of bodies. --We are just starting here. Everyone is getting acquainted as you can see. Scheduling will take place tonight for the coming releases. We've already been approached by several good-sized retailers who wish to do business with us so long as we can assure it's safe. And, with the help of the Guermentes, we can guarantee that. Much like gambling, wise politicians understand this to be a simple vice, that we are simply supplying a safe product to people who cannot get it legally. And we've already been approached by many writers. Listen here: Amazon, through its subsidiaries, only accepts the most marketable authors and titles, and, because there is no other outlet to which the denied artists can go, they are damned to us, the literary underworld. What Amazon thinks it is doing is committing all the radical and overly-experimental authors to literary inexistence, but what they're actually doing is sending them to us. We intend to publish experimental, radical, bizarre, politically charged texts that Amazon won't touch. And when readers are tired of the boring, Mid-Western, mundane topics to be read on their e-books, then they will come to us. They'll want to read our titles because they'll either believe the books contain information that they're not supposed to know, or, they'll think that we have more

profound work to publish, considering the risk, stuff that is not strictly commercial, i.e. real art. Ah, let me introduce you to the Killa Beez.

They approached a group of men dressed in fine black suits. In the middle of the crowd was an emaciated man wearing a white monk's robe, a tuft of nappy hair tied in a knot on top of his head. --This is the Abbot, said Horton, gesturing toward the robed man. --He'll be directing his guys on the street to sell the new paperback titles in every borough in the city. The rest of the clan is in the front, here: The Genius, Dirt McGirt, The Rebel INS, The Golden Arms, Tony Starks, Methical, Shallah Raekwon, whom you've met, The Dutch Masta Killa, Raw Desire, LeVon, Power Cipher, Twelve O'Clock, Sixty Second Assassin, The 4<sup>th</sup> Disciple, The Brand White, K.D. the Down Low Wrecka, Shyheim AKA The Rugged Child, Doo-doo Wales, Mista Hezakiah—better known as the Yin and the Yan, The Tru Masta, Asan, DJ Skane, The Tru Robocop comin' through, Scientific Shabazz, my motherfuckin' man Wise the Civilized, The Shaolin Soldiers, Daddy-O, and Papa Ron, coming down from the south end of things, you know. Wu-Tang Killah Beez, on a swarm.

All of the members in attendance held up the “W” in salute, and Kogard returned the gesture; they all then returned to their conversation.

--Shit, there's a lot of them, said Kogard.

--And that's just the 36 Chambers of Death and the Inner Circle. The rest are street guys. Over here, Horton said leading Kogard away, Is Caesar. He'll be lending some of his Occupy theory to our project.

--'Sup, K, said Caesar. --What me and the other Occupists intend to do is embark on a street art and graffiti campaign to bring our message to the masses without drawing attention to us, per say. I'm thinking of using the language “Decentralize, Horizontalize, Decolonize,” in some capacity, perhaps with the words “Open a book” or “Black Market Press” underneath. With the graffiti part we've hired the help of El Wood.

--Nice.

--And over here, said Horton, Is MacMillan. He'll be the project editor of all of our titles, working closely with the copy guys.

--Why him? asked Kogard, He's bent on “plot” and sellability.

MacMillan seemed irritated at this (but then again, when was he not irritated?) --As a result of my position I was concerned with that, he said. --As editor of a commercial literary magazine I *had* to appeal to marketability. But I can work with this publisher as well. Your premise, which is an inherent kind of dissent from marketability, I can handle this, too, and I can make your image as an underworld organization appeal to the public. And, obviously, I can edit—for despite your marginality in relation to the grand literary machine, your publications *must* be free of typos, usage errors, sensibility, and awkward syntax. You need a man with experience-based understanding of “the final product.” What is your angle? What is your target audience? I can help you with that.

--But when it comes to what kind of material we want to publish, do you really understand what we're looking for? asked Kogard.

--I do, but that'll be predominantly your concern.

--*My* concern?

--Kogard, said Horton, turning to look him in the eyes, Of course, I am publisher and Editor-in-Chief here, and MacMillan here is project editor. Our copy editors from VWH will be working with us. But we need an acquisitions editor who knows the big picture. We need a guy who knows exactly what image we're going for and what manuscripts best represent what we want to see in the marketplace. We need a man who embodies our love of books, our love of new experiments in literary arts, and our hatred of Amazon and mediocre novels. What better man for that job than the very person who spawned this whole idea? What better man than our own patron saint of books and cigarettes? Walter Kogard, will you be our acquisitions editor?

Kogard had to light another cigarette, but he could hardly keep it in his mouth because his smile was so wide. He lit it and inhaled, and in a cloud of smoke breathed, Yes.

## VII.

Conversations continued throughout the day in which Kogard was introduced as the acquisitions editor of the newly formed Black Market Press. Fredo and Chelsea Guermantes arrived later in the evening with wine and scotch, and at eight o'clock all in attendance toasted to the new endeavor; Kogard held up his glass of water. The atmosphere was one of celebration and genesis.

Much later, after drinks had been drunk and the cash deals had been cut with distributors and shareholders, the young writer Antarah Crawley arrived, walked down the steps and approached Kogard and Horton.

--Antarah! said Kogard, I didn't know you were involved in our project.

--I invited him, said Horton. --I read the story you gave me and I liked it. But what I appreciated most about it was that you liked it. I called the little bugger up and told him to come to our event. As acquisitions editor, Kogard, it's your decision to cut him a deal or not.

--Mr. Kogard, said Antarah, Before you make your decision, I just want to say that I deeply respect this endeavor of yours, for I also have an irreplaceable part of my heart reserved for print books. I am not interested in obscene profits or legality. I am dedicated to writing meaningful literature that will be disseminated in the manner in which I fell in love with literature. I profess my undying commitment to your gang, and, of course, your great genius in writing. If you can assure that I will have the basic necessities to live here in Empire and write my days away has I have always longed to, then count me in!

Kogard put a firm hand on Antarah's shoulder and drew him into a hug. --Young man, you are a gifted writer. We'll take care of you, don't worry about that. I'll have Horton and Fredo come up with a nice advance for you right away. Welcome aboard.

More toasts commenced throughout the night and by this time the drink hung so heavy upon peoples' actions and words that talk of business had to be postponed until the next day.

Before Horton Tenenbaum left for the evening he approached Kogard and said, Now, K, I want you to be committed to this job. I anticipate that a lot of writers are

going to want to be apart of this. I want you to be able to determine the most promising candidates. We will have a large market for work, especially in this city. People love to get their hands on illegal ideas. The hipsters will flock to them. It will be a kind of hip honor to be seen reading a Black Market book. It means you are in the know. But, K, and I told this to Michael Davis and Britt Moorman and Julia Johnson, and the rest of our big shots—we need an initial season's catalog filled with big names to attract the attention and the sales. Look motherfucker: I want that fucking book!

--It's coming, it's coming.

--You always say that! Two months, fuck face! Commit to it! You can't start your work here until after the book is done. If it sucks, it'll send it back to you and tell you to revise the shit out of it. But, of course, you've been working on it for six years, it can't suck.

--I'll have it ready for you.

--Good! Bye! he said swaggering up the stairs and out of the warehouse.

Later, after most of the crowd had either cleared or passed out, Frank Lachowski came down to the warehouse and approached Kogard, walking on his four arms.

--Well, well, well, Mr. Big Shot Acquisitions Editor. Welcome to the underworld.

--Quite apropos that your apartment building has been chosen for the press location.

--I suppose. I am, as they say, a center of discussion.

--What does that even mean?

--Never mind. Fuck it. It's late. I had a couple of absinthes.

--You weren't writing tonight?

--I took a break, just for the evening. To commemorate our loss and our success. Where we lose ground on one front, we pave the way on another.

--So you'll be working with us?

--In some capacity. I'll be writing books for you all. Interesting stuff, too, I might add. I think it will garner a sort of intellectual legitimacy for your press.

--I'm glad to hear it. But how are you doing with the Archives news.

--Ohh, that. Well, we all knew this was going to happen. But I'll be damned if I write for the e-books.

--It's kind of the same as writing for the press, no? It's all words, in the end.

--Ohhh, look who's talking, Mr. Fuck-E-Books-It's-Not-The-Same. I thought it was about the message.

--It is...

--Well, in any case, I'll be doing writing for you all now. We all have to keep writing, right.

--Yeah...

--What's the matter, K, you seem down.

--It's nothing. I'm honored to be a part of it all...

--...But...?

--But the struggle—and it will be a struggle—my question is, is it worth it? To risk imprisonment for publishing books?

--It's about the cause, right?  
--Amazon will surely get wind of this soon. They'll try to crack down on us.  
--The Guermentes will protect us.  
--But is it really worth it? Why don't we embrace the times? We have to progress sometime... Are we living in the past? Are we, as writers, an expired breed?  
--My god, boy, what's gotten you so down? Of course not. You *believe* in writing, don't you? You believe it can change universal consciousness, right?  
--Of course.  
--You believe in the physicality of books, right?  
--Of course.  
--Then don't doubt yourself. Sure, the businessmen say that e-books and tablets are the future, that they're cheaper and more practical, but for the people like us who love the smell, feel, and comfort of opening a book, an e-book will never replace that pleasure. There are millions of people out there like you and me, and they believe in you. They want this press to succeed. Don't forget that.  
--I know, I know. But with Amazon, it will be war. A war of who will control public information in this country.  
--Yes. And we, the writers, will be the soldiers.  
--How long will it last? Until we win?  
--No one will win. It will be a war of attrition. This is WWI. This is Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. We'll shoot books. They'll shoot e-books. We will try to survive, we will try not to lose. We just have to make sure we don't get extinct. But no one will win.  
There was silence. The presses whirred on sleep-mode.  
Kogard said, I feel good about this. But I also feel weird. I never thought it would be like this. I always knew us writers were weirdos, but I never thought we'd get forced underground. I never thought that we would become public enemies.  
--Well, we are. We're just as weird and dangerous as Occupiers. But don't worry, K. The weirdos always turn out on the right side of history.



then I had fallen into the finis of my book: into its calm (all right, cold) yet angry conclusion; because it ceased in a silence which had silence for its fanfare; the blank page beyond did not even say "blank," anymore than death itself says "death," or "over," or "finis," or "done."

W. H. Gass