

# Pharmacon of the Spirit



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Pharmacon  
of the  
Spirit  
by  
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Vesak Word House  
Washington, D.C.

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Published by Vesak Word House, Publishers  
in Washington, D.C.

Manufactured in the United States of America

*for  
the betterment of all sentient beings*



# Phase the First.

I.

Walter Kogard 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 where his desk was. He had considered in his mind re-calling the bedroom the deskroom, for he sat at his desk more often than he lay in his bed.

He pulled a cigarette from the pack thereon, lit it, and smoked the whole thing, drinking water throughout, for he believed that adequate water—more than eight 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 his 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 sooth 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? He had had a good home and a past relationship 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. Only the government would



find him a year later, corpse'd, his house smelling, all because they were wondering why he hadn't paid his taxes. 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 of the literatti. He had published a book some time ago that was very received well. 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 municipal bonds and other safe-places, and had for those years after until now made money off of the money he had made then. \$110,000 of interest per year to be precise, that's not to mention royalties, articles, speaking compensations, &c. 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 predisposed. And so he lived well and empty until he got on the wagon at the age of thirty for reasons unthinkable at the present moment. 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 his desk which he sat at 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, think of all those carefully composed lines, 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 swallowing no longer, he found that act equally difficult. The same pain ensued as the liquid came out as when the liquid slid down. He most definitely had 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. This he felt gave his life some 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!

Grandfather Clock could have been one of those Indian names, like Many-Moons or Raging-Bull. Maybe the grandfather's name was Clock. Bill Clock. Too analogous? Is that the right word?

grandfather clock, tick, tock.

His daughter sat beside his bed

reading to him from the *Book of Changes*.

Why the *Book of Changes* of all things?

grandfather clock, tick, tock.

~~His daughter sat beside his bed~~

~~reading to him from the *Book of Changes*.~~

Nice.

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 thought, as he did of most other grand books of the time, that it's author was pretentious and pitiful. He did remember one line, though, one line always.

a broad swath of dark gray streaked upon the smog canvas

vertically

towering above the technicolored cosmopolis

monochromatic

shimmering like oils freshly applied.

It was one line but 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 and was thus halted in his hitherto unexecuted plan of which he had stopped in the middle. 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 then their use value they were a nice accessory, the rectangle in the shirt pocket. The cylinder dangling from the lip. 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 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 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 was ever there or had 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 remained in place like a whole unit. 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 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 it's 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. Stillbirths, cancer, poverty, irrelevant, keep marshaling on, a cruel god, his only god in this world.

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 and after some time sitting at his desk was promptly beckoned to the Ugly Mug where MacMillan rested his elbows perpetually at the bar.

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*. He had 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.) There was a large stack of books 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*; *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*; *Zuckerman Bound*; *Method and Madness* (he had meant to throw that out); *Metamagical Themas*; *Godel, Escher, Bach...* 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. 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 weighing 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. Or in a gutter. 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 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 that 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 had 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. Time does not pass; it is 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 or 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. 'Twas 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 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 that he was low. There were enough to have one presently and one for the walk to Jack's 24/7 to buy another carton. He thought about the fact that Mark Walsh from University had become a raging homosexual. He had seen him on the street the other day after buying a carton from Jack's. Of course the adjective, as in most cases, was superfluous. Nothing about Mark, then or now, struck him as being filled with rage. He was a pleasant guy. Kogard thought that he might like to see an actual raging homosexual one day. Perhaps they were paraded around circus

tents in backward Spanish townships.

He put a pair of black Dickie's workpants over his underwear and pulled on a black sweater. He went to the downstairs part of his apartment 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 blond 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. It was mussed but in the stylish way of the modern day. His glasses were oval and opaque. His nose was rather Jewish and his lips were full like a black man's. He reckoned he had both in his lineage. He was very white, almost pale, but he retained some black features, like the lips and a square chin, but with a thin face. His neck was slender and his sweater hung nicely on his shoulders, a portion of his collarbones exposed. 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; however bland, he possessed a mysterious aura that made people on the street wonder, *who is he and what does he know?* 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 brought out his little pad 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 need  
to live. We will soon consume our own life  
blood. Life 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 cousins. But words are not people. They are more perfect. Wherever from they come.

V.

The Jack's 24/7 was a convenience store just seven buildings away from his. Kogard lived in a small building in the BoHo neighborhood of Empire City. It was Imperial style, or whatever the style in which the Eisenhower Executive Office Building was built. He felt he should have studied architecture. It can be quite interesting.

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. If the old widows ever 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. Its 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 Red 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. It had a blue awning like a little bodega. 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 a millionaire. 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

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 (they should really bring back that box design), 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, 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 went to enter the door, he felt a caving-in of his chest.

Oh no.

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 breathed in, 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 the same accident. 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 not-serious-news, 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. It made Kogard notice his scathed tongue. The headline read: AMAZON CORNERS RANDOM-PENGUIN; LAST BOOK GIANT FALLS TO AQUISITION

--Oh Shit.

This was 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. Kogard's guy at Vesak 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-earing and spine-bending. So 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 large female driver.

--You getting' on this bus? she 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.

--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.

Kogard got up and stormed away. The bus closed its doors and pulled away. As it passed him, Kogard threw his coffee at the bus's rear. The vehicle stopped 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 lung 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 no air 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 had thought it to be a trifle, but he had heard of people dying from asthma. His father had had it and suffered greatly, and 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 smoke, 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 a tractor. 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 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' postmodern magnum opus *The Recognitions*, which sat beside it on his bookshelf, and at this he thought Fanzen 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 has 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  $1/60^{\text{th}}$  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 fourth 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 Ugly Mug, the bar to which some of his fiends 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 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. Book 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 a 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 stay 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 world; 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 Ugly Mug.

The hipsters were out tonight. They always ran in packs. As much as he disliked him, 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 of the Ugly Mug, 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 seemed enough of a miscreant for Kogard to feel comfortable.

--K, Fredo waved him over out of the crowd as if he had not already been on his way there. --This is Bob.

--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 in a cardigan and button-down. --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 an extension of the way he felt comfortable with degenerates. 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, and boy was he a drinking man, 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. MacMillan was about 20oz. 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 Carlos 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 fuckface wanna-be mobsters? 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 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. But his business was none of Kogard's concern. 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. 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 Chronicle* 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 of 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, 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. Faggot's 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.

--As white as George Washington's bare ass.

--I could use one of those.

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

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

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

--I could get that together.

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

--Where's Caesar? Kogard asked MacMillan.

--Said he'd be here, he said, and 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 fast-paced-ness. 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, 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," and 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 resurgence 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 the good old paper were 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 of the boys 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 breath 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. 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, took a drag and skimmed his eyes over the top page--

Corporate state: an oligarchic/fascist society under which government, lower and higher education, military, police, infrastructure, public services/utilities, communications/news outlets, agriculture/farming/food retail, and entertainment are owned by and exist for the progress and profit of privately owned corporations. (eg. The Seventh Pfizer University, The Bloomberg Capital of New York etc.)

As of 2012, all of these social constructs had been or were being pursued for purchase by private parties (eg. Monsanto—farming; Time Warner, NewsCorp—entertainment, news outlets; Google, Facebook—communications; The Federal Reserve—commerce; etc). In effect, this aptly named Private Party served as the umbrella party for members of the Democratic and Republican Parties operating in all three branches of government, including the US Military. Third parties were outlawed in 2016, and Ron Paul, believed by many to be the only secular representative of the interests of the people, died of digestive complications. Evidence from his autopsy points to poisoning.



...

Slaves are unprotected by the Constitution of the United States. Slaves in the US are not citizens, nor human beings. A definition of slavery is contingent upon self-acknowledgment of the enslaved. Make no mistake: a wo/man who exists to serve another man is a slave. A society owned by a group of men is a slave state. IF YOU ENTER INTO EMPLOYMENT OR INTERACTION WITH THE CORPORATE STATE UNDER THE FALSE PRETENSE OF JOB SECURITY, UPWARD MOBILITY, ETC, THEN MAKE NO MISTAKE ABOUT IT: YOU ARE A SLAVE. In order to free one's soul—and be a human being again—one has to free one's self from such a state.

Introduction to the Second Edition  
"Occupation: Introduction to Resisting  
Corporate Influence,"  
Black Market Press, 20--

--What the fuck is this? said Kogard. --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--

As with most innovating endeavors, they

started off small and humble. But the collaboration and conglomeration of four internet-and technology-based companies has become the dominating force in social life on earth. These four companies are the sole holders of the means of human communication, information dissemination, commerce, and employment: they control the essence of human life, and that is very dangerous.

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 of of trustees plucked from the highest executive order of each institution. This group is known as the Social Trust and you have never head of them.

With the influence of the internet reaching unprecedented effect in the 1990s, Amazon emerged as an online bookstore, and soon rose to prominence as a multi-billion dollar online commerce format in the 2010s. Although Microsoft's Windows had been the quintessential operating system up into the mid 2000s, the Apple Corporation was the first to impede on the personal telephone

market in 2007 with the iPhone. And although Windows-platform smart phones began to dominate the market in the early 2010s, Apple's lobbying of Congress and its cunning private coercion techniques led to its monopoly of the telephone market by 2019. Every phone was an iPhone, which negated the need to specify the term "phone," and by 2020 the colloquial term was "I." Highly influential social media platform Facebook and commerce platform Amazon utilized iApps to expand into the mobile web market. With all people using I's, Facebook and Amazon prevailed as a result of people being able to take the internet—and by extension social media and mobile commerce—with them wherever they went. The mobile app ecosystem trumped use of the desktop/laptop-based web by 2015.

With I's having become the main indulgence of people by this year, advertising monies—in the United States, a one-trillion-dollar-a-year industry—flowed directly into Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and the monopolous search engine Google. Marketing real estate moved from a physical platform—that is, billboards, magazine ads, television commercials, etc.—to a mobile platform. This resulted in the concept of infinite real estate. Just as oil fed industry in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, mobile telephone signals came to be the driving force behind social interaction, commerce, and advertising, and

they came to be known within the industry as "invisible gold." The rise of these four giants, in a nutshell, was the result of daily business being conducted on a mobile platform. (While not completely eradicated, and sustained by contracted operating systems development, Microsoft continued to pour billions of dollars into developing an attractive platform in the Windows phone. This endeavor, however, was to no avail. Apple had already contracted virtually all non-government/military employers to conduct business using their product.)

By 2021, the web-based internet, save use by the government and military for public data storage, had become a barren wasteland, dried up along with the book publishing industry. Amazon had become the ministry of literature, and all universities, publishers, and authors conducted business using Amazon e-books. Notebooks and textbooks in classrooms became extinct.

Society is now dominated by the "I," the iPhone, iPad, iMac, you name it. 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 censorship of art through Google, Facebook, the

ministry of literature, and their subsidiaries has depressed many, but they would not wallow in their self-pity, not conform to the ludicrous monopoly on their expression. And so, 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 press has become dangerous, and government officials are cracking down on physical media. Paper is as illegal as marijuana; to have paper on your person is to be subject, at any point, to arrest.

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 really be a person. We exist in the real.

--Chapter 3: The Social Trust & Methods of Dissent  
"Occupation: Introduction to Resisting Corporate  
Influence,"  
Black Market Press, 20--

Kogard took a deep sigh and a deep drag and then said, I must tell you, this is absolutely ridiculous...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 just 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, if I get on good terms with the boss's daughter that could rocket me into a higher rank.

--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 with his jacks, for his sole drug of choice was nicotine, and it made him happy as his friends slipped deeper and deeper into the muddiness of drink. (Words, too, he thought. His drugs of choice were nicotine and words.) 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,” 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 scattered. 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 o'clock 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. The Ministry of Literature is 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 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 from Happy Hour, 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 over to the girl.

He made no eye contact with her during the ten minute walk it took to wade through the flesh, and when he got in front of her he didn't look up for ten seconds. 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 on the way to my apartment? she said, smiling coyly.

--Whatever.

During their walk she spied the I-read-*Monolith*-five-times-and-it's-the-truest-book-I've-ever-read confession 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 inside this convenience store for a quick second.

--Okay, said Kogard, slightly annoyed that he was still with this girl after he'd forgotten that he had left with her. 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 convenience store. 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 of 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 the Empire City Archives, a library dedicated to cataloging copies of every book ever put into print. 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 come in for late visits like these he would quietly come into 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 smoking in the near-dark for a while before saying anything. Moreso 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 when he was ready, What's been on the page lately?

--Albert Speer, Frank muttered, dropping his butt into the ashtray set on the table in front of him. He used two of his arms to light another while the other two typed away furiously at the 1970's era IBM 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.

Frank snuffed his jack and lit another, then asked, What's been at your fingertips? His fingers kept typing as if counting the seconds with each stroke.

--Nothing.

--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 whose 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. Lets 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 then for a while, and 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 mid-level 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 be able to get published ten years ago if Amazon controlled the whole game then. 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 Ugly Mug. --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 scoops up another good small press, 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 government, 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, its more economic. Less storage space. 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 then 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's face dropped. His cigarette fell onto the floor.

--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 looked quite deflated at this point; his elbows rested on his knees and his expression was aloof.

--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 oppose ideologically. 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.

Kogard was inside himself. He shook his head with melancholy. He 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 and Kierkegaard. And 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 leaning sideways 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. 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 he handed the stack to Kogard. --This is what I'm writing now. Give it a look.

Kogard glanced up and took the stack. The title read "Origends: A Primer on Singularity and Space-Time Progression."

*We are travelers on a cosmic journey, stardust, swirling and dancing in the eddies and whirlpools of infinity. Life is eternal. We have stopped for a moment to encounter each other, to meet, to love, to share. This is a precious moment. It is a little parenthesis in eternity.*

-Paulo Coelho

*Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.*

Donna Haraway, 1985

*You might think you've peeped the scene. You haven't. The real one's far to mean. The watered-down one, the one you know, was made up centuries ago. It made it sound all wack and corny; yes, it's awful, blasted boring. Twisted fiction, sick addiction, well gather 'round children, zip it, listen...*

Kanye West, 2010

## Introduction

The subtitle of this paper is misleading, just like everything you've previously been taught about life, death, the universe and time.

It's not that you've been living a lie your whole life. It's just that you've been living with a misguided view of how the world operates. Your misguided view doesn't change the way the world works, it just changes how you perceive it. It's not "wrong"; you can live your whole life with that same paradigm and still lead a healthy, successful life.

But my project here is not to condone that type of thought. (Let me assume that I'm talking to citizens of a "cultured", industrial-based nation.) What we've been taught is a very linear way of looking at 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. 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 the book, 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 at first. Then you would be able to ease through it.

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 is no such thing 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. The entire universe operates in these 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 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 not "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 finally see the unity in everything, and the multitude in

## Prologue

### *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 animals. 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 illustration 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.

Origends

### *Space-Time*

The progression of all time follows a repeating pattern that can best be pictured as a series of diamonds: the space-time continuum line (fig. 1).

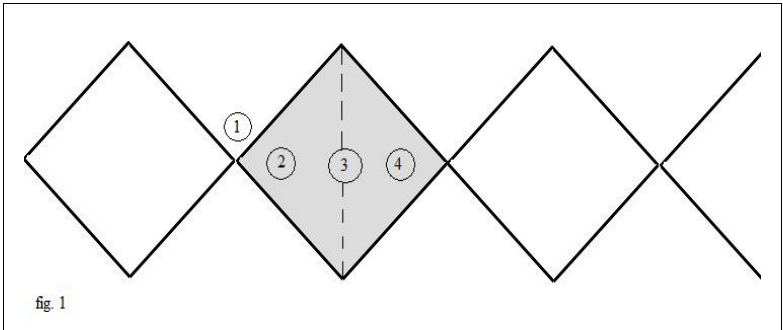


fig. 1

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 another 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, 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 "ball of energy" will start its life somewhere else in the universe. That's why the big-bang 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.

### *Singularities*

This section will complicate and eventually undermine the concepts I've just talked about. 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. I must say, it's a bit loftier. 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 same exact 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?

Well. Here is where things start to contradict what you think you know.

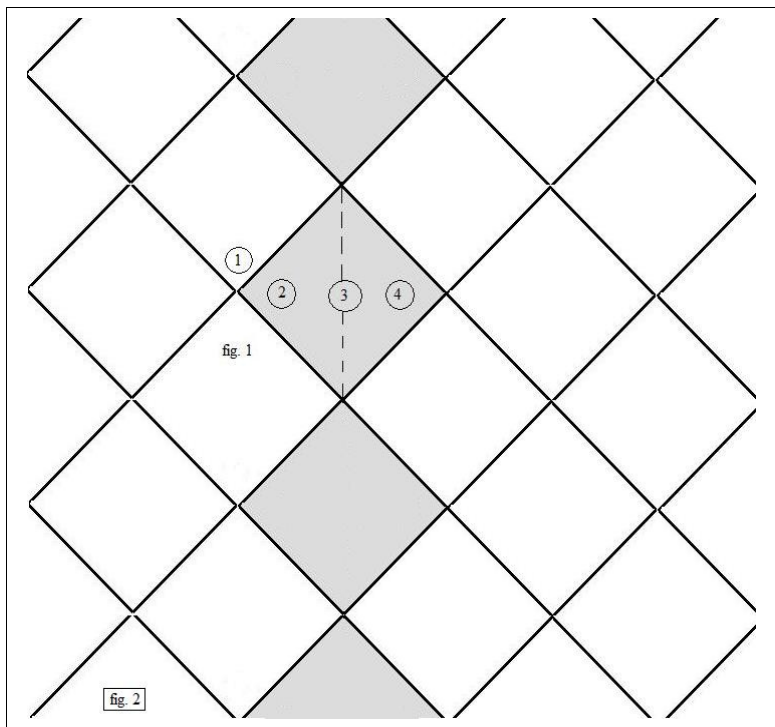
To be kicking the same ball over and over, there has to be an identical me on the other side of the fence, kicking the same ball at the same time that I kick my ball. As the identical me kicks the ball over the fence, he is actually kicking my ball to me while I am kicking my ball away

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 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 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:

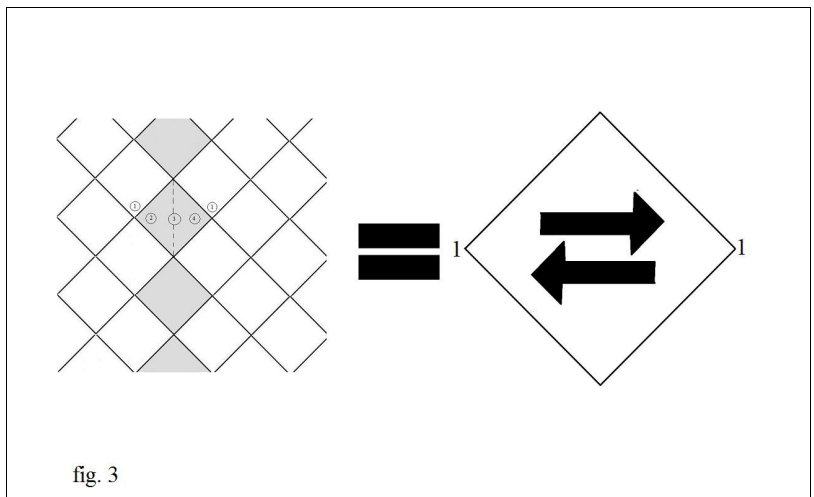


fig. 3

Note in figure 3, as we've just established, 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.

## *Contextualizing the Universe: Multiple Dimensions*

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 continuums. 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 same 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 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.

### *Conclusions*

Here are the conclusions we've arrived at:

(1) There is no such thing as linear time at all.

(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 to it.

(10) You don't exist.

Sorry to completely undermine what I began this book telling you, but, hey, that's what the universe does.

*What do we do now?*

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 mines, 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 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 in 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 living creatures—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 that I just talked about. 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, could be completely true and not true at the same time in different parallel universes. 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.

## 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

# Phase the Second.

I.

You are a drop of water, and the world is a half-empty glass sitting on a table in a room. The glass is filled with water; 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. To the world, we are equivalent to the very same basic molecules that comprise us.

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—water sitting in a whole other glass, sitting on a table, in a room.

The universe is simply a series of infinite points stacked on top of each other, a Russian doll of existence. An infinite number of universes stacked on top of infinite space stacked on top of infinite beings on a planet stacked on top of infinite molecules which comprise all life stacked on top of infinite atoms...and who knows how many infinite components make up an atom; they probably contain other universes.

The fact that a person exists, that a mind exists, to conceive of the universe, is the reason that the universe exists. A human being is a singularity; it exists independently of everything around it; there is the interior mind, and everything else is exterior—body, clothes, and world. (Just think, you can lose a leg and still be able to think just the same.) The mind is where the exterior universe ends (with the atom and whatever is within the atom), and where the infinite universe of imagination and impression begins. (Just think: 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 mind interacts with everything that is exterior. If a human being has no senses, or no mind to interpret senses, then it could not interact with or even conceive of the universe and the universe would not exist. To clarify: for the mind to interact with the universe is for it to put itself in relation to something bigger, outside of it; otherwise, interactions with these external forces wouldn't make 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 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 is 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 clock read 12:45 A.M.

II.

Kogard masked his morning breath with cigarette smoke. He often 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 city had been awake since four.

This, he thought, continued the cycle. This was the cycle he had been repeating for years, the one he had finally, through all of its shortcomings and frustrations, felt comfortable falling into. 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.

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 undisturbed. He swiveled slightly in his plush 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 endless current of life with such leisure. If he had to work he would have had to get off of 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 labor abuse 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; *enjoyment* is inherently the point; you will never experience the moment you're in again; you must wring all of passion from the present time. Working goes against the natural current of life; staying in one place is to swim against the flow of the current and you will inevitable end up in a spot you were never supposed to be in; 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 that lifestyle.

The only "job" Kogard ever had was as a barista at the Coffee Express-O! coffee shop in downtown 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, he

needed it as an emotional outlet, but only for himself. The cycle of writing for himself seemed more valuable than anything else he did because he had products to show for his continuous work, products that 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, or, more often, regurgitating, information. The journey of writing was Kogard's passion, not the end of a succinct, easily-deconstructed paper. Life was cyclical and vague, so why not the emotions that one put 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.

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 9-5 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.); 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, but it was not the kind of cycle he wanted to see himself repeating. 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 a loyal subject to a man who lived the way he 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 two 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 nineteen, moved to Empire City where he wrote *Monolith*, and the rest, as they say...

Kogard's boss back at the coffee shop was peculiar. His name was Matt and he had been a primary lawyer to the mayor before he started his own branding company and, later, opened the coffee shop over which he lived with his wife Kathy and his two adorable little 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 of, advertently or inadvertently, her mountainous 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 had 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 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 out with the shop's rush hours, he liked to play air guitar to whatever was playing on the speakers.

Kogard always smoked on his shift; that's when his habit got really bad. It was his crutch, between asshole customers asking for espressos-to-go, 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 up 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 strict 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 around all of the people. 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 so as to not get dizzy, cigarettes were his focal point so that he would not fall down 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 of any 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 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—Kogard's hunger. The world's hunger for fertilization—Kogard's hunger 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. Kogard laughed with them.



He took a drag and as he removed the butt 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

Kogard stopped the flow of ink; he pulled the pen from the sheet. What once what white, pure, worldly, now bear 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. His oppressed expression was in revolt.

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 sentence 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...

initiations

Klan initiation

Klansmen look like plague doctors,  
the pointy beak and the pointy hood

they both look supernatural  
the eyeholes are too small in a Klan hood;  
they can't see very well  
how symbolic

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 to back the title up, 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 600 pages, I 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. Keep my head above water. Just where is this book headed, if anywhere?

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

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 release 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.

*Hell is empty and all of the devils are here.*

*Full fathom five thy father lies.  
Of his bones are coral made.*

*Those are pearls that were his eyes.  
Nothing of him that doth fade  
But doth suffer a sea change  
Into something rich and strange.  
Sea nymphs hourly ring his knell*

Ding dong.

*Hark, now I hear them, ding dong bell.*

He flipped passed all these 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. He looked around the room: three high windows that looked out along the residential rooftops; two plush green chairs, ripped, cotton showing; paintings 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 was lined with dense tree trunks and all of the tables were topped with unlaquered wood. They gave you a 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 witchhousey 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 had bought four years ago from the elderly delirious husband of an estranged Rockefeller cousin in Weslan County for \$95, 000. 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 back 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 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 got out of his building and walked the half-block to the 218<sup>th</sup> Street—Bosch/Horace Avenue Station; BoHo. 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 had 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 an entire 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.

Kogard 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 subway car closest to the center door. He looked around and assessed his environment as was his nature. Everyone—businessmen, hipster skaters and housewives alike—were all consumed with their electronic devices. He saw one old geezer beside him reading *The Empire Gazette* 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. (Of course, the outfit would have been “hip” if it had been worn by a “hip” person. The conceit of hipsterdom is that it's only cool to look poor and lame if you can afford it.)

It has been said that deep loneliness is sublime, but in a terrifying way. Deep loneliness indeed was Kogard's major mode of experience, and he did revel in it like a sweet

melancholy. 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 pupil. 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 them selves for fear of being suppressed by the system, or are otherwise outcasted by the popular population for their absurdly 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 their surroundings; only with their 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 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 jet 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 walked toward them, stopped at the threshold, turned around to all of the eyes still upon him, took a drag, and then 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 snuffed it. He walked with an ear-to-ear smile on his face up the stairs to the 4Train 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 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 for 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 wondered if all the commuters on that car might be charged with accessory. He would also be responsible. No one said anything. The shock... How's that for human interaction.

He got to the street and saw that the fog had gotten thicker. Kavanaugh Cafe was right down the block, however, and he walked there blindly with he glasses fogged.

He got into the building and 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 from the

scene outside 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 Ugly Mug, but he decided not to jump to conclusions. --What can I start you with?

--That's okay, I don't need a starter, I'll jump right into it. May I have a cappuccino now and then and 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. It's gritty dullness, like the static of an analog television, the banality it caste over the street, all so beautifully composed as if by the stoke of a painter. He soaked it all in. It was literature to the atmosphere; it was art upon the city.

After a while, he began to notice the music playing. It was played low but noticeable enough for him to be annoyed at it. It had taken on a warping effect, modulated over hi-hats and a hollow sounding bass. The melody was not melody exactly, but a steady rhythm of some deep liquid sound that lent the effect of a black hole sucking in music. He wasn't quite sure what to make of it. He looked over and saw his waitress behind the espresso machine and called her over.

She scattered over to him like an eager beaver, flashing her teeth, 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 ♠♣♥♦?

--...What...?

--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, emotionally satisfying, as a meal should be. He sipped at his coffee. The waitress came over and silently filled his cup. He sipped. The fog loomed on. 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 that 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 *plopped* into a pond, the warp of the initial ripple, the last bit of auditory vibrations being sucked into the black hole. And on that note, the song was completely consumed by itself and then silence. Absence. Deathly calm.

What commenced from the speakers then 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...*Listen to it...the city breathing...*

Escuchela...la ciudad respirando...

Escuchela...la ciudad respirando...

Escuchela.....

The booming voice came in; 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 collosus, 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” retained the implicit foreign character of the population; not necessarily *from* Africa, or beholding of any identity connected to the continent; but the foreign characteristic of being distanced from the white hegemony, an outsider. “Black” simply invoked the dichotomy—Black v. White—but “Negro,” maintained 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.

He recalled: 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 puffed. Blew out. Smoke was plentiful. Flew into the air and became fog.

Bellowing clouds. He stuck the butt between his lips and replaced it with a pen from his pocket, drew out his little 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 and obscured his thoughts. He was wholly consumed by the air's condensation. It intensified the feeling of deep loneliness. Hung heavy. One felt like a water droplet. In the midst of clouds. Was 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...)

By the entrance Kogard saw that the cafe had a stand for various periodicals, some of which he was familiar with. There were few legitimate titles, *The Observer*, *The Onion*, but all the others were satirical or tabloids, which wasn't bad; some of them were actually enlightening, like *Harper's*, *The Atlantic*, and the *New York Times*. Appropriate: hipster cafe carries satirical magazines. Kogard picked one up: *The New York Times* read: GOD IS DEAD.

He began to read the “story,” which, though satirical, was about one hundred and twenty years too late, but a voice called him from across the room. He looked up and saw, over at the round bar in the middle of the room, his two friends sitting there sharing a drink, Manny Kant and JP Toomer.

Manny, or, as he often insisted on being called, Immanuel (Gosh! *so* Old Testament), was not very close to him; he often remained cooped up in his office at the Empire University. But JP was an old friend, a poet, whom Kogard admired well. He had committed his poem *Georgia Dusk* to memory for its powerful imagery. JP was a fine-looking man of about the same age as Kogard, and 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. A lot, 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? Equally as bad? Kogard himself was not sure what the man's creed was. Perhaps he had eluded it, perhaps dropped out of Negro life, or at least stepped back to observe it from afar. Kogard went over to see his friends.

--JP! he said, shaking his hand. --Manny, how are you? He slapped him gingerly upon his back.

--Fine, said Manny.

--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? 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, 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. 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.

--Its 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 is 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?

--The fuck do 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 game of language.

--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 come back at Kogard. Just then the bartender slid a glass of water in front of him and he sipped it. The condensation was cool against his palm. He liked a nice cold glass of water. --So, said JP, Wha'cha' 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 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. 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 in 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 outside of us?

--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 is 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 that 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, cunt. I mean, Kant.

--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 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 cloud 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 yo 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 and 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. But it's something we as people have to come to grips with. Personally.

Quiet again. Rustling of newspapers. The bartender came over and refilled Kogard's glass with water, JP's glass with scotch. JP sucked his 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 then.

--Well El Wood's having a show in the city, he said.

--Oh the young artist? I know of him.

--Yeah, good guy. Really interesting work. Me and Deborah are headed over there at around nine. Then probably drinks as the Brooklyn Basement.

--Oh shit, that sounds really good.

--A lot of big names are gonna be at the show. Some people who are looking for you. Publishers.

--Eh, fuck them. 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. Those crows always stand in awe at the indifferent writer. JP patted Kogard on the shoulder and left. Kogard finished his refreshed 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. He'd take the Bentley.

VII.

(  
Kogard smoked half a pack of cigarettes on the trip back to his

apartment. When he arrived at the steps he opened his pack, 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. I don't know. Perhaps he was an impressionable person. He had destructive idols.

He decided not to dwell on it. 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 bedroom he removed all of his clothes and laid down.

)  
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?--Whom ever 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 at which to be. 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 around to 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 was illuminating enough that it outlined his room. He saw his black sweater and black Dickies lying on his floor.

Where was I going again?...Oh right. The art show.

He looked back at his black sweater. 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 shuffled 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 then removed his flannel shirt. He tossed in 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 be stretching the envelope. Or pushing the envelope...

He thought. He had some Salvatore shoes but he hated to wear them. 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 on the way out he ate a handful of coffee beans.

The Bentley was parked in the rear lot of the building in an alley reserved for less-aggressive homeless people. Most of them were crust punks anyway. They were usually strung out so they never bothered anything. Beside that fact, he left his car uncovered because no one beyond a Bentley sales rep would recognize it as a luxury automobile, definitely not by the current standards. The newer Bentley and Rolls Royce models were much too sleek and futuristic for his taste. A person infatuated with modern luxury cars would scoff at his boxy '84. The coat needed a wash, too. Oh well, too late for any of that. After all, a car is a car.

As he entered the city the sky's twilight had already turned to darkness. He never looked at street signs, but knew he was getting close to midtown by the growing abundance of tourists wearing "Empire City" tee shirts and snapping photos of locksmiths. It would have been ironically hipster—the cameras strung around necks, and the self-aware "I love this city" shirts—if these people were not also fat and covered in white hair. Some of them even had fanny packs. That could have also been "hip" if they weren't clearly from Iowa or some other godforsaken place. It dawned on Kogard as he sat in traffic on Eighth Avenue that most "lame" style choices could be "hip" if worn by "hip" people, beautiful people. He supposed then that people who were already hip could make anything hip. And then hip is not hip at all but simply remorseless larceny by hip people trying to stay in the vanguard. He saw them: hipster kids in forward-



facing baseball caps and fanny packs, and lame tourists in forward-facing baseball caps and fanny packs, in boat shoes, white shorts, and argyle socks. What differentiated them? It was not that one was more stylish, because they both had bad style. It was that on the hip person it was a statement; on the lame-o it was simply the first outfit he saw in his drawer. Conscious lameness=cool? Lame style+attitude=great style? Is the hipster simply a consciously lame person? *Oh, look at me, I like books and glasses and socks and dumb mustaches, I'm such a loser but I'm really actually cool.* Or, does the hipster embrace the lamest of style choices because what is lame is actually the new vanguard of cool? Consider a cardigan. It starts as a lame thing to wear, becomes an underground hipster fashion choice, becomes embraced by the hipster community, becomes embraced by the community as a whole, is paraded about in store windows, and is then damned as being “hipster.” The hipster must then scour the earth for the next most absurd fashion item so that he can be individually lame again, which makes him cool because he was the first hipster to wear this new lame fashion item. And then the greater hipster community embraces it, it becomes damned as “hipster,” and the cycle continues. Notice how the fashion industry as a whole has for some reason embraced this tacky, thrifted aesthetic and disseminated it to the masses. Urban Outfitters. The default look these days is “hipster.” Flannel shirts and hunting boots. Bold black glasses and skinny neck ties. The hipster can't get a break. Everyone is copping his style after he copped it first. How long until the hipster has co-opted every odd, quirky, and painfully lame fashion object? At that point, the only solution will be to look like the average Joe. To go against the grain of looking like a hipster because hipster has become the grain. Gap and Banana Republic and Old Navy will be hipster then. *Man, originality is so out.* Then, the guys wearing polo shirts and slacks will be on the vanguard, and the guys wearing Toms and fanny packs and eye glasses and

expensive street wear will be in the norm. At that point, Kogard decided that the only solution would be to blow his fucking brains out.

Traffic. Fuck.

He had already smoked ten cigarettes in the twenty minute drive from BoHo. Why the fuck does everybody and their mother have to be in 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 on the filter of his jack as traffic picked up again. He sped down four blocks and *skreeched* onto 15<sup>th</sup> Street. He passed the gallery, Samsara, a squat square building nudged between tall red-brick storefronts. It was 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 soot outside the door with a clipboard. People came from up and down the street, stopped at the man, and were either let in or denied entrance. Black suit. Fuck. He should have worn the flannel.

He drove a little further down the block and pulled into a day-by-day parking lot. This lot was near 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, so it was littered with Maybachs, Porches, and Italian race cars. It was guarded 24/7 by a booth-keeper and a security guard. Kogard got his ticket and found a spot near the back of the lot. When he got out of his car he suddenly had the feeling he was in a prison. High concrete walls surrounded the fleet of vehicles. It made him nauseous and constipated, but he knew that both feelings would subside once he got out of there. He threw his cigarette butt down and lit another as he walked toward the entrance. He could hear the anxiety of the city outside of 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? How about the city that's been high on coke since the 80's.

About fifty feet from his parking spot, Kogard spotted a fiery-red Lamborghini Gallardo with a license plate that read

3AT PSSY

He stopped in his tracks and stared at the thing, and as he stared at it his feeling of nausea became intensified. He clutched his stomach. He looked around the lot for the security guard or a camera. He did not spot either. He slowly backed away, scanning the ground near the spot, and came upon a fine-sized rock. He stuck his jack between his lips, picked up the rock and hurled it at the car's back window. *Shatter.* (It did not break on one swift *smash*, rather, it seemed to fall apart in intervals.) Kogard ducked behind some cars and ran in a roundabout way to the entrance of the parking lot. When he got to the booth he walked up to 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 happening all the time. 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. For the life of him he could not figure out why.

VIII.

Kogard approached the black-suited doorman in front of Samsara and asked, May I go in? The doorman looked him with intense

scrutiny.

--This is a private event, he said, turning his attention to the street.

Two large windows occupied the wall on both sides of the door and Kogard could see a crowd of people in black suits and ties, hair done-up, expensive urban wear, Ray-Ban glasses, glasses of cocktails, laughing and contorting, 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 turned to look at him again. --That is no outfit for an event such as this. Keep it moving, bummy.

*Bummy?* Kogard sighed and ran his fingers through his hair, adjusted his glasses. --My good sir, I am not one to drop names like these fashion heiresses and these kings and queens of gasoline who you may be accustomed to denying, but I am a well-known person. A writer. I am 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 will have to have you fired.

The doorman turned his entire body toward Kogard with hostility. --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, KAYYYYYY, 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 the outlands. 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.

--'Sup 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 loosing their innocence, I quite liked those.

--I wonder why, said Fredo.

--Oh, shut up, Chelsea said shoving his shoulder playfully and then wiping some liquid from his chin. Her smile was radiant.

Fredo winked at Kogard and then said, We're going to go around again. I think Jeffery Lamereaux has arrived. He owes me an outstanding debt. Fredo took Chelsea's hand and they waded through the crowd.

--Ahhh, so how have you been? said Amanda, raising her voice above the sea of tinkering glasses and slurring voices.

--Ahh, you know. *Bummy*.

She laughed like it was the funniest thing she'd ever heard. It made Kogard uncomfortable.

--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. 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 chatrm. 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 looking down.

--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. You would think that they had been a "thing" the way she still talks to him. They had only fucked twice.

He looked around the room and saw the bar over yonder, and who was working the bar but a twenty-something tattooed girl with thick black glasses. Kogard inched toward it through the crowd. People stopped him on the way, people who knew his face from articles and people whom he knew vaguely, rich folk and struggling but talented young artists. Cordials were exchanged and same questions always popped up: "When are

you going to write something new?" "Ohh," he always replied, "It's on its way out of my head as we speak." He started to joke with the questioners after a while. "When's your new book coming out?" "I'm writing it but I think it will take fourteen lifetimes." That always got a good laugh.

He got to a bar and ordered a glass of water. The girl bartender smiled at him as she poured it and said, You're Walter Kogard, right?

--Yes. And you are a stalker. Oh, ha ha, I'm just kidding.

She laughed as she handed him his water. --I admire your work. You're one of the only writers I think who really writes in the way that the old masters indented. Really illuminating modern truths in surprising ways.

--Why, thank you, said Kogard.

--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.

--Ha ha. 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 one of those, she said.

Kogard sipped and the water almost dribbled through the edges of his smile. --I'll be back, he said, and he walked away.

The crowd in the medium-sized room was so thick 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. It was an open room painted all white, but Kogard 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 didn't like art-critic-types that much. They were the most pretentious of them all, more pretentious than literary critics, writers, painters, and brain surgeons combined.

He migrated to the rear wall of the room and squeezed through the group of people hovered there. The piece located there was a similarly composed image which read

**black**

Ok, I think I know where this might be going. He turned toward a black-suited person standing beside him who was staring at the word as if he expected it to strike out at him.

--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 three small video projectors were hung.

Oh, Kogard thought. Digital art. Digital art that has not even transcended the boundaries of reality. But is it art if it is still intangible? Can a projection be art? Can a word be art? Well, 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... Hmm, he supposed it *was* very poignant.

He migrated to the right side of the room; projected upon the wall was the word



## art

Well, that answered all of his questions, he joked to himself. 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,” but it's telling us that it is “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? It is 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 the art.

--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 is 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 go back to the work to study it some more, but first he wanted to find El Wood. The room was not very big and all of the people crowded into it made finding one person 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 strongly 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, damn near 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, that little vandal, surrounded by rich art-minded white folks who wanted to buy his work and make him famous, just like he had always dreamed of. He wore a black trench coat over a tee shirt with Ronald Reagan's face on it, the eyes of which were blacked out and the forehead of which was adorned with an upside-down cross. He wore skinny beige slacks that had holes in the knees. Through the crowd Kogard saw that his shoes were Vans Authentics. He had the pleasant face of a lad, deep youthful eyes which seemed to protrude from his face trying to absorb all there was to behold, medium-dark skin with light little freckles spotting his cheeks, dreadlocks sprouting up out of his head at random like dandelions. They appeared to move as if on their own will 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. Kogard was convinced that all great artists were aliens whose lifespans never extended past the earthly age of 27—Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Cobain, Amy Winehouse, Haring, Basquiat. This requirement disqualified Kogard from the category of being a great artist, but Wood was 26, poor guy, didn't even know he was doomed.

As he approached him, Wood called out, Ah, Walter Kogard, a fellow writer!

Kogard got close enough to shake his hand and give him a big hug. Then he said, smiling, 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! Ha ha! Well, 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. 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 words rather than "ideas," per say. Writing in and of itself if 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, mired in awkward silence. There were two men in dapper suits and then 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.

Kogard threw up in his mouth a little. There was a stint of awkward silence.

Then, thankfully, someone tapped him on the shoulder. He turned around and it was Antarah Crawley, a young black kid who had moved to BoHo several months ago. (Ah, correction, there were *two* black people in the room tonight!) Kogard had seen him in the local coffeehouse writing on an old Remington. 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 quite astutely at 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. 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 little sketch that I've been working on and, seeing you here, I thought you might want to read it, or at least have something so blow your nose with. Ha ha. I tried sending it and a few other short fictions to *Ashtray* but they rejected it. 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. He left.

Good kid, good kid. Kogard turned back around and the two dapper man were looking at him as if they were expecting Kogard to continue with their conversation.

There was another awkward silence and then one of the men said, You know that boy?

--...Yeah, said Kogard.

--Cool, said the other man.

Kogard took a long sip of his water. The men continued to not say anything. --Weeeeeeeeeell, Kogard said, I'm going to take a cigarette now.

--You know, smoking is a direct cause of lung, throat and mouth cancer, said one of the men.

Kogard took a deep sigh, nodded politely, and stepped outside.

Sam the doorman was still standing there, but he ignored Kogard. Besides him, a group of hipster-looking fellows were congregated at the edge of the sidewalk smoking cloves, and a peanut-butter-colored man with white hair smoked a cigar while leaning against the building. Kogard walked over, leaned against the building next to the white-haired man, lit a cigarette, and pulled out Crawley's story. It was based in a fictional city called New York. It was an obvious euphemism for Empire City.

"Of Lotus Flowers"

Neil Armstrong had resolved that he was a terrible artist. He had dreams of painting scenes that were more beautiful than God himself could create on earth, but he was drawn to all of the forms he saw, of lotus flowers and beautiful girls who wanted to be his muse. Painting after painting, his subjects eventually began to contradict what he wanted to produce on the canvas. His subjects were forms, and they were beautiful, but it was space that he wanted to create—the space where forms once were. His muses' physicality drew out of him a desire to eliminate their forms and find their essence. And when he put that desire to canvas, what resulted was a tragic miscommunication. It was shortly after this realization that he packed a knapsack and traveled to Burma to be with the monks and learn the art of meditation. Meditation, he believed, was a method he could use to cope with the disparity between his mind that he so cherished to

use and the world he so loved to behold, a way to compromise the form and space of lotus flowers.

The country of Burma was under military rule and heavily policed, especially for outsiders, and so he had to sneak in by way of the oceanic border of the Rangoon Divide. Therein he visited the monks in the first monastery he came across and immediately began meditating, though he knew nothing of the art. He closed his eyes, crossed his legs, and laid his left palm in his right as his thumbs drew together in resemblance of a leaf of a lotus. None of the other monks bothered him, for he kept to his corner, and he meditated for thirteen months without food or water. One day, after more than a year of the mysterious visitor, a young monk ran to the studies of the monastery to tell his seniors that the foreign white man was levitating in his corner. To the monks' surprise, when they eventually came to lay their own eyes on the man who had become a fixture in the holy place, they saw that he was indeed levitating seven inches off of the floor. A crowd grew around Neil for the next couple of days, monks coming to meditate near the strange white sage, until one day Neil stopped meditating, came down from his space in the air, and left the country the same way he came in.

In the monastery, Neil had thought every thought he had to think, every

feeling he had about the world and the things he saw, until he had nothing else to think. Space had filled his being and he floated.

But Neil wanted the ultimate form—the most beautiful girl in the world—in hopes that it might bring him closer to painting better. He traveled back to New York and sat in Central Park, where he buried his possessions underneath him, and on top of the mound he crossed his legs, closed his eyes, and laid his left palm in his right hand. He would meditate until he drew such a crowd that his perfect muse must be among them. He sat in Central Park for thirteen months, until one morning, a jogger called the local news station to tell them that an unhealthily bony man was levitating in New York City.

Over the next week, an enormous crowd of pedestrians, spiritualists and news reporters gathered around Neil in the park. The ruckus was almost dangerous, but Neil had stopped thinking and tuned out all of the outside world. That is, until a tingle tingled in his groin. Neil descended to the ground and opened his eyes to see a beautiful woman standing in front of him. She had maneuvered herself to the front of the crowd because she was so compelled to see the most spiritual man in the world. She was the most beautiful woman Neil had ever seen. He then closed his eyes again, and resumed levitating. He levitated



progressively higher and higher until he was a dot in the sky over New York, and then he disappeared.

--Hmm..., Kogard mused, a leg of ash teetering off the butt of his cigarette. --That's not bad. I like that.

--Fiction? came a voice.

Kogard looked beside him. The white-haired man asked again, You reading fiction there?

--Yeah, said Kogard. A friend of mine trying to make it gave it to me. I like it. I might pass it on.

--You are Walter Kogard, right?

--Yes, Kogard said shaking the man's hand. --And you are?

--Hugo Realgo, the man said omitting his "h," rolling his "r," and bellowing cigar smoke from his mouth.

Kogard was suspended in shock. Hugo Realgo. The Nobel laureate. The Cuban-Black American reporter. A legend.

--Hugo Realgo! Kogard inadvertently screamed. --My god, I worship the ground you walk on. I'm not a journalist of course, but your book *The Blood Rorschach* has a permanent place on my 'all-time favorite books' list. It's incredible, your insights on the middle-eastern foreign policy. You probably get this all the time, but I would vote you for president.

--Ah, ha ha, it is precisely my astute observations of foreign policy that would disqualify me from the presidency. It just makes too much sense to pull out now.

--My god, and the vivid details. Your life story! It's incredible.

--Ah, not really. Actually, the most interesting parts of that trip were omitted from the final book.

--Really? There was more than Syria and Egypt? The Afghanistan section was superb, as well.

--It all really began with Libya. But I decided not to

include that for reasons which would be obvious to you if you heard it.

--Oh, God, please. Please, I wish to hear it. I don't even know what your doing at an art show like this, but you've been placed into my life now and I must hear the story!

--Well...Ok. He puffed at his cigar. --I like telling it, anyway. So: you know I was working for *The Observer* and that's how most of the book was written, through them sending me on missions back and forth to different countries.

--Right, right.

--Well, they sent me on two month dispatch to Libya to do field reporting on, as they were called, the rebel insurgents there. This was before Egypt and Syria and the Sudan. My first real dispatch. Dangerous, dangerous work. I was young. I was well known from my papers. And I was almost frightened. But I thought: danger: if that's not a reason to go I don't know what is. I was tired of sitting at my desk writing pieces about some politician's latest extramarital slip-up. So I went, yes. And wouldn't I have the luck: the moment I stepped off the plane my crew and I were swarmed by armed, masked rebel soldiers wielding M16s. That's that heavy duty *Full Metal Jacket* shit. 7.62 Millimeter rounds. Several of my crew members spoke Arabic and translated. We were told by the rebels to come with them. My crew told me that one of the unpaid interns was going to pose as me, and quite willingly. The rebels needed some collateral, you know. So while he was held hostage in a bunker somewhere, my crew and I were given automatic rifles and put in a sort of platoon, to fight against the Libyan government. What field work! I thought. If I get out of this alive this will make a fucking great piece. And, I suppose, being Cuban and American, this sort of arbitrarily being thrust into battle against a vaguely painted enemy came quite naturally to me. So yeah, I basically walked around in a mask and gun and shot at cars, blew up buildings, and so on and so forth. We were heavily watched by

the rebel generals so that we didn't escape or try anything funny. And then about a month later we were all set free. The reasoning escaped me but I didn't question it. All in all, I think it was a much more productive way to spend a month. The gutted-out buildings we slept in had so much more character than the hotel *The Observer* had set up for us. I guess life throws you into uncertain situations so that it can make the best of you. Or kill you. Anyway, that was that... And, you know what was most ironic? The hotel that was set up for us for our stay there, which was heavily guarded and everything...on the third week my platoon general had us blow it up. How's that for coincidence? Realgo took a last puff of his cigar and then stomped it out. --The show was great, wasn't it? he asked.

--...Yeah! The show...yeah, it was great.

--I like that kid. Well, anyway, I've got to go. I need a drink. Old man like me doesn't need to be up much later. He shook Kogard's hand and began to walk away, then stopped five feet away and asked, How's the book coming, by the way?

--Oh, said Kogard, it'll be another fourteen lifetimes before I finish it.

--Ha ha ha, Realgo said, his head flung black, as he walked down the street and vanished behind the curtain of Empire City night fall and steam rising up from the sidewalk gates.

Kogard went 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—the point—to the very notion of being here—being in the now. 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. Even the

girl bartender was a little tipsy. 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. It reminded him of a passage from one of his early unpublished short novels, of the young May Broom at the Dutchess' Ball...

She waded through the waves of perfume and hair and the clinking of jewelry and the highfalutincy of the kind of people she did not necessarily care for, but who could entertain her for short periods of time. A man in outrageous cufflinks or a debutant in the latest Fendi whom May would know by name and temperament, but not intimately, would call her out of the crowd and they would exchange regards, but she always kept on moving, as if on a cloud above them all. She felt closer to the chandelier suspended far above the party than to the guests themselves, and it may have been because the chandelier in all its glory was unassuming in its luxury; it just was, and she marveled at it for it. It was a sort of ecstasy for her to be in such a pompous atmosphere of celebration, and she could find pleasure in it like the lot of the socialites, but like a drug trip it was to be brief and carefully minded as esoteric, not real life. She was high in this sense, but only in that sort of high where one knows one is on drugs and that the out-of-place things are not the reality. But knowing that, she let herself fall into the trip and experience the excitement of it all. At the same time, though, she was all too aware that the partiers around her were junkies and could no longer distinguish real life from this drug haze.

## 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 some 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 silently. His ideal bar was one in which the music was just loud enough that one had to raise one's voice, where the seating was plentiful, and where one could order an expensive gin cocktail or a Manhattan Project Little Tall Boy—or a clean, refreshing glass of filtered water if one wished. A versatile bar. 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 Ugly Mug was nice, but it was often too crowded, and with the worst kind of people to boot. No, the bar that embodied that ideal atmosphere for Kogard was the Brooklyn Basement, a speakeasy in West Empire. It was frequented by artists like himself, quiet-spoken types, the kind of people who would impulsively share with you their life story in a

night and stab you in a dark alley if you rubbed them wrong, mobsters doing business with politicians, and old drunks who used to dance jazz with the flappers and philosophers. He never got out there much because it was on the other side of the city. But tonight, Kogard was excited to experience it again.

--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. Kogard stepped out then and inhaled six cigarettes.

*A movement is accomplished in six stages...*

*and the seventh brings return...*

*...action brings good fortune,*

*some say....*

El finally came out and they walked to the parking lot in silence, El, probably marinating in the afterglow of a successful show, and Kogard, simply sharing the feeling of expressionless ecstasy. Half way though the lot El pointed out that a Lamborghini had had its back window smashed. Kogard replied, Bunch of savages in this town.

They drove off and spent the first part of the ride in silence. 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, 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 is this "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.

--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 can 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 on mushrooms and that I put together 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 end. 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 your creation and approve of it 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 moves 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, let his dreadlocks flail about in the wind as the car passed the city in a sea of lights and smoke. He wanted the feeling of time rushing by, how the cold wind seared his skin. He wanted the feeling of rocketing past everyone else, the rush of the adrenaline, the roar of the eight-cylinder engine. 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 person. 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 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 is 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 *white folk* 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 West 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 the wood-paneled storefront. The boards had graffiti tags all over them.

--Hey, this is my friend Joe's tag, El said pointing to the word JOE scrawled in large black paint marker on the wood panel which replaced the left window.

--He must not be very smart.

--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 to the alley passing winos holding empty bottles, a dumpster probably filled with babies,

and went into a back lot in which was parked a matte black Rolls Royce and a red Spyder. The chipped paint of “Jay's Deli” peeled off of the top of the brick exterior. Below it was a steel black door with the characters “Bb” painted above a sliding peep-hole. Kogard rapped the melody on the door; the cold steel notes resembled those of a piano.

--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 studied them. The hole slid shut and the sound of many latches could be heard *clanging* behind the door. A gruff, cigar-stained voice beckoned them in, *Post haste!*, 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 with booths lining the left and opposite walls, a door at the back of the room—presumably leading up to the abandoned delicatessen—tables dispersed throughout, a pool table, and a twenty-foot oval bar in the center. The few lights in the place were located above the bar. A stereotypical bartender whom everyone called “Pal” stood polishing glasses. Most of the booths were full. Several men in half-way unbuttoned white shirts, sleeves rolled up, presumably having retired for the night, stood around the pool table holding their sticks. A drunk but composed young lady danced to the low-playing Radiohead on a tabletop. Nobody looked up when Kogard and El entered. Here, everybody minded their own business.

Kogard looked around the room and saw MacMillan, JP, and Deborah sitting at the booth in the far right corner. El immediately went over to them. In the booth next to them Fredo dry-humped Chelsea Guermantes. Around the room Kogard noticed faces he recognized from news interviews with the mayor of Empire talking to faces he recognized from Fredo's business circle. He did not dwell on them, though; especially

here, it was not polite to stare. The floor was immaculate, from being washed so many times.

In the left corner of the room near the stairwell from which Kogard had just entered a shake-down appeared to be taking place. Nobody interfered in the business that went on here, but the mop-bucket was always kept on deck for the hits that regularly took place. But this little squabble looked innocent enough, a simple intimidation (for if they were going to kill him they wouldn't have been talking to him.) The scene was this: two black men in black suit pants, polished shoes, and white shirts cornered a crying little man laying on the ground clutching the side of his head. The two standing men exchanged threats toward the little man—

--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: TSSSSSSSSSS!

--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 sto-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...

--What's going on over there? Kogard asked Pal as he approached the bar.

--Oh, you know. Same ol' shit. Somebody didn't pay up.

--Damn, when will they fuckin' learn? Glass of water.

--Coming up. Pal disappeared under the bar for a moment 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 with definitive angels around her jaw. Her dress was cut low, red, showing how modest her breasts were. She wore black sunglasses, pouted shimmering red lipstick, and presented a well-executed illusion of soft clear skin, when in fact scrutiny revealed the bumps around her left cheek. 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 saw him noticing her and winked at him. Kogard turned his head the other way.

In the seat directly beside him sat a black man in a dapper suit who possessed a resemblance to someone Kogard had seen before. He tried not to stare. Pal came back up and sat a glass of water on top of a napkin in front of him. Kogard sipped it and let out a refreshing *ahh*, but he had the overwhelming desire to place the black man's face to a name. Just then one of the assaulting men from the corner came over pulling an individually wrapped cigar out of his ear. He unwrapped it and proceeded to crack it open length-wise with his thumbs. The dapper black man at the bar turned around and said to him, Yo Meth, hold up, hold up, where my Killer tape at, God? You dun 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 sounded out 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?

The latches were unlocked and another black man in a black suit ran down the stairs. The dapper man at the bar said, What's up, God?

This man who had just entered was a bit bigger. He wore a black rag on his head and he had a goatee. He said, 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 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 lifting the blunt to his lips and licking 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 coolness.

Then it dawned on Kogard. Meth. Rae. God. He knew these men. They were Killah Bees.

In most of Empire City and in scattered cities across New Jersey, the South and Southern California, the Killah Bee Assassins were an underground criminal organization and secret cult who observed the Tao of Wu. Their day-to-day businesses included mixtape distribution, narcotics, bootleg liquor—especially 40s—and cyphers. Cyphers were battles which involved elaborate quick-spoken poetry rather than physical assault used 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 who was still sitting beside him, 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 RZAektor; one underboss, The Genius; and seven caporegimes, Dirt McGirt, The One Universal God, The Rebel I.N.S., MK, Methical and Tony Sparks (the two men who just left) and the man still sitting beside him was

Shallah Raekwon. These nine members were collectively known as the 36 Chambers of Death (four chambers per member) and they were highly skilled in battles of the tongue as well as the arts of Shaolin Shadowboxing and the Wu-Tang sword style. It was rumored that The RZA, The Genius, and Methsical were so skilled in rapping that they could slay their enemies with their tongues. Fredo knew all about them; they had 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, unfazed, and stared only into the nose of his 40. After a while, Kogard decided to stop being a little bitch and talk to the man. He leaned over, without being too intrusive, 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 didn't respond as they stared each other down. Not a muscle in Raekwon's face moved. Pal, who was near them, began to back away. Kogard's hands started sweating.

Then Raekwon broke out into laughter and said, Ah! You're that asshole writer, right? Walter Kogard. I've heard you pull shit like that all the time!

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, heh heh. I know all about you. How's it going,



man?

--Not bad, not bad, but it looks like your boys had to go rough somebody up.

--Shit happens, God. Niggas be wylin' 'n shit. That's why I keep that culture cypher, God, knamsayin, all day every day. He took a sip.

--What's a "culture cypher," if you don't mind me asking.

--Culture, my nigga: 4. Cypher: a circle: 0. Culture cypher: 40.

--40? Like a 40oz? Or a .40 caliber?

--Ayeeee, whatever you wan'it to be, God.

Kogard sat straight up in his stool again. He looked over at the woman on the other side of the bar. She had been eying him, but she looked away when he turned his head. Kogard felt comfortable now. He took a sip of water and asked, turning back to Raekwon, Why do you all refer to each other as "God" so much?

--Shit, nigga, fuck if I know; been sayin' it all my life. 'S like a salutation, knamsayin', like "What's up, man," "What's up, God?" Knamsayin'. God and man, we like one, knamsayin'. Single being, God, knamsayin'. We all connected in this shit. Man, dude, bro, God, whatever, knamsayin'. It's like a greeting for ya boys, ya dogs, knamsayin'; "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 mo', 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, 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 pop up on Raekwon's face, but it did not. He continued: They never sold crack or popped glocks or anything—[that comment incited a reaction, but it soon subsided]—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 it's 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 looked like he was thinking quite deeply about

this. He nodded his head to himself and sipped from his 40. --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 issued 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" 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 forms 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, 'Lo goose; the only way I began to G-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 16. 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. Shiiid, my life got no better. Same damn 'Lo sweater. Times was rough and tough like leather. Figured out I went the wrong route. So I got with a sick-tight 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 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 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! C.R.E.A.M—Get the money.

--Dollar, dollar bills, man.

--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.

Jazz played low on the bar's speakers. Raekwon seemed to be done talking; had tired himself out and was now listening, grooving, 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 lady at the other end of the bar began singing, to herself, surely, but that which was her's was laid bare for all to hear:

I picked this bouquet, of tin flowers for you  
You wanted roses  
I hope foil will do

I picked this bouquet, of tin flowers for you  
You wanted roses  
I hope foil will do...

Let's start over new  
Before my heart closes  
I picked this bouquet, of tin flowers for you

The truth ain't for you  
It juxtaposes, so  
I hope foil will do

Yeah, I hope foil will do  
I know you wanted roses  
I picked this bouquet, of tin flowers for you

This rose ain't for you

It just decomposes, so  
I hope foil will do...

Roses are red, violets are blue  
Get out this glass house, before it forecloses  
I picked this bouquet, of tin flowers for you  
I hope foil will do...

And that last note, that last “I do,” echoed throughout the room and around the eddies of smoke and perfume in a piercing E that might have shattered every glass and bottle in the place if after ten seconds it did not come to its humble and composed conclusion. The feeling swelled throughout the entire room 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 black swimming pools 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?

--Blacks.

--See, I don't know about that. He spoke some wise words. He made a lot of sense.

--Niggas ain't got no worldly sense. He only knows whether or not it's a good idea t' kill a nigga for a week-old debt.

That's the only sense he knows. El scratched his crotch and burped an arpeggio.

--Many different ways to look at something, said Kogard, lifting his glass and taking a gulp.

But—it wasn't his—he \*hiccuped\*—the burn... He looked into his hand and saw the buubbles in El's gin and tonic—\*hic\*... He hadn't had a drink in two years, and now—A whirlpool, it felt, rushed through the entire length of his blood vessels and cannoned into his brain, back down into his heart, and around and around again. He tried to look around the room but—buutt—his vision—bblluurriinngg. Thee wwoorrlldd ttuurriinnngg oonn iittss ssiidde. He wasn't drunkk, though, no, worse, he remembered—he remembered...the times before he kicked the stuff. The drunk fights, he was drowning; one sip of that gin-tonic and the flood gates burst; a wave of memories of Nichte and little Cassandra, his stumbling in every night, her fits, Cassie's wails from the crib--

*--I don't care if they think you're James-fuckin-Joyce, Walter, my daughter's NOT having an ALCOHOLIC FOR A FATHER.*

*--Bitch!*

*--\*GASP\**

*--CUNT*

*\*Cassie screams\**

*--SHH, Cass—see what you did to her!?*

*--SHUT HER UP THEN!*

*--GO AWAY, YOU'RE RUINING US; YOU'RE RUINING YOURSELF. FAME HAS FUCKED YOU OVER!*

NO, no, I'm alright noww.

*--GO AWAY YOU FUCK! YOU'RE NOT SO HIGH AND MIGHTY TO ME! YOU MIGHT BE TO THEM, BUT NOT TO ME! GO MARRY YOUR READERS, I'M THROUGH WITH YOU! FOR GOD'S SAKE, YOU'RE PROBABLY ALREADY FUCKING THEM!*

No, no, it wasn't like tthhaatt...

*--AND YOU KNOW WHAT ELSE?! I HATE YOUR FUCKIN DICK! I FUCKIN LOVE JOCELYN! SHE TREATS ME BETTER THAT YOU HAVE IN YEARS!*

*--FUCKING DYKE! FUCKING DYKE, I KNEW IT!*

*--WAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH*

*--SHUT UP*

*--SHUP UP, SHUT UP*

Shut up, shut up, no more memories. Goo, Goooo....awayy...

He stumbled up out of his seat. He stammmered acccrosss the room—BELCH—drip, drip, it bled down the front of his sweater. He stammmered uupp the sstttaaaiirrsss, aarroounndd tthhhee bbbllloocckk, thee PITCH DARK of Empire night.

*--GO AWAY YOU MELANCHOLIC FUCK!*

No, no, I don't wantt too rreemmembbeerr... Key in the ignition... Escape... No. Never escape. He'd never escape.

XI.

He had parked somehow, the tires upon the curb, his Bentley out in plain sight, fuck it; he felt around for the keyhole, missed THREE MILLION times; fuck fuck fuck; he felt terrible—UNLOCK—IN HIS APARTMENT—he stammered to his bedroom, fell upon the floor. He felt terrible—the liquor? Could it do this to him? In one sip?--or was it the memories, AUGH the memories, a stronger pharmacon of the spirit than any drink or smoke, poisoned him—he threw up again; he crawled to his desk, past his desk, to his desk-side-bookshelf, brought out a brown accordion folder—HIS PAPERS—papers he had planned to imprison there, papers from long ago, papers written in a haze of drink—he tore off the rubber band and tore out his papers, hundreds and hundreds of sheets—where was the story??where



was the story??the only thing he had to remember his feelings after she left, where were they??written in a fog of drink, how else would he remember how he felt then??where was the story, he tore through page after page, tossing the useless scribbled pages all over his room—where??where??he didn't want to remember but he needed to remember??What was she like before, his darling Nicte??Where where where were his memories—AHHHHHThere!There it is!!!There it is. He so wanted to remember what it felt like to lose her. He wanted to feel, he wanted to feel:.....:

Nicte

or, How To Love Someone From Afar  
(eight months after the divorce)

Have you ever loved somebody so bad?

Loved, like it was, but it's gone now.  
Loved, like you loved your blanket as you toddled and teethed. You never went anywhere without it. You loved snuggling in it. You loved its color.

Or maybe it wasn't a blanket. Maybe it was a doll, or a food. But whatever it was, it was your thing, and you'd die if you lost it.

But you're a grown-up now and you can't live attached to a blanket or a doll. You found the thing inside of you that fills that space of attachment, that leaves you naked without it. Maybe it's your ego. Maybe it's alcohol. But whatever it is, it's a substitute. It's the thing that gives you the artificial feeling that you're blanket was so perfect at giving

you. On those cold nights in bed alone, it's your ego that makes you feel how your blanket used to. The bottle of whiskey in your bedside drawer gives you the warm kiss goodnight you feel inside your chest that makes up for the lost warm fuzziness of that little piece of cloth. It's those nights, when the sky is so indifferent and all the other people alone in their beds and walking the street high seem like far-away stars that have already died and the light that's there is just a ghost, that I think about Nichte Anacora.

*Letter 1: write me a letter from a burning building*

As I lay here amidst the flames, lungs suffocating, flesh bubbling up off of my bones, I don't die. My heart hasn't pumped blood for years. Since I met you, in fact. I've been drained, empty. That night, remember, I know you do...that night crimson life flowed from my member into you. Now I'm all but a shell. A wrinkled vessel of desire, sustained by addiction for you. My brain pumps morphine through my veins. My muscles are motivated only to hold you. When I needed stability, I found it in my addiction to you. And I kept withdrawal at bay by being with you, by being in you, until just several months ago—the first day I never saw you. Now I'm burning. The flames lick and flick at the inside of my skin like my bones were drenched in butane,

mocking the flame and ash that currently engulfs me. This fire doesn't know how to suffer me; it's drying out a prune.

The fire alarm's been ringing in this building for years. Sedated, I couldn't tell you when the flames first sparked, or how long they've been raging.

### *The dream*

"So, I had a dream last night. I was in Farragut Park, across from the White House, well, actually, I was more by the White House, and there was a really big skate sesh going on in the park. I was looking at it from the fence. I was talking to somebody and they were like, 'everyone you know is here.' So I start to move more into the park, but the police came, so people were starting to leave, but they weren't rushing. I saw Ava talking to some mentally retarded person on a bed. And then I got to this big Olympic-sized pool in the middle of Farragut. And beside it, as people are leaving, I see Nicte and Jocelyn. So I skate over 'cause I hadn't seen them in a while and we're cool now. And I said 'Hi' to Nicte, and then she touched my face and giggled and kissed me. And I said, 'your drunk' and she said 'no I'm not.' And then we somehow moved over to the pool and we jumped in and we were making out at the bottom. But I had taken my wallet out before I fell in 'cause I didn't want it to get wet. So in the

middle of getting with her I swam back up and looked at my wallet. I was floating up there for a while and she was at the bottom, and for some reason, I saw this image from above, like a bird. I saw us close in proximity, but spatially, we were pretty far apart. Anyway, she swam back up and paddled over to an espresso machine that was on the edge of the pool. But I swam over to where she was, and somehow the pool got smaller there and I held her from the back and we just floated there. And in the dream, and at the same time as I was waking up, I felt like it was the first time I actually held her right."

*Letter #2: Home*

Tell me why you really left, because it's eating me up inside, like my heart is starved off love and is eating what it has left in itself.

Can I blame you for letting me know the future now? Can I blame you for being protective of both of us? Of you, keeping yourself detached and free, wild night wanderer. Of me, breaking this off early, killing the feeling before it grew unbearable. Thanks for my heart back, but really, you can keep it. I know you don't want it, but I don't want it either. Its home ain't in this chest. I couldn't give it half of the love that you can give it dragging it behind you. It can't survive in my body is a wasteland.

The feeling I had when we were together, of contentment, it was there because it had a home, if but shaky and uncertain. You once said that you could do anything and I wouldn't be put off. I thought about and, well, yeah, it's true. I can't bring myself to hate you. Even though I want to, even though I need to find another place to lay my heart, I will never find any home, no matter the condition, as beautiful and cozy as you. Nowhere else to play Common and talk about James Dean. Nowhere else I'll feel comfortable leaving that vital piece of me while I go about this life. It's just too heavy to carry around with me.

Do you care about these feelings? Probably not. I can't call you to tell you. If you picked up, which is unlikely, you still won't put yourself in the conversation. I may just as well talk to the side of the house I've been evicted from. I'll never get through to you. You'll never understand how sturdy you actually are to me. Even through your stubbornness, here, take my heart. Just take it. Let me come home... home is wherever I'm with you.

OK. I'll just leave it on the front step.

---

"What do you think it means?" I ask Taylor.  
"Can dreams predict...?"

"No," she says. "They only reflect."

I'm a bit depressed by this piece of reality, but it helps. I like the depression, like when I get really, really high and then very low. It may seem strange, but who among us nurtures pain that isn't self-inflicted? It's a sweet corrosive state that shears off your skin and makes you feel every speckle of dust and every gust of wind. It's what makes everything more bearable.

I try to change the subject. "It's funny, every girl I end up really liking turns out to be a lesbian. There's this girl that lives in my building who's gorgeous. Her hair is shaved on the sides and there's tufts of red curls on top. Her septum is pierced and so are a bunch of other places on her ears. She dresses so cool. But she likes girls. I told her if her relationship ever soured and she needed someone, I would take her out and make her feel great. She just smiled at that."

Taylor laughs.

"What?"

"You're too nice."

"You're a bitch." I look out the window. "It tends to happen a lot though, falling in love with lesbians. It's a kind of self-deprecation, I think."

"Why not just love someone who will love you back?" She says. "You know they're out there."

I smile. "It's too easy. The most

beautiful girls are murderers. I love it when my heart breaks."

"You're crazy," she says.

"I'm a fictional character," I say. "I put myself in impossible situations. Fodder for the novel," I smile.

She rolls her eyes.

*Letter #3: the letter in the raymond carver book*

Someone left that book, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, on one of the tables in the coffee shop. I've heard people praise this book to bits, but I never bothered picking it up. But here it was now; I flipped through the pages. I was gonna start reading it but I didn't get past the very first page, blank of text. All it had on it was a handwritten note:

Mike!

This is not a strange proclamation of love.

It is, however, the reason writing didn't suck in the 80s. Either Carver or his editor created the gritty, declarative style that short story writers of North America are only just now attempting to escape. Basically, this will be a great airport/plane read if you

don't already have one. Take  
care! It was great  
getting to know you.  
Goodbye forever!  
Sarah

Kogard's tears stained "forever!" and smudged the black ink. He held the paper in his hands, wept on them, drenched them in pitiful wetness. He lay back, flat, comforted in a shallow sense by all the leaves of paper scattered about. He lay the wet manuscript on his chest. Darkness filled the room having seeped in through his open window. He felt it again—the pain—sweet sweet despair, the feeling of having lost all of one's valuable possessions and been left with the scraps of what mattered. Rejoice: he still did love her! ...One sip of gin and now all of this... He cried, cried, fell asleep to sorrowfully sublime visions of Nichte, forgone memories of his queer broken family.



# Phase the Third.

## I.

Kogard woke up this morning on the floor, fully-clothed, the story laying on his chest, 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”

God, god, god...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, and Nicte 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! Toppled 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 bondslave! 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 that 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 himself in them; 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. Drinking, I wanted to distance myself from my self. And now I have neither not 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.

Jo. Big-titted, lean string bean, pixie hair cut, you think you can pass as 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 mine daughter. 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. Its 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. He haven't talked since the trial. We have a lot to get to the bottom of. Would she let me in? Or would she sic Jo on me 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.  
Take action...I could go....

## II.

He got up, naked, 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. He began to pick his papers up off the floor, organize them, his flaccid dick swinging back and forth in the smelly air. 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 has passed, the space between the two parameters of the event and the result, cannot 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.

Clean, clean, clean, must organize...

Suddenly he heard, from his common room, someone outside his building calling up on the intercom: *Kogard, It's Horton, let me in!*

Ah, Horton Tenenbaum, Kogard's representative at Vesak Word House Publishers. What the fuck did he want? He was in the midst of a cleanse. Publishers come in and fuck with everything. He lit a cigarette, pulled on some gray sweatpants and went to the intercom, pushed the button, --It's open, he called down. He cracked his door open.

In due time, Horton Tenenbaum appeared on Kogard's

threshold, fresh-face, pressed brown suit (Ugh!), ready for business...and holding a brown paper bag filled with something that had a distinctive odor.

--What are you doing coming to my home at this ungodly early hour? Kogard asked irritably.

--It's one o'clock in the afternoon, K. Horton walked into the room, closed the door behind him and handed Kogard the brown paper bag. --For you.

Kogard took it and unwrapped it: it was a whole mackerel, eye and all. He looked up at Horton, disgusted. --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 I 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 publisher-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 another one of 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 cyclical-ness of time, the lack of linear-ness, the lack of [air-quote] space [end-air-quote], as it were, between a body and another body. 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 flash-back. Things in the hospital room incite memories in both of them. 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, 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? Ha ha.

--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.

--Nichte?

Kogard nodded his head solemnly.

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, 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, I can love her now like I did before, maybe 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 her. 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 in her.

--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.

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.

Birds chirped on the telephone wire outside the window. Praise the sun, it shines on.

--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 is, 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 then pulled out a book, cautiously, as if it were a 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, 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. But the present: it is ever a crossroad with infinite prongs, and we must chose 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. It's been there for two years.

Horton got up and 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, warped, jagged page edges, a repaired red spine which had the words

Tomorrow  
and  
Tomorrow  
and  
Tomorrow  
~\*~

Huxley

written on it in a manner and typeface which seemed grotesquely foreign to the period in which the book seemed to be printed, but which nevertheless conformed to the wrinkled spine tape. He impulsive 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.

Heh, Kogard, thought, We're on the same plane. One hundred years later, he and Huxley are still quibbling 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 came back into the common room. --I'll have to drink this straight. He took a sip and sat down again, swirling his half-full tumbler of straight bourbon. --Those fuckers are squeezing us, he said, evidently out of nowhere. But Kogard knew “those fuckers” meant Amazon. --They demand 60% RRP on our books just to distribute them. He took a sip. --We're losing money. It only makes marketing sense to go through them for 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. People will follow your titles to wherever they are sold. 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... 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 dissemination. But remember this, Horton: cigarettes kill. Through all of the anti-tobacco lobbying and tobacco education that has been going on since the 50s, 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.

Horton squinted his eyes, his posture slumped, he swirled his drink. --People still smoke even though it's bad for them...and even though it's a costly habit, to boot.

Kogard turned around and looked up from his book. He stuffed out his cigarette. --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 lit it. --Why do people smoke, Horton?

--...I—I don't know. Why do you smoke?

He exhaled. --I smoke because I enjoy it. I truly enjoy it. I like the *UGH*-I'm-dying feeling of smoke seeping into my lungs. 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 secretly 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 will ever stop people from wanting to be cool. 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. 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 \$15 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. 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, put his glass down, and gave Kogard a huge 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 one more time and Horton headed toward the door.

--We'll be in touch. Oh! Kogard said, remembering

something. He ran into his bedroom and fetched a piece of paper. --This is a story a young friend of mine wrote, he said coming back into the common room and handing Horton the paper. --I like it. 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.

The door closed and locked itself; Kogard then proceeded to remove his pants and let his loins sway with the freedom with which they were clearly intended. Why have a flaccid rod attached to one's scrotum if one is not allowed the freedom to swing it about? Why have a hard-on one is not allowed the freedom to smack and impale things with it? Society these days...

We went back into his bedroom and tidied up, smoked and cleaned. He gathered the vomit-soaked towels as well as all of his dirty clothes and dumped them into the washing machine in the closet by the front door. Ah!—detergent—he had none. He decided to use dish washing liquid instead. While those ran, he put the fish in his freezer, for he had no intention to eat it soon or ever. The kitchen was already clean for he rarely ate in there. The common room was clean for he rarely entertained guests. Horton was probably the only person who came willingly to his residence, and that was because he wanted something from him, good a guy as he was. When he fucked girls he always went to their place. He kept his apartment a sanctuary.

He opened the windows a bit wider to rid the room of its toxic stuffiness, and then he sat down in his desk chair where he lit another cigarette. The chirps of birds seemed to ride in on the sunshine. 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 her drawing him in. He felt their common aura, forged from the good times past, drawing them toward each other. He knew 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.* Hah, she would make some sly remark like that. Smile slightly. Jo would look at him from the corner of her eyes and not say a word. 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, some apparition from the obscure past come to clear the shit from the pipes, come back 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? Oh, he said, as he had brought himself to tears again. He stuffed out his cigarette and went to take a shower.

IV.

[shower thoughts:...] blubblubblub...water, water, getting hotter...not hot enough—HOT TOO HOT...burning skin...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 pure water....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 provided 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, drying his hair and ballsack—

he was weary of using a towel on his face after he had used it in all his nooks and crannies, when, in all actuality, the ballsack is the cleanest part of the male body; it doesn't even touch air most of the day; it is cleaned and then tucked away—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.*

Well aren't I the popular motherfucker today, Kogard thought. A regular Glenn Coco. Two visitors for you, Glenn Coco; you go, Glenn Coco.

He walked to the intercom and pushed the button. --It's open, he said, and cracked his door.

Not a minute later, Fredo Martinelli kramered 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.

--Damn, I'm sorry to hear that. Got home OK?

--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 I could, 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. 9<sup>th</sup> 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 had helped himself to the scotch that Horton had left out. --You're not bringing anything with you? asked Fredo.

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, Kogard's Bentley was gone.

--Who need's 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.

The Great White Shark pulled off.

They didn't speak for quite a while; the car itself, with its sheer volume, possessed an attitude which spoke tons. The speakers blared bass-heavy songs from the new album by rapper Poppa Glock.

Artist: Poppa Glock

Album: "Pop a Glock"

track 1: *Pop a Glock*

track 2: *Glock 19*

track 3: *2 Glock 9s*

track 4: *Bitch Niggas Git Popped*

track 5: *Wack Hos Git Dealt Wit*

track 6: *Crack Money*

track 7: *Rocks in My Socks*

track 8: *My Glock 17 and Me*

track 9: *All Gold Errythang*

track 10: *Glock in My Sock*

track 11: *Snitch Niggas Git Wet*

track 12: *My Life is a Movie (Rap Game Jim Carrey)*

track 13: *Posted on the Block with my Glock*

track 14: *Coke Money Outro (Pop a Glock, Part 2)*

A couple blocks down, Fredo turned the music down.  
--We're going to this pizzeria on East 108<sup>th</sup> Street. The proprietor there owes me an outstanding debt. I just don't understand why a person would borrow money from a guy like me and then not pay it back. Would you try that shit with a bank? Shidd. They

come to me, what do they expect I'll do if they default. I can act like a bank, too. Something has to get collected. I'll repossess his balls if I have to.

--That's why I stay out of business.

--You're an upstanding person. Business is for scum like me. For people who don't know how to do anything else except make money. Sure, people say it's an art. But art has inherent value. Business is just the exchange of meaningless paper. I'd be a jazz saxophonist right now if I had the musical talent. They're the most beautiful of the horns. You can't play money, you know. You can't make those beautiful soul-shattering sounds with that little piece of green paper. So I just collect it and pay other people to play jazz saxophone for me. It feels inadequate most of the time—when I'm not the one creating it. But what can I do? I just collect the money, and I pay the artists to fill the empty hole in me with their art.

--And in turn, you fill the financial hole in the artist.

--Cyclical. Yin and yang and shit.

--Shallah Raekwon said to me in the Brooklyn Basement last night, cash rules everything around me. It's an obvious statement. But it just sounded so harsh expressed like that. So real. I could tell it was painful for him to say.

--Fuckin' money, man. I gotta crack skulls to collect; what do you think that does to a person? I'm fuckin' dehumanized. I don't care about human life. If it mean's I'll collect, you're life ain't shit. Business. It's dirty. The only think that keeps me human is old Coltrane. That melancholy horn makes me feel human again. I feel emotion again. I'm closer to his music than to humanity. What does that tell you?

--It tells me at least you still have a soul. You can't fill the soul with money, but you can fill it with beauty. Art, sounds, sights, women.

He laughed; it slowly died away like the last bit of water trickling down through a mesh of pebbles, but his smile

remained. He drove the car as if something was driving him inside. --Beauty, he said. --This business never lets me experience beauty. You're lucky; as an artist, an observer, you can find it in the everyday. But my business is purely dollars and sense. Strictly cold. But it's also kind of a blessing, because when I see or hear beauty now, I really feel it. And, man, did I feel Chelsea Guermantes.

--I saw you feeling her.

--God-damn, dude. That girl. She stuns. You know how I felt last night with her? I felt like the guy at the racetrack with the winning horse. No—better yet, I felt like the guy at the track who had placed all his money on the winning horse and didn't even have a clue about the outcome. You told me she wouldn't be into me, remember that? You told me, Guermantes told me not to try anything funny, hell, I wasn't going to try anything. I thought, of course a fucking dime piece like that, all youthful and fashionable and hip and shit, would never go for a greasy gangster like me—someone who *works* for her *father*. I thought there was no chance in hell. Just a night of cordiality and then a handshake goodnight. But man, when I went to her condo last night, all like, 'Hello, Ms. Guermantes. Your father has asked me to look out for you this evening,' dude, she gave me this look. I don't know. Rich sexy girls always give this look to people, like, 'I'm the fucking shit and good luck trying to impress me,' but *this* look, *this* look had something else in it. I don't know man, I don't know how I noticed it or what, but it was in the air. Shidd, listen to me, I sound like Zac-fucking-Efron or some fuck. I sound like a teenage-fucking-headcase. Heartbreak Hotel like shit. But anyway, we got in my car and we were just listening to music, we weren't even talking. She scrolled through my iPod, played some old Ice Cube, some Black Star, some Zeppelin, some fucking Pavement, some fucking Arctic Monkeys, Black Keys. I mean, an eclectic array of shit, and good shit, too. Even played some Coltrane. Hell, she put on that song, what is it

called, 'Pow R. Toc H.,' from *Piper at the Gates of Dawn*. I was surprised she even knew that album existed. This girl knew her shit. I said, 'Damn, girl, you know your music.' She said, 'Me?' all cute an innocent-like, but she knew she was being seductive with that airiness to her voice. She said, 'Who, me? I'm just playing what you have here. You're the one with the good music taste.' I was one smitten motherfucker. I saw her looking at me through the rear-view mirror. And then I knew me and her had something, you know. But I didn't wanna push it too far. She said she wanted to go to her friend's art show, so that's where we were going. Quite a drive. So I asked, 'You like grunge? Like old recorded-off-a-fucking-VHS-tape-sounding grunge?' She said, 'I guess,' again, all sexy and innocent. Then she lit a cigarette. An American Spirit. I thought to myself, this girl is smooth. So I decided to be smoother. I reached across her and brushed my hand across her leg as I got this tape out of the side-door pocket. I said, 'You ever heard of Nirvana's Rarities and B-Sides?' It's this old tape some guy made in his basement from old live recordings and obscure acoustic songs that were never released. Most of the shit on there sounds better than *Nevermind*. She said, no, she'd never heard of it. So I put that shit in and we vibed to that the whole way there. Every now and then she would rest her cigarette hand on my leg. Dude, he said laughing uncontrollably to himself. --As discretely as I could, I tried to flip my boner into my belt.. I think she saw, though. We got to the show and before we got out the car she leaned over and kissed me. Then we started making out in the car for like five minutes. I tried pulling up her dress but she said not yet. And the rest of the night unfolded like you saw. And I took her home and fucked the shit of her. I'm going to see her tomorrow night. I really think she's genuinely into me.

--Dude, that's great. I'm fucking surprised.

--No one is as surprised as me. I've fucked with my share of girls. Ratchet hos in Purgatory, fucking disgust me now.

Even the dainty ones, the classy one in midtown and the ones I've met doing business. None of 'em are like Chels. She's *cool*. Like, mad-fucking-cool. Smoke some weed, listen to some Velvet Underground on vinyl, Tumblr blog. Fucking cool, down-ass-chick. And I'm not even thinking about this, but if she's into me, and her *father* approves... Mannnn..., he signed, shook his shoulders, smiled so big the sun before him radiated off of his teeth.

--I rarely see you this juiced.

--I feel amazing, dude. Oh, we're here. Hopefully this fuckface doesn't ruin my mood.

Fredo parked the car across the street from a Liotta's Pizza and Dali. He looked at the storefront for a while; for what reason, Kogard could not fathom. But he also didn't care. Whatever it was, he was just helping his friend on a business errand. Spending some quality time. If some action went down, all the better, a story that they could share in the future. He lit a cigarette.

--OK, Fredo said as he opening the center compartment. He pulled out a shoulder strap and a .38 revolver and handed it to Kogard. --Put that on, but don't intend on using it. It's loaded, so don't even touch it. It's just for intimidation. You're my boy, right?

--As always, Fray-Mart.

--Cool, K-Mart. Fredo pulled his silenced 9mm out of his own shoulder strap and inspected the magazine.

Kogard weighed the revolver in his hands. He did love the weight of a gun. He liked the inert energy it possessed, the ability to destroy, the power, yet the inanimate refinement it possessed despite, the lack of willpower.

--Let's go, said Fredo; they put their guns away and went to work.



## V.

The bell above the pizzeria door *dinkled* open as they entered. Fredo looked around; few costumers, mostly old, were scattered around the circular checkered tables. The meat display hummed; the smell of olive oil and tomato sauce cooked in the air. A boy who looked about seventeen-years-old stood at the counter. Kogard could see the little boy felt a bit uneasy at their entrance: two men dressed in black suits who looked entirely uninterested in eating a hot slice of pizza right now. Fredo motioned Kogard to follow slightly behind him as he walked up to the counter. The boy tensed up; his face grew hardened, his voice, staccato, blabbered: What can I help you guys with?

--Yeah, said Fredo, Lemme get one slice cheese, one slice—K, what do you want?

--Meatball.

--One slice cheese, one slice meatball, six grand, and a Mountain Dew, all in a paper bag to go.

--The boy proceeded to punch in the order and then did a double take at Fredo. --Six grand? he said newly authoritative. --Is this a robbery? Don't you guys know who protects this shop?

--I sure do, said Fredo, and he's going to stop his protection if you don't give him his six grand and two pizza slices right now.

The boy's demeanor softened. --Oh, he breathed. He turned around and said in a weak yell, Mort, some wiseguys just walked in!

An almost inaudible “fuck!” emitted from the back room like the sound of dropped book. Soon afterward, a bumbling middle-aged man in a stained white apron came out of a closed door behind the kitchen looking as if someone had interrupted his masturbation. He walked to the counter avoiding eye contact with everyone until he got within an intimidating vicinity of

Fredo. --I'll take it from here, Mort said to the boy. --Freddy! he said with a fake smile and wide arms. --What brings you here?

--Are you a fucking idiot? The fuck you think brings me here?

Mort assumed a real serious look then. He turned his head and yelled, Carlos, prepare these men's orders! He turned back around having assumed a new mousy disposition. --Can we talk in the back? He motioned for Fredo and Kogard to come around the counter and follow him into the back hallway where they entered the door from which he had just come out. Inside, Fredo sat down in the chair behind his desk and Kogard sat in a folding chair in the corner, lit a cigarette.

Mort closed the door a third of the way and said, Look, Fredo, I can't give you the money right now.

--You don't have the money?

--I, I have it but, shit. I can't, I can't, Fredo.

--You have it but you won't pay, is that what I'm hearing?

--Fredo, I really can't pay. I have my legitimate bills—

--Excuse me, you fat fuck?

--I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I just mean, I have overhead, my heating is up. My employees expect to get their checks this week. My hands are tied.

--Your hands were tied last week. You're overdue, motherfucker. And didn't the Guermentes loan you five-k for a new oven last month? Why don't I collect all eleven grand right now, hm?

--Fredo! I thought you and I were cool!

--We're partners, mother fucker, ain't shit cool! Eleven grand! Now! Or, one of your fuses might blow tonight. Might have a little fire. What kind of insurance you got on this place anyway? Certainly more than eleven grand.

Mort was shitting. His legs buckled. Kogard found this funny. He blew smoke rings.

--WELL? said Fredo

Kogard looked at Mort, who looked as if he were turning transparent right where he stood. The deathly silence of a desert nightfall descended on the room. Mort bolted out of the door.

--SHIT, COME ON; Fredo hurdled over the desk and dashed out behind him; Kogard sighed and flicked his jack. He hated being interrupted during his smoke.

Mort had bolted out of the rear exit into the alley and was halfway toward the street by the time Kogard met Fredo outside.

--Fast fuck, Fredo said pulling out his silenced 9mm.  
--The fuck? He thinks we don't know where he works?

Right before Mort reached the street his leg was shot, accompanied by a spray of red mist and the sound of a *piff* like a snowball hitting a metal pole. He fell down very dramatically, Kogard thought. Passers-by looked down at the scene, looked up at the two suited men down the alley walking toward them, and went on to mind their own business.

--Don't scream, Fredo said as he got close. --Or you'll wake up the Guermentes.

--Should I take my gun out? Kogard asked.

--No, not unless he tries something. But he's got a wife and kids. He doesn't want a closed-casket funeral. Wait here.

Kogard turned around and smoked while Fredo did business. *Whack!* --Money! *Whack!* --Tomorrow! *Whack!* --All eleven heads! *Whack!* --Or else! I'll be back tomorrow with a bottle with a bottle of gasoline. It's up to you if I put it in my car or if I put it on your fucking floor! *Whack!*

Somewhere a dog barked. --Let's go, Fredo said walking past Kogard toward the building's exit. They went back into the pizzeria, walked down the hall, around the counter and Fredo yelled to the boy, Where the fuck are my two slices?

Carlos shoved a brown paper bag toward them. --Don't worry about the six grand, he said taking the bag, But I would start looking for other employment if I were you. Fredo threw a

hundred down on the counter and they left.

They got in the car and Kogard immediately started eating. Fredo turned up the radio. --You listen to Kendrick Lamar?

Kogard shook his head, no.

--I like listening to this song after a shakedown. He turned the volume all the way up and the bass shook the car with the force of a toddler with a snowglobe as it pulled away; he flipped on the hydraulics and started rapping the lyrics as they drove toward midtown--

*If Pyros and Crips, all got along  
They'd prob'ly gun me down by the end of this song.  
Seems like the whole city go against me,  
Every time I'm in the street I hear YACK YACK YACK  
YACK  
Man down, where you fromm,  
niggaa?  
Fuck who you wit, where you fromm,  
my niggaa?  
Where yo' grandma stay, huh,  
my niggaa?  
This the Empire, better run,  
my niggaaaaa...*

VI.

They pulled onto fifth avenue heading south; this is where Empire assumed its snobbish attitude; this is where Fredo turned off his radio; Kogard thought that this was because he wanted to absorb the grotesque eloquence, the revolting self-determination of an entire nation compressed into one city, truly, without filter; he wanted to feel his stomach curling. Fredo's business was money, surely, but in an overt violent sense, in the sense of spectacle; but the embodiment of America's legitimate business

ideal—of acquisition and coercion—in downtown Empire, *that* revolted him more than beating a man's head in with the butt of a gun. How could they damn his practice and hail they're own?—it was the same practice. Fredo felt sick with the fashionable city's denial of debauchery. He grimaced as he drove. Kogard felt his discomfort and shared it; he'd much rather be in the company of a self-aware criminal than a venture capitalist who had just sent two companies under, their employees left out to rot, all for the sole purpose of liquidation for profit, and cavorting about under the veil of civilian innocence and the false pretense of lawful and civic duty. *For the better of America.* No—for the better of the private sector. *For the better of the private sector.* No—for the better of robber barons. *In God We Trust.* No—in trust we trust.

Passing East 52<sup>nd</sup> Street, Kogard's imagination took over his impressions. This was an imagination cultivated at a time when he had been sympathetic to the Occupy movement. In his first writing piece of significant length he had superimposed an imagined Occupy riot over the canvas of Empire City. Those images never left him; those images he had imagined were never completely wiped from the facade of the real world. Passing East 52<sup>nd</sup> Street, a vacant lot full of burnt rubble lay smoldering. As the car proceeded down the island, the landscape became more estranged. At every corner, a soldier of the militia stood erect and armed, his eyes shielded in black goggles, and his posture saluting the fallen soldiers of Old Empire. Wherever a flag was not burned, it was lowered to half-mast. All of the store fronts including Barney's and Macy's were burnt crisp from the inside out, windows shattered. The Avenue all deserted but for the police, dressed in black; the sky, dressed in black; the hollowed boutiques, ravaged, and still, appropriately dressed in the scorched black of their downfall, adorned in white pearls of ash. It looked as if all of the bodies had already been cleared from the streets—or at least those that were still distinguishable as people. They turned onto East 8<sup>th</sup> Street and then pulled onto

Broadway, which looked more or less intact, save the cloud of smoke that could be seen rising from a pile of burning Occupy camps and dead rioters in Washington Square Park. On lower Broadway, scattered pedestrians walked with the heaviness of war weighing on their shoulders, avoiding members of the militia. When the car reached Zuccotti Park pedestrian traffic stopped where the militia had blocked off foot traffic again, obscuring another camp—the central Occupy camp—being burned in the park. The car slowed as it pulled onto Wall Street, where the center stage of world trade was leveled, this time by a much more familiar terrorist. It wasn't leveled in the strict sense—the buildings stood erect, still—but decrepit, fire ridden, broken, uncanny. Kogard could see the Empire National Stock Exchange down Nassau Street. The fires had completely stricken the American flag from its façade and lay bare the high Roman columns that now looked as if, indeed, they had been erected some two thousand years prior. The car turned up Williams Street and passed what was left of the building at One Chase Manhattan Plaza. The first thirty floors were fire-ravaged and windows-broken, as if the Occupiers had been jabbing at the legs of some great giant for decades until they finally felled it. As the car passed the tower, and it became eclipsed by Liberty, Maiden, and John Streets, it did not speak any last words of wisdom. It did not incite a feeling of freedom or greatness. It was only a reminder. Something outdated. Old.

Kogard, who had strained his neck to look back at the silent black monolith before it disappeared altogether from his vision, now pulled his eyes from the passing scene and looked over at Fredo who was slouched in his seat with his elbow resting on the door handle and his hand over his mouth. His Ray Ban sunglass lenses reflected, disinterested, the landscape of desolation.

--What are you thinking about? asked Kogard.

--All of it.

--All of it?

All was quiet. *Purrrrrr* of the engine. *Tear down this Empire. Rebuild. It's the only way...*

He was brought back into reality by the sound of an ambulance whining by stalled traffic; it passed; traffic picked up again.

--Why did we go through the financial district? asked Kogard.

--I don't know, said Fredo. --I get this weird feeling being at the foot of all those tall buildings. It's not a good feeling...It's kind of frightening...But it's also kind of addicting.

--Sublime?

--Maybe.

One Chase Manhattan Plaza, that looming skyscraper, remained in Kogard's mind just as freshly laid there as it had been when he first saw it in person, that tower which spawned his written monolith. Black, overpowering; the strong silent type;

a broad swath of gray streaked upon the smog canvas  
vertically  
towering above the technicolored cosmopolis  
monochromatic  
shimmering like oils freshly applied.

--There are so many parts of this city that I love, said Kogard. --Neighborhoods, mostly. With people who are human. But there are also many parts which give me an uneasy feeling. These financial soldiers in their armor of suit-and-tie...they're not human. Their tall, black, steel, eyeless financial headquarters'... These...monoliths...they're ominous to me... Did you ever read my book?

--I didn't. I never get enough time to appreciate beautiful things, crafted things. Always on the move. There's always someone to collect from.

--You should read it. You might like it. It's about these

buildings, these grand fortresses, the watchtowers of the Empire.

--Why would I like it?

--It involves men who broke all the rules to get to the top. Men who killed to gain leverage in their industries, and who made a fortune off of those actions. Once the industrious man was like yourself, in the knitty-gritty, getting his hand dirty, people like Carnegie who muscled out other steamboat companies and rose to wealth and power. But now, it's all different. They're finance men. They deal in the abstract realm of stock quotes and currencies; they deal with wealths that mortal men cannot see or touch; they are alchemists forging profit out of the idea of value—*company's up a point here, down a point there, sell sell sell*; they dwell in the clouds. And they quarter themselves at the tops of those high towers because they're afraid to fall. These are the men who maintain the financial monoliths now, who have the world bowing at their feet, and yet behind closed doors they remain human, all too human. They know they cannot support themselves or their empires upon this cloud of value much longer.

--You trying to say I'm a killer who is going to get his just desserts in the end like those financial fucks, that I'm going to fall just when I reach my peak?

--No. You won't fall. You'll stay grounded because you admit you're a killer. You can make all the money you want. Brick your fortress with \$10,000 stacks for all I care. But when you kill a man with your bare hands it grounds you. It connects you to your humanity, and the fact that you're taking it away from someone else. A person is not a company or a stock point; you can't just liquidate them without feeling an emotional connection. So many powerful men hire out their dirty work. So many C-levels take away a person's humanity by lumping them together and calling them a failed company with which they can do what they please. You'll keep your humanity because you handle your business face-to-face, as a man, and not from the



penthouse office of some some great monolith.

--Thanks I guess. You know, you're pretty twisted yourself for admiring a known mobster, a man you *just* saw bash another man's head in over late payments, and not the heads of the banks you keep your money in.

--I admire a man who confronts his own demons face-to-face, a man who can say, "these things of darkness I acknowledge mine," and can still live with himself. Banks foreclose on low-income families all the time and call it business. But they confront their issues face-to-face? Do they give their debtors the respect of being human, at least? Does the foreclosing banker go to the family's home and watch them pack up their lives and go out into the street? No. When they kill people, they do it from their office.

They were quiet as the car brought them down 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Kogard lit a cigarette.

--May I? asked Fredo.

Kogard gave him one.

--You hipster fuck with your American Spirits, he said lighting it. --I do want to read your book. One day...

Glorious Empire, so temporary, yet filled with infinite possibility in the moment. One knows it all has to end sometime. But in the midst of driving down the street at the foot of Empire's glory, one feels invigorated, eternal, in spite of its shortcomings.

--For that book, Fredo said later, The magazines and journals and the intellectuals, and your fan base in general, they all call you genius... I may be rich; I may get richer; hell, I may become as wealthy as Louis Guermantes one day, but no one will ever call me genius... Fredo looked into his face. --How does it feel?

Kogard glanced at him and then looked out the window, smoked, thought, then said, I am only a man. In my head I am scum, unworthy of the very words which I write. And yet people

read them and call them genius, say that they come from a genius mind. To tell you the truth, it's all very confusing. As a young man I let it get to my head. And still, there were dark points when I felt like they were all wrong. Low points which I filled with liquor. But now, I don't think of it. I don't read the reviews. Whatever they call me, it's their interpretation. Focusing on them will distract me from genuine work... I wrote a little poem about this feeling, around the time I was twenty-five, esteemed, but, like I said, feeling inadequate at times. I didn't know how to live up to my image, personally. I wrote--

What does genius mean?  
Can it's tune be put to word?  
To recognize things not seen;  
To comprehend things unheard.

To transcend time not past;  
To dawn cloths yet unsewn,  
To surpass race and caste—  
Yet still be little known.

I still think on it often.

They were quiet again as they approached West 39<sup>th</sup> Street; the bus station came into view.

Then Fredo said, Tell me more poetry, Kogard. Money does not sing. It does not profess. I may be a man of questionable business practice, but, like any person, I desire beauty. Tell me another, please.

Kogard sucked in the last leg of his jack and tossed it out the window. He began, *Impression*:

“Everything is in a state of flux.  
Everything is flowing.”

On days of exquisite experience,  
your body may dissolve  
spontaneously.



How many hitherto unpublished manuscripts float in the ocean of things yet to be?—How much lost art is floating at sea?

But then again, how many people die unknown, how many people one day stop breathing knowing their voice might one day find a home?

How many people die believing?

--I like that one. That and *Genius*, they stay with me.

--I like them. You write beautiful poetry.

--Nahh. I'm not very good. I've read poems that leave mine pushing daisies. I just write it because I like chopping up lines. It affects the meaning when it's done right. I like seeing text displayed vertically. But in terms of imagery and cadence and footage all that shit, I'm terrible. So I decided to go with what I was excellent at, and that was prosity.

Fredo pulled up to the front of the Empire-Federal Express Bus Station. He turned around to face Kogard again, and spoke from somewhere deep inside of him. --Tell me one more poem. Those are nice, but too heady. I can't very well grasp them, not like a college graduate may be able to. I want to hear something that will make me love this country again. I know you aren't that type of poet. It doesn't have to be in praise. But something that speaks to this terrible place. Terrible details often leave me in a state of wonder. The terrible things make me love, and I don't feel love very often... Do you have any poems about America?

Kogard looked at his knees, his eyes, shielded behind his opaque glasses, squinted in thought, trying to rustle through the discarded papers of his mind. --I do, he said then, without looking up. --The first poem I ever wrote. It's about America. I think I can remember... What was it called?....ah! *Colossus*:

It's peculiar, the American Way,  
which holds high its values:  
Give us liberty  
from Babylon; Freedom  
to act as we will and extend equality--  
to who? Well, just us.

But that's just us  
for none other acts in so reckless a way.  
Capitalism breed equality?  
Can't be among its values,  
right? Free market, freedom  
of competition. Must be liberty.

Exclaim, "Give me your tired, your poor" in the name of  
liberty.

And with silent lips preach injustice.  
Because everyone else? They can have freedom,  
but they can't have their way.  
They can hold our values  
as long as they don't expect equality.

Well they *can't* expect equality,  
not with all this liberty  
Indeed, liberty to assume our own values,  
even if they benefit just us  
and only us; that's the old way:  
freedom to take away your freedom,

'Cause if we'd known better we would have freed 'em;  
If we respected equality,  
we would have left them on their merry way.  
But we had the liberty  
to disregard and chain; justice:

our core value...

We disregard and promote our values  
at the same time; using our freedom  
to take it away in the name of all that's just—U.S.,  
in the name of Equality,  
Liberty,  
and the American Way.

And the value pillars soon reduced to rubble; equality  
found in the chaos of complete Freedom and Liberty;  
Then, justice will prevail over the carnage—Babylon,  
we're on our way.

*Tear it down. Tear it all down.*

Kogard looked at Fredo. There were tears in his eyes.  
--I'll keep that with me always, he said. He held out his hand.  
Kogard embraced it, squeezing. --Go to your woman, now, he  
said. --I'll be here when you return. This city is my cradle and  
my grave.

--As it is mine. I'll see you in a day or two. Be good to  
Chelsea.

--You bet.

Kogard got out and went into the station as the sound of  
the Great White Shark roaring away behind him.

VII.

It was 3:15.

--When's the next bus? Kogard asked the woman at the  
reservations desk.

She lowered her eyes to her computer screen and typed  
something. Then she looked up and said, Right now.

--Can I make it?

--Sure. It will be...\$35 because you're cutting it so close.

--I can do that. Kogard pulled out his credit card.

--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 3. You should hurry.

And hurry he did. He got to the ticket man, out of breath, 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 large man who looked as if he smelled like cheese steaks.

--Welcome aboard, the smelly man 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 smelly man, who did indeed smell like some combination of cheese whiz and beef, 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 seven-thirty, he recalled the words of Federal City's patron saint of punk rock, the idol of his youth, Ian McKaye--

*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 bus pulled onto H Street, Northeast Federal City, which had, since Kogard had last seen it some ten years ago, undergone a dramatic reconstruction and become infested with white people.

You tell me; white man come to this country, infest everything.

Indeed, the white folk had flocked to both the residential and commercial areas, newly lined with stylish bars and niche restaurants like a German place called Biergarten Haus (those silly Germans are always misspelling simple English words). The Rock N Roll hotel still existed. Kogard had seen Fugazi there 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 folk 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, now picking up garbage with metal tongs to clear the white folks' 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 being the country's murder capital to having 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. It had to happen at some point, right? Mayor Williams took over and brought in the developers and the money started flowing. The 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 the mass commercial culture? (Mass commercial culture=white culture...) By 2010, the Target/Best Buy/Modell's/Bed Bath and Beyond was built in Columbia Heights and the Hispanics were all forced out of their surrounding homes. Property values skyrocketed a neighborhood away in Mt. Pleasant and the Hispanics who lived and worked there had to forfeit their pupuserias and bodegas. Now yuppies living there beside the very same ones who had driven up the property values and forced the old community out

remark, We live in such a rich, cultural neighborhood.

Ironic, ain't it?

There is something inherently hipster about gentrification.

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 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 a case of disgruntlement, a population has to understand: never riot in your own neighborhood.) The property value plummets. White folk get out, move to the suburbs, look across the river at the crisped 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 that 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 coming 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 raises again. 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 Empire-Federal bus pulled into the mezzanine of Federal City's Union Station, just several blocks from the nation's Capitol. Kogard immediately got away from the fat cheese steak man as the bus offloaded. The moment he got outside, in the musty exhaust-filled air of the wide concrete lot, he pulled out a cigarette. (It was not completely true what he had said to the woman at the ticket booth; he did have luggage—he had packed two-and-a-half packs of cigarettes for the two day trip.)

When Kogard went to light his jack 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 flipped closed his lighter and walked, not toward the entrance to Union Station like the rest of the passengers, but out the bus exit and down the concrete ramp toward the ground-level 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 made his body jones for a bit 'o nicotine. 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 ant hill. It was dark outside by this time. 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 \$7.50 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, had no distinguishable features and Kogard did not speak to him. He only recalled days in his youth when his aunt 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 can respect the boundaries of a culture in day-to-day life, while internally making assumptions and connections about them that would most definitely sic the Human Rights Watch, or whoever maintains the political correctness of the country, on his lily-white ass. Women often cross the street as a lone sizable man approaches her on an unlit street at night. Does that mean they're skeptical of all men? Yes...? Well, be that as it may, women 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 that aid their journey through this largely dangerous world. Clearly, not all black people are criminals. But when they are paraded about on the 5 o'clock news as robbers, murderers, and gang-bangers, the elderly white woman in Illinois has no choice but to assume those characteristics about 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 Hispanics (yes, he lumped all non-Salvadoreans together as general Hispanics). Racist? No, it was a consequence of his environment (Isn't that what they all say!). Large Salvadorean populations migrated to DC (God knows why here) in the late twentieth century due to rampant gang activity in El Salvador. So Kogard was keen to notice that more Hispanics 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. When one is questioned about the correctness of those assumptions, then one may then change their opinion; in this case, the question has been made relevant to them; but until that point, it's a free-for-all.

The Eritrean 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 may indeed fester between two equally stupid people. Too judgmental? Eh...

And what about the music these clubs play. It has become monotonous in a terrible, electronic way. *Bass, bass, tsst, tsst, unce, unce*. Horrible. Horrible. And they're all the same, all the songs. They're all about dancing in the club and popping E and all other base activities. What has become of substance? Oh, he forgot, one does not go to the club for substance. Substances, yes. Substance, no.

He also hated that Molly drug that had swept the club scene nationwide. He had tried it once. It just annoyed him. He wanted to just go to sleep but he couldn't. His clothes left like

sandpaper on his skin. That was a bad night. Whatever happened to good old marijuana? Get a little high, watch some television, laugh a lot, eat a lot, *those* are good times. Want some adventure? Acid, Mushrooms, DMT. *That's* adventure. *That's* a trip. This Molly shit? Kogard waved his hand in dismissal of this thought. Even the drugs these days sucked. The entirety of popular culture is decadent and depraved, rote memorization of song lyrics and television plot lines; third, fourth, and fifth sequels to Hollywood movies (when it's not a sequel it's a re-make or adaptation); “style” is normalized, zero inventiveness (and what is inventive, or what is hipster, is immediately co-opted by the fashion conglomerates, toned down, normalized, and marketed to the simple, impressionable masses who will buy anything if they think it will make them cool, get laid) monotony of music beats, *bass, bass, tsst, tsst, unce, unce.*

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 had their warehouse several blocks off the main street. There was once a decent place called the Pharmacy Bar that he used to frequent. But what became of it? Ah, succumb the same fate that consumed all the other decent places: they were too genuine to exist beside mass culture. Most of the buildings contained different venues now. Most of them were clubs and bars, and the worst kind of bars, too. These were the kind of bars in which, when a person wanted a break from the monotonous *unce* and were genuinely in the mood for classic rock, they yelled, Free Bird. The same kind of people walked these street scouring for clubs; the dress code for women: black dress which shows the bottom of your butt cheeks, a clutch, high heels; for men: look as much like a douche as possible, feather your hair, whatever it takes.

But his ranting slowed down when he passed California

Street. He was getting close. He fiddled with his hands now. They were becoming slippery with sweat. The crowds of near-naked clubbers became all a blur. They were slowly being eradicated from his consciousness as the true purpose of his visit drew near. Lights-a-blinding...

--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 cramped with brick four-story 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 got out of the car. His feet hit Federal City soil...er, concrete. In any case, 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; he had the spins and he hadn't smoked pot in years.



Uncertainty filled the air like cigarette smoke exhaled. 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 are not drunk—slowly, hands on the knees, can I do this? sure, I'm fine...no, I'm not fine, back in the seat...OK, 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. He knocked three times, lightly, not enough to rouse someone inside dreaming. He stepped back from the door. He almost hoped they were dreaming. He hoped he was dreaming. When the door cracked open, he could have sworn he was.

When the door fully opened, who was at the bottom of it holding the doorknob but a miniature female version of Walter Kogard himself, standing not three feet tall and wearing a large flannel shirt over black tights. Her black hair was tied into two ponytails.

Kogard smiled the kind of polite smile one wears in the face of the sublime. He 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, how much he was sorry. But he tried to clear all of 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 looked newly concerned, she 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, little Cassie?

Cassie ran back 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 could 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...it 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...he was in raptures... He looked down; he had stained the front his shit with

tears.

Footsteps sounded from upstairs, and hushed speech between two women. The footsteps walked across the floor and began to descend the creaking wooden steps. They were Nichte's 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...*, his emotions shuddered; his spirit was exalted, that beautiful porcelain angel, more beautiful now than he had ever realized. But isn't that what they all say after a period apart? But does that make it less true? No. She looked at him coldly with those saucerous blue eyes. He had always said she looked like Twiggy, perfectly androgynous, or Christina Ricci in *Monster*. That pout of her lips, perked for him to never kiss them 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 Paul Simon tee shirt, and sweatpants that looked as if they had been hastily thrown on. Her tiny feet were bare. She stood not five-and-a-half feet. She was Nichte.

--Hello, Mickey Mouse, Kogard said, and turned his head shyly. --You used to like me calling 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. May I come in? Kogard thought: if he had had a hat, he would have been holding it in front of him like men do in the old movies when they come home after a long period away.

--Fine. But you're not staying.

--I know, he said stepping in and closing the door behind him. --I just wanted to talk.

--Why?

--...Um... He was stumped. He really didn't know. --I don't know.

--Well...what the fuck?

--I...I came down from Empire. Because... I had a strong feeling.

--About what? She tapped her "t"s 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 cuckholding whore bitch, this doesn't concern you, fuckface.* --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 OK, baby? Jo asked without turning her incinerating glare from Kogard's direction.

--Yeah, it's OK. 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.

--OK...may I have some water?

--They serve water at bars.

--OK...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 narcissistic drunk fuck!

--OK, right, yes, I was that person. But that is 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 double 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....vvooiiceesss *—What's happening to Daddy???* --*Goo ttoo yyoouurr rroomm!!!* My ex-wife is fucking crazy.....bllaccckkoouutt...lligghhtssss-aa-blliinnddiinnngg.....

#### IV.

He woke up on the couch on the first floor of the house, 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. Little 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 around and adjusted the mask on his face. He looked over 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 Mommy Jo 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's head shot up and she made a smiling “O” with her little 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 to be blue. He has pink hair.

--That's very nice. She turned the book back toward herself 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 two. The only sounds: a pencil scribbling, the clinking of a glass in the next room.

Then Cassie asked, Where have u been?

--Empire City.

--Ohhhhh, that's far away. Why were u so far away from me? Don't u love me?

A single tear fell from his left eye. --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 folder her notebook and pencils. --Bye-bye, Daddy, she said, and hugged him. Kogard drew her in tight. He held her in his arms for an eternity, 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 Nichte...nada.

He nodded, drying the streaks.

--I'll walk you out.

As she opened the door, he said, I'll call you in a week. He turned and looked to the dark outdoors. --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. He saw her again at least. That was more than he deserved for his actions in the past.

But 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 really 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. 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,  
some say,  
(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”-type shoes that he owned: fine hand-made Italian leather, scooped up in a vintage/thrift 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.

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 at 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 knock 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 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, heh, 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 OK, 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, aaaannndddd, 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 avail. He went to the elevators.

On the second floor, Kogard followed the respective arrow down a silent hallway flooded with artificially 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 (*bass, bass, tsst, tsst, unce, unce*). Try a statue of a nude woman at least. Go so 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. (This Terry Richardson Hotel he had imagined, he also imagined that they would play *Piper at the Gates of Dawn* lightly on repeat throughout the hallways all day and night.) 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 minimalist round table sat beside it on which sat a cylindrical lamp. A desk and a black swivel chair sat 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 sat 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 Bible they usually stored in these drawers. 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 with gold reading

Engaging in the Conduct  
of the Bodhisattvas

by

Shantideva

This text, a Buddhist epic poem, 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; 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 gold-lined pages beckoned him to pry inside. 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 festers. 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 came back 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. --OK, universe, Kogard said to no one and to all, The ball is in your court. He lay back 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 for his jacks—yep, they were there—and opened the door to find that the sound that 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. With 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 and is taking up room from the rest of the customers. OK, 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 were uninteresting... 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., who also controls the printing and binding of their titles and has no parent company or external partners, 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 then went inside to the payphones at the end of the lobby, fished some change out of his pocket, and dialed Horton Tenenbaum's cellphone.

*Brrrt...Brrrt...Brrrt.*--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, OK. 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 of Lit-Land. We hear they're taking some legal steps to try and

quell any remaining indie publisher whose trying to publish, physical or electronic. The acquisitions were just the beginning, Kogard, you know that. They're 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 fourth. 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 total 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 wasteland. 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.

--OK, 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 the jack into the street and went back up to his room. The smoke had leveled him out, and now, he had an ache to write something, anything.

When he got back up to his room he went to his jacket

pocket and got out his little notebook. He 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. Pen in hand, he pressed it to the paper, then he glanced over at his shoes. He 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 had long been empty,

and all of the devils are here.

VII.

He tried to go to sleep as morning twilight sprinkled through the window, but 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.)

## Phase the Fifth.

This is a squalid little city. I'm not going to compare it to anywhere else as new residents often do, I think, to make up for some inadequacy. This is a somber place with squat sand-colored buildings of old, huddling together downtown under the oppressive gravity of the white, white capital, and the Washington monument which gets whiter half-way up. When you look down on it from the window of an aeroplane, all of these buildings, the Department of the Inferiority, the Department of The Fence, the Department of Just Us, look like a group of short monochromatic old men. Downtown saddens me. An arch made by Chinamen is the most colorful thing standing.

I can pass through all of it on the P6, which rumbles underneath the arch on H Street Northwest, and turns down toward Federal Triangle and Penn Quarter on 11<sup>th</sup>. I can pass through all of those squat little buildings that all do the same thing as far as I know. The bus turns down an archaic cobblestone road that severs the East and West buildings of the National Gallery of Art. That's a nice building. It has some flare. I would only hope so.

Then the bus cuts through the Mall, which has of late been turned inside out, and rarely do I look at the ever-lit Capital(ism) building; rarely do I look at the bulging phallic symbol of all that is good about our forefathers, and the b(l)acks they broke to help erect it. I look straight ahead.

The bus takes me through Southwest where Mom told me not to go when I was little. But it looks all right now... And I guess I'm guilty, too, of thinking 'safe' and 'all right' means I see a few more white folk at night. There's a Safeway, too. And Z-Burger coming. And a fancy restaurant with kingly plush chairs where the white people go.

The bus makes a few more turns and I pass the National Monstrosity. When I hear "ballpark," I think of over-compensation. Bigger balls. More spectators. Straight-up voyeurism. I've never been inside there either.



I ride up past the Navy Yard where my father works. There's a ship there that I've never seen go anywhere. Looks like a piece in a game of Battleship. Adorned with flags and lights so I can see it from my window east of the river, as if it comforts me when I sleep.

The bus rides across the new bridge they built. Beside me are more uncompleted ties between the city proper and the slums of Uniontown. And we roll into the borough and a big, cursive neon sign announces where we are: home. It's not the slums in a bad way; it's romantic. If I were going to compare any part of this city to anywhere else, I'd say it's like the Brooklyn of Federal City, east of the river. But like Brooklyn, they say it's not going to stay slummish for long. They believe, too, that progress means a few more white people walking around at night. Pretty soon the quaint little historic homes will be hostels for the new wave of residents. Pizza shops and boutiques will spring up like lice. Condos with shops on the ground level will spring up from empty parking lots, and pretty white women will go jogging with their dachshunds along the waterfront. Won't that be a good look. I even see a new pizza shop as I ride by. I get off the bus at U and MLK. There's a piece of street art by Gaia on the wall of an boarded-up corner building. I met him once. He goes to MICA.

During the day you hear "Single Newport, Single Newport."

I don't smoke Newports, I smoke Camels, Reds and Spirits on occasion. I once bummed a Red to a man somewhere north of Chinatown. He said, "You from the same neighborhood as I am."

I smiled knowingly. We're all from the same neighborhood, really, the same circle that surrounds downtown, but doesn't touch it. Everybody in Federal City knows each other. But pretty soon we'll all be lousy, and we will all be dead.

You know who I'm talking about when I say "we," right?

There's a strange happening in this city. It's growing these tumors, you know. Tumors that will be filled with cancerous cells: newbies in the body of the nation's capital. Sometimes cancer is inevitable.

These tumors are being built floor-by-floor, by somebody named Douglas. If I were a trading man, I would invest all of my money in Douglas Development. You can quote me on that.

I remember when the Washington Convention Center was built about seven years ago around the corner from my parent's house. It was a mighty big hole I tell you.

Then they put that big hole in the site of the old convention center Downtown. And now that hole is being filled with

something called City Center. Southwest Waterfront got a couple of holes in it too, and those are being filled now. The Giant supermarket in Shaw where my mother used to take me and brother became a big hole, and the tumor of concrete and glass is now surpassing ground level. The housing project beside that Giant has also been leveled and is growing a tumor. My girlfriend says it was "finally" done my a guy named Kelly. She told me this story about being in a classroom at Wilson High with little Kelly, and a video came on about how this mysterious Mr. Kelly was destroying all of the project communities in the city. Then Mr. Kelly's face came up on the screen and sure enough, little Kelly his his face in the dark classroom full of dark-skinned students.

Logan Circle used to be filled with the homeless. There was a man who frequented that spot, but he wasn't homeless. I guess all of his friends just lived there. He walked with a gait like he downed a breakfast of two Orange Jubilees every morning. I overheard him talking to one of his friends one day not too long ago, after Shaw started to become lousy. "I walk walking down the street over there, and this white broad's dog came up to me and started sniffing my leg. I said to her, 'You better watch yo dog.' She looked at my like I was crazy, and then she pulled out her phone to call the police. I know

people think I'm a drunk because of the way I walk, but I got a gimp in my leg. From the war. Well, boy, one day I was sitting on my stoop the other day and the white folks across the street from me called the police. I had to tell the police that I lived there, and prove it, too. That happened several times. My landlord said, 'you can't be sitting out on the stoop no more.' I said, 'I live here, I can't sit on my own stoop?' Shiid, white folk, I tell you."

The new Shaw library is a sight to behold. It was put up recently. And like all the buildings I've seen go up recently, "City Center" and that big box in Southwest included, there's a lot of attention toward glass and metal. There's a building down the street from Shaw library being built that looks just like it: the whole facade is glass and it's held together by metal. It's strange to see the latter building stand beside the old, squat Hostess-Wonder Bread factory there. My friend used to break into that abandoned building and throw up tags in it. I've always wanted to go in it. But if the developers think anything like I do, they'll turn that shell into a set of edgy stylish condos. Shid, I'd live there if I were just coming here.

Glass and metal...it's like an obsession. City Center is a big ol' black box of glass and metal, at least from the half-built way it looks now. It stands

out, you know. I guess that why they do it.

New architecture in this city has a way of standing out from the old, as if the developers want it to be known that the city's not always gonna look all old and solemn. I mean, it's not a bad kind of solemn. It's homely, romantic, like I said. The oldness feels like someone's home town. But these metal and glass things—they look like apartments from the Jettsons. I guess they're banking on the future, huh.

-Antarah Crawley

November 2012,

written on the P6 bus toward Southeast Federal City,  
Nine months before moving to Empire.

\* \* \*

Kogard awoke from four hours of sleep with a haze over his vision. It was not a kind of horrible groggy haze, but the kind that persists after one has smoked copious amounts of marijuana right before going to bed. It was as if a nonchalant filter had been placed over his impressions; the world seemed to exist on a cloud, or as in a waking dream. He checked out of the Dupont Circle Hotel, feeling as if he were leaving some mystical haven, and entered the outside: blinding sunlight put a strain on his filter, but it nonetheless continued throughout the day. He intended to catch an eight o'clock bus back to Empire, sleep for a while in his own bed, and 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 traveler in one's home...

He took the Metro to Southeast Federal City and got off at Uniontown. A man outside the station chanted,

Single Newport, single Newport.

Ahh, that familiar mantra.

Black boys all wearing the same coat crowded around the station entrance, shooting the shit and hollering as female passers-by. The youth style of Uniontown was always worn collectively. The uniform used to be North Face jackets and Nike Boots or New Balance 993s. Now it was Helly Hansen outerwear and those god-awful Nike Foamposites. Males of all ages generally wore their hair in dreadlocks. When Kogard exited the station, the group of boys looked at him, hovered—Kogard lit his cigarette—and the boys went back to their business. This neighborhood, although viewed as such by the greater gentrified city, was not an impoverished dangerous ghetto to be avoided. It was simply a community, insulated, containing its own customs, dialects, and manners; weary of outsiders. Historically black, why would the residents look favorably upon the white man? Does the white jogger in Palisades and Georgetown look favorably upon the black youth who frequent it? The kids were just kids here, just like anywhere else. If anything, he was the skeptical one, this black-suited white man, perhaps threatening to gentrify the only part of the city they could still afford. (But make no mistake, it would come, the gentrification; it would come)

He walked up Howard Road; behind him the enclave of black boys yelled, Aye yellow pants! Com'ere, lemme talk to ya'.

--Damn, sahn, she bad as shit, sahn.

--Aye, yellow pants, you bad as shit, sahn!

Different pick-up rituals for different peoples...

Down Howard road another man chanted,

Single Newport, single Newport.

Kogard wondered, was there a union for the jackman—that what they were called, these people who sold single cigarettes for 50 cent. Was there a Jackman Union? Perhaps they organized where on the street each jackman would stand.

Perhaps the union sorted out turf issues and that sort of thing.

Single Newport, single Newport,  
singles, singles.

Kogard passed the United House of Prayer for All People; this was only one of the many prayer franchises in the city. A black boy in uniform approached from afar. The boy asked, Aye, my mans, gotta extra jack?

Kogard stopped; the boy stopped; Kogard pulled out his American Spirits.

--Oh, you ain't got Newports? the boy asked, disappointed. --Thass, aite. He walked away.

Kogard shrugged and walked on. More for him. All black folk in this part of the city smoked menthols, and that was not a generalization. Why smoke menthols, anyway? You don't go to a cigarette for the refreshing taste of pine-mountain air. If you want that sensation, go brush your teeth.

Kogard took a left onto Martin Luther King Avenue. A group of young men and women approached. Helly Hansen and North Faces. The girls wore animal-print tights, Foamposites, and brightly colored lipstick. They all had a common way about them. They were in the midst of conversation as they passed--

--So I sez to that nigga, 'Bes' back du'fuq off, slim, fo' someone git popped.'

--Go 'ead, sahn.

--Niggaz was wylin' forreal, doe.

--Kill, moe, niggas down Minnesota be lunchin'.

--Real live. You heard that nigga shot his baby's momma *and* kid on the B2 las' week, down Minnesota.

--Dese bitches always wanna fuck wit wylin-ass niggas an' wonda' why dey git popped.

--Heem, sahn.

--Gurrllaaahh, you cain't be tuakin', you was fuckin' wit that crazy nigga juss yestaday. Nigga at the party wit da nine talkin' shit 'bout how he done robbed two liqua' sto'es last

week'nd.

--Gurlah, he was cy-ute.

--Aye, moe, back'a a nigga's head looked like a pack 'a hotdogs, moe.

--Hahaa, kill, moe, nigga looked like Uncle Fester like shit, moe.

--Ion'kno' what you niggas tuakin' 'bout, nigga looked good. Had dat fresh tat on his neck. But a girl was turnt up off dat lean.

--Kill, niggas was passin 'round blunts like shit, sahn. That loud shit, too...

Down the street, Kogard passed a carryout. Someone inside ordered, Ten-piece chicken, fries, mambo sauce—on the side! On the side! You put that shit all over my order last time!

Across the street, middle-aged men stood outside of a barbershop drinking from brown paper bags. One of them said, ...And then they called G34. I looked at my number. I had G67. I said, 'Mannnn, fuck this, a nigga got to get to work.' They all laughed heartily.

Two elderly women looking as if they had just come from service walked toward him.

--I asked the Lord to bless my grandson. These ch'ren get into all types of stuff these days. All I could do was ask the Lord to send his mercy.

--Bless these ch'ren. All this gang-bangin'...

Kogard came upon a lot filled with men who looked as if they had gotten the short end of life. Their coats were not the latest Helly's. They wore oversized jackets with goose-down feathers showing out of rips in the fabric. A depressed-looking white man with a sagging face sat on a milk crate with the soft pack of Newports stuck out in offering.

Single Newports,

he said in a low voice.

A Pepco station was across the street. A girl who looked



to be no more than fifteen held a seven-year-old by with one hand and the handle of a stroller containing a newborn with her other. She stood beside a dreadlocked black man in a suit as they waited for a bus.

Down Chicago Street, all was calm. A lone girl in leopard-print tights walked up the sidewalk.

A boy crossed an intersection diagonally, walking rhythmically and yelling

Champagne wishes, whips fulla bad bitches!

Loud on, loud, like I never had riches!

Thes' UV's I jus' luh' t' show mah ass in 'em

Duh-duh-duh, duh-duh-duh, duh-duh-duh-duh-duh...

When Kogard got closer her saw that the boy had headphones in his ears. As he passed he played a pair of invisible drums.

A lime green El Camino drove by.

A dusty-brown pick-up followed soon after. An elderly black man in a jean shirt and thick frames drove with a white-collared Latino man in the passenger seat.

Across the the street, a large grassy opening was enclosed by a fence. Within, three large houses stood, their foundations falling apart. The paint had peeled off and their porches were reenforced with wooden beams. All of the windows were boarded. Among the lawn, white and black men in white shirts holding clipboards walked slowly and pointing at various places. A burgundy Escalade was parked in the gated gravel lot. Another boarded building stood at the corner of the street. It was red and had a pointed roof. It had been a "Wine & Spirits" store, so it said.

Two girls in school uniforms approached and passed.

--Mr. Reiner be blowin' me, moe.

--He always gotta say some shit about 'Be the best you can be!' Nigga, you don't know me. You'on'kno' if I can do all this work an' shit. I ain't got time t' be doin' all that at home. My cousin's baby be at the crib *all the time*, she said clapping her

hands along with the last three words.

--Gurlaah, I'm tryin't'git some Chipot-*layy*.

It was as if all of the girls in this neighborhood sang their words. ...is that why the caged bird sings?

This gritty, simple life, paycheck-to-paycheck, hustle-to-hustle, infected Southeast speech. To an untrained or unappreciative ear, it might have sounded like pure ignorance. To Kogard, it was a particular way of life distilled into language. He passed the parking lot of a large city government complex. This language had taken on the characteristics of whole new dialect. It's wasn't "Ebonics," or whatever the call black speech as a whole. It wasn't "Brooklyn," or "Purgatory," or "Atlanta," or "Southside Chi." Southeast Federal City had a dialect all its own, a way of communicating through more than just spoken words. They were speaking an unheightened poetry. Teenage girls sang their vowels, all words were muffled under the tongue and strung together, no one opened their mouths too far except to laugh. It was language tainted with the pain of the spirit, a mosaic upon the tongue, something out of *Finnegans Wake*, a speech made up just for the occasion of life in this neighborhood in this moment in time. Spoken within the insulated community. No, perhaps the speech wouldn't be acceptable in the real world—the white world. But it sufficed to exchange emotion among the community.

Kogard stopped at Martin Luther King Ave. and Good Hope Road, where MLK turned into the 11<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge which ran over the river into Capital Hill. Beside him stood only the facade of a historical brick building. The wooden boards which covered the empty window holes were painted with a mural which read,

hey, hello, Yo!  
'sup, Hi, Aye  
what's up? Peace!

in colorful and organic bubble lettering. It was all a greeting,

whichever way you said it. In front of him was a tall green corner building which looked like something out of a Edward Hopper painting. Kogard tossed the butt of his jack and lit another cigarette. He crossed the street and waited with several other people for a bus. A man leaning against a fence said,  
Single Newport, single Newport.

In Foggy Bottom, Kogard walked along the grounds of the old University. Students scurried from class to class. Tall, dark, and beautiful Middle Eastern students congregated around Starbucks' outdoor seating area smoking cigarettes. The girls had long flowing black hair. Their outfits were all black, their sunglasses black, all of it accented by the light and medium-light browns on their Louis Vuitton bags. They were the oil and gas kids.

The Jersey financial kids walked around, their eyes similarly covered. They were tall, pale and beautiful and carried Tori Burch or Michael Kors. Their shoes were Prada, or also Tori Burch. The boys wore Vineyard Vines or Ralph Lauren. They all carried their iced coffees in one hand and their iPhones in the other.

It was obvious to spot the kids who had gotten a scholarship to the \$58, 000-per-year school. They carried their books in their arms and looked straight ahead.

Artsy kids talked about opium and psychology in the Quad.

Writerly kids and English majors talked sitting on benches in the square, smoking; they talked of many things—of shoes, and ships, and sealing wax, of cabbages and kings...and with great lawyers they had discussed lepers and crooks (you're very well-read it's well known...)

Lines formed around food trucks—Halal, dumplings, Korean tacos, Mexican, paninis...

Professors smoked heavily and tried to avoid eye contact with students.

Asian students all congregated outside of the library, smoking and bowing to one another. Kogard thought, How polite.

One girl coming out of B--- Hall said to another girl, We're going to my parents' house in Aspen for Spring Break. Getting wastedddd.

--Remember to stock up on Molly. We can get bud in Boulder.

Someone outside of Starbucks said, My dad was going to get me the 2012 C-Class, but I begged and begged and begged and finally he gave in to the Beemer.

--The 335i.

--I mean, what else? If it wasn't that, I'd have just settled for the Benz.

--You know that guy from Dubai in Econ? I saw him in an R8 by CVS yesterday.

--Fuckin' oil kids.

--I know. Our dads are in the wrong business.

--Dentistry is a bad business?

--You know what I mean. We could be riding around in an R8.

A kid wearing a Minus the Bear t-shirt and a Gibson SG strapped to his back said to a girl wearing a Longshore bag, Vans Authentics, and a large flannel shirt, Sure Zep IV was a good collection of songs, but it wasn't cohesive as an *album*.

The girl giggled and sipped her iced double-whip vanilla mocha.

In Georgetown Kogard went into a used-bookseller. The bookshelves were filled floor-to-ceiling with titles. An elderly clerk looked at him and smiled and went back to the thick book he was peering at though circular spectacles. Out of the corner of his eye, Kogard saw the man do a double-take at him as he walked toward the "Featured" table. On it, he saw *Monolith*

propped up beside titles by Delillo, Zadie Smith, Diaz, Bolaño, and Auster. He picked up *Monolith* and pulled out the yellow bookmark on which were scribbled notes under the heading “Staff Recommendation”--

Never has a debut novel wow-ed the literary community this much since *Oscar Wao*. What put Kogard above the norm, however, was his remarkably young age at the time of publication. *Monolith* is both deeply allusive and impressively inventive. This novel of 1% privacy, guilt, and scandal combines the best aspects of Fitzgerald and Delillo, while peppering in the authors own keen observations of modern consumer and popular culture. It blends mysticism and realism as only Kogard can achieve.

[back]

Kogard's style is purple and elaborate—in the style of 19<sup>th</sup> century novelists—and yet sharp, witty and, often, hilarious. It will go down in the American canon as both a timeless story of wealth and power, and a novel grounded in the time in which we live.

The clerk then said in Kogard's direction as if he were in the middle of conversation, Once, an older man came in here, looked around, and then plopped an old book of Russian

international relations onto the counter for check-out. I went to ring it up. The man gave me his credit card. I went to ring the card, looked at the name, looked at the book, looked at him, and said, 'This—this is you.' 'Yes,' he said quite irritably. He had thick Austrian accent. A woman he was with, presumably his wife, said, 'He wrote that book, he shouldn't have to pay for it.' I looked at him and said, 'Well, sir, if you just sign your name on the title page here, I'll add \$20 to the price!'

Kogard and the clerk shared a laugh.

--How are you today, Mr. Kogard?

--Fine as I can be in this weather.

--Why, it's beautiful outside.

--A storm rages between my publisher and Amazon if you haven't heard.

--Ahh, yes, I did see that. I'll put guys like me straight out of business if Amazon has their way with this e-book craze. It is unfortunate. I wish us both the best. Hope you brought an umbrella.

--Ha ha. Don't need one. I'll get wet if I have to. But I think we shall take shelter underground.

--Ah! Very good then. You all have my support and sympathy. Hard to be a writer in these changing times. But so long as I am breathing and this store exists here, we will carry all Vesak Word House titles so long as we can find them.

Kogard smiled at the man, and shook his hand on the way out.

Up Wisconsin Avenue, Kogard stopped at the Wingo's carryout restaurant for an order of french fries with Mambo Sauce. The store had 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 went to sit on the bench at the curb and wait for his order to be called from the street-bound window. Beside him was a man who appeared to be homeless at first glance. But

what was uncanny was that the man had no baggage. He had sandals on his feet which exposed his yellow toenails. His white shirt was stained and half-tucked-in to his light brown pants which had been cut at the shin. He had a canteen slung around his body with a piece of rope. His face, an uncanny mixture of Chinese, Latino, and Indian, which was neither youthful nor aged, was serene and very clean. His eyes were closed and his head was tilted slightly back, but it was clear that he was merely enjoying the sunshine as he rested on this bench. His legs and arms were crossed, and tied to his left wrist was a smooth white stone attached to a black rubber band. Kogard's attention was drawn to, of all things, this stone. He looked at the man's calm face and asked, What's that on your wrist?

The man slowly opened his eyes and glanced over at Kogard as if he were a familiar friend, perhaps one he had planned to meet in this location at this exact time. He said then, 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 doing in that environment.

--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.

--14<sup>th</sup> Lama, huh?

--The 14<sup>th</sup> reincarnation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. 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.

--14 reincarnations?...14 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 14 lives.

The man laughed a hearty laugh. --I am sure they walk lightly through their lives. They are, after all, near transcendence.

Hmm, Kogard thought, Imagine the state of the sole after 14 lives...

Wind whistled through the silence. Then, 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, 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.

Silence.

Then Kogard said, in a low voice, Any soul may then potentially descent 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 soul's 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 artists 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. 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 general guilt is your compassion, the sign of a wise and aged soul. The poor in the world, unfortunately, are in a bad situation. 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 more pleasurable situation. 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.

Kogard was immersed in his own thoughts now. The man looked on him with kind eyes. Kogard then looked up and

said, Is it possible to have achieved enlightenment in a past life...and 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 then 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 thus enlightened. 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, and Kogard opened his as if they were connected. 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 to where the man had gone, the man had disappeared.

In a coffee shop in Chinatown, a man in a blue pinstripe suit said to Kogard as he drank a cappuccino, 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*—surely a great novel, 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 quite deflated. A random stranger had handed him his spleen on a tablet. Was he really of the old world? Is print really worth it to fight for? 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 more we damn our race. The machines will begin to take over. Look—they already have begun: our time, our friends, our schedules, our news, our words; the last thing left is our innermost thoughts. The technological singularity will be upon us. Well! Let the human race enslave itself to the screen. But he would not follow.

(Our machines are disturbingly lively,  
and we ourselves, frighteningly inert.)

Let not art be damned to data.

In Union Station at 8:00 in the evening, Walter Kogard bought a bus 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 tall buildings, 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 the city, his old universe in a single drop.

\* \* \*

...At the end of the day, I go home on the P6, passing all of those big holes being filled with metal and glass tumors, and I take me a bath with some of that de-lousing power. And in the morning, as I walk to the train station I love to hear that familiar sound: "Single Newport, single Newport..."

# Phase the Sixth.

## I.

On the bus ride home, under the blanket of night, all on the bus 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 just born into this body and now have to deal with it? No one ever asked for this, and now we are forced to be a human being, to anticipate death at every corner, and to top it off abide by the imposed rules of the society and the time that we are 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 plop 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? Kogard looked up out of his window. The world seemed merely to be 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 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, tttoocckkk—expands and contracts at will. Or, perhaps, not with will but with non-will; 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. Like the latter, time and us, we interact, but we are not conjoined. It is not steady or even. It is not a rule. Like this—do the stars track the hours?

Not grandfather clock, tick, tock, but





cohesiveness of word-beings. Remember: it is always the incidental things which are most meaningful, which bring 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 ∞

This chapter has been added after the book “Pharmacon of the Spirit” has been completed. It may have come at any point in the book, so why not here? While the book itself is finite, and follows a certain pattern of phases and chapters, this particular chapter has no logical place within the linear system of the book; thus, it may be placed anywhere. We may also call this chapter, Chapter X.xxxxxxxxxxxxxx.... of Phase the X. While the linear

patter of chapters progressing from X to X+1 to X+2 and so on persists, this chapter may be placed within the finite numerical system as one of any infinite number of intervals which come between X and X+1, such as, X+0.000000001.... or X+0.0309249242940044... or any of the other infinite intervals proceeded and succeeded by zero or any of the numerals. The ideas in this chapter are not complete... There is no way to complete them. In other words, the limit of these ideas does not exist...

When we look up into the night sky, we may assume that the universe extends infinitely in all directions 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 the 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 can use to 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 ties in 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 thoughts. 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, as it does within the parameters of  $X$  and  $X+1$ ? 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 around midnight in the 9<sup>th</sup> 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 running by 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.

Speaking of: 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 expressed audibly. (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 white people 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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, one could say. They were not confined to 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, and through many different forms of art

and musical 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 with 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 emergency land line. Only one of the four people alive who had it's number was likely to be on the other line, 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.

Kogard 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 1:30, okay?

--Hmph. Okay, I see.

--Peace, God. See you later.

Kogard hung up the phone. If what had 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, though. He snuffed out his jack. It was not 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 out to Jack's.

V.

The headlines today were tempestuous:

AMAZON TO STOP CARRYING PRINT BOOKS

AMAZON SUBSIDIARIES TO RELEASE ONLY E-BOOKS  
HENCEFORTH

PRINT PROHIBITION: AMAZON-INFULENCED FEDERAL  
BAN ON NEW PRINTED BOOKS

AMAZON SOLE LEGAL DISPENSARY OF LITERATURE  
E-BOOK REIGNS SUPREME

If he had not been privy to this prior, 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, the ones 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 that 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 like, the last indie house 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 to 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?

--Heh heh, 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 North Dakota's national parks.

--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 mega-level. And then there's the government that keeps track of it. 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.

--Huh. 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 two-sides-to-every-story could be in jeopardy. The government could, like, delete all articles which shed light on unsightly government practices, or books that bash an opposing 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 copies 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 and 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 be warrant for your arrest.' Pricks.

--Oh yeah?

--Yeah, it was just to scare us. We can still release electronically, though. But unfortunately the only real 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. So where did you move the printers?

--Well, my friend, that is the good part. Come, let us walk.

## VI.

Horton led Kogard toward 221<sup>st</sup> Street, and as they walked he asked, Did Fredo call you?

--Yeah.

--Good, good. He might have said that we're now in business together. I'm guessing you're pretty confused as to what is 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 e-book 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 in the street and lit another as they went into 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 rhetorically.

Horton now spoke as if continuing a separate train of thought: 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 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. The just have to be 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 lively conversation rising up off of it like steam. He followed Horton onto the gated platform and from the balcony saw many crowds of people all talking and pointing. Around them were two rows of eight large industrial printing-and-binding machines. To the far end of the wall Kogard saw two rows of eight long tables.

Horton led Kogard to the stairs that 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! Ha ha ha. 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 fucking damned. When they reached they floor, Kogard looked around the room to see many familiar faces. --Holy shit, he said pointing at 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, et cetera. That is where our friends the Guermantes 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 way. Ah, Monsieur Guermantes, this is the excellent Walter Kogard.

Louis Guermantes turned around from his group and smiled a wide, hearty smile and said in a gruff 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 all 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. Planning will take place tonight for the coming releases. We've already been approached by several good-sized booksellers who wish to do business with us so long as we can assure it is safe. And, with the help of the Guermantes, we can guarantee that. Much like gambling, the 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 think that they contain information that they are not supposed to know, or they will think that we have much more interesting stuff to publish, stuff that is not strictly commercial—real art. Ah, let me introduce you to the Killa Beez.

They approached a group of black men dressed in fine black suits. In the middle of the crowd was a man wearing a white monk's robe and had a tuft of nappy hair tied in a knot on top of his head. --This is the RZA rektor, said Horton, pointing to the robed man. --He'll be directing his street guys 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 One Universal God, Tony Sparks, Methical, you already know Shallah Raekwon, MK, 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 Hezakah—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 went back 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 the words: "Decentralize, Horizontalize, Decolonize," 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, wrong usage, 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's mostly your issue.

--My issue?

--Kogard, said Horton as he turned to look him in the eyes and set one hand on his shoulder, I am overall publisher and Editor-in-Chief, 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.

The conversations continued throughout the day and Kogard was introduced as the acquisitions editor of the new Black Market Press. Fredo and Chelsea Guermentes arrived later in the evening with wine and scotch, and around 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, and toasts, 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 the rest of our big shots—we need a 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 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.

Hah, Kogard thought sipping his water and smoking his jack, what a guy.

Later, after most of the crowd had either cleared out 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. It'll 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, 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'se 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 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 it is 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 for get 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 go extinct. But no one will win.

Silence. The presses whirred on sleep-mode.

Then 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.

# Phase the Seventh.

In the middle of the night, Walter Kogard returned home.

As he approached his building he knew: It was time.

He felt the writing big biting him.

He went into his room, removed all of his clothes, sat down in his chair, and lit a cigarette. He pulled his electric Smith-Corona out of its bag and set it on his table beside the ream of blank paper. He took the top sheet, scraped it, and then took the second sheet, winded it into the drum, and set his hands upon the keys. The calm before the storm...

He typed the title out, finally freeing it from the confines of his own mind:

Pendulum

by Walter Kogard

He pressed the return key. *Chhhink*. He started.  
grandfather clock, tick, tock...

He returned. He indented. He sat back in his chair and stared at the words. They were the wrong words. And he had know that before he wrote them. A pen sat beside his typewriter. He picked it up and scratched out the eight words, not enough to eradicate them altogether, but leaving their essence on the page so that he could see where he had been, and where he was going to go. He pressed the return key three times, *chink, chink, chink*, and began anew near the middle of the page.

The Past Lives of the Bodhisattva  
by Walter Kogard

He looked at the words. He smiled. He began his work.

I had once attained enlightenment, but that was many lifetimes ago. I lost it when I had it right within my grasp, but I was not ready. It escaped me life after life, and presently, it eludes me still. Yet only now have I been able to put the pieces together, to see just how I failed time after time. I shall tell you how I lost it, by telling you about the aftermath, and then the great loss, only after which you will understand where I started, where I have been, and where I intend to go. I shall relay to you my 14 lives, from the present backward to the point I fist fell from Bodhi. I shall pen all of my lifetimes as they have happened; and then you and I alike will understand why enlightenment and freedom from body escaped me. And by that I will learn how to attain it again, not now, but it future lifetimes. So here we are: the present: It is the twenty-first century. I inhabit the body of Walter Kogard, dismal writer, of 2666 E 218<sup>th</sup> Street, Empire City, USA, Suite No. 4.

For clarity's sake let me say: I am not Walter Kogard, or any of these 14 individuals. I



am a spirit, one with the universe, an invisible component of the great singularity of all infinite universes and possibilities. These lifetimes that I scribe, they are the physical expression of my soul on earth, taking up portions of time that layer your world history. But they are not me. I am eternal. I am trying to escape the heavy body. But I am stuck in the mind of Kogard as a result of my action 14 lives ago. Thus: I write this first life, and all lives before that, in the third person. Let us observe the lives with a critical ear and an observatory quality reserved for the omniscient: God. With this filter, and our impressions heightened, we may now begin the 14 past lives of the spirit who lost enlightenment.

## I.

Walter Kogard 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. A yellow disgusting thing it was, 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 wrote. He wrote because his life depended on it. He wrote the conversations he had had with JP, Fredo, Frank, and El Wood, his journey to the Federal City, and the conclusion he had come to about he and Nicté's future, which was as conclusive a conclusion as conclusion could be; and yet, it only seemed to

him after being put into words that that end was merely the beginning of a new life with his daughter, and with Jo. He wrote the saga of the stragglng book publisher, and the revolution to ensue. When he finished his present life, he went on to the next. He wrote one life, two lives, three lives, four, five, eight, ten, twelve, thirteen; he did not stop; the lives flowed fluently into one another, minutes turned to words; days and weeks did not elapse, only lifetimes. And at the end of the fourteenth lifetime, he stopped typing and reclined in his swivel chair. He lit a cigarette and smoked it vehemently. One last stretch to go. He mused upon the words he had written, the lives he had just brought into existence, his life immortalized in words. He sucked down his cigarette and went back to the keys. He hammered the last lines into the manuscript like the final tacks of a coffin nail.

Thus concludes the 14 past lives of the Bodhisattva. But make no mistake: although these, my lives, are finite, I am not. I live within and beyond them. In truth, the life, my life, the life of the soul, lives in the infinite, in the stars, in the atoms, and whatever is beyond. And because you also live beyond your body, in the atoms of the stars and in the universes within atoms, you are also me; I am also you, and you are Walter Kogard.

These may be the last words of this book, the last words I will tell you about my lives, but never forget: it never ends.

Silence. He lifted his fingers from the keys. He set the last page of the manuscript upside down on the stack beside his typewriter and reclined in his chair, rubbed his fingers through his hair, pulled a cigarette from the carton on the table and lit it, the last cigarette of the carton. He drew smoke, he exhaled, and he marked the words of William H. Gass:

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.”

...Because it's never done.

It continues, through me, beyond me...It never ends.

He lifted his hands from his typewriter and stuffed out his last cigarette. It was time to buy another carton. He opened his desk drawer and pulled out his carton of emergency cigarettes, Camel filters, to tide him over in the meantime. But he had to pee first before he went out, and his nose was full of mucous. He got up and went to the restroom.





